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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (almost 250 of you are new since my last issue), welcome to my e-zine! You can find all the previous issues on my web site at:  
<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/afwezine.html>

All readers of this e-zine are supposed to be here by choice. If you have somehow found yourself receiving this e-zine by accident, there is a link at the bottom of this email that will terminate you.

In this issue I'd like to focus on the fine art of writing dialogue. Ever read a chunk of dialogue that bored the living heck out of you? So have I. I'll show you an example of boring dialogue from a best-selling author who shall remain nameless. (Let's call him "Tom Clancy.") I'll explain exactly what "Tom" did wrong.

I'd also like to talk about a very practical issue for every working writer (and lazy ones too): back pain. Most writers face this at one time or another, and I

have a few suggestions.

If you've been reading this e-zine long, you'll know that I'm a huge promoter of what I call "Tiger Marketing"--letting the web bring customers to you. Part of that is learning to help Google help you. But what happens when Google gets cranky and starts saying stuff about you that ISN'T EVEN ON YOUR SITE? Whaddaya do? I'll tell you in this very issue.

Finally, I'd like to mention some other writing resources on the web that you might find useful. Or not. It depends on who you are, where you are in your career, and what you need right now.

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## 2) Dialogue and the Art of War

If you write fiction, then you have probably gone through a stage where you tried your best to make your dialogue sound like Real Conversation.

The problem is that Real Conversation is boring! Go ahead. Test me on this. Next time you're in the subway or on the bus or in line at the supermarket, eavesdrop on the conversations around you. If you're listening in on teenage girls, you'll get something like this:

"And then he said, 'No way!' And I'm like, 'Yes way.'"

"No!"

"Yeah!"

"So whatcha gonna do?"

"I dunno."

We interrupt this wretched Real Conversation now, before you die of sleep apnea. Let's tune in now on two middle-aged guys talking sports:

"Could be the year for the Dodgers."

"Yeah, maybe. If they can get a decent #4 in their pitching rotation."

"Ain't gonna happen. They'll have to do it with hitting."

"So whaddaya think about the steroid thing?"

"Terrible. The commissioner shoulda done something ten years ago."

Again, this Real Conversation works better than Somnec at putting you out. If your fiction sounds like this kind of Real Conversation, then you are slitting your novel's throat.

So what's a writer to do?

Well, duh! It's obvious! Don't write Real Conversation. Write Dialogue!

You'll notice that I just capitalized the word Dialogue. I didn't capitalize it at the beginning of this article, but I capitalized it here. I did that to make it clear that in this context it is an RTT (Randy's Technical Term). The term Real Conversation is also an RTT.

I better define those two RTTs. Real Conversation is that informational sort of back-and-forth that you saw in the two snippets above. There is no conflict in Real Conversation, and that's the problem. Fiction is about conflict. More precisely, fiction is about characters in conflict.

Now I'll say it again: Don't write Real Conversation. Write Dialogue.

Real Conversation is RARELY about conflict. Think about the Real Conversations you've had lately. You'll find they fall into various boring categories like these:

- a) People making small talk to pass the time.
- b) People exchanging information.
- c) People avoiding conflict.
- d) People trying to solve a problem.

Why are these boring? Simple. Look for the conflict in each one:

Small talk has zero conflict. Don't put small talk into your fiction! It's a killer.

Exchanging information also usually has no conflict. If one of the parties is trying to HIDE information, then there is conflict. If you MUST write a Dialogue in which information gets exchanged, then make the informer do his best to avoid informing the informee.

Avoiding conflict also has no conflict, unless you subtext the conflict. See, for example, just about any scene in PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. If you like subtexted conflict (and I do), you'll love Jane Austen.

There CAN be conflict when people are trying to solve a problem, depending on whether the problem is easy or hard (and whether one of the players isn't too keen on the getting the problem solved). If you're going to solve a problem in Dialogue, then make it a nasty,

vicious, horrible problem. Or make one of the players an obstructionist who would find it disastrous for the problem to actually BE solved.

The strange thing is that every author is tempted to put some Real Conversation into their novel, especially early in the story before the characters have figured out what the conflict is about. There's a remarkable example of deadly dull Real Conversation in RED STORM RISING, by Tom Clancy and Larry Bond.

