
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

Publisher: Randy Ingermanson ("the Snowflake guy")

Motto: "A Vision for Excellence"

Date: April 6, 2010

Issue: Volume 6, Number 4

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

Circulation: 20140 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: Small Chunks
 - 3) Creating: The Opportune Moment
 - 4) Marketing: Interview With Thomas Umstattd
 - 5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com
 - 6) Randy Recommends . . .
 - 7) Steal This E-zine!
 - 8) Reprint Rights
-
-

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (over 500 of you signed up in March), 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>

This issue has been delayed to let both you and me get through those pesky taxes. Hope you survived!

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.

* Big projects get done one chunk at a time. What's a chunk? How big should you make it? How do you know when it's done? Read this month's column on organizing your writing life, "Small Chunks."

* The foundation of every great story is a great Storyworld. But not all Storyworlds are great all of the time. Want to know one possible missing ingredient that can make a good Storyworld great? Find out in this month's column on craft, "The Opportune Moment."

* It's not often that I meet a marketing expert who I think is the real deal. Last month, I met one at a writing conference who really impressed me. I persuaded him to do an interview for this e-zine. Read it here first in this month's marketing column, "Interview With Thomas Umstattd."

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

2) Organizing: Small Chunks

I don't know any writers who can write a whole novel in one sitting. For most novelists, it takes weeks, months, or years to write a novel. They'll tell you that you write a novel (and later you edit it) one chunk at a time.

What's a "chunk?"

The answer to that is different for different novelists. Many writers work one scene at a time or even one page at a time. But it's easy to get bogged down on that scene or that page and waste insane amounts of time.

Time is precious, and all other things being equal, you'd like to write your novel as quickly as possible.

I've been studying up on personal productivity lately,

and one technique I've found very helpful is to set aside a block of time dedicated solely to whatever I'm working on. During that time, I focus entirely on what I'm doing. I don't check e-mail. I don't answer the phone. I'm surly to the cat.

When the time's up, I take a break. During the break, I can check e-mail, listen to voice mail, or pet the cat.

I learned this technique from a productivity guru named Eben Pagan. Eben has a particular formula for it. He recommends that you work in blocks of 50 minutes, and then take a 10 minute break. During the 10 minutes, your goal is to detach completely from your work. Since writing is mainly intellectual work, during your break you might want to do something physical (like taking a walk) or you might want to do something that connects you emotionally with others (like talking to a friend or getting on Facebook).

That's it: 50 minutes of intense work, then 10 minutes to take a break. Then go do it again.

The reason this works is that you have a limit to how long you can work without losing focus. Different people are different, but typically it's about an hour.

Your goal is to work productively AND to have fun. During each 50 minute work period, set a goal for what you intend to get done. If you're writing a scene, you might shoot for writing three pages. That might not sound like much, but if you write that much in 50 minutes, it works out to 900 words per hour, which is a pretty good clip. If you're a fast writer, your goal might be higher. If you're a slow writer, it might be slower. The point is to set the goal at a point that you can only hit if you're really focused.

Let's do the math for a minute. If you write only one 50 minute chunk per day, five days per week, and if you get in three good pages during that chunk, you'll write a full-length novel of 90,000 words in 24 weeks. That's only five and a half months.

If you worked 2 of those small chunks per day, you'd get that novel done in 12 weeks.

3 of those focused chunks per day would get you finished in 8 weeks.

Is that actually possible in real life?

You bet it's possible. I've written several of my novels in less than two months each. I know a fair number of published authors who routinely write the first draft of a novel that fast or faster. Some of them can write a full novel in less than a month.

Writing the first draft is just the first step, of

course. After that, you need to edit your work. Depending on how rough your first draft is, editing might take you days or it might take you months. You edit your work the same way you write your first draft -- in small chunks. 50 minutes on; 10 minutes off.

Now let's get down to the practical details. How do you know when the time's up without checking the clock every two minutes and . . . losing focus?

The answer is very simple: Use a timer.

You can buy a kitchen timer for \$10 to \$15. Or you can get a software utility to do it. I use a simple Mac shareware program with the incredibly sexy name "Timer Utility" (by JR Productions) which I found on the Web site <http://www.VersionTracker.com>. You can set it for any length of time, click the Start button, and it beeps when the time is up.

The reason to use a timer is simple: Now you can relax and work hard without having to watch the clock. The timer will tell you when to stop. No worries. Just work hard. Work focused. A timer gives you the freedom to do that.

This idea may seem to you so absurdly simple that it can't possibly work. Do yourself a favor. Try it for just one day and see how much you can get done in a 50 minute chunk.

