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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Circulation: 7451 writers, each of them creating a  
Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

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What's in This Issue

- 1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!
  - 2) Cruise Update
  - 3) Creating Characters -- Part 1
  - 4) On Writing Proposals -- Part 5
  - 5) Anxiety and Writers
  - 6) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com)
  - 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 (about 700 of you are new since my 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 email that will put you out of your misery.

If you missed a back issue, remember that all previous issues are archived on my web site at:  
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine>

As most of you know, I'll be going on an Alaska cruise in July and running a writing workshop with my co-author, John Olson. And you're invited! For more info, see the Cruise Update in this issue.

In the last few months, we've talked about fight scenes. In this issue, I'll switch gears and begin a multipart series on characters. I'll show you a key technique for creating great characters.

Over the last few months, I've run a series of articles on writing proposals. I'll wrap that up this month with an article on writing the dreaded synopsis.

A lot of writers I know struggle with anxiety. Not the normal kind of anxiety, but something deeper. I'll talk about that in this issue.

Do you miss reading my monthly articles on Tiger Marketing? The good news is that I'm now writing TWICE as many articles per month on marketing. But they're no longer in this e-zine. Just one month ago, I launched a new e-zine that's ONLY about marketing and ONLY for writers. The launch has gone extraordinarily well and the e-zine already has a large number of readers.

The new e-zine is named The Mad Genius Writer, and in it, I hope to teach writers how to market themselves like a mad genius. Every issue contains one article on strategic marketing and one article on tactical marketing. To read the first issue, click here:  
<http://www.MadGeniusWriter.com/ezine>

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## 2) Cruise Update

The Alaska cruise is now only five and a half months away! My cruise director, Amy Olson, has asked me to let you know that the Princess Cruise people are doing Yet Another Signup Special. (They seem to do one every two months!) Amy writes:

"Princess Cruises is currently offering a sale on our cruise on the Golden Princess. Reserve your cabin today and you only have to place \$100 down per person for a deposit. You also receive a coupon book valued at \$120 for use on the ship. The sale ends Feb. 15th, so register today!"

All the pesky details on the cruise, along with contact info for our cruise director, are right here:  
[http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/home/cruise\\_info.php](http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/home/cruise_info.php)

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## 3) Creating Characters -- Part 1

If you want to write great fiction, then you need great characters. You can get away with a so-so setting and a plodding plot and a threadbare theme, if only your characters are great people that your readers want to spend time with.

And what makes a great character?

Lots of things. I could make a long list, but today I'll focus on one in particular.

A great character has a strong internal conflict.

OK, that's progress. And what makes a strong internal conflict?

Again, could be lots of things. Again, I'll focus on the one that the smart money bets on.

A strong internal conflict comes from a conflict in a character's core values.

We're starting to get somewhere. What, exactly is a "value?"

You can come up with all sorts of definitions for what a value is, but I have a working definition that serves me pretty well. A value is a motivating force for which the character can give no reason.

Let me give you an example from Star Wars. (The original Star Wars movie, perversely numbered as Episode 4.) We'll look at two core values of Han Solo.

Here's the backdrop. Late in the movie, the Death Star is approaching the rebel planet. Luke is getting ready to go into battle. Han Solo is loading up his ship with money so he can leave the rebel planet. Luke wants Han to stay and fight, but Han insists that he has to go pay off Jabba the Hutt. Luke calls him a coward and Han leaves in a huff.

If George Lucas broke into the movie right here and interviewed Han, it might go something like this:

George: "Han, why are you leaving your friends in danger like this?"

Han: "Because I need to go pay off Jabba the Hutt."

George: "Why do you need to pay off Jabba the Hutt?"

Han: "Because he's got bounty hunters all over the galaxy looking for me."

George: "And why do these bounty hunters motivate you to leave your friends when they're in crisis?"

Han: "Because if they find me, they're going to kill

me, you ninny."

George: "And the problem with that is ...?"

Han: "I don't want to die."

George: "And the reason you don't want to die is ...?"

Han [exasperated]: "Because I don't want to die!"

George: "Han, you're not making sense. You don't want to die because you don't want to die?"

Han: "Right!"

George: "Aha! You value your life, then, right?"

Han: "Well, duh! Doesn't everybody?"

George: "No. Luke and all these rebels are going into battle right now against hopeless odds because they value freedom more than life."

Han: "I don't get that. Nothing is more important than life."

END OF INTERVIEW

See how that works? One of Han Solo's values is his life. He can't give a reason for it. He thinks it's obvious. He can't understand it when other people consider something else more important than their lives. That's what a value is -- something so "obviously important" that you can't give a reason for it.

