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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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 "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
400 of you have joined since the 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

What's in this issue:

I believe that success in fiction writing comes from balancing three aspects of the writing life: organization, creativity, and marketing. I'll discuss each of these in one of my regular columns.

In the first column, on organization, I'm not going to talk to you. This month, I'd like you to talk to me. I want to hear what cool product you'd like me to create. There's something in it for you. Want to hear what it is?

In the second column, on creativity, I'll return to a subject I wrote about last month -- nonverbal communication. In February I analyzed a passage in which the nonverbal communication "matched" the verbal communication. This month, I'll look at a passage where the nonverbal cues don't match the words. Which do you think shouts louder?

In the third column, on marketing, I'll continue a series of articles on web sites and blogging. We spent several weeks discussing this recently on my Advanced Fiction Writing Blog. Do you know the 9 questions you should answer before you even begin designing your web site?

Are you reading my blog? If not, join the fun here: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog

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2) Organizing: What Cool Writing Software Would You Like?

Recently, a writer emailed me asking if I knew of a software product that would solve a particular writing problem. I didn't. As far as I know, that product doesn't exist. It would be cool, but it's not the sort of thing a software engineer would ever dream up.

It's what a writer would dream up.

That got me to thinking, because I've spent a good part of my life writing scientific software. Few scientists are really strong at writing software, and even fewer software engineers are really strong at math. So there's a nice niche for people who are strong in both.

I can't help thinking that the same might hold true for fiction-related software. There are few novelists who write software. There are few software engineers who write fiction. I'll bet there are some screamingly cool products just waiting for a write-brained geek to build them. (OK, that pun stunk like a skunk. Sorry.)

I've been planning for some months now to start

creating cool software products for writers. I have a few ideas already written down, such as a program to streamline my "Snowflake Method." You'll hear more about those in the coming months.

But I'll bet many of you have a great idea for a cool tool for writing. An idea for a product you'd love to have, but which you don't have the skills to produce.

If so, I'd like to hear from you. If it's a good idea and if I can do it, I'll write that software and make a product out of it.

What will you get out of it? Several things:

* You'll get the great tool you want.
* You'll do something good for the world.
* You'll get all the fame you deserve.

Fame? What's all this about fame?

If you're the FIRST person to suggest an idea, then you'll get the credit: your picture in the "About This Program" page of the software, with a link to your web site, with your bio, and with a listing of any books you've written. That's fame. The value of that fame can be enormous.

If you're not the first person, you'll still get a line in the list of people who suggested the idea and a link, but no picture, no bio, no book list. Sorry, but the lead dog gets the best view.

You may be asking: What about ... money?

The answer is that money's not on the table. Here's why.

The kind of ideas I'm interested in are of this type: "I have this problem that needs to be solved..."

The kind of ideas I'm NOT interested in are of this type: "Here is how to solve this problem..."

I don't want to take over your idea that you could make money from. I want your unsolved problems that I can apply my skills to. You tell me the problem; I'll worry about figuring out how to solve it.

If you have an idea that you can implement by yourself (or pay someone else to implement) and you can market it by yourself (or pay someone else to market it), then do so. Don't tell me about it; just do it.

If your idea contains some "intellectual property" that you own, then you should NOT tell it to me, of course. I don't want your intellectual property. I want to use my own. (You can find out what "intellectual property" is by using your favorite search engine.)

But if you'd rather that your idea just gets done so

you can use it and get a bit of fame in the process, then tell me about it. The sooner the better, because the FIRST contributor of the idea gets the Lead Dog share of the credit.

Also, bear in mind that while I might sell some of these as products, some of them will be cool tools that I release into the wild for free, just to get a little more fame for me. I like doing things like that.

Don't want to play? That's fine. I'm sure that plenty of others of my Loyal Readers do. And I've got a few ideas of my own stacked up on my To Do List.

If you DO want to play, then send me your idea. I could make you a star, baby. (If you answer by hitting the Reply button to this e-mail, PLEASE delete the body of this e-zine in your reply. I don't need a big pile of 700-line e-mails, and I will DELETE any replies that contain the body of this e-zine.)

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3) Creating: Dissonant Nonverbal Communication in Fiction

Last month, I talked about nonverbal communication in fiction and analyzed an example from THE PROMISE, by Chaim Potok. In that example, the nonverbal communication of a swindler agreed with his verbal communications. That's what made the swindle successful.

