
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

"Fiction Writing = Organizing + Creating + Marketing"

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (more than 500 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 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:

The successful novelist needs good organization, good craft, and good marketing. In this issue, we'll talk about each of these in turn.

Successful people take action to reach their goals. But there's a triage process that can be painful. Read all about it in my article, "If Not Now, When?"

Ever had somebody tell you that the pace of your scene is "wrong?" What do they mean by that? Ever wondered what the secret ingredient is to adjust your pace at will? Discover that secret in my article, "Pacing Your Novel."

If you're going to sell your novel, you're going to need connections. Do you know the one best place to make those connections? Read my article, "Making Connections."

Are you reading my blog? This month, we're applying my Snowflake method to analyze the movie STAR WARS. Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: If Not Now, When?

Rabbi Hillel was one of the greatest rabbis in the history of Jewish thought. He died about the year A.D. 10. I've always been intrigued by the third part of a saying attributed to him. Here's the whole saying:

"If I am not for myself who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?"

The first two parts are fairly clear: You need to stand up for yourself. But that can't be your whole goal or you're nothing.

The third part has always felt very Zennish to me. "If not now, when?"

Lately, I've been thinking that maybe Hillel had been reading "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Rabbis."

The reason I say that is because there really are only three possible answers to his question:

* Now!

- * Later.
- * Never.

And that is the essence of anyone trying to manage their life effectively. Every one of us is assaulted daily with a zillion "excellent things" we could do.

We can't do them all. I can't. You can't. Even Spiderman can't.

You have to perform triage on all those "excellent things" hammering on your calendar. You have to focus. And that means making decisions that are hard. Decisions that are painful. Decisions that will make good people unhappy with you.

But look, you are finite. You have limited resources. You can't do it all. So with any "excellent thing" that crosses your plate, you have to decide, and there are only three possibilities: Now, Later, or Never.

How do you decide? What measuring stick do you use?

Hillel would no doubt have a few things to say about focusing your life. Focus means that you have a guiding principle that helps you choose quickly among the many "excellent things" you could be working on.

Your guiding principle is likely to be different from Hillel's or from mine. But in some ways, we're alike.

You and I and Hillel turn ideas into words.

You and I do that in fiction. (And Hillel was known to tell a story or two himself.)

Tomorrow, you'll get handed yet another excellent thing to do. Maybe you'll have to do your taxes for Uncle. Maybe you'll need to write a rush report for Bossbert to ignore. Maybe it'll just be time to launder the cat.

All laudable achievements, to be sure. But do they take you closer to getting your novel published? If not, can you delegate those excellent tasks to somebody else? Can you put them off? Would it hurt to just say uh-uh?

Life is short, and you don't know when you'll enter your own personal endgame. If writing your novel is important to you, then you need to make time for it. Uncle wants his taxes now. But can't Bossbert wait? And maybe the cat deserves a "never?"

Whatever decision you make, somebody is going to be unhappy with you. But (if I can paraphrase Hillel) who's going to stand up for your fiction writing time if you don't? If you don't do the one thing in life that's most meaningful to you, then what are you?

And if not now, when?

3) Creating: Pacing Your Novel

When I sold my first novel, one of the comments I got back from the editorial team was this: "The pace for this novel was perfect -- never too fast nor too slow."

I was surprised, because I'd never thought much about pace. Certain things come easy to every author, and other things come hard. Pace comes easy to me.

What is pace?

It's the amount of time you spend on each part of the story.

The Goldilocks Principle applies to pace -- it should be neither too fast nor too slow, but just right.

There isn't any tidy little rule you can memorize to define what the perfect pace is for a story. A general rule is to vary the pace to suit the tension in the scene.

So most often, you'll want to zip through the boring parts of the story and take more time on the exciting parts.

That seems very strange, doesn't it? If you're showing a high-speed car chase, surely you'd want to make it read fast, wouldn't you? Which means using fewer words, doesn't it?

Yes and no.

Yes, you want it to read fast. But no, you don't want to spend fewer words on it, you want more.

