
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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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) Special Feature: How To Talk To An Agent
 - 3) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com)
 - 4) Steal This E-zine!
 - 5) 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 300 of you have joined since the last issue), welcome to my e-zine!

About a week ago, I accidentally deleted my entire database of subscribers to this e-zine. I called my e-zine tech support, and they restored the database, but I have a few more subscribers now than I had expected.

My best guess is that some folks who have unsubscribed in the past may have been resubscribed by my tech support people. If that's the case for you, please accept my apologies.

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 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:

This month, I decided to do something slightly different. Normally, I write three columns, one on organizing, one on writing, and one on marketing.

This month, I'm doing one VERY long article that I ran on my blog recently. It's one of the most popular articles I've ever done -- an example "appointment with an agent."

As I've said many times, your best chance to meet an editor or agent is at a writing conference. But what do you DO when you meet that pesky editor or agent? I could TELL you what to do, but I'd rather SHOW you.

I had dinner at a recent conference with my long-time friend, Chip MacGregor, an uber-agent with many years experience in the publishing business. Chip was the acquisition editor for my first novel, and he has also held the job title of "publisher" in a division of Time-Warner's former publishing unit.

So when I got home from the conference, I emailed Chip and asked if we could show people how a "typical" appointment goes. We did an IM session, which I then posted on my blog.

By the way, I highly recommend Chip's blog at:
<http://www.ChipMacGregor.com>
It's one of the blogs I read most regularly and it is often hilariously funny. He answers questions on the publishing industry and agents and all that.

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

2) Special Feature: How To Talk To An Agent

One of the best things you can do for yourself is to go to a writing conference. If you're a "Freshman" or "Sophomore" level writer, you'll learn an enormous

amount about the publishing industry, you'll make some instant "lifelong" friends, and you'll see your craft take a quantum leap.

If you're a "Junior" or "Senior" level writer, you'll likely have some appointments with either editors or agents. If those go well, you may find yourself on the fast-track to a publishing deal. It happens all the time to writers who've put in the time to develop their skills.

You may be thinking: "What? Meet with an editor? Talk to an agent? I'd rather drink molten lead and chase it down with firewhiskey."

There is only one answer to a thought like that: Get a grip on yourself. If you are going to pursue your publishing dream, someday you'll need to sit down across the table from an agent or editor and pitch your novel. You just will.

So get over that shy little wallflowerly act that you've convinced yourself is reality. Editors and agents are just as nice and just as interested in you as your best friend is, except that they are smarter and funnier than most of your friends, and also they can get you a publishing contract, whereas most of your friends can't.

In this article, I'll show you how to pitch a book. It's not really all that traumatic, IF you know what you're doing. If you don't know what you're doing, then yes, it CAN be pretty traumatic.

Let's deal with the preliminaries. Here are a few questions that I've been asked about agents and editors:

Q: What's the difference between an editor and an agent?

A: An editor is employed by a publishing house to acquire manuscripts, edit them, and shepherd them through the process. The editor does not work for you. The editor is your business partner in a joint venture. The editor's fiduciary responsibility is to earn as much money as possible for the publisher and to give enough money to you to keep you from going elsewhere.

An agent is employed by you. The agent helps you refine your proposal, pitches the project to suitable editors, and negotiates the deal to benefit you. The agent's fiduciary responsibility is to get as much money as possible for you, and to let the publisher keep enough so it doesn't go bankrupt. The agent is normally paid a commission on your earnings, but he doesn't get paid until you do. The usual commission for a novel is 15%. You should not pay an agent up front.

There is some natural conflict between editors and

agents, but it's business, not personal. All of them have many great friends on the other side of the table. Otherwise, they wouldn't be in the business long. Many agents have previously worked as editors, and a few editors have previously worked as agents.

Q: Do you really need an agent or can you sell your book on your own and keep that 15%?

A: If you know your proposal is very strong, AND if you know all the editors you need, AND if you are a good negotiator, AND if you are familiar with publishing contracts, then you can do just as well for yourself as an agent can. Otherwise, you'll do better with an agent.

Of course, unpublished writers often have trouble landing an agent, so it's quite common to break into the business without an agent. (My first agent died without ever selling anything for me. I then sold my first three books without an agent. Then an agent came looking for me.)

Q: If you get an offer from a publisher, would it make sense to look for an agent to help you negotiate the contract?

A: Yes.

