
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

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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 750 of you are new since my 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 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>

In this issue, we'll continue our discussion on creating strong characters. As we talked about last month, at the core of every character are values. But not all values are created equal, and that is a key to writing strong fiction.

Are you going to a writing conference this year? The conference season is gearing up already. I'll be teaching at five conferences this year. Conferences are great; they're terrifying; they're exhilarating; they're disillusioning; and they're life-changing -- all at the same time. Conferences are where most writers break in, a few break out, and many break down. In this issue, I'll give you the run-down on how to set your objectives for a writing conference, how to behave while you're there, and how to get what you came for.

Writers have a responsibility to be part of their world. A week ago, something hit the fan that caused quite a stir around the world. Because of my background, I was strongly qualified to comment on it. So I wrote an article on my web site and it's been getting a fair bit of exposure. It has nothing to do with writing fiction, so it's off-topic for this e-zine. And yet the FACT that I wrote it has everything to do with writing fiction, because all writers have obligations to the world. More on that in my article "Off-Topic And Yet Strangely Relevant" below.

Want to learn the latest cutting edge techniques for marketing your work? Even if you're not published, there are things you can be doing NOW to make yourself more marketable on the day you sell your book. Matter of fact, those techniques can make it more likely that you WILL sell that first book. And if you already ARE published, then there are things you could be doing to get the word out on your novels.

This e-zine has a sister publication, the Mad Genius Writer, dedicated to teaching brilliantly mad marketing methods FOR WRITERS ONLY. Check it out at <http://www.MadGeniusWriter.com>

The next issue of the Mad Genius Writer comes out a week from today, and it'll be a special issue, featuring a technique I've learned only in the last month. I consider it the coolest idea I've seen in the past year. It's a method for marketing your work while earning you money. That's a nice switch from most marketing methods, which generally cost you a bundle.

A word of thanks: In last month's issue, I wrote an article on "Anxiety and Writers." I am pretty sure that article generated more email to me than any article I've ever written. Every one of you who wrote was very supportive. And many of you told me of your own struggles with anxiety, panic, or whatever. Thanks to all of you for writing. I appreciate you!

Last month I wrote a column about creating characters in which I talked about values. Values are the core principles of a character -- the axioms for which a character can give no reason because they're "obvious."

Values determine a character's abstract motivations and concrete goals. Values are important because they define, ultimately, what a character will and won't do.

When a character's values are in conflict, they force the character to make a choice.

That's a key to writing great fiction. It's easy to make a decision when you only value one thing in life. We all know people who only have one criterion for making decisions. It may be their quest for money. Their hunger for fame. Their theology. Their cat. Whatever.

People like that CAN be an interesting character, IF they have some powerful opponent. Then there'll be a nice external conflict and hopefully the Good Guy will win. It's a battle of Good versus Evil, and that's always interesting.

But it's so much MORE interesting when the Good Guy has conflicting values. Then there's an internal conflict too. It becomes a story of Good versus Good. It forces the character to confront his own values. And it forces you to think about YOUR values.

I'm thinking of the movie Chariots of Fire. It's a story of two British runners in the 1924 Olympics. Both of them want to win, and each has an interesting story. I'm going to focus here on only one of them, Eric Liddell, because a major part of his conflict is internal -- a clash of his values -- and both of those values are good.

Eric Liddell is a conservative Scottish Christian and he loves to run. In one of the strongest scenes in the movie, he's explaining to his sister why he likes to run, even though it seems like a frivolous activity. He says, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." So that's one of his values -- Eric runs for God.

But Eric also believes that a man shouldn't race on Sunday. He's a throwback to an earlier time when many Christians observed Sunday as a Christian Sabbath. That's pretty uncommon these days, but it was more common in 1924. Whether you agree with Eric's theology or not, you can at least understand that Eric believes absolutely that he's doing God's will by not racing on Sunday.

The internal conflict comes for Eric when he learns that he'll have to race on Sunday if he wants to run in the Olympics. He comes in for a lot of pressure from

the British Olympic committee, because he's the favorite to win the gold medal. It's a matter of patriotism for them. What's the big deal, Eric? Won't it glorify God if you run on Sunday? Other Christians do it. Why can't you?

But Eric can't and he won't. For him, running and winning while violating God's law would be worse than losing. Eric has two values in conflict, but they're not equally strong. And his stronger value wins out, even when the weaker value gets a powerful push from the British Olympic committee. Eric refuses to race.

