
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

Publisher: Randy Ingermanson ("the Snowflake guy")

Motto: "A Vision for Excellence"

Date: October 7, 2008

Issue: Volume 4, Number 10

Home Pages: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>
<http://www.Ingermanson.com>

Circulation: 13029 writers, each of them creating a
Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

"Fiction Writing = Organizing + Creating + Marketing"

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (over 300 of you have joined since the last issue), welcome to my e-zine!

You should be on this list only if you signed up for it on my web site. If you no longer wish to hear from me, don't be shy -- there's a link at the bottom of this e-mail that will put you out of your misery.

If you need to change your e-mail address, there's a different link to help you do that.

If you missed a back issue, remember that all previous

issues are archived on my web site at:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine>

What's in this issue:

The successful novelist needs good organization, good craft, and good marketing. In this issue, we'll talk about each of these in turn.

What's the most important thing you need to get done TODAY? We'll talk about that in my organization column.

Most people believe that actions speak louder than words. Do you know how to exploit that to deepen your writing? This month I'll show an interesting example by a master of fiction, Robert Ludlum.

One of the legs of any marketing campaign is publicity. This month in my marketing column, I'll interview Rusty Shelton, who works at Phenix & Phenix, one of the most successful publicity agencies for authors.

Are you reading my blog? Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: The Most Important Thing To Do Today

I start every working day exactly the same way: I ask myself the question, "What's the One Thing I really want to get done today?"

At the end of the day, if I got that One Thing done, then I consider it a good day, even if that's all I got done. If I didn't get that One Thing done, then it was a bad day, even if I got lots of other stuff done.

Now let me distinguish here between things I "want to do" and things I "have to do."

The fact is, there are all kinds of things you "have to do" every day. You're supposed to exercise. Eat right. Work. Sleep. Floss. Make time for your family and friends. Meditate (if you're the meditative sort) or pray (if you're the praying sort) or whatever you do to get in touch with your True Self, your Higher Power, or your Inner Troll.

And a thousand other things.

All of these are the routine stuff that you pretty much "have to do" to survive.

None of these really feed your dreams. Let's face it,

unless you are one sick puppy, flossing is not feeding your dreams.

But what about the things you WANT to do? The things you desperately want to do? Are those getting crowded out by the "have to do" things?

For most of us, writing fiction is at the top of the list of things that feed our dreams. We want to sell that first novel. Once we've sold that, we want to sell the second, third, fiftieth. And we want to market the heck out of them.

For some of us, these dreams are realistic. For others, they're a delusion. Sometimes, it's not easy to tell the difference. There's a fine line behind reality and delusion.

Truth to tell, it hardly matters. The dream of getting a novel published is our dream. We don't have to justify it. We want to write fiction because we want to write fiction. No other reason is needed.

The question is how to get there. In my December 2007 column on organization, I talked about making a roadmap for your next book. That gave the big picture on how to get there.

This month, I want to focus on the little picture. What are you going to do TODAY to move toward your goal? It doesn't have to be a big step. It might not even be a step at all. Maybe it'll just be clearing the path so you can take a step tomorrow.

The important thing is to take action. Take action today. Take action tomorrow. Keep taking action every day that you possibly can. Take action until you reach your dream, or until you decide that you don't want that dream anymore.

Nothing happens unless you take action.

What One Thing do you really "want to do" today? How important is it to you to get that One Thing done today? Will you make time to do that One Thing today? Are there unimportant things you're doing that you need to sacrifice in order do that One Thing today?

Feed your dreams. If you don't, nobody else will. If you don't today, you probably won't tomorrow, or the next day, or ever. And you'll spend your whole life flossing.

In the August issue of this e-zine, I showed an extended example of subtexting in dialogue, taken from Robert Ludlum's novel THE MATARESE CIRCLE. When I wrote that column, I reread the entire 500+ page novel looking for the best example of subtexting I could find.

While reading it, I also found a terrific example of using actions to add a subtext to dialogue. This month, I want to show you that example.

Most of us have heard the cliché that "actions speak louder than words." Usually, it's understood that the actions are subconscious giveaways that undermine the speaker's words.

In the example I'll show, the actions are very consciously chosen to negate the speaker's words. Why would Robert Ludlum want to do that? You'll see...

