
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 (over 300 of you are new for this issue), welcome to my e-zine! You can find past issues of all the previous issues on my web site at:
<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/afwezine.html>

The articles I wrote on those pesky MRUs in the last issue were so popular that I've decided to do some more--only this time analyzing literary novels. This month, we'll look at novels by Leif Enger and Audrey Niffenegger.

I'll also do a post-mortem on my very first shot at Tiger Marketing, which I did years ago when I wrote my first book. Finally, I'll do an interview with someone you've all heard of, an eccentric guy who thinks he invented the snowflake.

- 2) Analyzing The Masters, Part I

In May, I gave away one of my biggest secrets in the craft of writing fiction. I spilled the beans on MRUs.

If you missed that article, now would be a good time to go read it or to check out the article on my web site on "Writing the Perfect Scene" at http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/perfect_scene.html

As a VERY brief reminder, an MRU has two parts, a "Motivation" and a "Reaction". The Motivation is objective and external. The Reaction is subjective and mostly internal to your Point of View character.

Last month, I showed how an analysis of MRUs could improve on the work of Tom Clancy, Dan Brown, and Michael Crichton. What I'd like to do this month is to pick some random scenes from a couple of literary novels and see if we can pick out the MRUs. (I have no plans to try to improve on people who write better than me.)

The tension mounts as our intrepid columnist opens the first novel at random and chooses a passage . . .

From Leif Enger's novel, *Peace Like A River*. In this scene, two neighborhood thugs bent on violence enter the house of our narrator, eleven-year-old asthmatic Reuben Land. For our convenience, I number the paragraphs.

- 1 Sometime past midnight the rain turned to snow. I could tell by the difference in the sound against the window: a less sharp, wetter sound. At first I thought that was what wakened me.
- 2 Then the door handle turned--the back door, off the kitchen. I knew that little squeal. How I wanted it to be Davy coming in, smoky and quiet and shaking off water, but Davy was inside already, sleeping not five feet from me, breathing through his nose in satisfied draughts. Nor was it Dad, for I could hear him too, rolling to and fro in sleep, wrestling his headache.
- 3 I heard the dry complaint of the kitchen floor, of the place beside the broom closet where joists groaned underfoot, and if I'd had any doubt that someone had got inside the house it vanished when a damp current of air came in and touched my ears and forehead.
- 4 Davey smacked, swallowed, sank to yet more earnest sleep. My lungs shrank with expectation; my whole surface hurt; I ached to creep across and wake him but felt benumbed, crippled. Now for the first time I heard real footsteps. They crossed the living room. A shoulder bumped the mantelpiece. My windowpane filled with a burst of driven snow and I abandoned myself to the knowledge that I'd waited

too long to wake Davy. What would happen now would happen.

- 5 The steps came forward. They stopped at my door. I felt, more than heard, someone's hand upon the knob.
- 6 Then Davy spoke from beside me--"Switch on the light"--his voice so soft he might've been talking in his sleep. But he wasn't. He was talking to whomever stood incorporeal in the doorway. "Switch it ON," he commanded, and next thing we were all of us brightsoaked and blinking: me beneath my quilt, and Israel Finch standing in the door with a baseball bat in one hand and the other still on the switch, and poor stupid Tommy all asquint behind his shoulder. Davy was sitting up in bed in his T-shirt, hair askew. Somehow he was holding the little Winchester he'd carried in the timber that afternoon. And holding it comfortably: elbows at rest on his knees, his cheek against the stock, as if to plink tin cans off fenceposts.
- 7 It is fair to say that Israel had no chance. I'm not saying he deserved one. He stood in the door with his pathetic club like primal man squinting at extinction. How confused he looked, how pinkeyed and sweaty! Then he lifted his bat, the knothed, and Davy fired, and Israel went backward into Tommy Basca, and Davy levered up a second round and fired again.

Wow, now that's excellent writing! I'll be honest--I don't see how I could possibly improve it, but let's analyze this thing and see how Enger uses those amazing MRUs to his advantage. I'll split apart the paragraphs so that the motivations and reactions are clearly spelled out:

- 1a Sometime past midnight the rain turned to snow. I could tell by the difference in the sound against the window: a less sharp, wetter sound.

This is a Motivation, but notice how Enger has fused it with the Reaction that follows, by injecting his narrator into it with the words "I could tell". This is Motivation because it's objective--had you been there, you could have told exactly the same way.

- 1b At first I thought that was what wakened me.

