

Publisher: Randy Ingermanson ("the Snowflake guy")
Motto: "A Vision for Excellence"
Date: November 1, 2011
Issue: Volume 7, Number 11
Home Pages: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>
<http://www.Ingermanson.com>
Circulation: 28500 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: Vision, Strategy, Tactics
 - 3) Creating: The Moral Premise
 - 4) Marketing: The Future of Publishing Revisited
 - 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 (about 600 of you signed up in October), 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.

* Do you wonder sometimes why your writing career isn't moving along faster? I believe you need to excel at three kinds of planning in order to succeed. Your career will be limited by whichever of the three you do WORST. Do you know what's holding you back? Find out in my organizing article, "Vision, Strategy, Tactics."

* Do you cringe when people ask what the "theme" of your story is? So do I. Few writers want to write a didactic, moralistic novel that beats readers over the head. And yet great fiction hangs on great themes. Find out the secret for doing that in my craft column, "The Moral Premise."

* A year ago, I wrote my predictions for the future of publishing. The last year has been a white-water adventure of massive change in the industry. Want to know what my crystal ball is saying now for the future? Check out my marketing article, "The Future of Publishing Revisited."

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

2) Organizing: Vision, Strategy, Tactics

Every writer is an entrepreneur, by definition. We're in the business of creating and selling entertainment.

As I see it, when you're in business, you need three distinct kinds of planning skills:

* Vision -- a high level understanding of where you want to go.

* Strategy -- a high level description of how you want to get there.

* Tactics -- a step-by-step description of how to get there.

As an example, say you wanted to go traveling "somewhere." That is far too vague to be useful. "Somewhere" isn't really anywhere. Real planning is concrete, not abstract.

Your Vision, Strategic Plan, and Tactical Plan will be progressively more concrete and detailed. This is what they might look like:

* Vision: I want to visit New York City.

* Strategy: I'm going to fly (not go by car, train, or moped) and stay at the XYZ Hotel, see the ABC play on Broadway, visit Ground Zero and the Empire State Building, and play chess with Donald Trump.

* Tactics: Now here is a ten-step plan to get my airline tickets, reserve a room at XYZ, learn the subway system so I can get where I want to go, buy tickets for the ABC play, and persuade the Donald to let me demolish him at chess... (Fill in with detailed action items.)

Vision, Strategy, and Tactics will come into play in at least two ways for you:

* Planning your career

* Writing each book

Which is most important to you as a writer? Vision? Strategy? Tactics?

I believe they're all critical. If you don't do a good job in all three, then you aren't going to do well as a writer.

The problem is that very few people are good at Vision AND Strategy AND Tactics.

I'm not good at "the vision thing." It takes me a long time to figure out what I actually want to do in life. But I'm very good at strategic thinking, and I'm exceptional in tactics.

At various times in my life, I've filled in my "Vision gap," either by working with people who are better at the Vision thing than I am or by intentionally writing down my long-term Vision for my life.

What about you? Which are you best at? Which are you worst at?

In the next three months, I'm going to look at each of these in a bit more detail.

Next month, we'll begin with Vision and how it applies to both your writing career and to each book you write. Most importantly, I'll give you some ideas on how to improve your Vision.

In the two months after, we'll do the same with Strategy and then with Tactics.

Stay tuned!

3) Creating: The Moral Premise

Here are the kinds of novels I hate to read:

- * Novels that aim to make me change my politics
- * Novels that aim to make me change my religion
- * Novels that aim to make me change my scientific views
- * Novels that aim to make me change my mind on ANYTHING

I read fiction to have fun, not to read a diatribe, a sermon, or a polemic.

How about you? Yes or no on preachy fiction?

That's what I thought. It's unanimous.

This is why I was extremely leery when I learned a few months ago that one of the main speakers at a forthcoming conference was going to speak on "The Moral Premise." The last thing I wanted to hear was that we novelists need to be writing moralizing books.

As it turned out, my fears were groundless.

The speaker at the conference was Stan Williams, Ph.D., the author of the book THE MORAL PREMISE, and a fascinating guy. (He has a degree in physics, which is always a good sign.)

Stan's basic idea is that a movie (or any kind of fiction) will fail when it is based on a "moral premise" that the audience believes is false.

Audiences will suspend disbelief on lots of things, but they bring in certain bedrock assumptions about the way the universe ought to operate. So do you.

