What's in This Issue

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1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!

Those of you who have joined in the past couple of months (more than 500 of you are new since my last issue), welcome to my e-zine! You can find all the previous issues on my web site at:
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/afwezine.html

As you all know, Hurricane Katrina essentially wiped out New Orleans and a number of other cities on the Gulf Coast at the very end of August. In view of the massive relief efforts that occupied the entire country, I decided not to send out a September issue of this e-zine. This month, I'm back on track, with more information on the craft and marketing of your fiction.

In this issue, I'll announce the winner of a brand new iPod and tell you what steps you can take to improve your chances of being the next winner.

I'll also do two articles on Tiger Marketing, one on the theory and one on a "Tiger Marketing Makeover" that I'm just beginning for a friend of mine.

November is National Novel Writing Month! Are you ready? I'll give you a brief intro on what "NaNoWriMo" is all about and how a lot of writers get themselves geared up for it.

In the last couple of months I've given some serious thought to how I help more of you develop your writing careers. I'm spread pretty thin right now, so it's hard for me to help you directly. But I've got some ideas on how I can help you indirectly. And help is help, right?

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2) Congratulations to . . .

I began this e-zine back in March with high hopes. I figured that by the end of the year, I could maybe have 1000 subscribers. I was wrong.

I reached that goal in a couple of months, and that's when I set my sights really high--2000 subscribers. I figured that would be pretty close to Total World Domination, right? To help speed that process, I announced that I'd hold a drawing when I got to 2000 subscribers, with a twist. I wouldn't draw from the list of subscribers. Instead, I'd draw from the list of those who REFERRED a subscriber. And each referral earned the referrer another entry in the drawing. Those who referred 50 people got put in the hat 50 times.

This e-zine passed 2000 subscribers some time in late July, and I held the drawing in early August. The winner was Judy Anderson of Freeland, Michigan. (I have her permission to use her name here.) Once I got her snail-mail address, I hopped on the Apple web site and bought a snazzy new iPod for her. I had promised one of those $99 iPod Shuffles with 512 MB of memory, but I decided to throw in an extra 30 bucks and get her the model with twice the memory. Happy listening, Judy!

Oops, Judy won't even see this congratulations. The odd thing is that Judy doesn't subscribe to this e-zine. She's NOT a writer, she's just a fan of mine who told a friend about my web site. That friend became a subscriber and listed Judy as her referrer. Funny how life works out, isn't it?

Giving out an iPod was so much fun, I've decided to do it again, only better. I'm certain that Total World Domination will surely slip into my grimy grasp once I have 5000 subscribers. So that's my next target. The prize will be an iPod Nano--that glitzy 4GB model that Apple just released. Take a look at it right here: http://www.apple.com/ipodnano/

If you want a shot at that pesky iPod, just tell your friends about this e-zine. And twist their arms to list YOU as their referrer. (They will be disqualified if

they list themselves as their own referrer.) Who knows?
You might have a Nano in your stocking this Christmas.

At the rate this thing is growing, the Advanced Fiction
Writing E-zine will soon be the largest fiction-writing
e-zine on the web. Maybe I should start aiming for
Total Galactic Domination?

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3) Tiger Marketing

I coined the term "Tiger Marketing" back in the first
issue of this e-zine to describe the use of advanced
web-based marketing techniques to promote fiction.
Tiger Marketing is a big topic, and I've been writing a
regular column on how you can make it work for you.

In the last issue (August), I discussed how to identify
which "search keywords" are the most valuable. A search
keyword is a word or phrase that can be searched for on
a search engine, such as Google. Such a keyword can
bring lots of hits to your web site if two conditions
are met:

* Lots of people are searching for that keyword.
* The search engines believe your web site has "high
relevance" to that keyword.

In the last issue, I explained exactly how to find a
list of keywords that many people are searching for.
That's the first half of the battle. The second half is
to increase the relevance of your web site for a given
keyword. That's today's topic.

