
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Circulation: 19730 writers, each of them creating a
Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

"Fiction Writing = Organizing + Creating + Marketing"

What's in This Issue

- 1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!
 - 2) Organizing: Your Hopes and Dreams File
 - 3) Creating: Some Things Are Impossible
 - 4) Marketing: Whither Twitter?
 - 5) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com)
 - 6) Randy Recommends . . .
 - 7) Steal This E-zine!
 - 8) Reprint Rights
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- 1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!

Those of you who have joined in the past month (nearly 500 of you signed up in February), 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 at the bottom 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.

* Every one of us has hopes and dreams for our lives. It's easy to lose track of them in the busyness of life. But there's an easy way to make sure you keep those in front of you. Read all about it in my article, "Your Hopes and Dreams File."

* It's easy to believe that anything can happen in a novel. After all, it's fiction, right? But there are some things that can't happen in your novel, and unless you know what those are, you're asking for trouble. Find out more in this month's column on craft, "Some Things Are Impossible."

* Last year at this time, just about every author I talked to was excited about Twitter. Is Twitter the ultimate marketing solution for a novelist? I'll tell you my thoughts in my article, "Whither Twitter?"

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

2) Organizing: Your Hopes and Dreams File

Want to get really, really, REALLY depressed?

Take five minutes to do this exercise right now:

* Take out a piece of paper or open your word processor

* Write down everything that's on your plate. Everything. Your meeting with Joe at 11:30 tomorrow. That oil change you still haven't done on your car. The light bulb in the kitchen you need to change. That idea for a novel you want to write. The T-rex that needs to be milked at 5 AM. EVERYTHING.

You have exactly five minutes, so go do it now . . .

* * *

Well? How'd that work out for you? Are you good and depressed?

I was when I did this exercise a couple of months ago.

I've got a gigantic load of things that need doing and I'm pretty sure you do too.

In the day to day battle of life, the things that usually rise to the top and get done are the urgent things and the concrete things -- the meeting with Joe, the light bulb, the T-rex.

The things that get put off are the vague and squishy things. Getting in shape. Saving money for retirement. Writing a novel.

I've been reading a book lately, GETTING THINGS DONE, by David Allen that talks about how to juggle all the things on your plate.

Bottom line: it's really hard to get it all done. But it's not that hard to keep track of what "it all" is. And it's not that hard to make sure that the most important of those "vague and squishy" things on your list get done.

I can't summarize a whole book here, and I'd be crazy to try. If you want the whole book, then go buy it. It's a good book and you'll find it very inspiring.

In this column, let's just talk about one small aspect of getting things done -- managing your hopes and dreams.

Your hopes and dreams are those vague and squishy things that really matter to you. They're the kind of thing you can't just knock off in a Saturday afternoon of intense effort. Your hopes and dreams require sustained effort to achieve.

Here are some steps you can take to see the most important of your hopes and dreams come true:

- * Take a look at that depressing list you just wrote down. Ignore all the little diddly things like meetings with Joe and changing light bulbs and milking Rex. Look at the big things, your hopes and dreams. Write down each one on a separate sheet of paper and put them in a stack.

- * Sort the stack into piles of similar things. Put each stack in a manila file folder and label it. Some of my folders are labeled "Pending House," "Pending Novels," "Pending Office," "Pending Products," "Pending Math," and "Pending Yard."

- * Store the files in a safe place (it's traditional to use a filing cabinet, but a desk drawer or a bookshelf works just fine). This is your "Hopes and Dreams" file and it represents all the really meaningful things you want to do in your life.

- * Make it a point to review your "Hopes and Dreams" file regularly. I review mine weekly, on Friday

afternoon, at 4:30 PM. There's a note in my online calendar to do this review. During the review, I ask the same question about each sheet of paper in each file folder: "Is now a good time to start work on this?" In most cases, the answer is no. You simply can't do everything at once.

* If the answer is yes, then I transfer the sheet of paper to a different file, which I review daily. It's no longer a "pending" project, now it's a "current" project. That means that I've committed to doing the project. It also means that I have to define exactly what it is I want to achieve. I write this on the sheet of paper. Now it's no longer vague and squishy.

* Every morning, I look at my file folder of "current" projects. For each piece of paper, I ask whether I want to work on it today. Often the answer is no. As I said, you can't do everything at once.

* If the answer is yes, then I ask what's the next action I could take to move the project forward. Then I put that on the list to do today, somewhere between the light-bulb changing and the milking chores.