OK, now on to the meat. Let's say you've been writing for several years and you believe you are a "Junior" or "Senior" level writer. You've got a novel finished and you think it's publishable. Your writing friends think it's publishable. You go to a writing conference and make an appointment to meet with an agent (or editor).

Now what do you do? What's that appointment going to look like?

That depends on a lot of things. I asked one of my many agent friends, Chip MacGregor, to do a role-playing mock appointment with me. We did it on Instant Messenger and I edited it slightly to clean up our spelling, but otherwise, this is exactly how it played out, mistakes and all.

I pretended to be Tom Clancy pitching his first novel, THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER. (One of my favorite novels.) Chip pretended to be an agent meeting with Tom at a writing conference. To make sure we didn't get too enmeshed in the fantasy, I used my name in the appointment, not Tom's.

I wasn't sure how well this game would go, because I'm not all that great at pitching. But I figured Chip could help me over the rough spots. Most agents and editors are skilled at helping an author get through an

appointment. They "know how to dance" so if you don't, let them lead.

Here's how the appointment went:

Randy: Hi, Chip.

Chip: Hello Randy. Nice to meet you.

Randy: To be honest, I've never pitched a novel before so I'm a little green right now.

Chip: That's okay. Why don't you just tell me what it is you've written.

Randy: OK, it's a military thriller about a Soviet sub captain who decides to hand over the latest Russian sub to the Americans.

Chip: So this is a novel?

Randy: Right.

Chip: Okay. And you have a background with subs or the US Navy?

Randy: Well, no. I'm an insurance salesman. But I have a lot of friends in the Navy. We do a lot of role-playing military war games.

Chip: Okay. That's fine. Tell me a bit more about your story.

Randy: I guess I should start with motive, right? Because it's a little implausible unless you understand why a Russian sub commander would do this.

Chip: This is your 15 minutes, Randy. You can start wherever you feel comfortable.

Randy: OK, good. Here's the thing: The Russian commander is actually a Lithuanian. So right there, you have an outsider. Secondly he was married to a great woman who got appendicitis. She went to a Soviet hospital and an idiot surgeon took out her appendix and gave her an infection. Then they gave her Soviet made antibiotics which were useless. So she died. So our sub commander hates the Soviet system. That's his motivation.

Chip: Um... wait a minute. Too many details. Pretend you're a helicopter, flying over the big picture. You've got a Lithuanian guy who is captaining a Russian sub, right? And, as I understand, he wants to get back at them -- exact some revenge. That it so far?

Randy: Right.

Chip: Okay. What's the wife got to do with the story?

Randy: Well, she's now dead, and the sub commander blames the Soviet system. So he wants revenge the only way he can get it -- by handing over a prize intelligence plum to the Americans.

Chip: Okay. That's an interesting premise.

Randy: But the catch here is that he wants to hand it over to the Americans without the Russians knowing it.

Chip: All right. I think I've got your basic premise. How does your story start?

Randy: The sub commander kills the political officer in his office just after the sub has left on its maiden voyage. The political officer is a useless guy who isn't in on the plot. The rest of the officers on the ship ARE in on the plot. They're all disaffected and want out of the Soviet system too.

Chip: All right. So the sub captain is a dissident, and he's gathered around him a bunch of other dissidents to help him defect?

Randy: Right. But they also have a large number of young enlisted men onboard who know nothing about the plot.

Chip: Okay, so they've got to do this in secret somehow.

Randy: Right. They have to find a way to hand over the sub, defect to the Americans, get the enlisted boys back home to Russia, and keep the Soviet military from knowing that the Americans have the boat.

Chip: You've got a military thriller planned. So the audience is basically male.

Randy: Right. There are of course some women who like this kind of story, but the target reader is a guy who believes in the military and isn't ashamed to have America flex its muscles. It's not for the politically correct crowd, Chip. This is for middle America.

Chip: Okay. Just so you know, right now it's a tough time to be selling men's fiction.

Randy: Hmmm, why's that?

Chip: Just the market at play. How many words is the book?

Randy: About 100,000.

Chip: Is it completed?

Randy: Yes, and I've edited it a couple of times. It's about as polished as I can make it.

Chip: Good. Has anyone else read it? I mean, have you had an editor take a look at it, or run it by your critique group?

Randy: I don't have a critique group or an editor. My wife worked over the grammar. But I did have five of my Navy friends read it and they helped me fix a TON of little details. It's about as accurate as I can make it.

Chip: Okay. May I take a look at the first couple of pages?