Some background on the scene is in order. KGB agent Vasili Taleniekov is a man on the run. He's searching for information on a shadowy international organization called the "Matarese" which is trying to destabilize the world using terrorists as pawns.

Taleniekov is on his way to visit an old girlfriend in Leningrad on a brutally cold winter day. He hasn't seen her in years, and he knows that if he's being followed, he'll endanger her, but he must take that risk. Her name is Lodzia Kronescha and she can help him find the truth. He expects that she'll be asleep when he arrives. It doesn't occur to him that the Matarese might already know about her.

Here's the passage we'll analyze:

He knocked on her door. Within seconds he heard the footsteps beyond, the sound of leather heels against hard wood. Oddly, she had not been in bed. The door opened halfway and Lodzia Kronescha stood there fully clothed -- strangely clothed -- in a bright-colored cotton dress, a summer dress, her light-brown hair falling over her shoulders, her sharp aquiline face set in a rigid expression, her hazel-green eyes staring at him -- staring at him -- as if his sudden appearance after so long were not so much unexpected as it was an intrusion.

"How nice of you to drop by, old friend," she said without a trace of an inflection.

She was telling him something. There was someone inside with her. Someone waiting for him.

"It's good to see you again, old friend," said Taleniekov, nodding in acknowledgment, studying the crack between the door and the frame. He could see the cloth of a jacket, the brown fabric of a pair of

trousers. There was only one man, she was telling him that, too. He pulled out his Graz-Burya, holding up his left hand, three fingers extended, gesturing to his left. On the third nod of his head, she was to drive to her right; her eyes told him she understood. "It's been many months," he continued casually. "I was in the district, so I thought I would..."

He gave the third nod; she lunged to her right. Vasili crashed his shoulder into the door -- into the left panel, so the arc would be clean, the impact total -- then battered it again, crushing the figure behind it into the wall.

Randy sez: Let's separate out the dialogue first and see what it's saying on the surface:

"How nice of you to drop by, old friend," she said.

"It's good to see you again, old friend," said Taleniekov. "It's been many months. I was in the district, so I thought I would..."

Randy sez: This dialogue is so banal, it hurts to look at it. This is the sort of dialogue your high school creative writing teacher told you NEVER to write. But the actions that come with the dialogue completely subvert the words. And both Lodzia and Taleniekov intend them to do exactly that.

We need a little backstory here. Lodzia has been visited by an agent of the Matarese and questioned about Taleniekov. The agent expects that Taleniekov may come visit her, and if so, he tells her that she should welcome him without revealing that she's not alone. The agent intends to kill Taleniekov. So Lodzia has consciously prepared herself to tip off Taleniekov with actions -- actions that the Matarese agent won't know are abnormal.

Let's spell out those actions in detail and see what makes them work.

* Lodzia is wearing leather shoes at an hour when she should be asleep in bed. Even before she opens the door, she is communicating by her heel-clacking to Taleniekov that something is wrong. The message that she communicates to the Matarese agent is different -- he assumes that she has put on her shoes because she's EXPECTING Taleniekov.

* Lodzia has put on a dress, even though it's bedtime. And it's a summer dress, even though it's winter. The visual message she is sending to Taleniekov is that "something is wrong." Once again, the Matarese agent gets a different message. The fact that she puts on a dress tells him that she is planning on receiving a

guest. The fact that it's a summer dress, rather than appropriate winter wear, escapes him, as it would escape most men. (Lodzia tells Taleniekov this after the big fight.)

* When Lodzia put on her dress, the Matarese agent insisted on watching. She put up no protest, sending him the message that she's a floozy sort of woman who is planning on entertaining her gentleman friend. (Lodzia explains all this to Taleniekov a bit later in the scene.)

* When Lodzia opens the door for Taleniekov, she shows no surprise at seeing him for the first time in five years. Instead, her face is set in a rigid expression and her eyes stare at him. This tells Taleniekov, once again, that something is horribly wrong. The Matarese agent, hidden behind the door, probably can't see her face and eyes, but even if he could, they would tell him only that she's expecting Taleniekov.