This procedure won't magically clear your plate. It won't make all your hopes and dreams come true. It won't make you taller, thinner, sexier, or smarter.

What it will do is make you focus on the 20% of the hopes and dreams in your life that will give you 80% of the satisfaction.

All of the above is awfully primitive. You can do a lot better if you're willing to get more sophisticated. But I'm not going to cover that here, because that's really a book's worth of material, and David Allen already wrote that book.

If you want to know more about his book, GETTING THINGS DONE, then read the Amazon reviews here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/allen/gtd.php>

Why be depressed about all those things on your plate, when you can do something about it?

3) Creating: Some Things Are Impossible

Recently, one of my loyal e-zine readers asked me to write more about creating Storyworld. (Storyworld is my term for the universe in which a novel takes place.)

Every novel has a Storyworld, but three broad classes of fiction typically require an enormous amount of work

in constructing a Storyworld -- fantasies, science fiction, and historical novels.

In this article, I'll analyze the Storyworld of the bestselling TWILIGHT series, a young adult fantasy series by Stephenie Meyer. I'll explain how the Storyworld enables powerful conflict for this series.

The series has four books:

- * TWILIGHT
- * NEW MOON
- * ECLIPSE
- * BREAKING DAWN

Meyer builds her story on what appears at first glance to be our own world. Much of the first book is set in Forks, a small town in the state of Washington. The action occasionally branches out to the nearby Native American reservation at La Push and also to Port Angeles. A few scenes take place in Phoenix, Arizona. In the later books in the series, some action takes place in Italy and South America, but most of the story sticks close to Forks.

All of these are real places. Forks is not Middle Earth or Narnia or Hogwarts.

So what makes Meyer's Storyworld a fantasy?

The answer is that her Storyworld has two supernatural cultural groups -- vampires and werewolves. (Technically, as Meyer points out in the fourth book, the werewolves are actually shapeshifters, not true werewolves. We'll call them werewolves here because that's the term used in most of the series.)

Both of these cultural groups have remarkable powers.

The vampires of TWILIGHT are incredibly strong, incredibly fast, incredibly beautiful, and also pretty darned smart. When exposed to sunlight, they glitter. Their body temperature is very low and they're extremely durable -- essentially made of rock. They never get sick, they don't need to breathe, they have no heartbeat, and they're immortal.

The werewolves are huge -- bigger than your average grizzly. They're also very fast runners and when they take on their wolf shapes, they can read the minds of all the other wolves in their pack, enabling instant communication during battle. Their teeth are strong enough to tear vampire flesh.

The vampires and werewolves are natural enemies. Each thinks that the other smells terrible, and each can track the other over long distances. The vampires and werewolves in the story have an uneasy truce, and Forks is the middle ground, although none of the humans know it.

Both cultural groups are fascinating and readers naturally fantasize about being one or the other. Plenty of readers would love to be powerful, strong, beautiful, and immortal. Plenty of others would love to run with the wolves.

The big problem in any novel with supernatural powers is that it's all too easy for the reader to believe that "anything can happen." And when anything can happen, where's the conflict? After all, if the vamps are all powerful, then what's to stop them from feasting on all the humans in sight?

Meyer chose to put a number of limitations on the vampires and werewolves, and that's what makes the story possible.

I'll repeat that for emphasis. No story is possible unless there are limits. No limits, no conflict. No conflict, no story.

What are the limits in the TWILIGHT series? There are many. Some of them are hard limits (some things are absolutely impossible) and some of them are softer limits (some things are just very hard). Here are a few of them:

- * The vampire clan in Forks is the Cullen family, led by the gentle and kind Dr. Carlisle Cullen. The Cullens are voluntarily "vegetarian" -- meaning that they don't drink human blood. They crave it, of course. Some of them crave it terribly. But they hunt and kill only animals and they'd feel terrible if they killed a human. This is a soft limit, since they can in principle, kill a human. But it creates a terrible conflict when Edward Cullen finds himself attracted to the new girl in town, Bella Swan, the narrator of the story. Edward loves Bella with a deep and pure love, but there's a part of him that would love nothing more than to have her for dinner. That's a conflict!