This month, we'll look at an example in which the nonverbal communication of a swindler CONFLICTS with his verbal communication. Paradoxically, that's also what makes his swindle successful.

Note that in real life, people usually believe the nonverbal communication. As they say, "Actions speak louder than words."

This example is taken from DEADMAN'S POKER, by James Swain. It's a mystery set in Las Vegas. The protagonist, Tony Valentine, is investigating claims that there's cheating going on at a major poker tournament. The charges have been made by a 72-year-old gambler named Rufus Steele, who has been knocked out of the tournament and is crying foul.

Steele is a wily old coot, but flat broke, so he's running a series of insanely stupid-looking bets with a group of bad guys, including a mean cuss called "the Greek." In the scene we'll look at, Steele is setting up a bet with "the Greek" and his buddies for half a million dollars that he can beat a horse in a hundred-yard footrace.

On the face of it, Steele looks crazy. The Greek &
Company get to pick the horse. They get to pick the
jockey. They get to pick the location.

Can Rufus Steele possibly win this bet? He says he's
going to, but ... actions speak louder than words.
Let's look at his words and his actions:

Valentine didn't say anything, not wanting to jinx
Rufus, who stood on the fifty-yard line, doing jumping
jacks in his Skivvies T-shirt and black boxing shorts
while exhorting his fellow gamblers with nonstop
banter.

"Come on, boys, what do you say? I'll give you even
money I can beat that nag in the hundred-yard dash.
That's even money!"

Randy sez: Steele is saying with his words that he's
dead certain he can beat this horse. But the guy is 72
years old and he's a skinny guy, way out of shape, a
smoker. His actions say it's impossible.

As the scene develops, the gamblers are focusing
attention on the horse. They make sure he's not doped
and that he hasn't been tampered with in any way. Tony
Valentine is getting nervous, because he likes Rufus
Steele and is worried sick the old guy has lost his
marbles and is now going to lose his shirt. Here's what
happens next:

Rufus was still doing his exercises. He was all skin
and bones, with some sinew thrown in for good measure.
He winked as Valentine approached.

"Hey, Tony, you ready to help me fleece these suckers?"

Randy sez: Once again, Steele's words and actions are
out of sync. He says he's going to pull a collosal
scam. But his body tells a very different story. Tony
Valentine, master of all manner of cons, doesn't see
how Rufus can possibly win. Let's look at more words
from Rufus, who's talking to Tony:

"You don't think I can beat Greased Lightning?"

"Is that the horse's name?"

"Yeah. Raced in the Kentucky Derby a few years back,
came in fourth," Rufus said. "The owners use it for
stud now. A real nag, if you ask me."

Randy sez: Rufus has reiterated his claim that he's
going to win, not because he's a great runner, but

because the horse is a nag. But the actions that follow give the lie to that, as Tony Valentine watches the horse take a test run:

A football field is exactly one hundred yards long, and Valentine clocked the horse with his watch. Greased Lightning went from end zone to end zone in seven seconds flat.

He turned to see Rufus removing a cigarette from a pack of Marlboros. The Greek and his cronies were standing nearby, and watched Rufus light up and take a deep drag.

"Rufus," Valentine said, "you can't beat what I just saw. Give up."

Rufus exhaled a thick plume of smoke into the night air.

Randy sez: The horse's actions makes it clear that he's no nag. Yet Rufus is calmly smoking. SMOKING! Rufus is acting like he really believes he can win. Even his friend, Tony Valentine, is scared spitless that Rufus is going to be taken to the cleaners.

There's a huge mismatch here in what Rufus is communicating. His verbal communication says that he will swindle the Greek and his cronies out of half a million dollars. But his nonverbal communications say he's going to lose bad. The horse's nonverbal communications say Rufus is going to lose bad. There seems to be only one possible conclusion: Rufus is crazy.

Given this, what would you do? You'd bet every dime you own against Rufus, wouldn't you? The man doesn't stand a chance, and he is clearly out of touch with reality. Right?

That is why cons work. Nobody ever takes a sucker bet like this because they want to get swindled. People take a sucker bet because they think they can't lose. The Greek and his friends take the bet because they believe Rufus's actions, not his words.

