
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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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 (about 600 of you signed up in September), 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.

Are you a multi-tasker or a single-tasker? Does it make sense to write fiction when you can't do it full time? Find out in my article, "Three Big Chunks."

Can you write a successful novel based on yourself? How much of yourself can you put into your characters without getting into trouble? Take a look at my article, "Your Characters Aren't You."

Have you had it up to here with all this talk of your "platform?" Do you wish you could just write fiction and not worry about the blasted marketing? Check out my article, "What's Your Tribe?"

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

2) Organizing: Three Big Chunks

The biggest problem many writers face is the clock. No matter who you are, no matter how important you are, no matter how smart you are, your day still has only 24 hours in it. You and Bill Gates both have exactly the same amount of time in each day.

The crucial difference is that Bill has enough money socked away so he can do what he wants. Most writers don't have that luxury. We've got day jobs. Families. Hobbies, sports, and entertainment. Church or synagogue or PTA or the Moose Club. We're also supposed to sleep, exercise, eat right, enjoy a bit of fun once in a while, and floss.

Somewhere in all that chaos, we also need to write.

Some writers find a way to make it work; others don't. What makes the difference between those who do and those who don't?

I have a theory on that. It's only a theory, but it's based on watching working writers work. It's based on watching myself work. It's based on twenty years of watching.

Here's my theory. If writing is one of the three big chunks in your life, then you have a good chance of successfully writing fiction. If not, then you don't.

What's a "big chunk?" That's easy to define. It's where your time goes. Look at the things you do, other than sleeping and eating. How much time do you spend on each one? The things you spend the most time on are your "big chunks."

If you work a day job eight hours a day, plus a one-hour commute each way, then your day job is taking up ten hours per day, and that's your biggest chunk.

If you're a stay-at-home-mom and you're spending twelve hours a day taking care of three kids, then that's your biggest chunk.

Those are the two most common big chunks I've seen in writer's lives. There are any number of others that aren't quite so big, but which combine to fill up your life. Take an inventory of your own life. How many hours per week do you spend on each of these:

- * Job
- * Family duties
- * House, yard, or garden
- * Church, synagogue, or other group activities
- * TV, video games, or other electronic entertainment
- * Exercise
- * Reading
- * Writing
- * _____ (fill in that pesky blank)

Now let's be clear about one thing. Most of these are Good Things. Some of them, in fact, are Great Things. A few of them are Mediocre Things or possibly even Useless Things. It really doesn't matter.

What matters for you, as a fiction writer, is that your chances of success in publishing go way up if writing is one of your three biggest chunks.

Is it remotely possible that you can get published if writing is #4 or #5 on your list? Yeah, sure, it's possible. It's possible you could run a marathon on a training base of only 10 miles a week. But you wouldn't do nearly as well as you would if you were putting in 40 or 50 miles every week. There aren't very many certainties in life, so it makes sense to tilt the odds in your favor.

So my rule of thumb for success in fiction is to make writing one of the three biggest chunks in your life. I've got nothing against any of those other things. But the fact is that most writers who sell their first novel are writing at least 10 hours per week, and many are writing 20.

Let me clarify one thing. Very few writers start out writing 10 or 20 hours per week. Most writers start the way I did, doing an hour here and an hour there. Most writers work up to the 10 hour level over a year or two or five. But they rarely get published until they reach that level.

Your life only has room for so many big chunks. So here are some questions I'll leave for you to ponder:

- * Is writing one of the three biggest chunks in your life?
- * What changes would you have to make in your life to make writing one of your Big Three?
- * If you can't make those changes instantly, can you shift things gradually over the next six months?
- * Would it damage your life to make those changes?

Now let me switch gears and point out the opposite hazard. What would happen if you sold a novel for so much money that you could quit your day job and spend all your time writing? Wouldn't that be GREAT?

