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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Publisher: Randy Ingermanson ("the Snowflake guy")

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<http://www.ingermanson.com>

Circulation: 477 writers, each of them creating a  
Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

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- 1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!

Thanks to all of you for joining me in this venture. When I decided to launch this E-zine, I figured I'd be doing well to start out with 100 readers. 200 if I got lucky and hit a nerve.

Well. My email database tells me that over 500 souls have signed up already, and more than 90% of them made it through those pesky hoops with that irritating confirmation letter. Congrats to those of you who survived all that!

My goal with this E-zine is simple. I want to create quality information on the craft of writing fiction and on the marketing of that fiction, and I want to instill in you (and myself) an entrepreneurial spirit. Let's define those terms, shall we?

"Craft" means the the art of creating a powerful emotional experience in your reader.

"Marketing" means giving potential readers the tools they need to find you and brag about you to their

friends.

An "entrepreneur" is someone who creatively solves problems for other people. (In the case of us novelists, the problem to be solved is that regular life is boring and we all want to be entertained.)

I've specifically latched onto the word "entrepreneur" because writers too often want to be the prima donna artiste who lets the publisher worry about tacky stuff like marketing. That doesn't wash these days. It is not the publisher's job to make sure my books sell. It is my job. It's your job to make sure yours sell. Each of us works for ourselves. We are entrepreneurs, and one thing entrepreneurs do is collaborate with each other to get better at what they do.

Hence this free E-zine. Why am I publishing this thing for free? The short answer is this: I've found that when I teach something, I always learn a whole lot of new and unexpected things. I'm a selfish guy, and I want to get better at this crazy craft called fiction. And I want to learn how to market my books better. Ain't no better way for me to learn that than by trying to get my thoughts down on paper.

I hope you'll learn a whole lot too. This is what the oozy floozy synergistic types here in California call a "win-win situation". Whatever. We're going to learn a boatload of new things. And we're going to have fun. Thanks for joining me!

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## 2) A Roadmap for Your Writing Career

What's the dirtiest word in a writer's lexicon? Think about that for a minute before you read on. What's the worst thing you can call a fellow writer?

Ready? Here's what I think the answer is, or at least it's what many writers would say: "Unpublished."

I've met a ton of writers at writing conferences. To break the ice, I usually ask them what they're working on. They'll spend ten minutes telling me all about their novel. Then, if they've not sold a book yet, they'll hang their heads like they're admitting to being a drug dealer or a congress-critter and mutter, "But I'm (shudder) unpublished."

Let's agree up front to dump that word. I've got a better one. When I was in college, I knew a lot of students who were hoping to get into med school. Some of them eventually made it. Some didn't. But here's the thing: I never heard any of them saying they were "unmedical" students. They said they were "pre-med".

I don't want to ever again hear anyone saying they're

"unpublished." In this E-zine, I'm going to insist on the word "pre-published."

Why is this important? Because the way you think about yourself influences whether you succeed or not. And how long it takes you to succeed.

I spent about 16 years pre-published (counting from the day I decided I was gonna write me a novel till the day I saw one of my novels on the bookstore shelf.) That's not at all uncommon. I've got friends who took longer. I've got friends who did it much quicker. I took way too long, and I suspect my own attitude had a lot to do with it.

If you've read the "Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Author" article on my web site, you know that I believe it should take about four years to get to publishable quality in your fiction. Some writers will be quicker, some slower, but four years is reasonable.

You may be a Freshman, a Sophomore, a Junior, a Senior, or even a Graduate. Chances are, you aren't happy with how your career is going. So here are five steps you can take to haul yourself out of the ditch and get back on the road to where you want to go.

\* Take inventory of yourself. What level of writer are you? Do your writing friends agree? Do published authors agree? If you think you're a Senior and everybody else thinks you're a Sophomore, then there's a problem. Being a Sophomore doesn't mean you're a bad writer. It means you're not fully trained yet. There's a difference. Figure out where you are.

\* Make a long-term goal for yourself. If you've figured out that you're a Freshman, then a reasonable long-term goal is to graduate in about four years. Whereas if you're a Senior, then a reasonable goal is to graduate THIS year! Please note that you need to realistically think about whether this writing game is for you. You may wind up spending the next four or five years training to write fiction, and then end up NEVER getting published. Does that make you chuck your cheeseburgers? If so, then go find another career. Pick a safer one, like wing-walking or cliff diving or lion taming.