There's really no paradox here. Ever seen a football game in which one of the players makes a huge play, dodging first one defender, then another, all the way down the field, finally dancing into the end zone for a touchdown? What happens next?

You can bet your shirt that the networks are going to show the whole thing AGAIN, this time in slow motion, dragging out every twist, turn, head-fake, missed tackle, fancy step, jump, roll, block, clip, and lost helmet, all the way down the field.

Showing it in slow-motion takes a lot longer, but it doesn't cut the pace. It INCREASES the pace.

Why?

Because when the play ran at normal speed, you missed most of the action. You saw a guy running and you saw guys missing him. It all went by in a blur so fast that you couldn't take it all in.

When they ran it in super slo-mo, you saw every little move. You saw your man do an inside-outside-inside fake. You saw the defender respond to each fake in turn, finally overcommitting in the wrong direction.

Then your man cut to his right and sped on to the next defender, faking left, then right. You saw the defender freeze, then set himself low for a tackle. Then your man leaped right over the defender.

And on down the field. When your man reached the sidelines, you saw him threading a needle between his blocker and that thin chalk line. You saw every block, every weave. You saw the last desperate flying tackler miss your man's heels by an inch.

As he entered the end-zone, you saw his gait change to a high-stepping strut, saw him raise the ball in triumph. And then the normal pace resumed.

It took ten times as long to see it that way, but this time, YOU SAW IT ALL. You saw every action, every reaction, in beautiful, sharply cut detail. That's what you came to see. With that one play, you got your nickel's worth for the game.

In your novel, the moral equivalent of super-slo-mo involves spending far more words than you normally would, but using much shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs.

You alternate rapidly between what your point-of-view character is doing and what his opposition is doing.

If your paragraphs are normally three sentences apiece, they might drop down to two sentences or one.

If your sentences are normally ten words apiece, they might fall to five words. Or three.

Or one.

You can't keep that up very long, of course. That would be crazy. In the same way, it would be crazy to watch an entire football game in slow motion. You want to ramp up the pace only for the high-tension scenes, where the stakes are high.

Slowing down the pace works the opposite way. Longer sentences. Longer paragraphs. Fewer actions and reactions. More interior monologue, longer dialogue.

Why does this work? It's really very simple. The reader reads fiction hoping to have a Powerful Emotional Experience.

Inside a scene, you provide this by showing actions and reactions between your point-of-view character and the other characters. Every time you show your POV character reacting to the other characters, you have a chance to provide an emotional hit point to your reader.

If you have short actions and short reactions (using short sentences and paragraphs), then you score emotional points with your reader faster. If you lengthen out the actions and reactions, then you score fewer emotional points.

Naturally, it only makes sense to speed up the pace when the tension is high. If you try this when the tension is low, the story is going to drag. (Imagine showing the team's huddle in slow-motion.)

There are an infinite variety of paces you can use as you work through each scene. You speed it up and slow it down, possibly several times in the scene.

How do you know when you've got it right?

That's easy. You've got it right when it feels right. Fiction is about creating a Powerful Emotional Experience in your reader. Tweak the pace until you're doing that, and your reader will feel like Goldilocks.

4) Marketing: Making Connections

When I began writing, there was one thing I was dead certain I would never do -- talk to an editor.

Why would an editor want to talk to me, anyway? There were tens of thousands of wannabe writers just like me, all of us wanting to get published. How could I possibly stand out from the crowd? The whole idea was just too scary for words.

Fast-forward twenty years. I have many editor friends. It's not uncommon for editors to email me with a question or a request. This morning I spent nearly an hour on the phone talking with an editor I've never met before.

What made the difference between then and now?

One word: "Writing conferences." *

After I'd been writing for about a year, I went to my first conference. I was scared spitless, but I had a 200 page proposal clutched in my sweaty paws. I didn't

know that my proposal was about 180 pages too long, nor that my idea could not possibly work, nor that my writing stunk like a dead ferret.

What I knew was that if I was ever going to sell my heartbreaking work of staggering genius, I needed to learn more about the publishing business.

And I did. At that first conference, I learned that editors are real people. I learned that publishing is a tough game, but that it needs writers in order to function. And I learned that I could talk to an editor and live.