The book opens with an exciting sequence in which Islamic terrorists destroy a Soviet oil refinery, drastically cutting Soviet oil production (and eventually leading up to World War III). Meanwhile, over in the US, we meet Our Hero, Bob Toland, who hasn't quite figured out that he's the star of an international bestseller yet. Bob is engaging in some truly wretched Real Conversation, which I quote here verbatim:

Bob Toland frowned at his spice cake. I shouldn't be eating dessert, the intelligence analyst reminded himself. But the National Security Agency commissary served this only once a week, and spice cake was his favorite, and it was only about two hundred calories. That was all. An extra five minutes on the exercise bike when he got home.

"What did you think of that article in the paper, Bob?" a co-worker asked.

"The oil-field thing?" Toland rechecked the man's security badge. He wasn't cleared for satellite intelligence. "Sounds like they had themselves quite a fire."

"You didn't see anything official on it?"

"Let's just say that the leak in the papers came from a higher security clearance than I have."

"Top Secret--Press?" Both men laughed.

"Something like that. The story had information that I haven't seen," Toland said, speaking the truth, mostly. The fire was out, and people in his department had been speculating on how Ivan had put it out so fast. "Shouldn't hurt them too bad. I mean, they don't have millions of people taking to the road on summer vacations, do they?"

"Not hardly. How's the cake?"

"Not bad." Toland smiled, already wondering if he needed the extra time on the bike.

Randy sez: Oh, Lordy, Lordy! Spice cake? Exercise bike? Where is a mean old editor with a blue pencil when you need him? This Real Conversation sucks, to be perfectly blunt. There is no Dialogue here, no conflict. There is a hint that maybe Toland knows something that he's not telling, but it's so far submerged that it's useless.

I remember reading this book when it first came out. The first scenes read so fast I could hardly flip the pages fast enough. Then I got to this scene and WHACK! It felt like I was swimming in sand. There is NOTHING go on here! Spice cake? An overweight NSA analyst? Journalist jokes? Please, Tom, give us some Dialogue here!

And what's the cure for this scene, you may be asking? Simple. Cut it. There is no hope for a scene like this. No conflict. No opposing interests. No nothing. Neither character really gives a rip about this dialogue, so why should the reader? Scissor this monstrosity right out of the manuscript and you have a better novel.

Luckily for Tom, he already had about a billion fans from his previous book, THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER. Plus this novel began with some serious zing. But what if this was Tom's first novel? What if he'd started out the book with this Real Conversation? Poor Tom would have sunk like an Elbonian sub.

Let me say it straight. Dialogue is war. There is never an excuse for writing Real Conversation that has no conflict in it. Such informational tripe is not Dialogue. Slash it.

Don't get me wrong. It's perfectly legitimate to write Dialogue that ALSO transmits information or reveals character or backstory or the story world. But all Dialogue had better have conflict in it FIRST. That means two characters talking who have opposing interests.

If you look at the Real Conversation above, you see that that's exactly what's missing. Bob Toland's interest is the spice cake. (And how pitiful is that?) The unnamed co-worker's interest is to make small talk about the fire, which he doesn't think is serious. (And how much more pitiful is that?) These are different interests, but they are not in opposition. No conflict. No Dialogue.

If you're Tom Clancy, you can get away with this (except that you will still be mocked in the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine if you write this badly). But you aren't Tom. Neither am I. Write Dialogue, not Real Conversation.

If you have my Fiction 101 CD, you'll be delighted beyond words to be reminded that I discuss the fundamentals of Dialogue in lecture #6. If you don't

have my Fiction 101 CD, I invite you to listen to lecture #1 for free on my web site:

<http://www.kickstartcart.com/app/adtrack.asp?AdID=214702>

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### 3) Those Pesky Back Pains

I remember the day I sold my first book. It was a horribly hot day in August, 1998. I was scrunched up in my miserable little Dilbertesque cubicle at work trying to get my face closer to the tepid stream coming out of an unambitious air conditioner.

My phone rang.

I almost didn't have the energy to pick it up.

Good think I did. It was an editor calling to say that her publishing committee had met that day and voted to publish my book! Yow! Now there's a cure for lethargy!

I was so happy, gravity just about lost its grip on me, because I was floating about three feet off the ground all afternoon. I had been writing my guts out for more than 10 years, and now I had finally joined The Club! I was an author.

