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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 500 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 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.

* Novelists are continually being told to do more. More writing, more editing, more promotion, more everything. There comes a time when you have to ask why. I do that in this month's organization column, "Less is More."

* All fiction needs conflict, but ... what kind of conflict? The usual answer doesn't quite work. A simple revision of the standard answer works better. Much better. Discover what I mean in my craft article, "Nothing is More Important Than..."

* Your web site should be working for you, not the other way around. One way to make that happen is to create a web site that pulls in traffic from the search engines using "search engine optimization" -- SEO. This month, I interview SEO expert Donovan Kovar in my marketing column, "SEO 4 U."

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

2) Organizing: Less is More

I've been thinking lately (again) about the importance of focus.

Focus means working on a few, really important things, rather than on a large number of merely important things.

Focus means saying "yes" less often and "no" more often.

Focus is hard.

There's an old saying here that applies. "Less is more."

If you've got ten projects you're working on and you cut them down to five, you automatically double the amount of time you can spend on each one.

But you also cut in half the number of interruptions you're likely to get from the other projects. Your mind has fewer things to worry about, so it's better able to concentrate on one thing at a time.

Cutting five projects out of your life doesn't mean that you'll never, ever tackle those five. It means you're consciously setting them aside for "later," when you can deal with them more effectively, rather than letting them intrude on your life now, when you're already overloaded.

Cutting them now might actually make it more likely that you'll get to them someday. Someday when there's less on your plate.

Less is more. More focus. More attention to detail. More time to get it exactly right.

Less is also less. Less distraction. Less frustration. Less stress.

I'm preaching to myself on this one. I take on too many projects. I say yes to too many people. I spread myself too thin.

I'm thinking about how to solve that. The first step in solving it is knowing that it's a problem.

Now that I'm thinking about it, I'm going to try something right now.

I'm going to wrap up this column. I've said everything I have to say on the subject. If less really is more, then more words will only detract.

Less is more. Think about that. And then take action to do something about it.

3) Creating: Nothing is More Important Than...

Long ago when I began learning to write, I picked up this handy definition of fiction:

Fiction is "characters in conflict."

That's a good rule of thumb, and yet it isn't the whole truth, nor is it always strictly true. Let me give you a couple of counterexamples:

Imagine a novel about two thugs, each trying to kill the other. These thugs are mindless brutes. Neither one much cares about anything. Neither one even cares whether he himself lives or dies.

Therefore, neither does the author. Therefore, neither

does the reader. The entire story is nothing but pointless violence.

Are there "characters in conflict" in this story? Yes.

Is this fiction? No.

This is not the sort of story anyone would want to read. Having "characters in conflict" is not enough.

Imagine a second novel about a lone character, the last survivor of an ill-fated run to the South Pole in 1901. Our hero's goal is to make it home alive, bringing important scientific data gathered along the way. But lugging those rocks slows him down and makes it far more difficult to survive.

There's only one character in this story, so we don't exactly have "characters (plural) in conflict."

But is this fiction? Yes, and it could make a gripping tale. (It would be similar in spirit to the real-life Scott expedition of 1911, which had no survivors.)

Clearly, "characters in conflict" is not even necessary.

So the old definition of fiction as "characters in conflict" seems to need a little revision.

What is fiction, really?

I've been thinking about this lately and my conclusion is that a better definition of fiction is "values in conflict."

I define a "value" as a "core truth" for a character which can be phrased in this form:

"Nothing is more important than _____."

A "value" is any word or phrase your character would use to fill in the blank. Most characters will have several values. Good characters will have several conflicting values.

In the first counterexample I gave above, neither of the thugs have any values that your reader can identify with. Most characters in most novels could at least say, "Nothing is more important than survival." But the two thugs in question lack even that basic value.

No values. No story. It's that simple.

In the second counterexample, our hero is all alone in his world, but he has two powerful values:

* "Nothing is more important than survival."

* "Nothing is more important than scientific discovery."

These values are at odds with each other. The character can dump his load of rocks and improve his chances of getting home alive. Or he can risk his life for the sake of science. When the going gets rough, which will he choose?

Fiction is about making hard choices between conflicting values.

We should note that one particular value, "Nothing is more important than survival," is practically universal. Virtually all characters in fiction have this value. Virtually all readers have it too.

Deep fiction comes when a character has one or more values that rival the survival instinct.

At a recent conference, I analyzed *THE HUNGER GAMES*, by Suzanne Collins, to see what made it work. I found that the strength of conflict between the values of the main characters drove the novel.

Here's a quick summary of the story:

A 16-year-old girl, Katniss Everdeen, volunteers to take her sister's place in an arena where 24 teens will battle each other to the death. One of the other competitors, Peeta Mellark, has been secretly in love with Katniss since they were five years old.