But that's not the end of things. If Han Solo's only value was his own pitiful little skin, then he'd have flown off to pay Jabba the Hutt, leaving loopy little Luke to face the wrath of Daddy Vader.

That isn't what happened. In the climactic battle, Luke is bearing down on his target, but he's got Darth Vader on his tail, shooting at him. Luke's a sitting duck. Vader is going to whack him before Luke can fire his torpedo. But then . . .

Out of nowhere, a ship appears, fires some shots, and sends Darth Vader's Tie fighter zinging off into the abyss and out of the movie. Luke has a free hand to shoot up the Death Star, which he does, brilliantly.

But who's in that cavalry ship? Surprise, surprise, it's Han Solo, who's come back to save lucky Lukey.

Now let's get George to cut the action and interview Han Solo once more:

George: "Han, you came back! Why'd you do that?"

Han: "I thought Luke might need a little help."

George: "But it was dangerous! You might have gotten killed."

Han: "Yeah, well . . . that's not as bad as some things that could happen."

George: "Don't tell me you've suddenly caught the Freedom Fever? What could be worse than dying?"

Han: "That bratty Luke called me the C-word."

George: "Help me out here. I've lost the script. What did he call you?"

Han [spluttering]: "A cow... A cow..."

George: "He called you a cow? Don't give me that bull!"

Han [with clenched teeth]: "He called me a cow...ard."

George: "So? You are a coward, aren't you? Running off to save your skin?"

Han [grabbing George by the collar and shoving him against the wall]: "Don't you ever call me a coward! Nobody calls Han Solo a coward and gets away with it!"

George [gasping]: "Easy, Han. Take a deep breath. And let me take one too. What's the problem here? There's no shame in being afraid."

Han: "Is too."

George: "Really, now? What's so horrible about being afraid?"

Han: "I don't mean being afraid. I mean when people think you're afraid."

George: "You'd better elaborate on that. Only an idiot isn't ever afraid."

Han: "Han Solo is never afraid."

George: "Han Solo is talking about himself in the third person. What's got into Han Solo?"

Han: "I don't tolerate people thinking that I'm afraid."

George: "What's this now? You don't want to BE afraid, or you don't want people to THINK you're afraid?"

Han: "What's the difference? You are who people think you are."

George: "So it's your reputation that was at stake here?"

Han: "Yes, obviously. If people thought I was a coward, I'd be ruined."

George: "Ruined? How so? Why do you care what other people think?"

Han: "Because I care what other people think. George, how can you be so stupid?"

George: "I don't care if you think I'm stupid. But I'm trying to understand what you think because it doesn't make sense."

Han: "Of course it makes sense! You are what other people think. That's so obvious, if you don't understand it, I can't explain it."

George: "You value your reputation, don't you?"

Han: "Duh! Doesn't everybody?"

George: "Do you value your reputation more than your life?"

Han [thinking long and hard]: "Gosh, that's a tough one, George, but I guess I do. I came back, didn't I?"

END OF INTERVIEW

And that's the key. Han Solo has TWO values here, not just one. He values his life. But he also values his reputation. And those two values are in conflict. That's part of what makes Han Solo interesting. It's part of what drives the story.

Obviously, in your story you can't conduct an on-the-nose kind of interview like George did with Han. You can't make your character TELL what they value. You've got to SHOW what they value. And that's not hard to do, because the old saying is true: Actions speak louder than words.

We know that Han values his reputation more than his life because of his action -- he came back. And we knew far earlier in the movie that Han values his reputation, because we saw his swagger, heard the bravado in his words, saw the way he talked to Princess Leia. We knew Han was putting on a cowboy front. Nobody had to tell us.

You don't have to spell this kind of thing out for the reader. Your reader will absorb it unconsciously.

But you may need to spell it all out for one very important person -- yourself. Many writers do extensive character development before they ever write a word of the story. I know writers who interview their characters in order to get to know them better. To

learn their values.

Do you hold long conversations with your characters in your head? Do you hear their voices when you wake up in the middle of the night? Do you interview your characters to probe their values?

Give it a try. See if it might work for you, by George.

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#### 4) On Writing Proposals -- Part 5

I would guess that for beginning writers, the most agonizing part of writing a proposal is the "outline."

So let's be clear right up front: There's no such thing as an outline for a novel proposal.

If you're writing nonfiction, then yes, you're allowed to write an outline for your proposal. But in fiction, we don't do outlines. We do synopses.

I'm not just evading the issue by renaming it. A synopsis is not an outline. Outlines are those horrible things you wrote in 7th grade that had Roman numerals at the top level and then capital letters at the next level and the Arabic numerals and then lower case letters, etc. A synopsis is nothing like that.