Randy: Right here.

Chip: (Reading) Great. As I'm looking this over, tell me something . . . what are your expectations of this meeting? I mean, we have a few minutes together. Are you expecting to find a publishing deal? to have me respond to your words? to talk about the market? what?

Randy: Well, I don't have an agent yet and I'd like to know if you're interested in working with me on this project to find a publisher.

Chip: All right. I just want to be clear as to what you were expecting. (Continues reading the first two pages.)

Randy: Right.

Chip: Hey -- that's good work. A good opening. I liked it.

Randy: Really? Wow, that's great to hear. I've never done this before, so I'm a little nervous right now.

Chip: That's okay, we're just talking here, Randy. May I share a few thoughts about this with you?

Randy: Sure.

Chip: All right. I like your basic premise. It sounds like it has the makings of a good story. I just had a couple minutes to read your words, so this isn't exactly a detailed response but I thought your opening was strong. To do it justice, I'd need to read more. Let me talk about your expectation for a moment . . .

Randy: OK.

Chip: Here's the thing: we've just met. I think this has some merit, and I'd be willing to look at more of it. But you're probably not going to walk into a 15 minute appointment and sign with an agent . . .

Randy: Right.

Chip: in fact, an agent who would sign you up with nothing more than a cursory look at your work probably

is a bit too eager anyway.

Randy: You'd be surprised how many people buy life insurance after a 15 minute talk.

Chip: So let me suggest a couple things to you . . . First, we're about out of time. I thought this was a good start. I'd be willing to see more . . . If you'd like, I'll invite you to send me the entire thing and I'll read over it. Second, while we're here at the conference, I'm going to ask you to do a couple things . . .

Randy: OK.

Chip: I'm going to suggest you attend the workshops that deal with thrillers, characterization, and dialogue. Take a look at the listings and you'll find them . . . Next, I'll ask you to go over this with a couple things in mind -- ACTION and DIALOGUE. A novel like this is built on those two pillars. I just want you to go over this . . .

Randy: (writing) Action and Dialogue.

Chip: . . . and make sure your book focuses on ACTION and DIALOGUE. This is the sort of story that will need to keep people turning the pages. So you've got to make sure there is genuine movement . . .

Randy: Right.

Chip: . . . from one paragraph to the next. No stopping to catch your breath. No waiting while you offer a bunch of cool description. It's got to be move - move - move. Always pushing me forward.

Randy: OK, I'll work on that.

Chip: You might also want to think about how you start and end chapters. Does the first sentence grab me? Does the end of the chapter make me have to turn the page and go to the NEXT chapter?

Randy: Yeah, that's one thing my wife hammered on me about.

Chip: Okay. Look, we're about out of time. Is there anything you'd like to ask me?

Randy: Just one thing: what should I do next? Revise it? Send it to you? I'm a little clueless here.

Chip: That's okay. Like I said, attend some of the workshops here at the conference, and see if there's good information you can take and use. Then go home and look over your work -- especially the first two or three chapters. Does it start strong? End strong? Action and dialogue? Keep me turning pages? Do some evaluation. Then, if you think it's as strong as it can

be, email it to me. Here's my card. Just reference the conference in the subject line, so I know it's not a cold submission.

Randy: OK, I'll do that and get it to you within the next few weeks. Thanks a lot! I really enjoyed this, even though I was scared to death coming in.

Chip: Well, you did great. Tell you what -- today is the 14th. Why don't you plan to have it to me by the end of the month? That gives you two weeks to do any last revisions, then get it to me.

Randy: OK, I'll get it done.

Chip: Great. Nice to meet you. Appreciated seeing your work.

Randy: Thanks.

[End of interview.]

Randy sez: This interview went about the way I expected. I played a novice writer with a strong storyline. Let's look at some of the main features of the interview:

1) I gave Chip a good one-sentence summary of my novel, but I forgot to start off telling Chip that this IS a novel. I just assumed he knew. But in a cold interview, the editor/agent knows NOTHING about the author. So I had him a little confused. Chip represents both fiction and nonfiction, and he sees all sorts of both. I'll bet he also sees a lot of stuff that is unclassifiable. So he asked me to clarify. A good agent will ask for clarifications quickly.

2) As soon as he knew the genre, Chip asked about my qualifications -- am I a Navy guy? Normally in fiction, qualifications aren't that important, but in a military novel, it might be important. So he asked. Tom Clancy, if I remember correctly from an article I read by him many years ago, had never been on a sub before he wrote THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER. But he had talked to plenty of people who had. And he'd done a lot of war gaming. That was his strong suit.