You might just surprise yourself.

3) Creating: The Opportune Moment

Last month, we looked at the importance of setting hard limits within your Storyworld in order to make conflict meaningful. This month, we'll talk about the importance of timing.

Some Storyworlds are interesting all the time, but some of them have certain time-points at which they're far more interesting than usual. Setting a novel at one of those critical time-points can really ratchet up the intensity of the novel.

I call those critical time-points "opportune moments" because they make certain stories possible that would normally be impossible. If a story could only work at one particular point in time, then that's an opportune moment.

Let's look at some examples:

THE MAN FROM ST. PETERSBURG, by Ken Follett

In the spring of 1914, tensions were building across Europe. World War I would break out in July of that year. THE MAN FROM ST. PETERSBURG begins on May 1, 1914. It's the story of the negotiations leading up to a secret treaty between Great Britain and Russia. If they sign the treaty, then either country agrees to enter an armed conflict if the other does.

That's the backdrop. One man knows about the secret dealings and vows to stop it -- by assassinating the Russian nobleman negotiating the treaty.

The would-be assassin is Feliks Kschessinsky, a Russian anarchist who knows that this treaty will condemn millions of Russian peasants to death in a rich man's war. Feliks will do ANYTHING to stop this treaty. He is not afraid to die. But Feliks has no idea that the woman he once loved now lives in England.

It's a terrific story idea, and Follett tells it brilliantly. But notice that the timing is critical. The story would not make sense if set even three months later. It would lose most of its fizz if set even a year earlier. The incredible tension of the story comes from the fact that Follett chose the perfectly opportune moment.

OUTLANDER, by Diana Gabaldon

In 1745, Prince Charles Edward Stuart led a short-lived rebellion of Scotsmen against England. The Duke of Cumberland broke the back of the rebellion at Culloden in April, 1746, and Bonnie Prince Charlie ultimately escaped to France, leaving his Scottish army decimated.

Gabaldon sets her time-travel novel OUTLANDER two years earlier, in 1743, as tensions are rising in Scotland. A time-traveling nurse from the 20th century, Claire Randall, falls in love with a young Scottish rebel, Jamie Fraser. Claire knows what's going to happen at Culloden and warns Jamie not to get involved in the Rebellion. But Jamie is a man of honor and not one to walk away from a fight, least of all one that involves his clan.

It takes time for a love story to develop and it takes time for political machinations to move forward without benefit of modern communications. Two years before the Rebellion is the opportune moment for this story.

ENDER'S GAME, by Orson Scott Card

An alien race (the "Buggers") has twice attacked planet Earth and has twice been narrowly defeated. Everybody

knows that the Buggers will be back soon, stronger than ever. Can humanity find a military genius capable of defeating the Buggers for all time?

A giant Battle School orbits earth. There, the brightest and most ruthless children on the planet are sent to be trained for war. The commanders of Battle School are on the watch for The One who can save the earth.

Ender, a young boy, looks like he has the exact mix of skills and genius and rage needed to save the human race. But are his trainers too late in finding him? The Buggers could arrive any day. Is there time to bring Ender to his peak? Will his trainers ruin him first? Orson Scott Card has set his novel at the precisely opportune moment.

Storyworld is more important in some categories than others. It is typically very important in any science fiction or fantasy novel or in any historical novel. If Storyworld is important to your novel, then here are some questions to ask about the timing of your story:

* What are the Big Things happening in this Storyworld -- politically, philosophically, religiously, scientifically? List any wars, new ideas, theological revolutions, or technical discoveries.

* Does your story relate to these at all? Explain how, and think about whether you can tie your story more closely to the Big Things in the Storyworld.

* Have you set your story at the opportune moment for this Storyworld that will create maximum external tension for your characters? Explain why your story works better at the exact time you chose than it would for any other.

Of course, it's entirely possible that your novel really has no opportune moment. Many novels don't. PRIDE AND PREJUDICE would have worked well over a broad span of years, and Jane Austen moved the dates forward about a dozen years between her first draft and the final published version.

If your novel can't have an opportune moment, don't worry about it.

But if it can, think hard about how exactly to time your story for maximum tension. Finding exactly the opportune moment can turn a good story into a great one.

4) Marketing: Interview With Thomas Umstatt

Late last month, I spent five days at a major writing conference. There, I met Thomas Umstatt, Jr., a guy who really knows his marketing. I immediately dubbed him "Thomas Unpronounceable" since his name is even tougher than mine for many people to wrap their minds around.