This is actually pretty simple. Search engines are
constantly scanning the web, automatically reading web
pages and figuring out what each page is "about". Now
these engines aren't terribly smart. They don't
actually understand your web page. What they do is look
at the words on your page and figure out which of them
are "most important" as content on that page. Then,
when somebody searches for a particular keyword, the
search engine refers to them to the pages for which
that keyword is highly important.

Please note something very important. A page that is
"about everything" is going to be considered to be
"about nothing" by the search engines. So if you want
one of your web pages to rank high in searches for a
particular keyword, then that page probably won't rank
nearly as high for other keywords. Tough beans. If you
want people to find your site using another keyword,
make another page that's optimized for that keyword.

Now we get to the nub of the matter. How do you
optimize a web page for searches on a particular
keyword?

Here is another important principle. Not all words on your page are created equal. When a search engine looks at your page, it assigns a higher "relevance" to words that it finds in particular locations on that page. And those locations aren't a secret. Here they are:

* The title. If the title of your web page contains a given keyword, then that keyword is considered HIGHLY relevant to the page.

* The "description metatag". When you create a web page, you can define certain "metatags" that describe that page to search engines. One of these metatags is the "description" metatag. This is usually a one-paragraph description of what the page is about. Any words in that description are going to be considered prime keywords by the search engines.

* The "keyword metatag". You can define a metatag for each page that tells the search engines what YOU think are the most important keywords on that page. Resist the urge to include a zillion keywords in this metatag. Less is more. If you put only one keyword in this metatag, then the search engines will believe that that keyword is profoundly important to that page. If you have twenty keywords, then the search engine knows you're blowing smoke and it won't regard ANY of them as being important.

* The headings. If you have a given keyword in any of the headings of your page, then that keyword is considered highly relevant for that page.

* The top of the page. Search engines believe that you put the most important words near the top of the page. Do so.

* The "alt-tags". And what the heck is an "alt-tag"? An alt-tag is an "alternative" to an image. Here's the thing. Not everybody who browses the web can see the images. Folks with limited vision may not be able to see it. And those web-browser phones that have limited space may not display images. To let these folks know what they're missing out on, you can include an "alt-tag" for each image. The alt-tag simply spells out in text what the image is about. Search engines rank keywords more highly when they occur in an alt-tag.

* The frequently occurring words on the rest of the page. If the text of your page contains one word fifty times, then the search engine can be reasonably sure that the word is in fact highly relevant to the content of that page.

It's a good idea to look at every single web page on your site and ask yourself what keyword you'd like to optimize that page for. Choose one for each page, but no more than one. Then make sure that keyword occurs in each of the above locations on the page. However . . .

Don't spam the search engines! Search engines know when you're cheating. If you have a page about camel cheese, and you include the words "Marilyn Monroe" all over the page in the same color as the background of the page, (making it invisible to readers, but visible to search engines) then the engines will flag you as an abuser and your page will be ranked LOWER than it would have. You might even get black-listed.

If all this seems kind of theoretical, I'd like to bring it down to earth a bit in the next article . . .

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4) A Tiger Marketing Makeover

Recently, a friend of mine asked me how to improve her ranking on Google. I looked at her web site and gave her a list of several ways to have her webmaster tweak her site to make it more appealing to Google.

A little background here, to explain what kind of site she's got and why I would help her for free, and why I can't do the same for you, drat it. (I'm a busy guy, and there are nearly 3000 of you and I can't possibly do a free website makeover for all of you. In fact, if you all send me email and I answer one each 30 seconds, it'll take me a full 24 hours to get through all the email!)

My friend's name is Meredith Efken. She happens to be the best critiquer I've ever had. She's now critiqued my last three novels, and she's made incredibly useful suggestions for each of them. And she doesn't charge me a dime. I owe her big time. That's why I'm happy to help her with her Tiger Marketing.