3) Once I started explaining the story, I started rambling. This is common, even for experienced novelists. We want to get into details. The agent just wants the big picture. Chip let me go on for a bit, then asked me for clarification. Notice that he synthesized the story and fed it back to me to make sure he had it right.

4) Chip quickly saw that this is a good story premise. So he asked me a bit about the target audience. This is a book aimed at men who like exploding helicopters. Then he made sure that I had a realistic understanding about the marketability of the book. It won't be as

easy to sell as certain other kinds of fiction. He wanted to set my expectations.

5) Next, Chip wanted to know where I am in the process. (Freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior.) Was the book done or just a pipe dream? How long is it? Who's seen it? The answers to these questions will tell him a lot more than if I'd told him, "Chip, I'm a senior." (I would not recommend telling an agent or editor that. They prefer to be shown, not told.)

6) Chip also asked about my expectations for the meeting. The reason is that writers come into these meetings with all sorts of expectations, some realistic, some not. Some writers want validation or a critique. Some want a contract RIGHT NOW. Some don't know what they want. In my case, the book was done and I believed it was ready to publish. So I didn't put on false humility and just say I wanted a critique. I didn't. I wanted an agent to help me sell it. But a meeting like this is of course just the first step of several. It would be very rare to get an offer of representation from an agent after one 15 minute meeting. Most agents would want to read more of the manuscript, probably all of it, before taking on a client. Especially an unpublished client.

7) Notice that Chip gave me some valuable advice that I could use, even if he never takes me on as a client. He knew that for this genre, the author needs to hone his craft in Action and Dialogue. So he advised me to take any workshops at the conference that focus on those. And he also told me to read through my manuscript and revise it as needed.

Finally, Chip invited me to send him the manuscript -- but only after I think it's as strong as it could be. He also gave me a deadline to do it. You'd be amazed how many writers get a request for a manuscript from an editor or an agent at a conference and then NEVER send them anything. It happens all the time.

Of course, there might have been other endings to this story:

* Chip might have told me, "Sorry, there's no market for this kind of thing right now." Notice that a response like that says NOTHING about the quality of the writing. It says only that (in his opinion, which might well be wrong), he can't sell a book like this right now.

* He might have said, "I like the premise, but I think you need to work on your craft a bit. You're not there yet." This is a very painful answer to hear. How can an agent make that kind of decision based on only 2 pages of manuscript? Easy. 2 pages is more than enough to tell whether a writer has decent craft. One paragraph is usually enough to tell whether the writer has brilliant craft.

* A very rare response could have been, "Tell you what . . . this is REALLY good. I'd be interested in this. Um . . . I'd appreciate it if you didn't show this around." You shouldn't count on hearing this, but if you do, either the agent is taking some drugs he shouldn't be taking, or . . . you have a great career ahead of you.

The actual ending of the interview is the most plausible one for this particular manuscript. It's a strong story premise, but the writing is not luminous literary artistry. The agent would really need to read a couple of hundred pages to know that this book is going to be a blockbuster. And most agents would want to read the whole thing to make sure the writer can pull off a good ending. Readers buy the book because of the beginning, but they tell their friends because of the ending.

Let's be clear on one thing. Meeting with an editor or agent for a cold appointment like this is scary the first few times you do it. First dates are scary too. Driving on the freeway the first time is scary. Most things worth doing are scary the first few times.

If you never do it the first time, you will never get over being scared. But if you do, then you will.

And remember, editors and agents need writers. Without us, they don't have a job. And they also like us. Writers are the most fun people in the known universe.

So when you sit down for an appointment, you are meeting with somebody who needs you and likes you. Could life possibly be better than that?

3) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I recently posted my third monthly humor column in a new online magazine. Want to know what terrible thing happened when I rejected my mentor's advice? Here's the link:
http://www.ChristianFictionOnlineMagazine.com/biz_rooney.html

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule.

If you want to hear me speak on fiction writing, there will be a couple of opportunities in coming months.

I will be teaching on those pesky Motivation-Reaction Units at the ACFW conference in Minneapolis in September. Details here:

<http://www.ACFW.com>

I will be teaching internet marketing in a major track at the Florida Christian Writers conference in February. Details here:
<http://www.flwriters.org/>

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>

4) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 3456 times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2008.

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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Randy Ingermanson
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