This is Reuben's Reaction, and it's nothing more than a Rational Thought. Enger leaves it in the same paragraph as the Motivation because he's done so well at putting himself in the Motivation.

- 2a Then the door handle turned--the back door, off the kitchen. I knew that little squeal.

This is more Motivation. It's external and it's objective, and that's what a Motivation is. And by golly, Enger has stuck his narrator in the thick of it again with that tell-tale phrase "I knew that little squeal." But you'd know it too if you'd been there. Enger is an absolute master at getting you inside the skull of his narrator, and this is one of his ways of doing it--by blurring the objective with the subjective.

2b How I wanted it to be Davy coming in, smoky and quiet and shaking off water, but Davy was inside already, sleeping not five feet from me, breathing through his nose in satisfied draughts. Nor was it Dad, for I could hear him too, rolling to and fro in sleep, wrestling his headache.

This is Reaction again. It's a Rational Thought sequence, where Reuben rules out all the plausible innocent sources for that noise downstairs. It's not his brother Davy and it's not Dad. And that means Trouble.

3 I heard the dry complaint of the kitchen floor, of the place beside the broom closet where joists groaned underfoot, and if I'd had any doubt that someone had got inside the house it vanished when a damp current of air came in and touched my ears and forehead.

This is all Motivation. Our narrator Reuben is deeply entangled in it, with all those phrases like "I heard" and "if I'd had any doubt" and the air coming in and touching his ears and forehead. But it's exactly what you would have heard and felt if you'd been there. There is no hint yet of a Reaction from Reuben.

4a Davey smacked, swallowed, sank to yet more earnest sleep.

This is a continuation of the Motivation into a new paragraph. Don'tcha love that "earnest sleep" thing? Enger has a ton of those on every page.

4b My lungs shrank with expectation; my whole surface hurt;

This is the first part of the Reaction, the Feeling part. This is all Feeling, and it's the first we've seen so far in this scene.

4c I ached to creep across and wake him but felt benumbed, crippled.

This is the third part of the Reaction, the Rational Thought part. (There is no Reflexive Action in this Reaction.)

4d Now for the first time I heard real footsteps. They crossed the living room. A shoulder bumped

the mantelpiece. My windowpane filled with a burst
of driven snow

This is a new Motivation--the sounds of footsteps and
bumps in the night and driving snow.

4e and I abandoned myself to the knowledge that I'd
waited too long to wake Davy. What would happen now
would happen.

This is a new Reaction--again, it's Rational Thought.
Note that Enger has put the Motivation and Reaction in
the same sentence. Yes, that's legal, as long as the
Motivation comes first. That second sentence is part of
Reuben's Rational Thought--it's his sense of
resignation that he no longer can prevent the horrible
thing that's about to happen.

5 The steps came forward. They stopped at my door.
I felt, more than heard, someone's hand upon the
knob.

This is Motivation again, and once again, Enger injects
his narrator into the thick of it. The sly devil.

6a Then Davy spoke from beside me--"Switch on the
light"--his voice so soft he might've been talking
in his sleep. But he wasn't. He was talking to
whomever stood incorporeal in the doorway. "Switch
it ON," he commanded,

This is a continuation of the Motivation, but now the
focus is shifting to Reuben's brother Davy.

6b and next thing we were all of us brightsoaked and
blinking: me beneath my quilt,

This is a Reaction to the light switching on, just raw
Feeling this time. Reuben is brightsoaked and blinking
(another terrific phrase), as is the thug Israel Finch
and Davy. But this time, Enger is pulling the other
characters into his narrator's experience, tugging the
external into the Reaction.

6c and Israel Finch standing in the door with a
baseball bat in one hand and the other still on the
switch, and poor stupid Tommy all asquint behind
his shoulder. Davy was sitting up in bed in his
T-shirt, hair askew. Somehow he was holding the
little Winchester he'd carried in the timber that
afternoon. And holding it comfortably: elbows at
rest on his knees, his cheek against the stock, as
if to plink tin cans off fenceposts.

This is back to Motivation again.

7a It is fair to say that Israel had no chance. I'm
not saying he deserved one. He stood in the door
with his pathetic club like primal man squinting at
extinction. How confused he looked, how pinkeyed

and sweaty!

This, I would say, is Reaction, but it's not the Reaction of the narrator Reuben at the time of the incident. It's his Reaction--a Rational Memory--seen through the lens of time, with Reuben making a judgment of a complex situation that happened long ago.

7b Then he lifted his bat, the knothed, and Davy fired, and Israel went backward into Tommy Basca, and Davy levered up a second round and fired again.