THE HUNGER GAMES is a deep and powerful story. The reason is very simple. Each of the two main characters has three values that are in conflict.

Let's look at Katniss's central values:

* "Nothing is more important than survival."

* "Nothing is more important than my sister."

* "Nothing is more important than avoiding love, because the more people you love, the more you have to lose."

Each of these values is in conflict with the other two. Katniss decides early in the story that she values her sister more than her own survival.

The ongoing conflict in the story comes as she feels a growing attraction to Peeta. Can she dare to return his love, when she knows with certainty that they can't both survive the arena?

Likewise, Peeta has three central values:

- * "Nothing is more important than survival."
- * "Nothing is more important than protecting Katniss."
- * "Nothing is more important than being true to who you are."

For Peeta, these values are in massive conflict.

Like Katniss, he decides early in the story that his survival is the least important of his three main values. He goes into the arena planning to sacrifice himself to keep Katniss alive.

The problem for Peeta is that he's a genuinely good, decent, and caring person. In the arena, it won't be enough for him to fight merely to protect Katniss. Defense alone won't save her. If Katniss is to live, the other 22 must die.

To save the girl he loves, Peeta is going to have to kill. He must steel himself to be ruthless. To be somebody he is not. To violate his identity and therefore to trample one of his primary values. Can he do that?

There's a reason THE HUNGER GAMES works so well with readers. The novel is packed full of value-conflicts. Hard choices. Moral dilemmas.

If you've read THE HUNGER GAMES, think about some of the other principal characters:

Katniss and Peeta have a coach, a drunkard named Haymitch. What are Haymitch's values and how are they in conflict?

Katniss is lucky to get an amazing stylist who deeply cares about her, Cinna. What are Cinna's conflicting values?

There's a massive brute named Cato in the Games who is obviously the guy to beat. Does Cato have values? Can you guess what they must be? How do they create conflict for him -- and for Katniss and Peeta?

Values are critical to great fiction because values determine what your characters do. Values make your characters' actions believable. Conflicting values make your characters' actions unpredictable.

So how about that novel you're working on? Is it ripping your heart out because each one of the central characters has to make an impossible choice between two

values?

If so, what are those values?

If not, then it might be time to change your game plan. Look into your characters. Push them against the wall and make them fill in the sentence, "Nothing is more important than _____."

Take what they tell you and run with it.

For the novelist, nothing is more important than values in conflict.

Nothing.

4) Marketing: SEO 4 U

In early August, I flew to Chicago to be part of a two-day workshop with Perry Marshall, a guy I consider one of the best marketing teachers in the world. I've been following Perry for years, and he routinely delivers great ideas.

Every so often, Perry runs what he calls a "four-man intensive." Four marketers gather with him in a room and they spend two days analyzing the web site of each of the four in turn.

Perry charges big bucks for this experience, and it's worth it. He's a fountain of great ideas.

What makes this work incredibly well is that Perry augments his own years of experience with the expertise of his four clients. The four generally come from widely different markets, and they cross-pollinate each other with their very best ideas.

I was the only fiction writer in the group that met in August. One of the other four was Donovan Kovar, an expert in "search engine optimization" (generally called "SEO").

The goal of SEO is to increase traffic that comes to your web site from Google and the other search engines.

It only took me a few minutes to see that Donovan knew way more about SEO than I did. What surprised me was that he knew way more about SEO than Perry. In fact, Perry hires Donovan to do the SEO for his own web site at: <http://www.PerryMarshall.com>.

That's a pretty powerful stamp of approval.

I learned a huge amount during the four-man intensive. My main goal was to get a vision for where my web site is going, and that's exactly what I got. Vision. Tons of it.

A few weeks later, Donovan generously volunteered an hour of his time to go over my web site with me on the phone. In that hour, he gave me a new strategy for increasing traffic to my site. I'll be putting that strategy into place soon.

I asked Donovan for an interview for this e-zine. If you don't have a web site, you don't need SEO. But if you ever plan to launch a web site or a blog, you will.

Every published author, every agent, and every publishing house has a web site. And (based on what I've seen of their web sites) most of them could use some serious help in search engine optimization.

We can only scratch the surface here. My goal is to get Donovan to explain the basics for beginners, to define the key ideas in SEO.

On to the interview:

Randy: You're an expert in SEO. For those who are new to the party, what is SEO and why is it important to anyone with a web site or a blog?

Donovan: SEO stands for "search engine optimization" and refers to "tuning" your website for the keywords that you want to be found for. Just as you would tune your radio into a station you want to listen to, you want to tune your website for the keywords that people are searching on. This is the first step in making it so you can be found online...