- * Vampires all around the world live under a law which forbids them to let humans know of their existence. The law is iron. If a human learns that vampires exist, then the human must either be killed . . . or turned into a vampire. This law is enforced by the worldwide community of vampires, and the most powerful clan is the Volturi who live in Italy in the ancient city of Volterra. This is a soft limit, since the vampires could in principle relax the law. But for their own safety, they believe it imperative to stick to the letter. When Bella Swan learns that gorgeous Edward Cullen is a vampire, that creates a terrible dilemma. Will Bella become a vampire -- or will she be killed?

- * There is only one way to become a vampire, but it's both risky and painful. You have to be bitten by a vampire. The venom gets into your bloodstream and over the course of a few days, it turns you into a vampire. But this is immensely risky because few vampires would

be happy to take just a nibble from your neck when your blood is so delicious. If a vampire bites you, he or she is almost certain to suck all your blood, killing you. This is why vampires are rare -- because they can only be created when they somehow evade being killed by their attacker. If they do survive the attack, they suffer for days in excruciating, appalling, hellfire-in-the-veins agony. This is a hard limit. This is the only way to become a vampire. No exceptions, ever. This creates enormous conflict for Edward, because he can't imagine causing that kind of pain to someone he loves. Nor can he abide the thought of causing Bella to lose her soul -- the condition for being a vampire.

* A number of the vampires in the story have one-of-a-kind supernatural powers. Edward can read the minds of anyone, human, vampire, or werewolf. Jane can telepathically cause excruciating pain in anyone, human, vampire, or werewolf. Zafrina can implant a visual image in the mind of anyone. But there's a strange, unexplained limit -- Bella is impervious to the telepaths. Why? Nobody knows. But Bella can't be mindread by Edward, tortured by Jane, or implanted with images by Zafrina. This is a hard limit on Edward, Jane, Zafrina, and the others with telepathic capabilities and it significantly affects the story.

* Alice can see the future (even Bella's future) but she can only see the future when an actual decision has been made. If a person changes their mind, then their future changes and Alice had better be on the ball, or she'll miss the changed future. This puts a hard limit on Alice. (She's a terrific fighter, because she can foresee her opponent's moves before they make them.)

* Vampires are immortal, but they can be killed. You kill a vampire by tearing him or her to bits and burning the pieces. (If you don't burn the parts, they reassemble and the vampire remains alive.) It's hard to tear a vampire's flesh. Chainsaws or jackhammers won't work. A vampire can do it. So can a werewolf's teeth. This means that if you want to get rid of a vampire, you need another vampire or a werewolf. This is a hard limit in the story. There's no other way to kill a vampire.

The above isn't a complete list of all the soft and hard limits in the series, but the point is clear. An immensely important part of the TWILIGHT Storyworld is this set of limitations on the supernatural characters.

I'll say it again -- supernatural fiction without limits has no conflict. If you want a real story, you need to carefully define the limits on the supernatural powers of your characters.

This is true, whether you're writing supernatural fiction or plain old everyday fiction. Some things have to be impossible or you have no story.

Think now about your own novel. What are the soft limits on your characters? What are the hard limits? Can you introduce more of these? If you do, will it make your story more interesting?

4) Marketing: Whither Twitter?

About a year ago, I sat on a panel discussion about marketing at a writing conference. As it turned out, all the other panelists were talking about the joys of Twittering.

Twitter, according to them, is a terrific way for a novelist to promote their fiction. Several of them even had anecdotal evidence in their favor -- they had heard from somebody who bought a book after hearing about it on Twitter.

My response then was simple. Explain to me in simple terms, how and why a Twitter campaign can sell significant numbers of books. Then show me evidence that it actually works.

Why do I insist that the campaign should sell significant numbers of books?

That's simple. Just about any marketing campaign, no matter how stupid and poorly executed, can sell insignificant numbers of books. (If you want to pay me \$10,000 to run a marketing campaign for you, I can guarantee that it'll sell at least 100 copies. I'll just buy 100 copies on Amazon, and then use the other \$9,000 to buy myself some toys.)

Why do I ask that you show me evidence that it works?

That's simple too. Anybody can cook up a marketing scheme that sounds good on paper. Theories are cheap. What matters is whether a theory actually works. (My training as a physicist is kicking in here. In physics, theories are fun to spin, but experiments decide which theories survive.)

All of this ought to be obvious. Most people wouldn't buy a car without getting at least minimal evidence that it actually runs. So why spend a lot of time doing marketing without any particular evidence that it's going to make a difference?

When I make these objections to Twitterers, I usually get the following three responses:

- * It doesn't take much time to Twitter.

- * It's impossible to measure marketing.
- * Twittering is better than doing nothing.