Ultimately, the committee enters him in a different event that doesn't require him to run on Sunday. It's not his best event, but he wins the gold anyway.

You've got to admire a guy like Eric because he did what he thought was right. That's always an admirable thing.

At the SAME time, it's also valid to ask whether what Eric THOUGHT was right actually WAS right.

The movie came out in 1981, at an interesting point in my own life. See, I was raised in a pretty unusual church -- the Seventh Day Adventist church. Adventists observe the Sabbath about as strictly as Eric did, but they don't observe Sunday. They observe Saturday. If you get cornered by an Adventist on this subject, and if you're honest, you will eventually admit that they are "right." The only Sabbath ever mentioned in the Bible, Old Testament or New Testament, is Saturday.

So the Adventists are "right", but . . . are they RIGHT? Because even if you establish that Saturday is the Biblical Sabbath, you still have to prove that Christians are obligated to observe it.

That's an interesting theological discussion that may interest a few of you but probably would bore most of you. I'll skip it for now.

In any event, when the movie came out in 1981, it hit a special nerve for me, because I was in graduate school at UC Berkeley, and sometimes tests came up on Saturday. In Seventh Day Adventism, it's not OK to take a test on the Sabbath. For me, that meant having to ask for a special exam on a different day. A major hassle for everybody involved.

So Adventists really liked that movie. When I watched it, I admired Eric for doing what he thought was right. But I also had some qualms about that. Sure, it's a good thing to do what you believe to be right. But what if you what you think is "right" really isn't? What if you're just laying an extra load on yourself needlessly?

In the end, I decided that Seventh Day Adventists had it wrong. They're nice folks (except possibly when they

corner you to convince you that you're wrong.) But I don't believe their theology is right.

Looking back on it now, I can see that the movie was one of the things that influenced me to ask hard questions. I could respect Eric Liddell for standing up for what he thought was right. But I also "knew" that he had things wrong. And that led me to consider the possibility that I might have them wrong too.

By the way, I don't want to suggest that you should get your theology (or philosophy or math or history) from the movies. There are a lot better resources for learning theology or philosophy or math or history.

But the power of a great story is that it can jolt you a bit. It can make you think about your own values in a new way -- from inside the skin of a character who isn't you. It can make you rethink your values.

You may end up confirming your values. You may end up changing them. But in the end, you'll know your own values better. They'll be more deeply a part of you. You will be more truly yourself.

All that from just a story! Don't ever let anyone put you down for "just telling stories." Story is one of the most powerful forces in any civilization. Part of the reason story is powerful is that story forces characters to examine their values.

In doing so, it forces us to examine our values too.

3) How To Have a Great Conference

Are you going to a writing conference this year? I hope you'll be able to. Writing conferences can be expensive, humiliating, and discouraging, but they can also change your life. My career began to blossom when I committed to going to at least one major writing conference every year. I know many writers who can say the same.

The problem is that writing conferences can also go horribly, frightfully, abysmally wrong. In this article, I'd like to talk about a few things you can do to have a good conference and a few things you can avoid so as to NOT have a bad conference.

Here are some DOs and some DON'Ts:

1) DO set your expectations based on where you are in your writing career.

* Are you a "freshman" or "sophomore" writer? Then you shouldn't be expecting to sell a book at the conference or get an agent. You should be expecting to learn as much as possible about the publishing industry, to learn more about the craft of writing, and to make some friends. Those are doable goals for "freshmen" or "sophomores."

* Are you a "junior" writer? Then you still can't expect to sell your book, but you CAN expect to get some valuable feedback from editors or agents. You might possibly even find an agent who'd like to represent you. And you can expect to make new friends.

* Are you a "senior" writer?" Then it's very reasonable to see some real excitement among the editors and agents over your book. "Seniors" are pretty rare, and editors and agents are looking for them. You might not sell your book at the conference, but it's likely you'll get some requests to send in your proposal or manuscript. And you might well land an agent on the spot. Or not. Your mileage may vary.

* Are you published already? Then your goal might be to make new contacts with editors and agents. Or you might pitch book ideas. Or both. It depends on you, but you know that by now.

If you're not sure what stage you're at in your career, check out this page on my web site:

<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/talks/roadmap/index.php>

2) DON'T try to cheat the system.