This is all Motivation. Note that if we were seeing this from Davy's point of view, there would be a Motivation (Israel lifting his bat), a Reflexive Reaction (Davy firing his gun), another Motivation (Israel tumbling backward into Tommy Basca, the other thug), and a second Rational Reaction (Davy firing again, this time clearly premeditated).

Randy sez: I'm no literary novelist, so all I can do is stand back and say, wow, that's pretty darn good. The analysis above shows how it works in terms of Story. Enger has maintained a strict cause-and-effect sequence, while blurring his Motivations and Reactions so as to put you right there. It's beautifully done, yes?

3) Analyzing The Masters, Part II

Our next passage is one from Audrey Niffenegger's book, *The Time Traveler's Wife*. It's about a guy named Henry who has a flaw in his DNA that causes him to sometimes abruptly time-travel a few years backward (or occasionally forward) for brief periods of time, before reverting to his own time. Many of his travels take him to earlier points of his wife Clare's life.

In this episode, Henry is in his late 30s and he is visiting Clare when she's sixteen and has just had a horrible date with a high school jock, a dog poop of a human named Jason Everleigh. After Clare shows Henry her bruises, he agrees to help punish Jason. They drive to Jason's house with a gun and knock on the door . . .

1 After a moment the music abruptly stops and heavy footsteps clump down stairs. The door opens, and after a pause a deep voice says, "What? You come back for more?" That's all I need to hear. I draw the gun and step to Clare's side. I point it at the guy's chest.

2 "Hi, Jason," Clare says. "I thought you might like to come out with us."

- 3 He does the same thing I would do, drops and rolls out of range, but he doesn't do it fast enough. I'm in the door and I take a flying leap onto his chest and knock the wind out of him. I stand up, put my boot on his chest, point the gun at his head. C'est magnifique mais ce n'est pas la guerre. He looks kind of like Tom Cruise, very pretty, all-American. "What position does he play?" I ask Clare.
- 4 "Halfback."
- 5 "Hmm. Never would of guessed. Get up, hands up where I can see them," I tell him cheerfully. He complies, and I walk him out the door. We are all standing in the driveway. I have an idea. I send Clare back into the house for rope; she comes out a few minutes later with scissors and duct tape.
- 6 "Where do you want to do this?"
- 7 "The woods."
- 8 Jason is panting as we march him into the woods. We walk for about five minutes, and then I see a little clearing with a handy young elm at the edge of it. "How about this, Clare?"
- 9 "Yeah."
- 10 I look at her. She is completely impassive, cool as a Raymond Chandler murderess. "Call it Clare."
- 11 "Tie him to the tree." I hand her the gun, jerk Jason's hands into position behind the tree, and duct tape them together.

That's enough to give you the flavor of the scene. It ends quite happily, with dear Jason taped to the tree, buck naked, and Clare calling all her girl friends to go look at him and mock him. When the girls later see Clare's bruises, they consider this fair punishment, and that's the last we ever hear of Jason.

Now let's take this scene apart and inspect the MRUs:

- 1a After a moment the music abruptly stops and heavy footsteps clump down stairs. The door opens, and after a pause a deep voice says, "What? You come back for more?"

This is all Motivation. A tape recorder would capture it exactly this way.

- 1b That's all I need to hear. I draw the gun and step to Clare's side. I point it at the guy's chest.

This is a Reaction, a series of Rational Thoughts and Rational Actions.

2 "Hi, Jason," Clare says. "I thought you might like to come out with us."

This is a Motivation.

3a He does the same thing I would do, drops and rolls out of range, but he doesn't do it fast enough.

This is a continuation of the Motivation (we are in Henry's point of view). Note that Niffenegger has put this in a separate paragraph. Had she told the story from Jason's POV, this sentence would have been Jason's Reaction, a sequence of Reflexive and Rational Actions.

3b I'm in the door and I take a flying leap onto his chest and knock the wind out of him. I stand up, put my boot on his chest, point the gun at his head. C'est magnifique mais ce n'est pas la guerre. He looks kind of like Tom Cruise, very pretty, all-American. "What position does he play?" I ask Clare.

All of this is Henry's Reaction, a series of Rational Actions.

4 "Halfback."

This is a Motivation, provided by Clare.

5a "Hmm. Never would of guessed. Get up, hands up where I can see them," I tell him cheerfully.

Another Reaction from Henry--Rational Speech.