Well . . . maybe. The thing is that fiction writing is about real life, or something pretty similar to real life. You always need something to write about, and for most writers, that comes from their own life.

What that means is that if you were to spend all your time writing, you'd probably run out of things to write about. Most of the working fiction writers I know have something else going on in their life. Writing may be their day job, but it's not the only thing they do.

My theory is that even when you reach nirvana and writing is your #1 big chunk, you still need to have a couple of other major things going on in your life that feed your imagination. Writers need to get out, do things, interact with the Muggles.

Not too many other things. Three big chunks seems to be about right.

That's my theory. It's only a theory. It's based on plenty of experience, but it's still at best only a rule of thumb.

Now the final question for you is whether this theory suggests an action plan you could make right now. If so, then go to it. Nothing ever happens until you take action.

3) Creating: Your Characters Aren't You

At least twice a month, I get a letter that runs roughly like this:

"Hi Randy:

I'm writing a novel about something horrible that happened in my life. Nobody would ever believe what those dirty rotten scoundrels did to me, so I'm making it a novel. It's gonna be great! The only question I have is what legal problems I'll face when they read my book. Can I get sued, even if it's all the exact truth? Do I have to change their names? I want them to suffer!

Sincerely,
Joe Wannawriteanovel"

Before you read on, think about that for a minute. How would you answer Joe? Can he get sued for telling the truth?

I usually begin my answer to this kind of e-mail by pointing out that I'm not a lawyer, and therefore nothing I say can be construed as legal advice. Then I say that, so far as I understand it, telling the truth is not libel, but it can be invasion of privacy. So even if a novel tells the absolute truth, the author might still be sued for making private details public.

I usually advise Joe to make a few eeny weeny changes: Change the names of the characters. Change their genders. Change their personal descriptions. Change their ethnic heritages. Change their personalities. Change the facts of the story so that nobody could possibly recognize the circumstances and guess that the people involved are friends or family of Joe. Change everything.

In short, write fiction.

In my view, the legal issues aren't really the biggest problem with writing a novel based on real people. The real problem is that real situations involving real people make really boring fiction.

In fiction, nothing is written in stone. If you need to edit a Gertrude into a Gary, then you must have the freedom to make that change. If you need to merge five fuzzy characters into two memorable ones, then you must feel free to merge. If your lead character needs a horrible seventh-grade experience involving a tarantula, a blindfold, and an icepick, then you have to be able to conjure up that memory.

You can't afford to hamstring your fiction with an inconvenient set of facts. If you base your novel on

something that really happened, then every time you need to tweak your plot or characters, you'll hear a voice in the back of your head saying, "But it didn't happen that way."

Let's be honest. Fiction is about telling lies. Big, fat, hairy, prevaricating lies. If you want to write about the truth, or approximately the truth, or even something remotely approaching the truth, then the career you're looking for is called "Journalism." It's a fine career choice, but it isn't fiction.

Which leads me to another common question I hear. "Is it OK if I write a character that's really just me?"

That depends on what you mean by the word "OK." I doubt very much that you can sue yourself for libel or invasion of privacy if you write a character that is just you. (Again, I'm not a lawyer, so if you sue yourself and somehow win, then don't blame me.)

I see several problems with writing a character that is just you:

- * You may not be quite as interesting as your lead character needs to be.
- * If you buff up your character to be "you plus a little extra," you may wind up looking egotistical.
- * If you add in some traumatic backstory that never happened, your friends and family might get upset.
- * What will you do for an encore?

Let's unpack each of these in turn.

Fiction is about characters in conflict. The characters are often a bit larger than life -- in some cases, a LOT larger than life. Let's face it. Although we writers are a talented bunch, most all of us aren't quite as talented as the characters we create. We'd like to be, but we aren't. We can't afford to limit our characters to be no better than we are.