* When Lodzia speaks, her voice is flat and expressionless, belying her words, which would normally be spoken in a warm greeting. In technical terms, Lodzia is using "paralanguage" to transmit a different message than the words convey. The Matarese agent, as it happens, is an Englishman with poor Russian, and it's possible that he's not able to detect this disconnect. But Taleniekov, a native Russian and a long-time friend of Lodzia, picks it up instantly. Lodzia is communicating with numerous actions that something is very wrong. Yet her words themselves don't communicate that. The only possible conclusion is that a stranger is in the room who can hear Lodzia's words but who can't decipher her strange actions as well as Taleniekov can.

Taleniekov is the best agent in the KGB, and he instantly reads this message and spots the stranger through the crack in the door. He deduces that there is only one man in the room with Lodzia. Ludlum doesn't explain this deduction. He simply asserts that she is telling him this. I'm not entirely sure how she's doing so.

Taleniekov then does a bit of non-verbal communication of his own, entirely at odds with his words, which are just a repetition of Lodzia's own very prosaic words. He pulls out a gun, which communicates to Lodzia that he intends to fight. He shows her three fingers and nods his head to his left to communicate what actions she should take. These are pretty vague actions, but Lodzia communicates back through her eyes that she gets it. Ludlum doesn't quite explain how this works, relying on the fact that Lodzia knows Taleniekov pretty well and she's a KGB agent herself, so she should just know what to do.

In my view, the scene works pretty well. There are a couple of unexplained points that are just glossed

over, but overall, the reader buys into it.

Robert Ludlum specialized in superclever agents who could read great significance into the smallest details and instantly respond to the gravest danger. In this case, he gave us a nice example of using actions to add subtext to a lethally boring dialogue.

4) Marketing: What A Publicist Can Do For You

At a recent conference, I had a chance to chat briefly with Rusty Shelton, who works for the publicity firm Phenix & Phenix. It's been a while since I talked about publicity in this e-zine, so I asked Rusty if he'd be willing to do an interview.

Here's the result:

Q: Tell us about your publicity firm, Phenix & Phenix. You've had a number of clients hit the best seller lists. Tell us some of your success stories!

A: Phenix & Phenix is a boutique literary PR firm that's been promoting books for authors and top publishing houses since 1994. P&P has handled launches for authors like Vicki Courtney, Dr. Les Parrott and Philip Carlo, publishers like St. Martin's Press, Thomas Nelson, Zondervan and TOR/Forge and best sellers like Crucial Conversations, The Ice Man and Revolve. Over the past three years we have added 19 best sellers to our overall tally of 30. We also frequently work with literary agencies and are among the list of recommended publicists at top distributors around the country.

This has been a busy summer for P&P, as we've been named the publicity firm of record for Chicken Soup for the Soul, added new capabilities like viral videos, book trailers and satellite radio tours and booked interviews for our clients with The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Family Circle, Martha Stewart Radio, Self Magazine, Women's Health and many more.

Q: What can a publicist do for a novelist that the novelist can't do for himself?

A: Having a publicist represent you can give you an edge when it comes to attracting the attention of members of the media. First of all, dealing with the media is a very delicate art form. Producers, editors, reporters, reviewers and so on are all busy folks. It helps to know what time of day a particular producer

likes to be contacted or whether an editor prefers phone or e-mail for pitching.

Relationships are really the biggest thing that a good publicist can bring to the table. The relationships that top publicists have with members of the media are very similar to the relationships that literary agents have with editors at publishing houses -- they trust our judgment because we've been working together for so long.

Although relationships are pivotal, there are other factors that also come into play. As an example, the fall news cycle has introduced some very unique challenges to authors and publicists. With current events and print journalism in flux right now, reporters are being taken off their regular beats and are being assigned to election or stock market coverage. A large part of a publicist's job is keeping track of what stories are drawing the most interest and finding ways to connect their clients to those topics. Face it, with the book signings, appearances and other marketing efforts that you're SURELY conducting, you probably don't have time to build relationships with the media. And think about it from a producer or an editor's perspective. With the high volume of books they are receiving for review or story ideas, they want to be contacted by someone who knows what they want to hear about. A good publicist keeps tabs on this.

Finally, an experienced publicist knows how to approach fiction. Although sometimes it can be difficult to create newsworthy buzz for a novel, your publicist's job is to identify newsworthy hooks and use them to create stories or find opportunities to pitch you as an expert. Having a publicist in your corner really lends a great deal of credibility to your project.