\* Make a short-term goal for yourself. Rome wasn't built in a nanosecond, and you won't learn neurosurgery or tennis or fiction in a few days or weeks or months. Can't be done. What can you reasonably do in the next three months? In the next year? For my short-term goals, I ask myself what I'm weakest at and what I'm strongest at. Then I work on improving just those two areas of my writing.

\* Get yourself some advisors. You are the average of the five people you hang out with most. Change your hang-out group, and you just might change your

behavior! Find some advisors who are at a similar stage in their careers, writers who are positive thinkers and are dedicated to advancing. (If you're a Sophomore, hang out mostly with other Sophomores, and maybe a few Freshmen or Juniors). Your advisors won't be in this just for you. They'll be in it for them too. They'll advise you, and you'll advise each of them. This is often called a Mastermind Group or a Dream Team or whatever. Get yours. No less than five. No more than six. This is NOT the same as a critique group. These are career advisors, not craft polishers.

\* Map out a plan to meet your short-term goal. If you're not sure what to do, ask your advisors. If they don't know, figure out who does. Share what you learn with your advisors. Do everything you possibly can to help them succeed. They'll return the favor in spades.

\* I promised five steps, but you get a bonus sixth: Go do it. Put your plan into practice. Meet regularly with your advisory group. Keep each other accountable. If your plan isn't working, figure out why. If you don't know why, figure out whom to ask. Get help! Give help! Work your plan until you reach your short-term goal. Then set a new one.

That's all! It's pretty simple, but don't kid yourself -- it isn't easy. Learning to write is hard work, and if you don't like that, then quit. Quitting IS easy and you'll get to watch more TV and probably have a better love life. You just won't ever get published, but you won't really care, or you'd be willing to do what it takes. Am I right or am I right?

I'm right.

You'll find more details on the various stages of getting published in the following article on my web site:

<http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/freshman.html>

Many of you have already read this article, but it may bear re-reading. I'll be back next month with more thoughts on working out that roadmap of yours. See ya then!

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### 3) An Interview With James Scott Bell

I recently did an interview with James Scott Bell. Jim is the bestselling author of suspense novels like *Breach of Promise* and *Deadlock*, and historical legal thrillers like *A Greater Glory* and *A Higher Justice*. He is fiction columnist for *Writers Digest* magazine and author of *Write Great Fiction: Plot & Structure* (Writers Digest Books). His website is at:  
<http://www.jamesscottbell.com>.

I met Jim a few years ago at a weekend screenwriting seminar in Malibu, California. We got into an argument right away, and have been good friends ever since.

RI: Hi Jim. Thanks for interviewing with me today.

JSB: It's great to be here, Randy. Congratulations on your new e-zine. I know it will be of help to a great many writers.

RI: What are the biggest mistakes beginning writers make in their fiction, and what can they do to fix them?

JSB: Over the years, after looking at hundreds and hundreds of beginners' manuscripts, I think there are some common mistakes I can identify.

Probably the biggest mistake is to warm-up the engine at the beginning. What I mean is that the opening chapter will be full of exposition and explanation and characters not doing very much. This is understandable. The writer thinks the reader must know all of the back story and what's going on inside the main characters before they can truly understand what's happening in the story.

In fact, readers will turn off if they have to wade through too much exposition up front. They will wait a long time to get a full understanding if you give them action and trouble and conflict at the start. One rule I give my writing students is this: Act first, explain later. Give us a character who is facing some immediate challenge or change. Start with the engine revved.

A great technique is what I call the "Chapter 2 switch trick." What you do is throw out Chapter 1 and begin with Chapter 2. This usually gets things rolling a lot faster. You can then drop in only what is essential for the reader to know. Most of the time you can put off a lot of the exposition until later in the book.

Another common mistake is made with dialogue. Too often, beginning writers try to recreate real life speech in dialogue. But real life speech is usually dull. We spend a lot of time in small talk and in avoiding conflict with our words. Fictional dialogue should always have a purpose, and that purpose should always involve some sort of tension or conflict.

It's helpful to think of dialogue as an extension of action. In other words, when the character speaks, it is an action intended to get a result. Even if two characters are involved in a scene where they agree with each other, there should be inner tension in the point of view character. In fact, every scene in the book should have tension somewhere, to some degree.