Thomas and I spent quite a bit of time talking, and I came away with a ton of ideas for things to do in the next year. I'll be talking about some of those ideas in the months to come. More importantly, I'll be SHOWING you those ideas via my actions. Keep a close eye on me!

Thomas has agreed to do an interview on short notice. I asked him to first give me a short blurb about himself and his business. Here's what he wrote:

"At Umstatt Media we help authors build an online platform that attracts publishers and sells their books. We build websites, advise authors and run AuthorTechTips.com, a site with free guides to help authors use the web better."

You can learn more about Thomas at his two web sites:

<http://www.UmstattMedia.com>

<http://www.AuthorTechTips.com>

Now here's the interview:

RI: Novelists everywhere feel horribly stressed and guilty that they aren't doing all 500 marketing things that their editors and agents tell them to do. In your opinion, what are the "minimal things" that every novelist should do to promote his or her work?

TU: The biggest thing novelists need is a strategy so they can say "no" without feeling guilty. Doing everything poorly is a bad strategy. Doing a few things well is easier and more effective.

That said, a Facebook fan page is the bare minimum. You can set one up in 15 minutes and they are free. You can then connect it with your Twitter account so you can update two for the time of one.

The second thing I would say is a remarkable website with a built in blog. If you can't afford a website, setup a blog at <http://wordpress.com> for free.

RI: I loved your comment in your talks at the conference where you defined "remarkable" as "worthy of being remarked on." Word of mouth is the best thing

going in marketing. You and I are both big fans of the WordPress blogging software as a tool for author web sites. What makes WordPress ideally suited to create a web site for a novelist?

TU: First, WordPress is easy to update. This means that novelists can update their website without having to pay their webmaster or wait for a friend to do it for them.

Second, WordPress is search engine optimized from the ground up. Many authors spend hundreds of dollars for things WordPress can do with a few free plugins.

Third, WordPress is easy to integrate with social networks like Twitter and Facebook. Plus every WordPress website has a blog built in, which is a huge plus.

RI: I'll say! My own traffic to my web site tripled overnight when I launched my blog. But now you've piqued my interest. Many novelists are currently using Twitter and Facebook to promote themselves, but they also wonder if it's actually working. Is there a "right way" and a "wrong way" to use these social networking tools?

TU: There are a lot of wrong ways to do Facebook and Twitter. The biggest trap I see authors fall into is using Twitter out of guilt. They do it because their publisher is making them and they have no idea what they are doing or even what they are trying to do.

We have a lot of articles on how to use Twitter well on AuthorTechTips.com. But, the short answer is to have a goal for what you want to accomplish on Twitter and then use tools like <http://bit.ly> to track how well you are accomplishing that goal. Add a + to the end of any <http://bit.ly> link to see how many clicks it has received.

Here are some bad goals:

- * Sell books (too general)
- * Build platform (too vague)

Here are some good goals:

- * Listen to readers and potential readers
- * Promote new blog posts
- * Build a community around my story
- * Learn about how to write well

Twitter is not the best fit for every author. Novelists especially can waste a lot of time on Twitter. If Twitter takes time away from your writing or from improving your writing you need to find a different tool. People buy well told stories, not Tweets.

RI: Thanks for injecting a bit of sanity, Thomas!
You're a fan of Google Analytics to measure traffic on an author's web site. Google Analytics shows a fantastic amount of information. Where should an author start in trying to understand traffic on his or her site?

TU: Google Analytics is a must for knowing if your website is working or not. I think the best way to learn Google Analytics is just to play with it. If you see a term you don't recognize like "bounce rate" just Google, "What is a bounce rate?"

RI: What is the one tip you would give authors to help them promote their books online?

TU: Learn to ask Google questions. Many authors waste a lot of time reinventing the wheel and learning things the hard way when Google is just a click away. I use Google perhaps 30 times a day.

Google is great at answering plain English questions. Like, "What is an RSS Feed?"

RI: What IS an RSS feed? OK, I'm kidding. But if I didn't know, that terrific little video you showed at the writing conference would have explained it in about two minutes. Very cool! Thanks for your thoughts, Thomas.

Once again, readers, I highly recommend Thomas' web sites. If you want straight talk in simple language, check them out:

<http://www.UmstattMedia.com>
<http://www.AuthorTechTips.com>

Marketing is simply too important to let your publisher or your agent dictate something that doesn't work for you. And it's also (in my opinion) too important to put off until you've sold your first book.

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>

In November, I also 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 early August, I'll be doing a 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:

* 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 71 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>

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 2-paragraph blurb with it:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 20,000 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.

Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine>
