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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 November), 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.

* If you don't have Vision for what you want to be as a novelist, then your career is going to be severely handicapped. Do you know what Vision is . . . and how you get it? Read my organizing article, "The Vision Thing."

* Are you a rule-lover or a rule-hater? Do you know when rules can help you, and when they can bring you down? Check out my article on creation, "The Real Rules of Fiction Writing."

* It's hard to make a living as a fiction writer, right? Or is it? Is it remotely possible that you could make a decent living? For some of my latest thoughts on this, read my marketing column, "1000 True Fans."

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

2) Organizing: The Vision Thing

Last month, I talked about three essential skills you need if you want to succeed in any business -- Vision, Strategy, and Tactics.

This month, we'll look at Vision in more detail.

Different people mean different things by "Vision." If you've ever read a corporate Vision Statement bogged down with baloney buzzwords about "creating value" and "leveraging competitive differences" and "managing knowledge," then you know the hazard of vague generalities.

When I talk about Vision, I mean just this -- something specific and difficult and worthwhile that you want to do or to have or to be.

Finishing a marathon or bringing clean water to a Third World village or getting your Ph.D. are all specific and difficult and worthwhile things you might want to do.

A house or a business or a racehorse are all things you might want to have.

A doctor or a grandmaster or a published novelist are

things you might want to be.

Vision is personal. It's up to you to decide what you want to do or have or be. Your family and friends might not get why it's important to you. That's their problem. Your problem is to do or get or become whatever it is you envision.

If you're a writer, you need both a Vision for your career and a Vision for each individual book you write.

Why do you need Vision for your career? That's simple. It gives you a clear and simple guideline for saying "yes" and saying "no" to everything that comes your way.

If your writing is any good at all, you'll eventually be bombarded with excellent ideas from people about what you "ought" to do. Books you ought to write. People you ought to collaborate with. Projects you ought to join. Agents you ought to talk to. Editors you ought to work with.

If you have no clear Vision for what you want your career to look like, you'll quickly get sidetracked with other people's excellent ideas.

You need to be able to say, "Sorry, that's not part of the vision I have for my career." And you need to be able to recognize the rare opportunity that comes along that fits squarely with your Vision.

What's your Vision for your career?

This really boils down to the following set of questions:

- * What kind of books do you want to write? (The category or categories, the style, etc.)
- * What kind of publisher do you want to work with?
- * What kind of reader do you want to appeal to? ("Everybody" is not a good answer here.)
- * What authors would you like to be compared to?

Maybe you want to write intellectual spy novels, published by a Big Six publisher, appealing to well-educated people who love John LeCarre novels.

Or maybe you want to write quiet Amish romances, published by a Christian publisher, appealing to Bible Belt readers who like Bev Lewis.

Or maybe you want to write young adult dystopic fantasy novels, published by a small independent publisher, and appealing to kids who like Suzanne Collins.

When you have a clear Vision for your career, you have instant guidelines on which kinds of writing books you should buy, what authors you should read, what storylines you should think about, what conferences you should go to, what agents you should talk to, what editors would be first on your list to meet.

Once you've defined the Vision for your career, you can refine that for each book you want to write. You don't have to write exactly the same kind of book for the rest of your life. So long as the Vision for each book fits within your broad career Vision, you've got plenty of latitude.

What's your Vision for the book you're working on right now?

This Vision may be identical to your career Vision, or you might need to narrow it down even further:

* Exactly which category and subcategory will this book fall under?

* Can you name five to ten publishers who would be suitable publishers for this book?

* Can you narrow down the target audience for your book? Can you envision one particular reader who would be perfect in every way for this book?

* Which best-selling novel would you like the reviewers to compare your book to?

You either see the value of having a Vision or you don't.

If you do, then take five minutes right now to write down your Vision for your career.

Don't worry about making it profound. Worry about making it specific.

Don't worry about whether it fits other people's ideas of what you should work on. Worry about making sure that it fits YOUR idea of what you want to work on.

Don't worry about getting it perfect, because you can always improve it later. Worry about getting it down on paper where you can be inspired by it every day.

If you survived writing your Vision for your career, take ten minutes and try to focus that down to a Vision for the current book you're working on.

This will usually be a bit more specific than your career Vision, so it will take a little longer.

That's it. Fifteen minutes of hard work can keep you on track for years.