Suppose you write a lead character just like you in every way. Then, halfway through the novel, you realize that he needs to be quite a bit better than you are in some way. Maybe smarter. Maybe faster. Maybe cooler. Whatever. So you tweak him and finish the story and get it published. Now all your friends and family read the story and they see right away that your lead character is intended to be you. But they also see that he's smarter than you are, or faster, or cooler. Naturally, they're going to assume that you think you're smarter, faster, or cooler than you actually are. That makes you look like an egomaniac. Is that what you want?

Suppose you write a lead character just like you in every way. Halfway through the novel, you need to explain why your character is afraid of electricity. You decide to make it plausible by adding in some backstory about being shocked with a cattle prod by an

unstable mother. Now you've got problems, because it's going to be "obvious" to everyone that your mother must have tortured you as a kid. If it's not true, your novel could be construed as libel. If it's true, your story could be considered invasion of privacy. Either way, your mother may just take you off her Christmas list.

Typically, publishers are interested in doing more than just one book with you. They invest quite a bit of money in developing an author, and it takes a few books to earn back that investment. Suppose you write a great novel in which your lead character is you. That's wonderful, but who'll play the starring role in your next book? You might be able to do a sequel that again features you as the lead. But can you keep that up forever? If not, then why get started down that road in the first place?

It's perfectly OK to inject a bit of yourself in your characters. In fact, I recommend it for every character, even your villains. Give each of your characters some little snippet of yourself, whether it's your tight-trigger temper or your obsession with stamps from Zimbabwe or your amazing skill at juggling buffalo chips.

You have plenty of interesting quirks and character traits to go around for every character you ever write. Your characters are like your children, and each of them should get some bit of your DNA.

My rule of thumb is that none of my characters should "inherit" more than about a third of their traits from me. I have no idea how much inheritance is too much, but I prefer to be cautious, so I try not to go over a third.

I've written several major characters who were physicists. Another was a software engineer, another an archaeologist, another a novelist. All of them shared a major interest with me. But I never thought of any of them as "me plus a little extra," because I've always started with somebody who was fundamentally different from me and then added chunks of myself. I think of my characters as "somebody I'd like to hang out with, because we have a major shared interest."

Now here are some questions you might want to consider for the novel you're working on right now:

* How much does your lead character resemble you? Will your readers wonder if that character is secretly you? Is it possible that this character is more nearly your clone than your child? Does your character have some trait that makes it clear that he or she can't possibly be you?

* How much of your DNA does your villain inherit? Is

there nothing in your villain that you can relate to?
Is it possible that you might be better able to
empathize with your villain by giving him or her some
valued trait of yours?

Fiction is a pack of lies that masquerades as truth.
Don't risk spoiling your carefully crafted lies with
too much truth -- or with too little.

4) Marketing: What's Your Tribe?

I recently read Seth Godin's book TRIBES, which is a
book that a fair number of novelists are using to
redefine their thinking about marketing.

What's a tribe? Godin defines it as a group of people
connected to each other, to an idea, and to a leader.

I predict that you'll either love TRIBES or you'll hate
it. You'll love the book if it ignites a vision for
leadership in you. You'll hate it if you wanted a
how-to manual that explains the twelve steps of
building a tribe.

TRIBES is about being a leader in a world that's
painfully short on leaders and painfully long on
managers. Godin uses these terms differently from
everyone else, so let me explain what he means by them.

Leaders change the world. Managers implement policies.
Leaders do what they love doing. Managers do what upper
management tells them to do. Leaders accumulate
followers and give them a vision for change. Managers
accumulate employees and give them a benefits package.

If the above paragraph resonates with you, then you'll
probably love TRIBES. If it doesn't, then you'll
probably hate the book.

TRIBES may possibly give you a powerful vision for
where you might want to go in life, but it won't give
you many clues about how to get there.

If you're a tactical person who needs a little help
with setting a strategic vision, then TRIBES is your
book. If you're a visionary person without tactical
skills, then you'll instantly get the message of
TRIBES, but you'll find it frustratingly unhelpful. If
you're not into either visioning or tactics, then
TRIBES probably isn't for you.