As it happens, Meredith is a very talented novelist, and her first mom-lit book is coming out in November under one of the imprints owned by Harlequin. In my opinion, Meredith is funnier than Erma Bombeck, and I wrote an endorsement saying so for her book.

The title of Meredith's novel is "SAHM I Am". If you're wondering what "SAHM" might mean, it's an acronym for "Stay At Home Mom". The story is about an email loop of Stay At Home Moms, run by a hilarious control freak named Rosalyn. The main characters are a few subversive moms who rebel against Rosalyn's "sanctimoniouser than thou" attitude. Since I write humor myself, it's hard to make me laugh. Dave Barry used to get me about once per column. Erma Bombeck did that too when she was alive. Meredith's book had me laughing out loud EVERY TWO PAGES. Both times I read it. This a darn good book, if you like humor.

For reference, Meredith's web site is here:

http://www.meredithefken.com/

As you can see, it's got a great look to it--very artsy and appealing to her target audience.

The question that Meredith asked me was this: How can I make my web site come up when somebody Googles the keyword phrase "SAHM I Am"?

I Googled this phrase and found that Google believes there are about 1.4 million web pages relevant to this keyword. Unfortunately, Meredith's web site is not on the top ten results. As of today, #6 on the list of returns is a book review of her book. #10 is another book review of her book. The other results on Google's top 10 all point to other sites, including one site that lists a book with the same title by somebody else. I continued on through the first 100 results on Google's list and did not find Meredith's web site.

The first thing to understand is that this is not anyone's fault. It's just due to the fact that Meredith's site is new. It takes time to develop a web presence. But you can accelerate the process, and that's what we'll focus on here. Over the course of the next few months, Meredith's goal should be to improve her ranking on certain important keywords. For now, we'll just work on the keyword phrase "SAHM I Am".

I browsed through Meredith's site and chose one page to optimize for this keyword, the page that talks about her book. This is the logical choice. Take a look at the page:
http://www.meredithefken.com/html/read.html

The first change I would make would be to split the content of the page into two pages. One page would be about all Meredith's books (there will be more). The other page would be reserved solely for the one book SAHM I Am, and should have a filename like:
http://www.meredithefken.com/html/sahmiam.html It's important to make each page on a website be about one thing only.

The next optimization is very quick. At the top of the browser, you'll see the title for the page: "For your reading pleasure - Check out my books, read an excerpt..."

That's not a bad title for a general page on all Meredith's books, but if we want a page dedicated solely to this one novel, then the new title should be something like this: "SAHM I Am, a mom-lit novel by Meredith Efken." That describes the page perfectly and has the crucial keyword. Note that this title will be the first thing shown by Google in its results page.

If you choose the "View Source" menu option on your browser, you can see the actual HTML that underlies the page. HTML can be very confusing, but for our purposes,

what we care about are the metatags, which are near the top. On this particular page, there are two:

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<meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=ISO-8859-1">
<meta name="Generator" content="NetObjects Fusion 8 for Windows">
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These define various aspects of the page, but they don't include the metatags for the keywords and description. This is easy to fix. There are two metatags needed, and each has a different purpose.

First, Meredith should add a description metatag like this:

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<meta name="Description" content="Read all about my mom-lit novel, SAHM I Am. Includes a free excerpt and insider info on how I wrote the book!">
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The "content" part of this metatag will be displayed by Google in the results for any search on "SAHM I Am". Note that it's basically an ad to entice people to click on it. The description metatag should be alluring! And truthful. If the book wins an award, the description should mention that. Tastefully.

Second, Meredith should add a keyword metatag like this:

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<meta name="keywords" content="SAHM I Am">
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The "content" part of this metatag will alert all search engines that this page is EXTREMELY relevant to any searches on the keyword phrase "SAHM I Am". Meredith could dilute the value of this keyword by adding a second one, such as "Stay At Home Moms". But it would be better to add a new page to her site with helpful tips for Stay At Home Moms, and optimize that page for that keyword.