After about an hour of breathing Cloud Nine Air, reality whacked me in the face. They needed the full manuscript in 9 weeks. And of course I'd told the editor that wouldn't be a problem. This was a nonfiction book of maybe 45000 words and I already had four whole chapters written. I didn't think it would be hard to finish the other fourteen. I figured it would be a piece of cake. And it should have been.

The only problem was that my back was killing me that month. You probably know the feeling--it's like having 3000 wolverines gnawing on your lower back. You're afraid you're going to die. Then you're afraid you AREN'T going to die.

The reason my back was feeling whacked was that my cheapskate employer had given all us peons some really crummy chairs. They looked deceptively like nice expensive office chairs, but they were cheap knockoffs. Oh sure, they had actual armrests. They even had wheels which actually rotated--sometimes. But there was no height adjustment. None. Nor would the things tilt. Nor would they swivel.

My chair was too short for me and there was NO WAY TO RAISE IT. I could have eased the stress on my back by leaning back, but there was NO WAY TO TILT IT. And

every time I had to turn in my chair, my back got twisted, because THE CHAIR DIDN'T SWIVEL.

I think I can make a strong theological case that there is specially reserved seating in hell for employers who buy lousy chairs for their employees. After two years of working in that chair, my back was a mess. And now I had to get a book finished in nine weeks.

There is only one way to write a book. You come home from your day job after sitting in a chair for eight hours. Then you sit in your own chair and you type at a computer for a bunch more hours and you hope to get a few thousand words of usable text. You keep doing that day after day after day until the thing is done. Then you sit in that same chair and you make revisions for hours every day until the second draft is done. Then you repeat for as many drafts as you need. In my case, five drafts is about right.

When your back is aching, two hours in a chair feels like two weeks. Five drafts feels like fifty. But when you've got a contract, you do what you gotta do.

What I did was talk to the Back Pain Expert, a guy named Tom who sat in the cube next to mine at work. Tom was a guy in great physical shape who had somehow messed up his back about a year earlier. I don't know how, but he did, and he spent months out of commission. When my back started hurting, Tom had recently returned to work and was doing well. So I asked him if there was some special exercise I could do to make my back feel better. I was using ice and aspirin, but I didn't want to just numb the pain--I wanted to strengthen my back. I wanted it now. To be honest, I wanted some magic.

Tom said just one word: "Walk."

That just made me mad. I wanted a vampire killer and I wanted it yesterday. "Tom, I don't think you understand. I need a SPECIAL exercise. My back's killing me."

Tom gave me that same kind of exasperated look that I give to writers who want a shortcut to fame and glory. "The best exercise you can possibly do for your back is to walk. Every day. Several times a day."

I was desperate, so I did what Tom told me, even though it sounded a little too simple. Every hour, on the hour, I'd get out of my nightmare chair and go take a walk around the parking lot. It wasted about ten minutes out of every hour, but I did it. And yes, I let the company pay for those ten minutes of my time, because they were the ones who wrecked my back by paying fifty bucks for a crappy chair when a hundred bucks would have bought a decent one. (Wasn't that a great way to save some money? Oooh, great thinking, Bossbert!)

I also took walk breaks while writing. Every hour, I'd get up and walk around the block. If I could have figured out a way to get Bossbert to pay for that, I would have.

It kept me going. Nine weeks later, I had the fifth draft of my book ready to FedEx out to my publisher. And I had my back in working order again. It wasn't quick or magic or easy but it worked.

One of the first things I bought with the advance money for my book was a brand new chair for home. Not just any old adjustable chair. I bought a Herman Miller Aeron II chair that goes for a list price of around \$1300. It's one of the best chairs money can buy. I found a place that sold it at discount for only \$900.

My Bossbert at work made some noises about buying me a decent chair, but he never did. So I kept walking every day, on company time, to keep my back from going out again. Apparently, Bossbert's motto was "Economy at any cost!"

Not too long after that, I got an offer to work at another company. They offered me a bit more money. The work was a bit more interesting. I asked for just one extra perk. "There's this great chair that I bought for my home office. I want one just like it for work."

The new boss smiled. "You come to work for me and I'll buy you any chair you want."