Honestly, I'm a whole lot better at tactics than at the
vision thing, so I really loved TRIBES. A little vision
goes a long way for me.

Godin doesn't talk at all about marketing fiction in TRIBES. So what's the connection? That's a little elusive. A tribe, according to Godin, is built around a leader and an idea. If ideas don't play much role in your fiction, then you might think that you're not a candidate for leading a tribe.

But not so fast! It's not clear to me that an idea has to be terribly profound in order to build a tribe around it. What's really important is that a tribe is a community clustered around a leader. That community can be electronic. That leader can be you. In some cases, the leader could be someone you don't even know, someone who loves your books.

As an example, consider MuggleNet.com. Ever been on this site? My kids have, zillions of times. So have all their friends. MuggleNet is a community site for fans of the Harry Potter series. You might say that the idea of the MuggleNet tribe is "Harry Potter is a fun series." It's not a big idea, but it's enough to attract a large community.

Inside MuggleNet you'll find a page called MuggleSpace, which has the title "MuggleSpace -- The ULTIMATE Harry Potter Social Network." That says it all. If you want to hang out with other fans of the boy wizard, MuggleSpace is your place.

And what good is that? -- you may be asking.

That's a fair question. If the only people who come to MuggleNet are already fans of Harry, then the site isn't marketing the books; instead, the books are marketing the site. That seems just a little backward.

But that misses a crucial fact about tribes, or any community. When people belong to a tribe, they like to talk about their shared interest. They talk with other True Believers. They also talk with their friends who aren't True Believers. That's how True Believers come into any tribe.

That is what we mean by "word of mouth," which happens to be the most powerful marketing force in the known universe. By building a tribe, you foster word of mouth.

There isn't any magic formula for building a tribe. Every tribe is different and every tribe has a different lifecycle. But most tribes are built because a leader did some or all of the following:

- * Chose an idea he or she was passionate about
- * Made a decision to lead
- * Found a way to communicate to followers
- * Made a way to listen to followers

* Gave the followers a forum to talk to each other

* Encouraged the followers to talk to outsiders

Be aware that not all tribes are about marketing. If you build a tribe for the money, then you may find yourself managing, not leading. But if you build a tribe to pursue your passion, then it's quite possible that the money will follow. If it doesn't, you won't care, because you'll be doing what you love.

The notion of tribe-building will either resonate with you or it won't. That is not a sign of your moral fitness or moral decay. A lot depends on who you are and how your brain is wired and how you want to run your life.

I happen to like the whole idea, but that's hardly surprising. Over the last few years, without knowing anything about the concept of tribes, I've built a tribe around the idea of "You can write a novel."

It's a fine tribe, and now my immediate goal is to figure out how to lead it better. I'll be working on that over the next few months. Stay tuned . . .

If you're interested in learning more about the book TRIBES, you can check it out here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/godin/tribes.php>

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

In April, I signed a contract with the publisher of the popular "Dummies" guides for a book titled WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES. This will, I hope, be an essential guide for pre-published novelists, and a useful reference for published authors. I've now completed the editorial revision process and I'm awaiting galley proofs.

I recently posted the latest installment in my monthly humor column. This month, in "Insta-Brandomatic," my plumber Sam adds branding consulting to his business model. Want to see what sort of brand Sam and his too-clever niece Samantha devised for me? 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'll be teaching two workshops on internet marketing at the Oregon Christian Writer's One-Day Fall Conference in October. Details here:
<http://www.oregonchristianwriters.org>

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>

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 6543 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, 2009.

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>

7) Reprint Rights

Permission is granted to use any of the articles in this e-zine in your own e-zine or web site, as long as you include the following 2-paragraph blurb with it:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 17,000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>.

Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing

and get a free 5-Day Course in How To Publish a Novel.

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