I once went to a weekend writing conference at San Diego State University. About 700 writers attended, so it was a big conference! The rules said that you could submit at most 5 pages of your work to a single editor. That was designed to keep the work load down for the editors and agents.

One writer at the conference decided to get around this restriction by submitting 30 packets -- each with 5 pages in it -- all to the SAME editor! Think that endeared the writer to the editor? Nope, it just irritated the bejeebers out of him.

3) DO be nice to everybody.

There is just no good reason to be rude to other people. Those other writers next to you are NOT your competition. They really aren't. If you let them, they'll be your friends, your coaches, your mentors, your cheerleaders, and your shoulder to cry on. And you'll be the same for them.

Want to know who your competition is?

It's you. The one person most likely to keep you from succeeding in your career is yourself. You probably think too highly of yourself OR you think too little of yourself. Sometimes you need other people to tell you that you really aren't Stephen King. And sometimes you need other people to tell you that you aren't kitty litter.

So be nice to other writers. That is the one thing you can do to make your conference stupendously wonderful.

I'm assuming you already know to be nice to editors and agents. In fact, you might get carried away, so that brings us to the next DON'T . . .

4) DON'T freak out in the presence of famous editors, agents, and writers.

Look, famous people are a lot like you. I can pretty much guarantee they use the exact same technique you do to put on their pants in the morning.

No doubt when you put on your pants, you toss them up twelve feet in the air, do a triple back-flip with a full twist, plunge your legs into the pants at the peak of your trajectory, and then land lightly on your feet with the pants zipped, ready to go meet the day.

Famous people do that too. So don't freak when you meet them. They're just like you.

It's OK to fawn a little, but freaking out is just a no-no.

5) DO expect the unexpected.

No writing conference I've ever been to has gone the way I expected. So I've learned to just go with the flow, try to meet people, set some reasonable goals, have fun, and be ready for anything.

Probably the most fun I ever had at a conference was the infamous "Shaving Babbitt" incident. I had that conference all planned out. It went exactly the opposite of what I had planned. By all rights, it should have been the most humiliating thing that ever happened to me. I loved every minute of it.

I could tell you more, but that's enough for now. To review:

- * Set reasonable expectations
- * Don't try to cheat the system
- * Be nice to everybody
- * Don't freak out with famous folks
- * Expect the unexpected

Oh yeah, and . . . have fun!

4) Off-Topic And Yet Strangely Relevant

Last week was a strange week. On Monday, director James Cameron and his team announced their forthcoming documentary on the alleged "Jesus Family Tomb." You've probably heard most of the details, but a recap won't hurt:

In 1980, an ancient tomb was discovered during construction in Jerusalem. The contractor called the authorities, who sent out a team of archaeologists to do a "salvage dig" to recover any artifacts before construction could continue.

The archaeologists came out, took pictures, drew sketches, and extracted 10 small bone-boxes from the tomb. The bone-boxes held human remains, which were given a respectful burial, following Israeli law.

Six of the bone-boxes had names on them. In English, these names were: "Jesus son of Joseph, Mary, Mary, Joseph, Matthew, and Judah son of Jesus."

The bone-boxes all dated to about 2000 years ago, and those names were all common at that time. Nobody thought much about it.

Eventually, a Canadian documentary maker, Simcha Jacobovici, asked whether it was a coincidence that those names sounded a lot like the family tree of Jesus of Nazareth. Simcha launched an investigation to find out. He brought in James Cameron and a number of people to work on his team and got funding from the Discovery Channel. They did chemical tests and even one DNA test.

One of the claimed results of the documentary was the report by a university statistician that the odds were 600 to 1 that this tomb was the actual family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, his "wife" Mary Magdalene, and their "son" Judah.

Of course there was a furor. Duh. The religious right reacted reflexively in righteous rage. The scientific community asked how in the WORLD the team had reached this kind of conclusion and why they announced it on TV instead of in peer-reviewed scientific papers. All the archaeologists kept repeating, "But those names are all really COMMON."

So it was a frenetic, frantic week in the blogosphere.

I have to admit that I was intrigued by it all. At first, I was skeptical. (Those names are awfully common.) Then I bought the book and read it straight through and started asking if maybe it could be true. (There is an intriguing chemical analysis shown in the book that looks remarkable and relates the bone-boxes found to ANOTHER recent find.)

And then there was that statistical analysis. 600 to 1 is pretty long odds. What if these people were RIGHT?