5b He complies,

This action by Jason is a simple Motivation for Henry's next action. Note that Niffenegger is compressing the sequence into narrative summary. She'll drop back into immediate scene blow-by-blow action in just a minute, but there's no point in dragging things out by showing this part, because Jason is being compliant. The author is giving the reader a brief breathing spell before the action heats up.

5c and I walk him out the door.

Again, this is telling Henry's Reaction in narrative summary.

5d We are all standing in the driveway.

This is now a Motivation. Why a Motivation, since nothing appears to be happening? Because nothing IS happening. It's the lull before the storm and Henry needs a short pause here to figure out what to do next. He is, after all, playing this pretty much by ear.

5c I have an idea. I send Clare back into the house for rope;

This is Henry's Reaction--an idea (Rational Thought) followed by Rational Action (sending Clare for rope).

5d she comes out a few minutes later with scissors and duct tape.

This is a new Motivation.

6 "Where do you want to do this?"

This is Henry's Reaction--Rational Speech.

7 "The woods."

Another Motivation.

8a Jason is panting as we march him into the woods. We walk for about five minutes, and then I see a little clearing with a handy young elm at the edge of it.

This is a continuation of the Motivation. It is told in narrative summary, so it would really be a sequence of Motivations and Reactions, if it were shown in detail. Note that MRUs tend to blur in narrative summary, and the net result is what those pesky editors call "telling, not showing". A more action-oriented author might choose to show all this, every step, lunge, feint, karate chop, kick, bite, and cuss word along the way. Niffenegger has bigger fish to fry here--she wants to show revenge. Classy revenge.

8b "How about this, Clare?"

This is Reaction to the elm tree--Rational Speech.

9 "Yeah."

Another Motivation from Clare.

10a I look at her.

A quick Reaction from Henry, Rational Action.

10b She is completely impassive, cool as a Raymond Chandler murderess.

This is another Motivation.

10c "Call it Clare."

This is Henry's Reaction, again Rational Speech.

11a "Tie him to the tree."

Another Motivation from Clare. Clare is driving the show here. She's sixteen years old and is showing some strength of will. She'll need it later on in life.

11b I hand her the gun, jerk Jason's hands into position behind the tree, and duct tape them together.

This is Henry's Reaction, a sequence of Rational Actions. You might think that it wouldn't be so easy to do this part of it. During the exchange of the gun from Henry to Clare, Jason might bolt. Why doesn't he? The answer is that Jason's got asthma and is having an attack. In the following paragraphs, Clare has to fetch his inhaler from the house so he won't die. Revenge isn't revenge if you kill the varmint!

Randy sez: A fine piece of writing in a very strong book. The book, by the way, gets an R-rating for sex and language, so if that offends you, be forewarned. The violence is at a PG level. I found it interesting that despite many many many jumps in time, the trajectory of the story was always clear.

4) Tiger Marketing

In previous issues of this e-zine, I've talked about various aspects of Tiger Marketing. Today, I'd like to tell you about my very first attempt at marketing a book. What went right? What went wrong? How could it have gone righter?

Back in 1997, a book came out that attracted a lot of attention--The Bible Code, by a guy named Michael Drosnin. The book claimed that numerous secret messages had been encoded in the text of the Hebrew Bible by time-traveling space aliens who wished to warn us of the dangers of nuclear holocaust in the coming decade. (Awfully nice of them to warn us--we had no idea those nukes could be dangerous.) This book sold hundreds of thousands of copies and attracted a lively debate.

While the whole idea seemed absurdly nutcake, it got quite a boost because it was based on work by some serious Orthodox Jewish mathematicians. I thought it would be a good idea to investigate the subject, develop some new tools to analyze the Bible code, and settle the matter once and for all. (This shows how naive I was. In a debate like this, there are always parties who don't want the matter settled.)

Anyway, I had a lot going for me. I had credentials as a theoretical physicist. I can read Hebrew well enough to tackle the problem at hand. And I had a genuinely new idea.

I wrote a proposal, took it to a writing conference, made some contacts, and sold the book, all in about eight months.

I was excited! I had finally sold my first book, and it was a very commercial and marketable idea. My proposal had an innovative marketing plan, which boiled down to this:

- a) Create a web site to promote my book
- b) Start a newsletter on the Bible code
- c) In the book, include my web site address

You can see here the Three Claws of the Tiger--the product, the web site, and the newsletter. On the web site, I gave away some free stuff, such as the software that I had written in Java to analyze the Bible code, along with some mathematical appendices. (My publisher just about fainted when they saw all my equations, and they couldn't do the typography, so we decided to put the appendices on my web site for free.)