RI: What can I do to be more creative as a novelist?

JSB: Creativity is like a muscle. It can atrophy through disuse. On the other hand, it can snap back pretty quickly if you work it.

In my book I have a chapter on the top 20 ways to get ideas. The key to creativity is to get as many ideas as you can without judging any of them. You later go back and throw out the ones you don't want.

Some of my favorite ways to generate ideas are the opening line game, where you write a provocative opening line and then let it suggest a story. Dean Koontz was doing this once and wrote an opening line that went like this: "You ever killed anything?" Roy asked. He didn't know who Roy was or who he was talking to. But his imagination was stimulated enough that it came up with a whole novel called *The Voice of the Night*.

Another exercise, almost the opposite of the above, is to think up a socko ending. Close your eyes and visualize an amazing last scene. Don't try to make up the justification for it. Just let your imagination supply the action and the characters. Listening to music, like a good soundtrack, can stimulate the imagination to do this. When you see this intriguing scene, you can sit back and try to make up what might have happened before this. That might turn out to be your novel.

I also advocate setting aside a certain amount of time each week just to be creative, to play creativity games. Try to come up with one or two line premises for stories, lots and lots of them. Start a long file of ideas. Every now and then go through them and pick the ones you want to develop more. It's an ongoing process.

RI: What are the key elements of plot and structure that a novelist must master in order to get published?

JSB: To make a plot original these days, the author must work harder than ever before.

The place to start, in my view, is with characters who are compelling. The fresher your characters, the more original your story will seem, even if the plot is something familiar.

Ratchet up the stakes. Make sure your Lead character has a lot to lose. The more important the stakes, the more the readers will care.

Another element is the surprise. Readers need to see things they don't anticipate, twists and turns that

make them sit up and keep flipping the pages. One good thing to do is pause every now and then and ask yourself what the average reader is going to expect to happen. Then do something else.

Finally, I'd say make sure there's heart in your novel. If your story lacks a "passionate center" (and this can only come from the writer), it will not reach the heights it otherwise could.

As for structure, this is being able to take all those elements and pour them into a form that will connect with the readers. It's all about connection. If the structure is off, the readers have to work harder to connect. It will frustrate them. That's why experimental novels sell four copies, while a Grisham or Stephen King sells millions.

I believe in the strength of the three act structure. It has stood the test of time, ever since Aristotle mapped out the drama. I go into detail in the book about what needs to happen in the beginning, the middle and the end.

But through it all, make sure that your Lead character wants or needs something so desperately he or she will do virtually anything to get that objective.

RI: In the Appendix of Plot & Structure, you have a worksheet for creating great "back cover copy" that can go into a novel proposal. What are the key elements for this?

JSB: I use the old advertising slogan, "Sell the sizzle, not the steak."

The sizzle is what would make a browser in a bookstore look at the dust jacket or back cover and think, "Wow, this sounds good. I've got to give this a read."

The "steak" will be found in your first three chapters (which goes along with your novel proposal). Try to avoid writing a long synopsis of your book. It's usually boring, and editors generally don't read them. What they read, when they get a proposal, is the first page of chapter one. If that's no good, they figure, why waste time with the rest? That makes your opening pages absolutely crucial.

A one or two page double spaced synopsis is best. Capture the main part of the story, and give a little background on the main characters. At least do some back cover copy at the beginning of your writing. Having a great hook will help keep you focused.

RI: What's the best piece of writing advice you ever got?

JSB: I'd have to say that being a professional writer is about producing words, not about sitting in front of a keyboard. I learned this at the very beginning, and it has served me well.

I set a weekly quota of words for myself. I break it down to a daily goal, but if I miss a day I know I can make it up another day. Doing this day after day, year after year, makes a productive, professional writer.

I do try to take Sunday off. A rest is good for creativity. I also may take a regular vacation during the year, and not write. But I have to work hard to keep my itching fingers from typing. So, on a regular basis, write daily, even if it's only a few hundred words. If you do this, you'll have a book soon enough. And then another, and on you go.

I like what Isaac Asimov, who wrote some 500 books, once said when asked what he'd do if he knew he had only one week to live. He said, "Type faster."

RI: Thanks for your time, Jim!

JSB: Thanks for having me on your e-zine.