You exert ultimate power over the universe which is your Storyworld. You know the drill. Great power, great responsibility. Don't screw up.

I spent some time talking with Stan at the conference and was extremely impressed with his ideas. I highly recommend his book for anyone who wants to put a strong theme into their fiction but doesn't want to come across as didactic or moralizing.

When you write a story with a sound Moral Premise, you are not trying to persuade your audience of something they don't believe. You are writing a story that confirms something they (and you) already believe.

Big difference.

Please understand that Stan doesn't recommend that your book should be only about nice people. Plenty of great fiction is about people who aren't nice.

THE GODFATHER is a great novel about a mafia family that isn't a bit nice. THE DAY OF THE JACKAL is a great novel about a psychopathic assassin. GONE WITH THE WIND is a great novel about some loveable rogues whom you'd kick to the curb if you met them in real life.

The key thing to understand when talking about a Moral Premise is that the story needs to end "right" even if the beginning and middle are "all wrong."

In the second DIE HARD movie, we see an airliner full of people get blown up right near the end. And the audience cheers. Why?

Because the airliner is full of bad guys who are escaping the long arm of the law. They've spent the whole movie doing Bad Stuff, but in the end, they get the only possible justice.

No, that doesn't always happen in real life. In real life, sometimes the bad guys get away. In real life, sometimes the good guys get reamed.

People don't read fiction to get another dose of real life. They already know real life sucks, mostly.

People read fiction to see things work out the way they "ought" to work out.

In fiction, the bad guys should get whacked in the end. The good guy should get justice. Or the promotion. Or the girl. Or whatever else he was trying to get.

In fiction, characters should get what they deserve, in a way the reader doesn't expect.

Let's remember that you don't have to write your fiction in black and white. In fact, you generally shouldn't. You've got a lot of shades of gray to work with and you're allowed to use them all.

Very often, the protagonist is both good and bad and has to make a decision about which way to go. Every reader knows that the "right" decision "needs" to be rewarded and the "wrong" decision "needs" to be punished.

You can write this as a simple design pattern: [Virtue] leads to [Good Result], but [Vice] leads to [Bad Result].

Here, you need to fill in [Virtue] with any particular virtue you want -- honesty, sincerity, justice, love,

humility, whatever. Then you need to fill in [Vice] with some particular vice opposed to your chosen virtue. Likewise, you need to fill in [Good Result] and [Bad Result] with the good or bad things that "ought" to be the results in a fair universe.

Let's be clear on one thing. We don't actually live in a fair universe. In the world we live in, murderers, rapists, and con men all too often go free. Decent people all too often get whacked.

The Moral Premise of a story is not about what is. It's about what "ought" to be. Your reader knows perfectly well what "ought" to be, and so do you.

If your fiction violates what both you and your reader know "ought" to be, then your Moral Premise is bogus and you're going to make your reader intensely unhappy.

The surprising thing I learned from talking to Stan is that in a well-crafted story, the Moral Premise applies to EVERY character. One way or another, the good guy, the bad guy, the love interest, the sidekick, the class joker -- everybody -- is playing out the same Moral Premise.

This really puzzled me. Could it possibly be true? I decided to analyze my award-winning novel OXYGEN, (which I just republished as an e-book last month).

My co-author and I never really much thought about the Moral Premise for OXYGEN. We just wrote a story we liked. Was it possible that, even without thinking about it, we had crafted a Moral Premise into our story that applied to all our characters at once?

The answer turned out to be yes.

The Moral Premise of OXYGEN is very simple: "Honesty leads to mutual trust, but dishonesty leads to mutual distrust and suspicion."

I quickly verified that every single major character in OXYGEN is wrestling with exactly this Moral Premise. We didn't design this into the story. It just happened. We built it in by intuition. But as I recall, it took about 15 drafts to get the story right.

And that's why it's important to study this stuff.

Stan makes a great point in his book: If you ask yourself what the Moral Premise of your story is as you develop it, you can save yourself a lot of time and effort, and you won't have to depend on your intuition, which is often unreliable.

There is much more to say about a Moral Premise and how it works. Stan talks about something he calls the "moment of grace" which makes a lot of sense to me. I'm not going to discuss that here.

If you want to know the mechanics of the "moment of grace" and how to integrate it into your story structure, then get Stan's book. He worked hard on it and he deserves to get paid for his ideas.