Actions really do speak louder than words. When there's a disconnect between actions and words, people always believe the actions. That is fundamental to life. Therefore, it's fundamental to fiction.

Since this is near the end of Swain's novel, I'm not going to tell you what happens. If you want to know, you'll have to get the book: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/deadmanspoker.php

I realize it's cruel and unusual punishment to tell you

all this and not tell you how it comes out. But you know how it comes out, don't you? Or do you? Are you sure?

As I mentioned in the last couple of issues, I've learned a lot about nonverbal communication (one of many aspects of showing character emotion) from Margie Lawson's fabulous course on Creating Character Emotions, which you can learn more about here: http://www.MargieLawson.com

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4) Marketing: Web Sites and Blogging, Part 2

Years ago, it was the rare author who had a web site. Those who didn't have one were asking the obvious question, "What does it buy you to have a web site?"

That question was hardly ever answered very well. Despite that, these days it's the rare author who does NOT have a web site. If you ask why, the usual answer seems to be, "Well, you have to."

Right, I guess that settles it.

If you press for a little more explanation, the answer usually comes down to, "You need it for marketing." But I don't know one author in 100 who could tell you the return on investment for their web site.

I've always had a secret suspicion that the real reason for having a web site is, "Cool authors have web sites." Which reminds me a lot of junior high school, when being cool was far more important than anything else.

In the last couple of years, blogs have been booming. Now many authors have blogs, and soon it'll be as unthinkable to not have a blog as it now is to not have a web site.

The question that should be asked is, "What does it buy you to have a blog?"

I wish I were hearing more coherent answers to that question than to the web site question, but I'm not. Again, it usually comes down to, "Somebody told me I need it for marketing." But if blogging is for marketing, then what's the ROI?

I would bet that the secret reason for blogging is the same as the secret reason for web sites. "Cool authors have blogs." But if that's the real reason, I wish people would just say so.

The problem is that this game doesn't seem to end. Once you get a web site and a blog, you find that now you need a MySpace page, once again "for marketing." And a FaceBook page. And a ShoutLife page. And on and on, always "for marketing." But once again, people fall silent when you ask about that pesky ROI thing.

Would it hurt for everyone to just admit that it's mostly about being cool?

Now don't get me wrong. I have a web site. Two of them, in fact. I have a blog. To my knowledge, none of them is remotely cool. If you want to know what they're for, I'll tell you. They're "for marketing." Shocking but true. And yes, I calculate the ROI for each one of them. They're worth my time.

I'm not criticizing the idea of having a web site or blog for marketing. I condone it. These are good things -- IF you actually use them for marketing.

That brings me to the topic of this article. Before you create a web site or a blog or ANY such beast, you need to know why you're doing it. And a lot more. There are a pile of questions you should ask yourself.

An effective marketing tool doesn't just happen. Effectiveness is designed in, not nailed on.

When I go to design anything, I ask a lot of questions. The answers to those questions give me the direction I need to begin designing.

I'd like to pose 9 questions you should ask yourself BEFORE you start designing your web site or your blog. I'll list some common answers to each one, but there are many possible responses.

Let me emphasize that there aren't any "right" or "wrong" answers to these questions. Your answers are your answers; they'll be different from the answers given by J.K. Rowling or your best friend or your plumber.

The important thing is that you need to own your answers. They need to be right for you.

Preferably, you'd answer these questions before you design the site or build it. But I know perfectly well that a lot of authors build it first, then design it, and only then start asking these sorts of questions. That adds a lot of complexity to your life, but take heart. It's never too late to think strategically.

Here are the questions, along with some possible answers:

Q1) What is the purpose of your web site?
 * To let me express myself
 * To let me tell the world about myself

* To tell the world about my books
* To market my books
* To market other products or services
* To give away my ideas for free
* Some other purpose
* Any combination of the above

Q2) How many pages do you want to have on your web
    site?
 * Just one "home page"
 * Just one page with a blog on it
 * Between one and ten pages
 * Between ten and a hundred pages
 * Between 100 and 1000 pages
 * More than 1000 pages

Q3) How often do you want to add content to your web
    site?
 * Several times per day
 * Every day
 * Several times per week
 * About once per week
 * About once per month
 * Hardly ever
 * Never; I want it to be unchanged forever