Randy sez: What I like about Jim is that I always learn something when I talk to him. I sure learned a few things here! And it was the same when I read his book, Plot & Structure. I read a couple of chapters every day, and was horrified to see how many things Jim knew that I didn't. Then I realized that it took him YEARS to learn all that, but it took me only a few days to read the book! This is called leverage.

I might add that Chapter 1 was so inspiring and encouraging, I felt like throwing the book down and going and writing a novel on the spot!

If you're interested in reading the reviews on Plot & Structure, check out the Amazon page at:  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/158297294X/rsingeshomepage>

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#### 4) Tiger Marketing

You may be wondering what I've been ingesting lately, to come up with a title like "Tiger Marketing." Never mind my chemical intake, which is none of your business. Let me cut straight to the reason for the name.

You've probably heard of the book "Guerrilla Marketing." I hear it's a good book, but the title doesn't connect with me. My brain transmutes it to "Gorilla Marketing," and I get this picture of a fat

and lazy gorilla chomping bananas in the zoo. I want something more powerful than an overstuffed monkey-powered marketing plan. I want a kick-butt, take-no-POWs marketing plan for my next book. I want a tiger-powered marketing plan.

Recently, I ran across some folks who seem to have one. People who are making money selling stuff by using the internet to connect with their market. Not spammers, who are nothing but scum. Honest, law-abiding people who use the web to help interested people find them.

Nobody calls this kind of thing "Tiger Marketing" except me. I just made it up this morning, when I was wondering how to get writers interested in marketing -- a subject most of us hate. (By the way, there is a company named "Tiger Marketing" out on the web, as I learned just now through Google. This company has nothing to do with what I'm talking about.)

I'll be talking about some radical concepts in marketing in this column over the next few months. I'll be experimenting with some of those methods on my next book. (More on that as things develop.)

Just to get you thinking along the right lines, there's a book you should get. It's an e-book by Seth Godin titled "Unleashing The Ideavirus" and it's free on the web. Go to <http://www.sethgodin.com/ideavirus/> and download it now. Read it. This book is not exactly about what I call Tiger Marketing, but it's a step in the right direction. It'll get your neurons firing.

Next month, I'll spell out some more details on Tiger Marketing. But read "Unleashing The Ideavirus" first. You need to wrap your brain around some of the basic concepts. You may need to unlearn some stuff. You need to get excited about what can be done at low cost. I'm very excited about this kind of thing, and I think eventually everyone will be doing it.

They won't call it "Tiger Marketing," of course. That'll be our own private term. Just to whet your appetite, I'll give you the three main components of Tiger Marketing, which I have shamelessly stolen from a guy named Tom Antion. You can check out his web site at:

<http://www.antion.com>

Here is Tom's "Three-pronged approach":

- \* A product. You can't market without having a product to market. For us novelists, that product is our fiction, so this is pretty easy. You've all either got a book published or you're working on one.

- \* A web site. Most published authors also have web sites. Most of these sites are excellent at telling potential readers all about us. Most of these sites

are incredibly wretched at actually marketing our products. There are a number of reasons for this, but you already know it's true. If you've got a web site, ask yourself how many books you've sold in the last week as a direct result of your site. If you don't know, then the answer is zero. That's pathetic. Most author web sites are a waste of good electrons. That's a crime.

\* A newsletter/blog. Many writers have these. But most of these newsletters or blogs are useless for marketing. They may do a great job of personally connecting us with our readers. That's not a bad thing. But ask yourself this: What is the monetary value of a name on your email list? What is the monetary value of a reader of your blog? If you don't know, then the answer is zero.

Because most of us authors don't integrate the three components above correctly, we wind up spending a lot of time and money on something that has no real marketing value. It may have other value -- emotional, spiritual, intellectual, etc. But it has no marketing value.

Furthermore, we wind up thinking about marketing a few weeks or months before the book comes out. This is way too late.

Your marketing campaign should begin the day you sign the book contract. Your marketing campaign should be spelled out in your book proposal long before you sign the contract.

I've decided that I will never again sign a contract for a book unless I am going to market the heck out of that book myself. Up front, beginning the day I sign the contract. I'm not going to depend on my publisher's marketing. My publishers have all been great people, but they tend to put the most marketing money on the writers with the most digits on their checks. In other words, not on my book. I would too, if I were them.