3) Creating: The Real Rules of Fiction Writing

Ever wished somebody somewhere would give you a complete guide to writing a great novel? Then all you'd have to do is follow the steps and out would pop a best-seller. All you'd need to know are the rules of fiction writing.

Maybe you've bought a book or two on fiction writing that promised to do exactly that. But then, after a few chapters, you suddenly start chafing at all the rules. Point of view. Showing, not telling. Eliminating backstory. Gack! All you want to do is to write a great story, so why should you have to follow a billion irritating rules?

I hear both sides of this, all the time. I hear from writers who want me to teach them the equivalent of paint-by-numbers. And I hear from writers who don't want to be stuck coloring between the lines.

Let's be clear on one thing. There aren't any rules of fiction writing. At least none that are universal. For every rule I've ever heard of, I can think of some writer somewhere who's violated that rule while writing a great novel.

And yet.

And yet every one of those rules can be helpful to you in writing your novel.

The key thing to get here is that all those "rules" you hear about are actually rules of thumb. They're guidelines to use in figuring out what's wrong with your story. They're NOT for telling you how to write your story in the first place.

This might be a good time to talk about the two hats you wear as a writer -- the Creator hat and the Analyzer hat.

The Creator hat is the one you wear when you're creating. Creation is the act of inventing something new. This is a chaotic process, and it doesn't sit very well with rules. Rules don't help you when you're wearing the Creator hat. They stifle you.

The Analyzer hat is the one you wear when you're

analyzing. Analysis is the act of sorting through all the stuff you created, separating the good from the bad, throwing away the bad, and putting the good into some kind of order. Analysis is an orderly process. Rules of thumb can be very helpful when you're wearing the Analyzer hat.

The brutal fact is that, unless you are some kind of Mozart-like genius, most of the stuff you create is going to be lame. Some of it will be downright awful. And some of it will be excellent.

Let's remember what we mean by "excellent." Your goal as a novelist is to give your reader what I call a Powerful Emotional Experience. Do that and you win. Fail to do that and you lose.

Excellent fiction gives your reader a lot of Powerful Emotional Experiences. Bad fiction gives your reader hardly any.

When you wear your Creator hat, you are creating stuff that either works or doesn't work. Either it gives a Powerful Emotional Experience or it doesn't.

When you wear your Analyzer hat, you are sifting through your novel, word by word, paragraph by paragraph, scene by scene, to decide what works and what doesn't. If it works, then you keep it. If it doesn't work, then you have to figure out why and either throw it away or make it work.

If it's really hopelessly lame, then throw it away, whether it's a word, a paragraph, or a scene. Don't waste your time trying to fix something that can't be fixed. It's dragging your story down, so slit its throat and throw it to the wolves.

Most of the time, you don't have to throw it away. All you need to do is fix it. But how?

That's where those pesky rules of thumb come in. If you know something is broken, check out some books on writing to see if any of them might bear on your problem. You'll probably find all kinds of advice, some of it contradictory.

What you're looking for is something that explains why this particular chunk of fiction isn't working. Some rule of thumb.

Once you find one, it's time to put on your Creator hat and try again. The rule of thumb will suggest a way to fix your problem. It may work, or it may not, but you won't know until you try. Do some creative work. Have fun. Don't overthink it.

After you've finished, switch hats back to the Analyzer hat and go through the whole process again. You've either fixed the problem or you haven't. If you have,

then you're done. If not, then you get to try again.
And maybe again.

Let me emphasize one thing. When you're wearing your Creator hat, don't think about the "rules" (or rules of thumb or guidelines or whatever you want to call them). Forget about them completely. Focus on creating.

Haul out the "rules" only when you need help analyzing something that isn't working. Don't expect any one "rule" to ever work all the time. None of them do. You'll find that some of them become second nature to you and some of them just never click for you. That's fine. Different writers are different.

This shouldn't be complicated, and yet somehow it is for a lot of writers. Don't let the "rules" drag you down. Use them for analysis, not for creation.

And have fun! If fiction writing isn't fun, then something's wrong.

4) Marketing: 1000 True Fans

A couple of years ago, WIRED Magazine co-founder Kevin Kelly suggested the outrageous-sounding idea that an artist can make a decent living if he or she has a mere 1000 "true fans."

By "artist," Kelly meant anyone trying to make a living in one of the arts, whether fine arts, music, writing, or whatever.