I highly recommend THE MORAL PREMISE, by Stan Williams. It's a brilliant idea. I'm going to use Stan's methods in the future on every novel I write, because I think it'll save me a lot of time.

And it'll probably save me someday from writing a story that just won't fly with my readers. Great power, great responsibility, and all that.

4) Marketing: The Future of Publishing Revisited

In July of 2010, I made a set of nine predictions in this e-zine about the future of publishing in light of the current e-book revolution.

If you want to go back and read that issue, you can. All issues of this e-zine are archived on my web site here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine>

Today, I want to update that set of predictions in light of what I've learned since then. Let's look at them in turn and see how clairvoyant (or obtuse) I was:

Prediction #1: Sales of e-books will surpass sales of paper books within five years.

When I made this prediction, it seemed aggressive. However, I now think it'll happen quicker than that. The most recent estimates I've heard are that e-books are currently about 20% of the total book market (up from about 4% a couple of years ago).

I'm going to guess that e-books will hit a 50% market share within the next two years.

Prediction #2: E-books will become the "minor leagues".

I think this is already happening. The numbers I'm hearing are that about a million e-books are being published each year in the US. That compares to a couple of hundred thousand paper books.

In March, Amanda Hocking signed a deal with St. Martin's Press. Hocking made her name late last year with her self-published paranormal YA e-books.

In August, John Locke signed a distribution deal with Simon & Schuster to handle sales of the paper editions of his massively popular self-published e-books.

Expect to see more of this in the next couple of years. Five years from now, I expect this will be commonplace.

Prediction #3: Beginning authors will e-publish first.

This is already happening quite a lot, and I expect it to become the norm within a few years. One of the writers in my local critique group, Traci Hilton, has done extremely well with her e-book series of mysteries.

What has surprised me is that some traditional publishers are now offering first-time authors e-book-only contracts for their first book. This past July, one of my former mentees, Mike Berrier, published his first novel, CASH BURN, in an e-only edition with Tyndale House, a mid-sized traditional publisher that has been very successful in paper for many years.

Prediction #4: Midlist authors will do better.

This is hard to measure because numbers are very difficult to get. Most authors don't even get their sales numbers from their publishers until months later, and they rarely share those numbers, even with their closest friends. So it's hard to know for sure what the status quo is.

However, I do know for sure that most of my midlist author friends have been hard at work in the past year putting their backlist novels into print as e-books. And they're much more able and willing to tell their numbers for those.

The numbers I hear from them vary, but it's fair to say that a midlist author can reasonably expect to earn anywhere from a few tens of dollars per month up to more than a thousand dollars per month on each backlist book they put into print as an e-book. This is free money.

It's unclear to me how things will shake out long-term, but I think this prediction is still a good one.

Prediction #5: Bestselling authors will profit most.

The clearest test of this will come when superstar J.K. Rowling gets her new "Pottermore" site rolling. It's currently still in beta testing.

I would not be surprised to see Rowling make this a massive success.

It's an open question whether other A-list authors are going to follow suit with their own e-book initiatives, but my hunch is that they will. A-listers tend to be smart business people and they go with the money.

Prediction #6: Publishers will no longer accept returns.

I've seen no evidence that this prediction is coming true. The reason is clear to me -- the major bookstore chains have been even more financially stressed than the major publishers. Borders, after a long fight, lost its battle with bankruptcy in July.

Returns are a major cost for publishers of paper books. (Not so for e-books, since there is nothing for a bookstore to return if an e-book doesn't sell.)

If the publishing world were logical, returns would not exist. But they do, and it's possible that this prediction will turn out to be simply wrong. We'll see.

Prediction #7: Agents will stop reading slush.

Again, I see no evidence that this is happening. Yet. Most of my agent friends still get enormous amounts of slush. They still read some of it and scan a lot of it, but I suspect it's the worst part of their jobs.

Give this prediction time. When self-published e-books becomes the normal way for budding authors to break into the business, agents will quit reading slush and turn to the e-book best-seller lists for their new clients.

Prediction #8: Publishers will become more profitable.

Yes, they will. Because they'll be publishing more winners. Because they'll be choosing which books to publish from the e-book best-seller lists. Because authors will be e-publishing first, before they go to paper.

Note that this means that publishers will be publishing fewer books. But the ones they publish will do better.