Q: Most publishers have a publicist already on staff. As an outside publicity firm, you work closely with the in-house publicist. How does that process work out in practice? What do you do that's different from the in-house publicist?

A: One reality facing most in-house publicity teams is a lack of time to devote to each book the house releases. There are simply too many titles to give each one quality attention. What an outside firm brings to the table is the ability to give a book enough attention to explore a variety of publicity opportunities. Whereas an in-house publicist might only have time to do a mail-out to book reviewers, an outside publicist will be pursuing coverage across all four forms of media with an eye on generating coverage beyond the book page. When you hire a publicist, they are working for you and the publicity they pursue is typically focused as much on building your brand as an author as the book itself.

We really value the relationships we have in place with in-house publicity teams. We're both working toward the same goal, so coordinating our efforts is a natural fit. The goal is to maintain a productive "triangle" of communication between an author and the in-house publicist so that each hit your outside publicist gets contributes to your publisher's ability to sell books into stores.

A good way to narrow down outside firms to consider is to talk with your in-house publicity staff and ask who they recommend. Often they will point you toward publicists that do a great job of working with them and you'll end up with a wonderfully productive team.

Q: What's the process for a publicity campaign? How long in advance of a book's release do you begin, and what goes on during the months leading up to launch day?

A: How much time do you have? There is a lot that goes into a national publicity campaign for a book. The key thing to remember is there really isn't a boilerplate process for each book (or there shouldn't be) -- every campaign has to be different depending on the specific book you are working with.

Typically we begin coordinating efforts with our clients 4-6 months before the book releases. The first step is the galley mailing to book reviewers, which typically happens about five months before publication. After that is complete, an author can expect a lull in activity before the formal publicity campaign gets underway about between 45-60 days prior to a book's official release date.

Most good firms begin a campaign with strategy development. This is a period where publicists do extensive market research for the book, identifying trends and newsworthy hooks, develop a strategy and draft press materials. The full press kit always goes out to the author and publisher for review and approval -- it is very important that everyone have similar talking points when it comes to the book.

One thing that our firm does before the book release is put each client through formal media training at our offices. This day includes sound bite development, practice interviews, breakout sessions on each type of media and other preparatory steps to get an author ready to go on the air. This is as important to our firm as it is to the author as each interview our clients do reflects back on our firm.

Media contact typically begins about a month before the book releases with an eye on timing coverage to happen around the publication date.

Q: Is there a "time window" for the success of a book? I've often heard that a book has about 3 weeks to make a splash. Is this true, not true, or sorta kinda maybe true?

A: This is sorta kinda maybe true.

Most publicists would agree that the optimum time for media coverage surrounding the launch of a book is the 60-90 day window after its release. This is when sales reps at the publishing house are trying to sell the book into stores and publicity can have a huge impact on that success. Once the books are in stores, you also need publicity to drive interest and make sure they don't come back as returns.

As with anything in this industry, there are always exceptions. Some books just simply take longer to breakout. There are times when the media ignores a book when it launches only to end up covering it months later after the book has become a word-of-mouth success.

We have also handled campaigns where we come on board a few months after a book releases and have been able to jumpstart the publicity campaign. The key question is how newsworthy is the book? If it has media potential, the media is going to be less concerned with when it released and more concerned with the story itself.

Q: Some of your success as a publicist depends on how well the novelist helps you publicize their book. What makes a novelist publicisable and what can we writers do NOW to make ourselves more publicisable in the future?

A: We review fiction with a very careful eye because a publicist has to have the right fit if they are going to run a successful launch. We pay very close attention to the nonfiction hooks within the novels that we review. To compete in the competitive media marketplace we have to have more than just a great story.

As an example, we recently handled a great novel from debut author Wendy Walker titled FOUR WIVES (St. Martin's Press) that was very successful. This campaign worked because we were able to take the book beyond book reviewers to feature editors at publications like The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and others. We did so by positioning Wendy to talk about nonfiction, newsworthy issues discussed in the book like opt-out parenting, what goes on behind closed doors in America's wealthy suburbs, relationship dynamics when only one spouse works, etc. This allowed us to go beyond book reviewers to find a large audience for the book.