The rest of the optimization process should be clear. Meredith should add some copy with a summary of what the book's about. The header for this copy should include the words "SAHM I Am". The copy should also include these words.

The page has two important graphics on it, showing the front and back covers. By viewing the source for the page, you can easily find the alt-tags for these images. The front cover image has the alt-tag: "SAHM I Am". I would recommend changing this to "Front cover of the novel SAHM I Am, by Meredith Efken". The back cover image has the alt-tag: "Read the Back Cover!" I would recommend changing this to "Read the back cover of the novel SAHM I Am, by Meredith Efken!"

Once Meredith does these optimizations, she should let Google and the other search engines know. That's easy to do--just go to the search sites and find the page where you can request that your site be indexed. Even if you don't do this, the engines will find your page eventually, but making a request to the engines will make it happen sooner, rather than later.

If Meredith does all this, will it guarantee zillions

of hits? No, not by itself. There's another factor that search engines use to determine which pages get ranked the highest: How popular is the site that contains this page?

Life really is unfair. Rich people get richer. Beautiful people get beautiful spouses. Popular people get more popular.

And popular pages on the web get more attention from search engines than unpopular ones. Google's great contribution to humanity was to figure out a way to determine which pages are "most popular". The basic idea is simple--a page is considered popular if lots of other pages on the web link to it. There's some math involved here to prevent cheating, and Google does that math very well. So don't cheat. But do be wise.

In view of this, I recommended that Meredith add a "Links" page to her site with links to her friends' web pages (including mine, of course!) Then she can solicit her friends to link back to her site. (In a tasteful way. There are some perfectly tacky ways to solicit links. You all know people who use these methods. You have all been electronically groped by these people. It's a little unpleasant.)

Getting links to a site takes time, so Meredith's site won't instantly become a major web portal. But over a few months, she should expect to see her search engine ranking improve. One way to get more links effortlessly is to add useful and valuable content to her site. Then people will find her site and link to it without even being asked. They'll beg for the right! If that content is somehow related to the subject of her novels, all the better, but it's not a requirement.

Let me make one thing perfectly clear. Improving your search engine ranking takes time and effort. Don't try to cheat. Don't be tacky. Treat the web and its denizens the way you want to be treated.

We'll tune in again on Meredith's site next month to see if things have improved for her on the search engine front. If not, I guess she can demand her money back from me. But, oh yeah, my advice was free. In the grand American tradition, that means she can sue me.

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5) Writing a Novel In a Month

November is National Novel Writing Month! Are you one of the thousands of writers who'll be writing a novel this November? It's fun, and you'll have a lot of company. Check out the web site:
http://www.nanowrimo.org

If you'll be doing the NaNoWriMo thing this year,
October is the month to get your novel planned, so
you'll be ready to slam out that deathless prose in
November. So start brainstorming now!

I discovered NaNoWriMo a couple of years ago, when I
suddenly started getting tons of hits on my web site in
late October and early November. I checked where all
those hits were coming from and discovered that quite a
few of the NaNoWriMo participants were big fans of my
Snowflake Method for Writing a Novel.

Of course (no surprise) some people prefer a different
method than mine to get their novel organized. Makes no
bones to me. I'm glad that I've been able to help some
people, and I'm grateful to the NaNoWriMo forums for
helping make my Snowflake page famous around the world.
It's that pesky Snowflake page that has driven this
very e-zine to its current level of popularity. Most of
you have been on this page, but just in case you
haven't, the link is:
http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/the_snowflake.html

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6) How Can I Help You?

I'm a selfish guy, no doubt about it. My oldest
daughter just started college, and she's working in the
cafeteria at minimum wage, which is not a great way to
keep the wolf from the door. So in sheer self-interest,
I asked her if she'd be interested in doing some
proof-reading or copy-editing work. I know plenty of
publishers who'd pay her more than minimum wage to do
that kind of thing. After all, she's an English Lit
major with an 800 on that pesky SAT in English. She's a
National Merit Scholar. She can do this with her eyes
closed.