Q4) How "pretty" do you want your site to be?
 * Extremely beautiful and cutting edge, with lots of
   motion and graphics
 * Professional looking
 * Nice looking
 * As long as it doesn't look like the south end of a
   north-bound rhino, it's fine
 * I don't care if it's ugly as sin

Q5) How interactive do you want your site?
 * I just want to show information; the user just needs
   to be able to get from one page to the others by
   clicking links
 * I may have a few forms on my site, (for example, a
   form that sends email)
 * I want fancy graphics that move around; show me some
   glitz, Baby!
 * I want my users to be able to leave comments (for
   example, comments on a blog)
 * I want users to be able to enter information into
   databases so my site can display that info or do
   computations (for example, an income tax calculating
   web site)

Q6) Can you do the techie stuff?
 * No, I can't do it and won't learn; I want to pay
   somebody else to do it all
 * No, I want to use a simple Sitebuilder web site that
   I can use to create my site without paying anybody; I
   understand that this means I can't make super complex
   sites, but I just want something simple for now
 * No, I need somebody to set it up, but I'd like to be
   able to make a few small changes, if somebody shows me
   how

* No, I need somebody to set it up, but then I want to
  learn how to do fairly major things
* No, but I can use one of those programs like
  DreamWeaver or FrontPage that does all the hard stuff;
  I'm willing to spend some time to learn to use them
* No, but I can learn how to hand-code my pages; just
  tell me what books to buy!
* Yawn, of course! I know HTML, CSS, PHP, JavaScript,
  SQL, Ruby, Perl, Java, or I can learn them from a book

Q7) How much do you want to spend on your site?
* I want a free site
* Nothing up front, and less than $10 per month for
  maintenance
* A few hundred bucks up front, and as little as
  possible for maintenance
* A couple of thousand dollars up front, and less than
  $100 per month after that
* Cost is no object; give me the best!

Q8) When do you want your site done?
* Yesterday, when my book came out!
* Today would be great
* This week
* This month
* Within the next few months
* Someday
* I have a web site, but it needs revamping

Q9) Do you want the search engines to bring visitors to
    your site?
* Yes
* No, I could care less about search engines
* I have no idea, but I suppose it sounds good

This is not an exhaustive list, but it gives you some
idea of the kinds of questions you should ask. If
you're planning a web site or blog, write down your
answers to each of these questions. If you have a
webmaster, show him or her your answers.

The fact is that the answers to these questions will
put a lot of constraints on you -- who can do the job,
what technology will be used, how long it'll take, how
much it'll cost, and how effective it'll be.

In an ideal world, every webmaster would ask a lot of
questions like these before they start working for you.
In the real world, not all of them do, and this
sometimes leads to expensive mistakes. You might end up
with a site or blog that drains your resources and
doesn't meet your needs.

You will save yourself a LOT of time if you answer
these questions before you build your site. But even if
you've had a web site since the Bronze Age, it still
wouldn't hurt to answer them now. Things might have
changed since you first started out. You might be
overdue for a new direction.

Once you've answered those questions, then what?

That is a question for another day. Answer the questions first. You may find that the act of answering them suggests some actions you could take right now. Even if you don't, we'll pick up this topic next month.

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5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

In February, I launched a new e-book, THE WRITERS CONFERENCE SURVIVAL GUIDE, authored by my freelance editor, Meredith Efken. I've already heard back from a number of readers, thanking me for making this e-book available. I'll be going to my next conference next week, and I'll be using Meredith's planning worksheets to help me set my strategy for the conference.

Did you get your copy already? If not, check it out:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/wcsg.php

I also spent a bit of time this month dealing with taxes for last year. This is WAY earlier than I like to do taxes, but my daughter is applying for college and there were a lot of financial aid forms that I had to fill out. I am Xtremely glad I have an accountant to help me through the morass. Accounting is not one of my talents.

All of which reminds me that until about 15 months ago, I didn't even have an accountant and I was wading through that money management muck by myself every year.

I got my act together only because a good friend of mine, Allison Bottke, kicked me in the butt (metaphorically) and convinced me that I needed to start acting like I was actually in business.

Want to hear what Allison told me? I got her on tape:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/clean.php

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6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 95076 times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

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:
My fiction site: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

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7) 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 11,000 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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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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