Don't get me wrong. A synopsis is still hard work and you still might hate writing it. But if you're going to hate something, at least you should hate the right thing.

Truth be told, I don't care that much for writing synopses myself. I much prefer writing character sketches. I was lucky to team up with a co-author for two of my books, John Olson, who loves writing synopses and excels at it. John taught me a thing or two about writing the beasts.

Here are a few rules I use for writing synopses:

- \* Tell the story in present tense
- \* Keep it short -- two pages is FINE
- \* Stick to the plot and avoid long explanations about the characters or the setting
- \* Focus on the major characters

Let's look at these in turn.

Why tell the story in present tense for your synopsis? I have no idea. It's just what everybody does. This is a case where it's best to go with the crowd.

Why keep it short? My editor friends tell me that

synopses are the most boring part of a proposal. The general recommendation I hear from them is to limit it to two pages.

Most writers are only too happy to keep the synopsis short, but there are those oddballs who think that a fifty-page synopsis is barely enough to tell the story. All I can say to weirdos like that is this: "Have mercy on your poor editor! A synopsis is always going to be boring because it tells instead of showing. Make it as short as possible, so your editor can get to your sample chapters as soon as possible."

Why focus on the plot for your synopsis? Because that's what a synopsis IS -- a summary of the plot. There just isn't time to go into what makes dear Scarlett tick, or why Spock hates his father. Put all that in your character sketches.

I realize that seat-of-the-pants writers are in agony over the idea of focusing on plot. Seat-of-the-pants writers don't know the plot until they write the story, so of course they can't summarize it until it's written.

My only advice to SOTP writers is this: Do a spectacular job on your character sketches, and pray your editor doesn't notice that your synopsis contains no actual story. If you choose a character-oriented editor, she probably won't notice, and if your character sketches are fab, she won't care.

Finally, why focus on the major characters? That's easy. You've got two pages, single-spaced. 900 words, max. That doesn't give you ROOM to talk about your fifteen brilliantly drawn minor characters. Focus on the five most important characters. If they aren't brilliantly drawn, then fire them and hire some of the minor characters you're in love with.

If you want to see a competently done synopsis, then check out the one John Olson and I did for our novel OXYGEN. It's in a proposal I've had on my web site for ages, so you can also see an example of a pretty good proposal.

I have truncated the synopsis because we didn't want to give away the entire story. But there's enough there to see how it's done. We didn't summarize every chapter. We chose key chapters and summarized each in one or two paragraphs.

Here's the link:

<http://www.rsingermanson.com/assets/pdf/O2Proposal.pdf>

Have fun!

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## 5) Anxiety and Writers

If you are a published writer, then people just expect that you have your life amazingly together. Surely you must be tall, rich, good-looking, and psychologically fit.

Oh, Virginia, I bet you believe in Santa Claus too. So let me disillusion you.

I'm tall, but I know a lot of writers who aren't. Getting published will not make you grow.

Tragically, most writers aren't rich, either. (With my Mad Genius Writer E-zine, I'm working to change that wretched state of affairs, but it's going to take a while to fix the world, so work with me on this one, OK?)

As for good-looking, I have only this to say about that: Most of those publicity photos you see on books are either way out of date or air-brushed. Or both.

But writers are at least mentally sound, right? After all, writers tell the world what to think and how to think. So they'd better be able to think straight, no?

That cackling sound you hear is the noise of a thousand whackball writers reading this e-zine and laughing at such naivete.

Fact is, writers have all kinds of psychological problems. Writers probably have MORE problems than the general public. And that's OK. I have writer friends who suffer from depression, anxiety, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, and . . . I'm probably forgetting a few.

And it's not just "them." It's me too.

About two and a half years ago, I realized that something wasn't quite right for me. I had been doing a lot of teaching that year and it was becoming horribly obvious to me that I had a major fear of public speaking. Of course, a lot of people fear speaking. But most of them can avoid it. I can't. Fear was beginning to take all the fun out of teaching for me.

Another issue for me was deadlines. When a book deadline loomed, I couldn't seem to get enough sleep. I'd wake up at 3 AM thinking about the book and how impossible it was going to be to get it done on time. And I couldn't get back to sleep. Every book I wrote felt like it was going to be the train wreck that would ruin my career. Every book felt like a three-month panic attack. EVERY book.

Furthermore, I had begun to hate awards ceremonies. It wasn't that I was afraid I might lose. I was afraid I might win. If you win, you have to go up front and accept the award and say a few words. And that began getting unbearable.