Then I told him how much a Herman Miller Aeron II chair cost.

He paid up without blinking an eye.

There was a man who knew that a thousand bucks for a chair is a small price to pay to keep an employee healthy.

I don't work for a boss anymore. I work for me. And I take a walking break every day. That and the chair are small investments for keeping my back in shape.

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#### 4) Tiger Marketing--When Google Treats You Wrong

Not long ago, Colleen Coble, one of my writer friends, discovered that Google was mistreating her. No, they weren't directing searchers for "miserable failure" to her site. (The top result for that is George Bush's bio page.)

But Google was definitely misrepresenting Colleen and



she wanted it to stop.

If you typed the words "Colleen Coble" into Google, Colleen's web site came up as the top entry. That was fine. But the description of her site was all wrong. It read like this:

"Historical and Contemporary romance author, who often writes with a touch of intrigue. Photo album, experts, newsletter and schedule of appearances."

Well now, isn't that bland???? Gack. Colleen felt that it was a horrible, wretched description of her site. And it didn't describe her well either. Colleen writes romantic suspense for Christian readers. She doesn't write "historical and contemporary romance." (Nothing wrong with writing that, but it isn't what she writes.) And what's this nonsense about "a touch of intrigue?" A suspense writer does not want to be tarred with the "touch of intrigue" brush. She wants to be tarred with the "big screaming boatloads of intrigue" brush.

Colleen had no idea WHY Google was showing such a tepid description. That paragraph does not appear anywhere on her site. So how did Google come up with it?

And more importantly, how could Colleen make them change it? Google is a hundred-billion-dollar corporation. Colleen is . . . not. How could she fight the behemoth and win?

Colleen sent out a blanket appeal for help to a number of her writer friends. I saw at once that this was a simple example of Tiger Marketing. Or more precisely, a simple example of NOT Tiger Marketing. A five minute investigation led me to the answer, which I then sent to Colleen and our mutual circle of friends.

Colleen has graciously given me permission to tell the whole sordid tale in today's column. Here is what I wrote, after my five-minute investigation:

The weird thing is that this paragraph is not found anywhere on Colleen's site. She has a number of metatags on her site, but no DESCRIPTION metatag. And therein lies the problem. If she had a DESCRIPTION metatag on her site, then Google would use the description she provides. Since she provides none, Google has to go elsewhere. And where do they go?

Answer: Alexa.com. Check out this link:  
<http://www.alexacom.com/data/details/?url=www.colleencoble.com>

You'll see precisely the description given above. As I understand it, this paragraph was written by a human from Alexa.com who visited Colleen's web site. They didn't necessarily get the impression she wanted them to receive. So they wrote a generic description and Google grabbed it.

And who is Alexa.com?

Alexa provides rankings of web sites, and it ranks Colleen's site at 2,775,664. The ranking is like on Amazon, where a lower number is better. Colleen's ranking is typical of a personal web site that has not been optimized for Google and doesn't draw a lot of traffic.

So what can Colleen do to get the description she wants on Google?

Simple. She needs a DESCRIPTION metatag on the top page of her web site that would look like this:

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<meta name="DESCRIPTION" content="Best-selling novelist Colleen Coble writes romantic suspense for Christian readers.">
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This is simple and gives the essence of Colleen. Of course, she could probably write a better sentence than this, but not MUCH better. It's pretty good, and far better than Alexa's.

By the way, speaking of various kinds of metatags, another common kind is the KEYWORDS metatag. It is tempting for novice webmasters to lard in a bunch of KEYWORDS metatags so that Google will find them more easily. This is a mistake. The more KEYWORDS metatags on a page, the less Google thinks any one of them is relevant to the page. So you dilute the effectiveness of all of them. It would be tempting for Colleen to have a KEYWORDS metatag that look like this:

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<meta name="KEYWORDS" content="Colleen Coble, suspense, romantic suspense, suspenseful romance, thriller, mystery, intrigue, sexy Christian fiction, chess champion, dog lover, horse rider"> and on and on. (I made up some of those keywords, by the way.)
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Unfortunately, Google will look at these and decide that Colleen doesn't stand for much of anything. This is the Google equivalent of brand-dilution and it's a killer.