Again, give this prediction time. This won't happen until it becomes the norm for authors to e-publish first and establish the saleability of their books in the Darwinian market.

Prediction #9: Some will do better; some will do worse.

This is a no-brainer. Whenever you have massive change, some will do better and some will do worse.

The ones who do better will be those with an entrepreneurial bent. The ones who do worse will be the other kind.

The above is my original set of predictions from July, 2010. Now I have two more to add here:

Prediction #10: The race to the bottom will end.

This is not really a prediction. It's an observation of what I already see beginning to happen and which I expect will continue.

A year or two ago, the greatest fear I heard from authors was, "They're going to devalue our work by pricing it too low. We'll all starve to death."

Authors were shocked when they heard of heretics selling their e-books for \$2.99. They were mortified at the success of authors like John Locke, who sold over a million copies at a \$.99 price point. And they were absolutely terrified when they learned that some wicked writers were pricing their e-books at \$0.00.

What if all e-books became free? Then how would authors earn a living?

That was the fear I heard voiced over and over.

What I have seen happening in the last month or two is a price bounce. Authors have learned that you can move a lot of copies at \$.99, but when you do that, you're lumped in with the shlock and you don't earn much.

The trend I'm seeing (and this is very recent) is for the quality authors to price their books higher. I believe that very soon \$2.99 is no longer going to be considered the optimal price for a self-published e-book by an established author.

I believe that good authors will actually sell MORE copies at a price point above \$2.99 because readers have begun to realize that you get what you pay for.

Prediction #11: Prices of e-books will correspond roughly to quality.

We'll always see free e-books. But more and more, a price of \$0.00 will be seen as a sign of low quality. The same will be true of the \$.99 e-books.

Authors will price their books at a level to maximize their total revenue. (They should do this. It's the only rational way to price an electronic product.)

This means that the best books will cost more and the

worst books will cost less. The market is smart and will swiftly sort things out. If the online retailers provide e-publishers tools to dynamically set prices, this will happen automatically.

If this happens, the worst books will have the lowest prices and the best books will have the highest prices.

This is great news for authors. We need not fear that we'll work like dogs and earn peanuts for our efforts. If this prediction comes true, for the first time in history, authors will earn exactly what they're worth. No more, no less.

Won't that be spectacular if it comes true?

An open question: What about piracy? Will it kill publishing?

I don't know, but I doubt it. I tend to agree with those authors who believe that "piracy is not the enemy, obscurity is the enemy."

Right now, I think the empirical data is too thin to know for sure, so I'm going to withhold making a prediction just yet.

Another open question: Will the wheels fall off of traditional publishers?

Again, I don't know. This could happen. It's a very real possibility. Here's why:

Most traditional publishers pay their authors only 25% royalties on the net sales of e-books. (A few pay even less.) Virtually all authors and agents consider this royalty rate to be massively unfair.

A small number of authors have abandoned traditional publishers because they believe they can do better by self-publishing electronically.

The hazard for traditional publishers is that their A-list authors will leave in droves. A-list authors are the ones who write the books that earn the publishers most of their money. If they all left their publishers at once, then the wheels really would fall off. Rapidly.

That is a horrible, train-wreck scenario. Could it REALLY happen?

No, it can't happen all at once, because most A-list authors are somewhere in the middle of long-term contracts that may take years to work through. So don't expect any sudden disasters.

But yes, it could happen over time, like a long series of dominos falling in sequence.

Will it happen?

Maybe. I consider this the biggest question in publishing at the moment. A lot depends on how much publishers are willing to bend on the royalty-rate issue.

My own best hunch is that A-list authors will eventually leave their publishers if they can't get a royalty rate on e-books above 40%. (The authors I've talked to think that a truly fair rate would be at least 50%, but I suspect they'd settle for 40%.)

Will the traditional publishers ever raise their royalty rates? I'm guessing they will, but they'll need to do so before their A-listers leave. And they'll need to raise the rates high enough to make their authors happy.

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's this year's 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 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 a few 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. Be aware that I am currently expecting to either teach or attend six conferences in 2012, which is pretty much my limit. So your best bet is to talk to me about 2013. I'm not playing hard to get. I AM hard to get.

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.AuthorMedia.com>

7) Steal This E-zine!

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

worth at least 40689 times the price. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

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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>

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

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