The obvious answers to these are the following:

- * It takes more time to Twitter than to not Twitter. Furthermore, Twitterers are constantly talking about all the software they've installed to make it even quicker and easier to tweet. If it doesn't take much time, then why spend so much time looking for software to make it take less time?
- * Some kinds of marketing are measurable. When I run a marketing campaign, I know within hours how well it's working. If you absolutely, positively can't measure the results of a Twitter campaign, then why do it?
- * The options are not "Twittering" versus "doing nothing." The options are "Twittering" versus "doing something else that might earn you some actual money." If you could measure the effectiveness of a Twitter campaign and found that it earned you twelve cents per hour, would you consider that "better than nothing?"

The usual objection to these answers is:

- * I don't Twitter to make money; I do it to spread the love.

The obvious answer is:

- * Excellent! You've finally gotten honest. Spread the love all you want. But be grammatically correct and stop calling it marketing, because marketing is done to make money. So call Twittering by its right name, which is spreading the love.

In the last few months, I've heard from a few writers who've gotten a bit disgruntled with Twittering. They've begun wondering why they should spend so much time tweeting. They've begun wondering if it does any good.

Excellent questions.

My own view is this. The purpose of Twitter is to keep up with your friends and let your friends keep up with you. Twitter is supposed to be fun. But when your friends start pushing commercials at you, the fun goes out the window. (This is the reason you stopped answering the phone when your Amway friends call, remember?)

Using Twitter as a marketing tool amounts to treating other people the way you wouldn't want to be treated.

Most of the time, that's a bad idea. Most of the time, that ought to send up a giant red flag. Most of the time, that's an excellent reason to run fast in the opposite direction.

My best guess is that three years from now, writers are going to say, "Remember Twitter?" in exactly the same tone of voice that people who grew up in the 1970s say, "Remember polyester shirts?"

What new marketing scheme will come next after Twitter? That's hard to tell. Marketing fads come and go.

Whatever fad comes next, just ask three questions:

- * How and why should this marketing scheme work?
- * What evidence shows that it actually does work?
- * Would I object to having stuff marketed at me using this scheme?

If you don't like the answers to these questions, then just say no.

One caveat to all of the above: It's quite possible that there's a good and useful way to use Twitter as a marketing tool in a way that doesn't abuse your friends and which actually works. I don't know how to do this, but I've never claimed to know everything, so I'm open to the possibility.

If you know how to use Twitter effectively to market fiction, if you can explain how and why it should work, if you have hard numbers to prove that it does work, and if you are confident that it doesn't abuse friendships, then I'd love to hear about it.

Otherwise, I guess I'm about as interested in Twitter as I am in your great deal on all that fantastic Amway stuff in your garage.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My new book, WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES, began shipping in late November and is now in bookstores just about everywhere. The book had a terrific launch and spent several days in the top 1000 on Amazon. You can find out all about WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES here: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/wffd>

I recently released my latest software product, "Snowflake Pro," which makes it fast, easy, and fun to work through the steps of my well-known Snowflake method for designing a novel. You can find out more about Snowflake Pro at: <http://www.SnowflakeProSoftware.com>

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule. My schedule for this year is now mostly filled in.

In late March, I will be doing a small group mentoring workshop at the Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference. More info:
<http://mounthermon.org/adult/professionals/writers-conference>

In late July, I'll be doing another small group mentoring workshop in Oregon. More details when they're available online.

In October, I'll be teaching an all-day series of lectures in Houston. More details soon.

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) Randy Recommends . . .

I don't take paid ads for this e-zine. I do, however, recommend people I like. I'm a huge fan of Margie Lawson's courses, both the ones she teaches in person and the ones she sells on her web site at
<http://www.MargieLawson.com>

Margie is a psychologist who applies what she knows about human psychology to writing fiction. I believe her material is brilliant.

Margie will be teaching a Master Class on "Empowering Characters' Emotions" in St. Louis on April 23-24, 2010.

See Margie's web site for details.

Margie will also be teaching several online courses this year:

- * March 1-31: Empowering Characters' Emotions
- * May 3-28: Deep Editing, the EDITS System, Rhetorical Devices, and More
- * June 1-15: Writing Body Language and Dialogue Cues Like a Psychologist.

If you want to buy these courses in electronic form, you can get them at Margie's site NOW:
<http://www.MargieLawson.com>

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 82 times the price. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2010.

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:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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