My daughter is no dummy. She knows I'm not made of
money, so she said she'd love to try it. Besides,
proofreading novels has got to be more fun that
slinging hash. So she's really excited about the idea.

That got my neurons jiggling. It struck me that if
publishers are willing to pay her to do proofreading,
then maybe writers out there in cyberspace might be
willing to pay her too. Once I got thinking along those
lines, I realized that I know other folks with similar
skills. A whole lot. I know zillions of writers and
editors with a multitude of talents: proofreading,
copyediting, critiquing, literary analysis, mentoring,
ad nauseum.

Not only that, but I know lots of writers, published
and pre-published, who might need those skills applied
to their Heartbreaking Works of Staggering Genius.

So it occurred to me that I could hook up people who need help with people who know how to help. I'm exploring this idea right now. I'd love to be able to help you in your writing. This e-zine is one way I can do that. Another way is to help you find someone who can give you a good mentoring or critique or edit or proofread at a reasonable price.

Are you interested? If so, DON'T email me! I'm on deadline right now, and I can't handle a deluge of email. But you can indicate your interest electronically, which will let me know what sort of help you all would be interested in paying for. I've set up a database to keep track of who's interested in what. Just pop on over to my web site and fill out the form.
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/mentoring.html

Don't worry, no sales-droid will call on you. If and when I figure out what sort of services people are interested in, and which of my friends can provide those services, I'll send you a short email to let you know, and that should be that.

If I do decide that this is a service I can help provide, I'm going to rely on friends I know and trust to do the actual work. I want to be able to vouch for the quality of anyone who would be doing this sort of work. (Plus I need to be able to punch them if they do a bad job.) So please don't write me volunteering to work for me, unless I already know you really well. I've already talked to several qualified friends who are interested in working on this project.

I have no idea where this idea is going to end up. It may turn out that nobody needs this kind of work. Or it may turn out that I can't find the right kind of workers. Or the sky could fall and whack us all. Lots of things could go wrong. If you fill out the form on my web site, you're not committing to anything, and neither am I. But wouldn't it be great if I could help a bunch of you improve your writing, and get my daughter gainfully employed at the same time? That, my friends, is a win-win thing-a-ma-jig, not to mention a GREAT step on my path to Total World Domination.

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7) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

As always, things have been busy here. I've been teaching at what seems like a zillion writing conferences this year. I'll be doing two more before the New Year rolls around. I won't bore you with details, because you are intelligent and diligent and you therefore know where to look up my calendar if you really care to come listen to me quack about writing:
http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/calendar.html

I'm currently on deadline for my next novel. The wheels
of publishing sometimes grind painfully slow, which
means that I STILL haven't signed the contract on this
book yet (although it finally came today by FedEx).
Alas, I don't feel comfortable giving details of deals
that don't have the ink dry on them yet. Suffice to say
that this book may well turn out to be my Big Break In
Publishing. Or my Big Splat in Publishing, if I really
screw up this opportunity. I'll be able to say more
next month, and I hope I can also tell you some details
on my Tiger Marketing plan for the book. Until then,
I'll be typing my little fingers to the bone.

See ya next month!

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8) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's
worth 104 times what you paid for it. I invite you
to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright
Randall Ingermanson, 2005. Gack, I hate this.

Extremely tasteful postscript: I encourage you to
email this E-zine to any writer friends of yours who
might benefit from it. I only ask that you email the
whole thing, not bits and pieces. That way, they'll
know where to go to get their own free subscription, if
they want one.

If you email it to them, remind them tactfully that
they should name YOU as the person who referred them,
if they sign up. People who name themselves as
referrers unfortunately don't get credit, so they might
as well be honest and admit it was you!

At the moment, there are two such places to subscribe:
My personal web site: http://www.RSIngermanson.com
My new web site: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine