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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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What's in This Issue

1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!
2) Did You Miss These Blog Entries?
3) Creating Characters -- Part 3
4) Building Your Writing Platform Via SuperArticles
5) Do You Need a Critique Group?
6) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com
7) Steal This E-zine!
8) Reprint Rights

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (about
450 of you joined in April), 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

Some of you emailed me after last month's issue to ask
"What happened to the dog?" The answer to that question
appeared in my new Advanced Fiction Writing Blog, which
I launched on April 12. Thousands of you have visited
the blog, and hundreds of you have left comments. If
you haven't yet been to my blog, I'll give you a quick

rundown in this issue on what we've talked about so far.

In February, I began a series on creating characters. That series continues this month with a look at the one aspect of your character that you MUST nail down before your story works.

Which would you rather be: a new novelist nobody ever heard of, or a new novelist that tens of thousands of people have heard of? This month, I'll look at that pesky issue of building a platform for novelists.

Do you have a critique group? If not, do you need one? These are thorny questions. In this issue, I'll give you my not-so-thorny answers.

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2) Did You Miss These Blog Entries?

I launched my blog on April 12. The URL is:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog

I began with the question "What Drives You To Write Fiction?" The response was overwhelming. I was swamped with comments and it took most of the next weekend to read through them all and choose a winner for a copy of my most recent novel, DOUBLE VISION.

Here are some of the other topics we've covered since then on the subject of writing:

"Why Do You Read Fiction?"
"Choosing What To Write"
"Craft vs. Marketing"
"On Those Pesky MRUs"
"Those Pesky Literary Novelists"

In one of my blog posts, I invited readers to submit 2 paragraphs from their work-in-progress for possible critique. You might ask whether 2 paragraphs is anywhere near enough to allow a valid critique.

No and yes.

No, 2 paragraphs is not nearly enough for a critique of your large-scale story structure.

Yes, 2 paragraphs is enough to form a pretty good judgment of your skills as a writer. Certain weaknesses will show up in the first two paragraphs.

Many editors and agents can tell whether you can write well by reading only a single paragraph or two. So can you. How many times have you opened a book in the

store, read a couple paragraphs, and put the wretched
piece of drivel back on the shelf?

I bet you've done it. I have. Most readers have. Life
is too short to keep reading tripe.

I'll bet you've also opened plenty of books in the
store, read one paragraph, and knew with certainty that
you were gonna love the book. And most of the time, you
did. It's happened for me many times.

In any event, I've received a number of 2-paragraph
entries from readers. (I'm not accepting any more right
now, but if this turns out to be a popular and useful
thing to do, I'll take more in the future.) I'm working
through them now and hope to do a fair number of
mini-critiques in the next week.

If you'd like to be notified by email whenever I post a
new blog entry, enter your email address in the
FeedBlitz form on my blog. You'll never miss a blog
post again.

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3) Creating Characters -- Part 3

In February and March, we talked about how values
define a character. I would say that values are
fundamental to a character, but they're not the only
aspect to consider.

Two crucial character components are built directly on
top of values: "motivation" and "goals".

These are fuzzy words, and people use them in various
ways. I don't have time to waste arguing about who's
using them right and who's using them wrong. I really
don't care.

I'll settle for telling you how I use them. Whether you
agree with my definitions or not, at least we'll be
clear and you can read the rest of this article without
getting confused.

When I use the word "motivation," I mean, "the abstract
thing that the character wants."

When I use the word "goal," I mean, "the concrete thing
that the character wants."

Here's the usual example I give. When you ask Miss
America what she wants to achieve in life, she always
says that she wants "World Peace." Whatever that is.

There's the problem. What do you mean by "World Peace?"

How would you know if you had it? How would you go about getting it? What's the roadmap to "World Peace?"

"World Peace" is abstract. It's not easy to picture. It may even be unattainable -- nobody knows. You can think of plenty of similar examples: "Justice," or "Fame," or "Marrying the Perfect Guy."

These are slippery concepts and they may motivate your character, but they won't grab your reader's heart.

What's going to get your reader's pulse revving is a character who wants something concrete -- something specific and visualizable and attainable.

Let's look at some possible concrete goals that might work for novels.

For the politician character who wants the abstract motivation "World Peace," a reasonable goal might be "Israel and Palestine signing my ceasefire agreement."

For the lawyer character who wants the abstract motivation "Justice," a goal might be, "Getting the death penalty of my innocent client commuted before they gas him."

For the ambitious singer character who wants "Fame," a plausible goal is, "Getting onto American Idol."

For the breathless babe in a romance novel who wants "The Perfect Guy," the goal might be, "Marrying Ashley Wilkes before he marries that idiot Melanie."

Let's be clear about one thing. In many cases, achieving the goal may not actually lead to achieving the motivation.

That Mideast ceasefire agreement might well be violated within hours of signing, leaving World Peace as far away as ever.

The innocent client on Death Row might wind up with life/no-parole, leaving Justice still a mirage.

The appearance on American Idol might be nasty, brutish, and short, leaving our singer still unfamous.

Ashley might be a lot less of a prize than Rhett, leaving dear Scarlett to wonder if the Perfect Guy exists.

None of those caveats are important. The point is that your character BELIEVES that reaching the goal will be a giant leap forward in achieving the underlying motivation.

In fact, your story will never get rolling without a goal for your protagonist. Your character can have the best motivation imaginable, but none of that means dirt

until that motivation is condensed down to a goal. Even if the goal is stupid or illogical, that doesn't matter.

People need goals in order to be focused. Without a goal, your character wallows in a sea of indecision. With a goal, your character has an action plan.

Let's look at an example from Frederick Forsyth's novel THE DAY OF THE JACKAL, published back in the 1960s. The backdrop is as follows. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, French nationalists were desperate to restore France to greatness. (The value is "French greatness." The motivation is "Restore France to greatness.")

These folks were extremely angry that Charles de Gaulle had given up Algeria and they believed that France could never be great again as long as de Gaulle remained alive and his government in power. So they set a goal to kill Charles de Gaulle.

A goal like that is very concrete and specific and measurable. Either they kill de Gaulle or they don't. (Whether that would restore France to greatness is utterly beside the point. All that matters is that they believed it would.)

But there's more, because these nationalists are not the protagonists of the book. The protagonist is a man known as "the Jackal," a professional assassin. The Frenchmen hire the Jackal to kill de Gaulle.

So the Jackal's goal is identical to that of the Frenchmen. But his motivation is entirely different. The Jackal doesn't care two cents whether de Gaulle is alive or dead. The Jackal's motivation is money. He'd like to retire and live in comfort for the rest of his life. He tells the Frenchmen to come up with half a million bucks and he'll kill de Gaulle. They strike a deal, and the story is launched.

Same goal. Different motivation. (And entirely different values. The Jackal values his own comfort and safety. As an Englishman who doesn't care about politics, he places no value on French national greatness.)

As a novelist, you no doubt value excellence in your craft. Because of that, you are almost certainly motivated to "write a great story." But you'll never achieve that unless make your goal to give each character a powerful and compelling goal.

Tragically, even if you reach your goal, you may not achieve the motivation behind it. But it's a start.

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4) Building Your Writing Platform Via SuperArticles

Whether we like it or not, business decisions play a large role in publishing. This is true whether we write fiction or non-fiction.

Don't get me wrong. Publishing fiction is an inherently risky business, and publishers know going into the game that a LOT of novels that they publish are going to lose money. What they bank on is that SOME novels are going to win big -- big enough to make up for the money that the others lose.

The fraction of novels that lose money is a closely guarded secret in the publishing world. If you ask editors, they suddenly get very interested in talking baseball. Or politics. Or the history of the hot dog. ANYTHING but the actual numbers.

I have not been able to get a reliable estimate from anybody of how many novels lose money. I suspect that I would lose my kneecaps if I ever found out.

About the only answer that I consider reliable is this one: "More than you imagine." I would hazard that this is a sore point with publishers, who would love to earn money on all their books.

As a novelist who pursues excellence, there's a part of me that's mortified by the discussion of filthy lucre. We are artistes, for screamin' out loud! We're above that sort of thing! We're just too pure to discuss such mundanities as money.

But as a guy with a mortgage, I understand that the publishers have to pay their bills too. The truth is that all other things being equal, a novelist whose books earn their advances has an advantage over a novelist who causes the publisher to lose its shirt.

What makes one book sell oodles and another book languish on the remainder pile? That's one of life's great mysteries. Ask five editors and you'll get ten answers. It's the cover. It's the endorsements. It's the back cover copy. It's the title. It's the hook. It's that blasted reviewer (or blessed reviewer). It's the weather. It's the economy. It's the writing. It's the marketing.

I don't think anyone knows the whole answer.

What I do know is that authors with a "platform" do a lot better than authors without a "platform."

What's a "platform?" A platform is visibility, fame, notoriety, name recognition. If you are a public speaker who speaks to ten thousand people per year, you have a serious platform. If you play football in the NFL, you've got a platform. If you're a famous

cartoonist, you have a platform. If you're a complete
unknown, then you have no platform.

That platform may well trump your writing skills. I've
seen way too many bad novels that sold well because the
authors were high-profile people with huge platforms.
I've seen way too many great novels tank because their
authors were no-name writers with a platform the size
of a popsicle stick.

This shouldn't be true, but it often is, and that's a
horrible, wretched, bleating shame. Darn, darn, darn!

The question for the working novelist is how to build a
platform if you haven't got one. And how to do that on
a time budget. Because the awful truth is that time
spent on building a platform is time taken away from
writing. We only get 24 hours in each day, and we have
to eat, sleep, live, pay the bills, and write.

How do you build a platform TOO?

Let's look at some possiblities. Imagine that you have
no platform at all, and you allocate 10 hours per month
for building your platform. What could you do in that
10 hours? Here are some of your options:

* Give a talk once or twice a month. (With preparation
time and travel time, that's about all you could do in
10 hours.) This way, you could reach maybe a couple of
hundred people each month. (If you had a big platform,
you could reach a lot more, but we're assuming you've
not famous already.)

* Do a couple or three booksignings. (If they go badly,
you might only reach 10 people. If they go well, you
might reach a couple hundred.) Of course, you need to
have a book published already in order to hold a
booksigning, so this is really only useful for building
your platform for that next book.

* Do half a dozen radio interviews. (It takes time to
set these up, but these can reach thousands of people.
The real problem is that you need to be somebody
already -- you need to have an existing platform or a
book. What if you have neither?)

* Write a couple of magazine articles. This is a
traditional way to build a platform for writers, and it
works very well. You earn some bucks doing it and a
good magazine can get you read by hundreds of thousands
or even millions of readers. The one problem is that
magazines are on the racks for a month and then they're
gone. So a magazine article you wrote last year isn't
doing you much good now unless you repurpose it and
sell it again.

* Write an online article. This is like a magazine
article, but potentially better. An online article can
be forever. It's there 24/7, and anyone in the world

can read it. The advantage is that it's easy to post an article online; the disadvantage is that an online article can get buried in the avalanche that is the web.

What's a busy writer to do? How do you build a platform on a limited time budget?

I've been thinking about this lately and looking at the numbers on my web site. In fact, recently, I switched domains for my personal web site. My old domain was www.RSIngermanson.com. In March, I bought a new domain at www.Ingermanson.com and transferred all the pages of my old site to it.

The reasons for this transition were two-fold:

* I've done a zillion radio interviews over the years, and it's ALWAYS a hassle to give out a web site over the air. You want it as simple as possible, and www.RSIngermanson.com does not translate well on the air.

* My old site was done using HTML and I wanted the speed and efficiency of using PHP. (Yes, I know, this is a geeky, geeky, son-of-a-geek reason, but it's real.)

Anyway, I ran the numbers on some of the pages on my old site, and I was astounded to see that my article on my "Snowflake method for writing a novel" had been viewed over 310,000 times in the last four years. Nearly half of those page views were in the past year. So that article is still accelerating.

I knew that page was a high performer for me, but I didn't know the full extent of it.

The Snowflake article on my site is what I am now calling a "SuperArticle." It ranks high in the search engines. Many sites all around the web link to it. In the past 12 months, it's consistently brought 10,000 to 17,000 visitors to my site each month. And I don't have to do anything. The Snowflake SuperArticle is evergreen, constantly pulling in people, constantly building my name-recognition.

That's a platform! Now it's true that it's a non-fiction platform and it doesn't sell many novels for me. But it does sell a ton of e-zines. The Snowflake SuperArticle is, in fact, the main reason this e-zine is the largest in the world in its niche.

It's possible to build a platform for fiction by writing online articles too.

As many of you know, I wrote an article a couple of months ago on that pesky alleged "Jesus family tomb." I put the article on my new web site and did a little posting on various blogs. That article gained me quite a lot of attention. Currently, it's the #1 result on

Google if you search for the phrase "Jesus equation" (or various similar phrases).

This is relevant to my fiction because . . . I'm working on a novel about Jesus! So that article, and its sequel article, are helping build name recognition for me in a subject area tied strongly to my novel.

A caveat: The "Jesus family tomb" thing was a 7 day wonder. It came and vanished. My articles have been credited with helping kill it. Maybe they did and maybe they didn't, but the truth is that a year from now, that article will not be getting much traffic.

So my article on the Jesus family tomb is not a true SuperArticle. A SuperArticle, as I said, is evergreen. My Snowflake SuperArticle will be getting hits fifty years from now, because there are always people who want to write a novel.

However, my point is that it shouldn't be hard to write a true SuperArticle about Jesus that would build me a platform for my novel. I've analyzed what went right with my Snowflake SuperArticle and I've reduced the process down to a series of steps.

I'm preparing a Special Report right now on how to write a SuperArticle. Anyone can write an ordinary article, but a SuperArticle takes time, preparation, hard work, and good promotion. It pays off forever.

This is, I believe, especially of interest to pre-published novelists. You may have been writing for only a year or two. You may have two or three years yet to go before your novel is polished enough to sell.

Imagine writing a SuperArticle now that steadily builds a platform for you over the years. Imagine that when your novel is ready, that SuperArticle has been read by tens of thousands of people, or hundreds of thousands. Imagine that your SuperArticle has given you name recognition with all those readers.

Now imagine that your novel is competing for the editor's attention with ten other books by first-time no-name authors. If all other things are equal, which novel is going to look best to that editor -- the one with the platform or the one without?

You know the answer.

An interesting side note, and something to be wary of: For several years, my Snowflake SuperArticle was the #1 result returned by Google when you searched for the phrase "writing a novel." Recently the article dropped to #8. The reason is that I moved it to a new site, which has fewer incoming links. I took all precautions, such as redirecting all pages on the old site to the new one, but even so, the search engines are a bit confused right now. I've been told by the experts that

soon enough, the search engines will realize that the new site is the same as the old site. In the meantime, the Snowflake is a little less super than it was. :(

For reference, the new Snowflake article is at: http://www.Ingermanson.com/writing/snowflake.php

Writing a SuperArticle is not easy. Like all writing, it's hard work. But it's rewarding work. I would bet that with a time budget of 10 hours a month, a good writer could launch and promote 2 or 3 SuperArticles every year. Imagine the power in that over time.

As I said above, I'll soon be releasing a Special Report on how to write and promote a SuperArticle. You'll hear about it here first. I hope you'll find it monstrously useful in creating a platform for your fiction. I expect that SuperArticles will play a key role in promoting every novel I ever write.

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5) Do You Need a Critique Group?

When I first started writing, I was the only writer I knew who had an email address. That was back in the late 1980s before the internet was widespread.

So when I needed a group of writers to help me learn how to write, my best option was a critique group of real, live, breathing humans. We actually met in a physical location. We saw each other's faces. We ate real cookies and edited real manuscripts on real paper with real pens.

That was then. This is the age of the faceless internet and it's so much easier to just do it all online. It's easier to sit in my office without having to drive anywhere. It's easier to critique a manuscript at 1 AM when I have a few spare minutes than to try to get together with a few other writers who all have their OWN schedules.

It's easier now.

But is it better? I'm not so sure it is. Now that I'm living out in the boondocks in my own special chunk of nature, I can go days without driving anywhere or seeing anyone except my family. I can do everything I want online, and that's good.

I've come to realize that it can be too much of a good thing. Isolating ourselves in electronic cubbyholes may be efficient, but it's still isolation. Once in a while, we still need to see writers. Real, live, breathing writers.

I think that's why I like writing conferences. Not so
much to meet editors (although they're important). But
I need to rub shoulders with writers. A critique group
is like a writing conference on a very small scale.

What about you? Have you abandoned your live critique
group because it was less convenient than the
electronic kind? Has it improved your life or
disimproved it? Is it time for you to be a little less
efficient?

Different writers will have different answers, because
we're all in different places in our careers. For
myself, I'm getting back to the awkward, inconvenient,
grubby world of real live critique groups.

I'll let you know how it turns out.

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6) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My Advanced Fiction Writing Blog is new, and it's been
taking up a fair bit of time. It's been a lot of fun to
learn how the blogosphere works, and it seems that my
blog readers are having fun too. That's what counts!
Here's the link to my blog:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog

For those of you wondering about that pesky dog that
showed up on our doorstep, here's the scoop. We've been
unable to find the owner, so we're going to keep her.
She's been a bit of a handful because she's REALLY
energetic, but we're learning how to handle her. When
things got bad, I posted some dog-questions on my blog,
and many of you came through quickly. Thank you!

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7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's
worth over at least 2007 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, 2007.

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 are two places to subscribe:
My personal web site: http://www.Ingermanson.com
My fiction site: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

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8) 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
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AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND
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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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