When things get unbearable, that's when you do something about it. I went to see a psychologist. We talked about what was going on. His diagnosis was that I had general anxiety disorder. He referred me to a psychiatrist. I talked to the psychiatrist at length. He decided it was more likely that I had panic disorder!

There's nothing to throw you into a panic like getting a diagnosis like that. To make things worse, just then I was coming up on yet another "almost impossible" book deadline.

I decided that I was going to do whatever it took to beat the problem. Part of that meant delaying the book I was writing by a year. Both my psychologist and my psychiatrist told me that I'd be crazy to try to get better while I was under the pressure of a nearly impossible deadline. (Ultimately, that project was cancelled. Sometimes a decision to get better carries a cost.)

Part of the solution was intensive counselling. Part of it was medication. I wasn't particularly eager to try the meds, but my counsellor felt pretty strongly that the counselling would work better if I was taking meds too. So I did them both.

Some people get better quickly, and some get better slowly. Some never get better at all. I was lucky. In only about 10 weeks of counselling, I made tremendous progress. Not just "I think I feel better" progress. I mean very measurable progress. Suddenly, I could do certain things easily that had thrown me into high anxiety before.

I was on the meds for longer than that. I know there are some people who think that medication is wrong, wrong, wrong. I really don't care what they think. (Tom Cruise, take a hike!) Meds can be a pathway back to health. When you get better, that's the time to quit.

Last summer, I decided it was time for me quit. I had been feeling better for a while, and I was doing well with those things that had once been anxiety triggers. I felt good enough to quit the meds. I was just about to move across country, and I figured that an acid test for me would be whether I could handle the stress of a major move without medication and without a meltdown.

The move went just fine. My life for the last six months has been just fine. I can speak in public now without major trauma. Of course, I still feel a bit of anxiety about speaking. That's normal. But from what I can tell, my anxiety level before speaking is LESS than

what a normal person feels. That's huge progress for me.

I still have days when I feel stressed out sometimes. That's normal too. What I don't have any longer is paralyzing anxiety. My anxiety is at a level that I can deal with now.

I mention all this because writers seem to be particularly susceptible to anxiety disorders (and depression). Whenever I teach on writing, I make a point to tell people what I've been through. I had anxiety issues for close to forty years. That's a wretched long time. And I ALWAYS hear from people after I speak who say, "That's me too! Thanks for letting me know I'm not the only one!"

I'll bet there are a number of readers of this e-zine who are saying right now, "Wow, that's me." I bet I'll hear from a number of you tomorrow. (I bet I'll hear from a few of you who think medication is the devil's own brew. Yawn, I've heard this before. Go have a panic attack and THEN come tell me why it's better to have panic attacks all the time than to take meds.)

A LOT of writers deal with anxiety, with depression, with any number of other issues that are "all in your head." So what if it's all in your head? Your head is attached to your body, isn't it? If you had a broken arm, you'd deal with it. You wouldn't brush it off as being "all in your arm." Would you?

If you need help, then get help. It ain't cheap. It ain't easy. It ain't quick. But it's worth it.

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## 6) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://AdvancedFictionWriting.com)

January has been a busy month for me. I wish, I wish, I WISH that I'd hired an accountant this time last year. Because if you live in a state that has a sales tax, then January is the month you abandon hope and enter sales tax hell.

Last year, I lived in TWO states that have sales taxes. To make it even more fun, California has an income tax and Washington has an excise tax on gross sales. And the Feds like to see writers turn in estimated taxes in January. Not to mention that if you've got any kids in college, you have to estimate your taxes before you file your pesky FAFSA.

All of which means that if you have an inadequate accounting system, then January is 180 proof misery for you. Last year, I had a just barely adequate accounting

system. I AM able to figure where every dime came from and where it went. But it's Byzantine beyond belief.

No more. Never again. I have an accountant now. I have a corporation. I have (God help us all) QuickBooks on my side. Next January will be better than this one, because I've taken the time to put my accounting life in order.

The upshot is that this January has been spent on just two tasks:

- 1) Figuring out what I owe the various governments who rule my solitary, poor, nasty, brutish little life.
- 2) Doing a series of teleseminars on how I got my act together, with the help of my friend Allison Bottke.

The teleseminars have been infinitely more fun than the accounting. If you missed them live, you can still listen to the recordings and read the three handouts for each session. For more info on that, check here: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/clean.php>

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#### 7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth 2007 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, 2007.

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 are two places to subscribe:  
My personal web site: <http://www.RSIngermanson.com>  
My new web site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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#### 8) 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 blurb with it:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the

Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 7000 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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Randy Ingermanson  
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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