Randy: Most SEO experts say that SEO starts with "great content." What is great content, how do you get it, and how do you know it's great?

Donovan: It's been said that "Content is King" and "Keywords are Queen" when it comes to search engine marketing. This is probably true. The key to using content for SEO is to write about what people might be searching on. It doesn't need to be world class writing to rank in the search engines, but if it IS good writing (and people can find it) than those 2 factors can work together to increase your credibility and the success of your website. Use the keywords in your page's/post's Title and again in the content (i.e. "How to Write a Novel") -- and if you are blogging, create TAGs for those keywords as well. All of these things work together to help the search engines to find your content.

Randy: Everybody agrees that incoming links from other web sites are a Good Thing for a web site. But what about outgoing links? Do those help you or hurt you? And what about internal links from one page within the site to another page?

Donovan: One way to think of links, as if they are a kind of "root system" for your site. The more that link into your site, the more strength it has. Interlinking your pages, or from posts to pages, using relevant keywords, is best practices and strengthens the internal structure of your site even further. Linking OUT to other resources (that are truly relevant and pertinent) is also best practices, because it shows that you are dialoguing about information -- and providing resources in your site/blog. Do these things in a moderate fashion and avoid "geeking out" with them. Links occur naturally like this, which is what makes up the web, and overdoing it can just make your site look messy -- and work against you.

Randy: People often talk about "black hat SEO". Any comments on that? What are some stupid things that one should never do on a web site that might get it blacklisted by the various search engines?

Donovan: Honestly, no one reading this needs to worry about being banned or "black hat" stuff. Black Hat refers to using automation to create massive amounts of links or manipulate the search engines in a number of different ways. Just keep adding original content (or reposting other people's relevant content) and your site's authority will grow naturally over time.

Randy: You just used the word "authority" for a site. For those new to the SEO game, what does "authority" mean and how is it measured?

Donovan: As you follow best practices, generate relevant content and get more backlinks to your site -- it will gradually be recognized as an "Informational Authority" in your niche. This leads to better rankings and more traffic to your site.

Randy: You did a great job helping me improve my SEO strategy on my web site. What would it cost for one of my e-zine readers to hire you for an hour to make some recommendations for increasing traffic to their site?

Donovan: Yes, I offer a 1 hour Go-To-Meeting where we look at your site or blog, and all of the components within it, and evaluate where you are, where you want to be, and how you can get there. I take this opportunity to share with you as much strategic information about your site as possible, and I record our session for you -- so you can review and implement it at your own pace. Everyone I've done this with

reports it's a great and insightful process that's well worth the cost.

<http://www.24-7-sales.com/seo/intelligence-report/>

Randy: Thanks for your time, today, Donovan!

The key thing to know about SEO is that your site will get more traffic if it has high quality information that people are looking for, AND if you take some intelligent steps to help the search engines help you.

As writers, our job is to provide that high quality information. The job of the SEO guys is to tell us how to help the search engines find us.

Final note: I wrote a testimonial for Donovan which you'll see if you click through to his web site. I believe Donovan's got the goods on SEO, so I'm glad to tell people about him.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My book, WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES, has been selling well since it began shipping nearly two years ago. It is currently the hottest selling fiction-writing book in the Kindle store. You can find out all about WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES here:

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

If you've already bought the book and like it, I'd be delighted if you wrote an Amazon review. Thanks to those of you who already have! I appreciate you!

I've also been gratified at the response to 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'm just now launching my award-winning novel OXYGEN as an e-book. I coauthored OXYGEN with my best buddy John Olson a few years ago, and we've spent the last several months editing it to make this second edition of OXYGEN the best book we can write.

We're including several bonus appendices for writers. More info on that later today in a Special Alert.

I normally teach at 4 to 6 writing conferences per year. For 2011, I have tried hard to cut back on my teaching, with only modest success. 2011 has been extremely busy, but it's now winding down.

I will be teaching at only one more conference in 2011:

Novel Writing Boot Camp, (November, Chicago)
2 intense days with 4 drill sergeants and 40 tough recruits. More info:
<http://www.christianwritersguild.com/novel-writing-boot-camp/>

If you'd like me to teach at your conference in 2012 or beyond, 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. Check her out on her web site!

I've also become a fan of Thomas Umstatted's terrific uncommon-sense thoughts on internet marketing. You can read Thomas's blog at:
<http://www.AuthorTechTips.com>

Thomas is especially skilled at helping authors create an inexpensive but powerful web site using WordPress blogs. I am a huge fan of this approach, since it gives the most bang for the buck in an author site. Find out more about this at:
<http://www.UmstattedMedia.com>

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 441 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, 2011.

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 e-mail 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.

Of course you should not forward this e-mail to people who don't write fiction. They won't care about it.

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 28,000 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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