I talked to two editors, in fact. Both of them treated me with respect and real interest. They let me know that a proposal can be a mere 20 pages and still do its job. They let me know that this particular idea wasn't quite right, but that the book could be refocused without losing one beat of its staggering genius.

Neither of them mentioned the faint whiff of ferrets.

One thing I took away from that conference was that I needed to get into a critique group. I did, and over the course of the next several years, I figured out the bit about the ferrets all by myself.

I continued going to conferences, year after year. Every year, I made new writer friends. I found a writing buddy, who introduced me to some key books on the craft of writing.

And I got to know a few editors. I began to see them as people, real people who were doing a job under lots of pressure for little pay, because they love books.

I learned that editors don't want to scare anybody, least of all writers. Editors are looking for good writing. They all define that differently, of course, which means that they aren't all looking for the same thing.

That's good. It means that lots of different kinds of writers have a chance to sell their novel. All a writer has to do is to write well and then find the kind of editor who likes that sort of writing.

Writing conferences are where you learn which editors like which sort of things. Writing conferences are where you meet people, often by chance, who introduce you to someone who introduces you to someone who introduces you to someone who might eventually buy your book.

Or not.

At a certain point, I realized that making a sale right now is not the point of going to a writing conference. The point is to meet the people you're most congenial

with.

Someday, when the market is right and your writing is right and the project is right, you will end up working with one of your friends, who happens to be an editor. And it will all seem very natural.

The first book I sold came as a result of meeting another writer at a conference. The second one I sold was the result of an appointment with an editor I met at a conference. The third book I sold was to an editor I had known for several years. After that, I had an agent to sell my books for me.

Where'd I meet that agent? Would you believe at a conference? At the time, he was an editor, and on that particular day, I was doing a bad job of pitching a novel to him. But like a lot of editors, he eventually morphed into an agent. (This is known as "joining the Dark Side.")

Agents are also real people, and you meet them the same way you meet editors -- at conferences. Again, the same principles apply. Just get to know them and when you find the one who really gets your writing, you'll know it. So will the agent.

To get published, you need talent and training and hard work. But you also need some "luck" -- you need to make the connection with the right editor at the right time for the right project.

In my experience, those connections build slowly over time. And for most of the published authors I know, those connections were formed at writing conferences.

That's why I stress so much the importance of going to conferences. Yes, they're expensive. Yes, they take time out of your life that you don't have. Yes, they can be frustrating, nerve-shattering, and downright depressing. Yes to all of that.

But they work, if by the word "work" you mean "helping you get published." Which generally translates into "making friendships with writers, editors, and agents."

Whenever I teach fiction, I include a twenty-minute talk on "How to behave at a writing conference." But I've found that there is more to say about this than I can shoehorn into twenty minutes.

So a year ago, I persuaded my freelance editor, Meredith Efken, to sell me the rights to market her e-book, "The Writers Conference Survival Guide," on my web site.

This is simply the best source I've found for how to prepare for a conference, how to work the conference, and how to follow through after the conference. Meredith's e-book is sixty pages of great insights at a

moronically low price.

If this is the sort of thing that interests you, then this link will take you to nirvana:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/mefken>

I have been blogging about conferences in the past week, because this is the time of year to make your plans, if a conference is in your 2009. It's been gratifying to read comments from many of my loyal blog readers on how much they've gotten out of various conferences.

You can read all about it here:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

What about you? Is this your year to start going to writing conferences? If not now, when?

Hope to see many of you at a conference someday!

* PS: Yes, I KNOW "writing conferences" is two words. I blame the ferrets.

5) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com)

I recently posted the latest installment in my monthly humor column. It's titled, "The Road To Heck" and it's about those pesky good intentions. 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. Here's what's coming up next:

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

I will be doing an 8-hour fiction mentoring workshop at the Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference in April. Details here:
<http://www.mounthermon.org/adult/professionals/writers-conference>

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>

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 96 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, 2009.

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>

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 2-paragraph blurb with it:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 14,500 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>.

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