What's a "true fan?" Kelly defined it as someone who likes your work so much that they're willing to spend \$100 per year on you.

The calculation is simple. If 1000 people are each willing to spend \$100 on you, then you can earn \$100,000 from them. Most of us would consider that a decent living.

You can read Kelly's original article here:
http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true_fans.php

It's an interesting idea and I think it has merit. I won't repeat Kelly's article here. Instead, I'll expand on his idea. I have three main points to make.

My first point is that there are different levels of fans, from rabidly loyal fans who would give you their left kidney, all the way down to very modestly loyal

fans who would be happy to read your next book if they could get it for a dollar.

You tend to have many more modestly loyal fans than rabidly loyal ones.

Mathematicians learned long ago that this common sense idea can be reduced nicely to numbers using a "Pareto distribution". (Google it if you're a geek and want to know how it works.)

Here are some example numbers to show roughly how it plays out in practice.

If you have 200 true fans willing to spend at least \$100 per year on you, then you probably have another 200 fairly true fans willing to spend at least \$50 on you. And you probably have another 400 modestly true fans willing to spend at least \$25 per year. And maybe another 1000 slightly true fans who would spend \$10 a year. If you've got all those, then you would likely have close to 20,000 very tepid fans willing to spend a mere \$1 per year on you.

Add up those various levels of fans, and you've got a potential \$70,000 per year, which isn't bad.

What this means is that you can get by on fewer true fans than you might have imagined. In principle.

My second point is that a lot of authors focus most of their efforts on building their number of Facebook friends (or fans) or on building their Twitter followers.

There's nothing wrong with that, but there's a very low entry level to becoming a Facebook friend/fan or a Twitter follower. Anyone can do it in a few seconds. Low investment, low commitment.

These kind of fans are nice to have, but bear in mind that they are mostly the \$1 per year crowd. If they hardly know you, then they hardly spend money on you. These are what we might call microfans.

Fans who follow your blog or subscribe to your e-mail newsletter will be fewer in number, but they'll also be far more likely to be in the \$10 per year group.

You don't have to find your superfans. They'll find you and tell you how much they love you. You can't sanely keep in touch with very many superfans, but that's okay because you probably don't have many anyway unless you're a superstar. Bear in mind that your superfans are the \$100 per year people. These are the ones who'll drive 200 miles through a rainstorm to come to your booksigning. And buy a case of books for their friends.

The important thing to remember is that you probably

need different tools for keeping in touch with your microfans, your regular fans, and your superfans. Don't treat them all the same, because they're not.

My third point is that you won't earn \$100 per year from your superfans unless you have more products available than just books. To earn \$100, you need to actually have \$100 worth of products available.

It's fairly rare for authors to have that much product available for sale. Generally, the only products authors display on their sites are their own books, and their publishers get most of the revenue from those.

But there's no reason for you to earn money only from your books. As an author, your main job is to be an entertainer. Any way you can entertain people is a possible way to earn money.

As one example, if you're an entertaining speaker (many authors are), you might pick up some extra cash by speaking. Your publisher will love you, because good speakers can move a lot of copies.

A friend of mine, Robin Gunn, has a store that sells all sorts of goodies related to her books. She's got a large fan base, and naturally some of those fans are eager to spend money in her store.

Scott Adams, creator of the massively popular Dilbert comic strip, has a terrific web site with an online store containing cool stuff that any Dilbert fan would love.

Of course the great majority of Scott's fans spend hardly anything on his site. The point is that those few who WANT to spend a lot on Dilbert goodies CAN spend a lot -- because Scott provides a ton of them.

If you're not published yet, you may think that none of this applies to you. Maybe it doesn't apply now, but it might apply extremely well someday. Whether you get published one year from now, or five, or ten, you'll want to earn enough money to keep writing.

Now is as good a time as any to start thinking about how you'll want to keep track of ALL your fans -- the tepid ones, the moderate ones, and the rabid ones.

What could you do for each of these classes of fans that would make them happy -- and earn you enough money to do what you love doing?

You don't have to answer that question now. But think about it.

The future keeps coming at us faster and faster. When it gets here, you want to be ready for it.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My book, *WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES*, has been selling well since it began shipping 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 flagship 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. I am currently booked up for 2012 (unless you want to make me a truly amazing offer or you have some incredible blackmail info on me).

If you'd like me to teach at your conference in 2013 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.AuthorMedia.com>

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 747 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 e-mail 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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