If you're in the midst of writing your novel, start thinking about the book from the media's perspective.

What more do you have to offer besides just a good story? What issues does your book deal with and what research have you done that qualifies you to speak as an expert on that topic? No one can predict headlines years down the road but if you write with promotion in mind you can really expand the PR potential of your book in the future.

Q: Do you have any secrets for writing successful press releases for novels?

A: Again, think nonfiction with your release. I see way too many press releases that have headlines that either a) compare the novelist to someone named Grisham, Clancy or Kingsbury or b) provide vague praise for the quality of the writing. Your press release should not read like an advertisement or review of your book; if it does, it's going in the trash. It should read like an article you would see in a newspaper or a short segment on NPR. It should contain statistics, quotes and other supporting facts to give the media some background on your topic. Headlines that play on buzz words or newsworthy topics work the best.

Here are some recent headlines we have used for fiction titles:

"Going Behind the Closed Doors of Suburbia: Author's tale eavesdrops on housewives' hush-hush secrets"

"Momtourage: Play group for mom: Moms unite, scrapbooking is common thread"

"'Tis the season for divorce: Marriage experts team up to help couples thrive through riskiest time of year"

The common thread across these press releases? Each deals with topics that are of interest to a certain demographic rather than generic praise for an author.

Q: Are there any red flags authors should watch for when hiring a publicist?

A: There are a lot of red flags authors should watch for but the main thing to consider is how closely a publicist is looking at your work before taking you on. The author-publicist relationship should be very similar to the author-literary agent relationship. If you call a publicity firm and they are offering to bring you on board as a client and send you a contract before they have even looked at your book, what does that tell you about how concerned they are with their ability to be successful with your book? Publicity firms should interview you as much as you interview them, so make sure any firm you are considering is taking a close look at your work.

Other red flags to watch for:

- A poor reputation with your publishing house
- Lack of formal weekly reports
- Vague answers regarding recent success stories
- A lack of experience with your genre.

Randy sez: Thanks, Rusty, for an extremely informative look at the world of publicity.

For more information on Phenix & Phenix Literary Publicists, please visit <http://www.phenixpublicity.com> or <http://www.phenixpublicity.blogspot.com>. You can contact Rusty Shelton at rshelton@phenixpublicity.com.

About Rusty Shelton:

Since joining Phenix & Phenix nearly six years ago, Rusty Shelton has partnered with some of the nation's top publishing houses and bestselling authors to create award-winning literary publicity campaigns. Rusty works to customize publicity campaigns to meet the unique needs of each project and offers guidance about the role media relations will play in the overall promotion efforts for books. Bantam Dell, FSG, St. Martin's Press, Tor/Forge Books, Zondervan, and Thomas Nelson are all publishers with whom Rusty has developed relationships on P&P's behalf, as well as several boutique publishing houses representing unique literary talent.

As managing director, Rusty leads efforts in new business development, traveling to conferences and conventions and speaking to writer's groups about literary publicity. He is featured as a faculty member at an annual publishing course offered by Harvard University's Department of Continuing Education. In 2007, he developed a media training program for The Writer's League of Texas and coordinated national publicity efforts for the Texas Book Festival. Rusty holds a B.A. in corporate communication from the University of Texas at Austin, where he is a member of the Texas Exes Young Alumni Committee.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I recently posted my fourth monthly humor column in a new online magazine. Want to know who's to blame when a novel doesn't sell as well as everyone expected? Sam the Plumber gives the straight scoop in this column. Here's the link:
http://www.ChristianFictionOnlineMagazine.com/biz_rooney.html

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year,

depending on my schedule.

I have finished all teaching for the year 2008. My calendar for 2009 is beginning to fill in.

I will be teaching internet marketing in a major track at the Florida Christian Writers conference in February. Details here:
<http://www.flwriters.org/>

I will be doing an 8-hour mentoring workshop at the Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference in April. Details are not yet available online.

If you'd like me to teach at your conference, email me to find out how outrageously expensive I am.

If you'd just like to hear me teach, I have a number of recordings and e-books that are outrageously cheap. Details here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info>

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This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 384 times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

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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. Otherwise, you'll be getting desperate calls at midnight from your friends asking where they can get their own free subscription.

At the moment, there is one place to subscribe:
My fiction site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