Far better for her to have a KEYWORDS metatag that looks like this:

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<meta name="KEYWORDS" content="Christian romantic suspense"> (or whatever specific keyword she would like to capture).
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The thing is that Colleen has a number of pages on her web site, and each of these can have a different KEYWORDS metatag. On those pages, she could have "mystery" or "sexy Christian fiction" or "dog lover" or whatever. But only one keyword per page!

By working hard, Colleen might conceivably "own" a keyword, meaning that somebody who Googles that keyword

would see a page on Colleen's site as the TOP result. This is gold if you can get it, but you have to work hard. As an example, if you Google the phrase, "writing a novel", you'll see why I get so many visitors every day. I "own" several keywords on Google, and those bring me a LOT of traffic, far out of proportion to my actual importance in the universe.

After Colleen adds in DESCRIPTION metatags and KEYWORDS metatags on her pages, she needs to go to Google and ask it to rescan her web site so it'll be up to date. If she doesn't, then Google will get around to it eventually (maybe 3 months from now) but if she does ask, then Google will do it within days. And then her updated metatags will be doing some good.

To do this, Colleen just has to go to the page:  
<http://www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl>

and submit her top level page ([www.colleencoble.com](http://www.colleencoble.com)) to Google. Google's spider will crawl the entire site from that page and make adjustments quickly.

That's what I wrote to Colleen on March 28, exactly a week ago. If you Google the words "Colleen Coble" today, you'll see a short and succinct description of her site on the first search result:

"Best-selling novelist Colleen Coble writes romantic suspense for Christian readers."

Colleen has beaten the mighty Google into submission! Hooray for Colleen for taking action! And hooray for Google for responding so quickly! They both win.

Isn't it COOL when this Tiger Marketing stuff actually WORKS?

By the way, Colleen's web site was named last year by Writer's Digest as one of the Top Ten Writer's Web Sites. What I like about her site is that it captures her personality so well. Check it out:  
<http://www.colleencoble.com>

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## 5) Fiction Writing Info on the Web

From time to time, I run across web sites that are particularly good at supplying information on the craft of writing. I like to mention those sites in this e-zine. I don't receive any money from these folks for mentioning their sites. I do it because you might find them useful. This month, I'd like to highlight TWO sites:

First is Moira Allen's web site:  
<http://www.writing-world.com/>

On this site, you'll find a wide range of articles on writing for both magazines and books, both fiction and nonfiction. Moira also has an electronic newsletter which you can sign up for on her site. Check it out!

Second are Bruce Cook's two related web sites:  
<http://www.author-me.com>  
<http://www.authorme.com>

These sites are international communities for writers. Their mission is to offer hope to writers who go unnoticed in the publishing world. You can post your fiction, nonfiction, or poetry on these sites for anyone in the world to read. Bruce gets close to 100,000 visitors per MONTH on his web sites. Find out what they're all coming for!

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#### 6) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://AdvancedFictionWriting.com)

As I've been saying for the last few months, I'm relocating to the Portland area with my family. Our house is now officially for sale and we had our first open house on Sunday. Our realtor says it was very successful. I wasn't there, because . . . somebody had to get the cats out of the house so they wouldn't spit out hairballs on potential buyers. That "somebody" was me. To be honest, our house looks too doggone nice to sell and I really hope nobody buys it because I want to stay.

In the few seconds I have every day that aren't related to moving, I've been teaching my daughters the art and craft of Tiger Marketing. My plan is to make entrepreneurs out of the little brats so they can pay their OWN way through college.

I'm hoping to find time in the coming month to (gasp) actually write something. But I make no promises.

See ya next month with more stuff on the craft and marketing of your fiction!

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

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth 76 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, 2006. But you knew that, because every flippin' word anyone writes is copyrighted the instant they write it. Even if you scrawl your writing in blood on old toilet paper, you own that sucker.

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

If you email it to a friend, remind them tactfully that when they sign up they should name YOU as the person who referred them. When my subscriber count reaches 5000, I'll hold a drawing for a brand-new iPod Nano. Your name will be entered once for each subscriber you referred. Subscribers who name themselves as referrers unfortunately don't get credit, so they might as well be honest and admit it was you!

At the moment, there are two places to subscribe:  
My personal web site: <http://www.RSIngermanson.com>  
My new web site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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Randy Ingermanson  
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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