So I looked closer at the evidence. The DNA test was a dud -- clearly thrown in to make the whole procedure sound sexy.

On closer inspection of the chemistry results, I noted some discrepancies. And testimony by one of the archaeologists made it clear that the chemistry test was irrelevant.

But the bottom line came down to the statistical analysis. Was it right or wasn't it? Those names are common, but the CLUSTER of those names is not common.

I checked around the web. Most of the archaeologists kept repeating the mantra, "Those names are common. They don't prove anything." But then they also added, "But I'm not a mathematician, so I don't know how to prove it."

Cameron and his people insisted that the odds were "600 to 1" and they had a mathematician to prove it.

At that point, I decided to get involved. I don't know if that was wise. I don't know if anyone cares what I think. But I do know how to do those exact kind of statistical calculations and I have a LOT of experience doing them.

I spent about two years of my life working on a project in which exactly this kind of "amazing coincidence" played a key role. About 10 years ago, Michael Drosnin published a book, *The Bible Code*, claiming all sorts of remarkable "codes" could be found in the text of the Hebrew Bible. There was quite a fuss at the time. A number of scientists got involved. I did too, and wrote my first book on the subject. My conclusion was that there are no measurable codes in the Bible.

In looking at the statistical analysis by the documentary team, I saw right away that their work was very similar to the old Bible codes calculations. They were computing a probability by asking the question: "Could this combination of names happen by chance?"

And they were making the same mistakes as the Bible coders from long ago.

So late Thursday night last week, I sat down, plugged the numbers into a spreadsheet, and ran the

calculations. And I got an answer. Actually, two answers.

* If you only factor in the archaeological data from the tomb that MATCHES Jesus of Nazareth, then you get odds of about 11 to 1 against this tomb being his tomb.

* If you then factor in the fact that history is completely silent on Jesus of Nazareth having a son, the odds get even longer. How much longer is a judgment call that different historians will call differently.

Assuming my calculations are correct, it's a long-shot that they've dug up Jesus. The odds are very strongly against it. Theology doesn't enter this calculation -- it's just numbers and cold history.

I talked about values in my column above on creating characters. One of my values is that you pursue the truth. You pursue it hard, whether it fits your agenda or not. Then, if you think you've got it, and if you think it's important, you publish it.

I believe we writers have a responsibility to do that. We've been born with a talent for words and ideas. We've worked hard to develop that talent. It's our duty to use that talent.

So I've posted my results on my new personal web site. I was just beginning the site as a replacement for my old personal site. In the interests of speed, I posted the site in an incomplete state. I'll finish it later this week.

If this kind of thing interests you, you can have a look at my analysis here:
<http://www.ingermanson.com/jesus/art/stats.php>

Maybe you're wondering, "What does this have to do with writing fiction?"

It has nothing to do with WRITING fiction and everything to do with BEING a novelist. Because novelists are concerned with TRUTH.

I once was invited to join a writing workshop run by the legendary novelist and editor, Sol Stein. Sol had a new book out, and we all bought copies. Sol knew I was a physicist, so he autographed mine with this inscription: "Physics is facts; fiction is truth."

Sol was half right. Fiction is truth. But so is physics. Science is not about an accumulation of facts, it's about asking what the world is like. Fiction and physics are about the same thing.

When I sat down to run the numbers last week, I didn't know what the results would be. But I knew that if I got a defensible answer, I was going to post the results on my web site, whether my answer made people

happy or not.

When you sit down to write fiction, you're going to look inside yourself in the pursuit of truth. You may well find things that you don't like. You may find things other people don't like. When that happens, you have to decide whether you value being popular or telling the truth.

I hope you'll decide to tell the truth. Because fiction really is truth.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

In the last month, I've been revamping all my web sites and not much else. (Ya gotta love that word "revamp". Does it imply that the web sites were previously "vamped?")

I've now redone the Mad Genius Writer site and my Advanced Fiction Writing site. I'm still working on my personal site, which I am transferring to a new domain. That should be done in a week or so. Once those are in place, I'll be focusing on producing some cool new products again. More on that when it actually happens.

I will soon be running blogs for both of my e-zines! (They're in place now, but quiescent until I get all my web sites revamped.)

Why have both a blog and an e-zine? Why not? Different people have different needs. Some like it hot. Some like it cold. I'll use whatever tools are available to teach what I know.

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth 8212 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.

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My personal web site: <http://www.RSIngermanson.com>
My fiction site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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