Nobody loves my books like I do. Nobody is going to market them with my passion. I'm in charge of my book's marketing, and you're in charge of yours. I'll be a tiger for my book, because . . . it's my baby.

Have I got your attention? Is this making sense? Tune in again next month, when I'll get more specific on Tiger Marketing. It's a big subject, and I have a lot to say. It'll help if we have a common language, so I strongly suggest that you read that Ideavirus book this month. And maybe scope out Tom Antion's web site.

If the idea of Tiger Marketing leaves you cold, then skip this monthly column and read the other articles. I'll have plenty to say on those too. Just to let you know, this year, I'm working on my marketing skills. I

hope some of you are working on yours, too.

Go get 'em, Tiger!

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#### 5) A Note on That Pesky Snowflake

Many of you know me as the Snowflake Guy. My personal web site has a page explaining the methods I use to write my novels, the so-called "Snowflake method." This page has made me famous all around the world. I posted it a couple of years ago for the benefit of my friends. I've lost count of the downloads of that page, but it's now doing over 1000 per week. Some weeks quite a bit more. I'm guessing it's been hit about 80,000 times in the last two years. I've heard from many novelists around the world who are using the Snowflake method. That is so cool, it makes me hyperventilate.

But there's been one problem. I keep getting asked to speak on the Snowflake at writing conferences. I'm happy to do that, but after the zillionth talk, I've pretty much learned everything I'm going to learn about it. It's time for me to move on to new stuff. And I don't have a CD I can give people to listen to instead of hearing me live.

Until now. I finally got fed up and recorded myself giving my Snowflake lecture. It's got a bit of my trademark whackball humor in there. You'll hear from a couple of unexpected guests who interrupted me. I burned the talk to a CD and got the duplicating people to make me 100 copies. They put a gorgeous looking label on it. The thing looks great. And I threw in some extra electronic file goodies to go along with it. I put it up for sale on my web site over the weekend.

Like I said, I only made 100 copies. Oops, I sold one already. 99 copies. If you like to listen to teaching CDs several times so you can squeeze all the juice out of an idea, then check it out at:  
[http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/the\\_snowflake.html](http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/the_snowflake.html)

Have fun!

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#### 6) Announcing [www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com)

I'm working on a new web site, which will serve as the headquarters and home site for this E-zine. The URL for the site is:  
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

You'll note that it's not done yet. That might be because I just started it a few days ago. I have a lot of work to do. Eventually, I'll open it up to allow

some of you to post some content there.

For the moment, you can do me a favor and check out my new site and tell me if you like the design. Honestly, graphic design is not my forte. I'd like to know if it looks decent and if it loads up fast enough. I have a cable modem, but not everybody does. Unfortunately, I don't have any way to check how fast the pages come up on your modem. But you do. So if you'd be so kind, let me know.

Thank you! I appreciate any help you can give me.

When the site gets more functional, I'll post a quick note to this list to let you know the goodies are in place.

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#### 7) Note to Potential Contributors

Several of you have already written to me to ask if I need contributions for this E-zine. The answer is yes and no. (I feel like a politician saying that, or even scarier . . . like an editor. Oh, the horror.)

Yes, I will need some content for this E-zine in the future. Maybe the near future. I'd like to hear from you now, if you've got ideas you'd like to write up.

But no, I don't need anything right away. It may be a month or three before I'm ready for somebody else to contribute to this, my precious baby.

I'm sure you understand. Obviously, I have control issues that I need to deal with. Or I need to get in touch with my inner ogre. Or whatever. Right now, I'm just not ready. I'll let you know when I'm strong enough to face reading your lustrous prose.

In the meantime, enjoy the ride.

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#### 8) Steal This E-zine!

Actually, it's a complex philosophical question whether you can steal something that's free. This E-zine is free. (If somebody charged you for this issue, please let me know and I'll get you a great deal on my Golden Gate Bridge. You've probably bought lots of bridges, so you already know why I want to sell -- I'm tired of paying the maintenance bills on it, yada, yada.)

My point is this. I own the copyright on this E-zine, but I encourage you to email it to any writer friends of yours who might benefit from it. I only ask that you email the whole thing, not bits and pieces. That

way, they'll know where to go to get their own free subscription, if they want it.

At the moment, there are two such places:

My personal web site: <http://www.rsingermanson.com>

My new web site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

That's all for this issue! See ya next month!

Randy

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