The book did moderately well, and even sold quite a few copies overseas. I did a fair number of radio interviews. My web site got a reputation as being fair and even-handed, and I got many links to it from other Bible code web sites. I even attracted some hate mail!

In all those respects, the project was a reasonable success.

However . . .

It could have gone so much better, if only I had started earlier. See, I had this very plausible notion that you start marketing a book when it's actually available to buy.

Wrong. You start marketing a book the day you sell it to the publisher. Or sooner.

My book came out in August, 1999. I put my web site up in around February of that year, and posted some articles on the Bible code. But I really didn't get my Bible code newsletter rolling until the book came out. So readers of my book came to my web site and signed up for my newsletter. But I didn't get that many people LEARNING about my book from my web site or newsletter. Think how nice it would have been to have a newsletter with ten thousand subscribers on the day my book came out! That would have given a nice spike in sales early in the lifecycle of the book. That gets word of mouth going.

Here are some things I could have done to make the launch of my book far better:

- a) Start my web site a year before the book came out
- b) Start my newsletter at the same time
- c) Add new articles to my site throughout the year
- d) Write articles for various other web sites, with pointers to my web site
- e) Write articles for print media, with a link to my web site
- f) Pursue speaking opportunities on the Bible code, and

get email addresses of those interested in my newsletter

Why didn't I do those things? Because I didn't know any better. I wanted to keep my new ideas fairly secret, because they were pretty doggone original. That was a mistake. I could easily have done a hundred articles just reviewing what other people had done on the Bible code, while giving hints that I was working on a new method of tackling the problem.

I know better now.

You might object that "That was nonfiction. What about fiction?"

It's a good question. And the answer is that a lot of fiction is based on nonfiction. A lot of fiction is ABOUT something that people are interested in. (If not, why would anyone want to read it?) Your mission, as a Tiger Marketer, is to find a way to tie your fiction to a nonfiction topic, and then market the heck out of that nonfiction topic.

I hope to be able to show you a real-life example next month, when things ripen up a bit on a project I'm working on. See ya then!

5) An Interview With Randy Ingermanson

Q: Hi, Randy, thanks for joining me today.

A: Trust me, it was nothing.

Q: Why are you interviewing yourself? Are you narcissistic? Egotistical? Delusional?

A: Yes. And I'm also easy to get hold of.

Q: What's on your mind today?

A: I gave a talk to a bunch of writers last weekend. In the question-and-answer period at the end, I got an interesting question, which I'm afraid I answered incompletely. I thought I'd take another cut at it here, in the comfort of my own home.

To give you some context, in my lecture, I claimed that you only need three things to get published--Content, Craft, and Connections. I claim that when you have excellent Content, excellent Craft, and excellent Connections, you WILL get published. Probably very quickly.

The question was the following:

Q: "Is excellent Content defined by pop culture?"

A: I waited an appropriate length of time in silence, letting the tension build, and then made the Clintonesque response: "It all depends on what the meaning of 'is' is."

Q: Do you want to elaborate on that?

A: Of course. What I meant was this. It's very hard to define Excellence. Who's going to be the judge of what's excellent? Me? Michael Jackson? Saddam Hussein? Mother Teresa? Picasso? Taste is relative. One man's meat is another man's "disgusting dead-animal products." Excellence is defined, at least in part, by letting everybody compete on a level playing field in the marketplace of ideas, and then seeing which of those ideas gets accepted.

Q: Do you agree with Richard Nixon then, that "More Americans like corn than caviar?"

A: Yes.

Q: So writers should cater to the lowest common denominator, is that it? Just pander to the unwashed masses?

A: Oh, quit yer frothing, will you? I didn't say you have to be a pander bear. Au contraire, I say you should be authentic. Look, it's really simple. Write the stuff you want to read. Sell it to whoever you can. Don't gripe if other people's taste differs from yours. If nobody wants to read your great Lithuanian-Japanese novel, then deal with that little tragedy. Life is full of unrecognized genius. If you don't believe me, go spend time in a homeless shelter for a week.

Q: Whoa! Looks like I hit a nerve.

A: Well, yeah, you did. Listen, I've been to a ton of writing conferences. I've talked to hundreds of pre-published writers. I WAS a pre-published writer for over ten years, and for a long time, I had this rotten attitude that I was a great writer and the publishers were all pandering to the lowest common denominator, just buying crappy writing because they didn't have the guts to buy the Great Stuff From A True American Literary Genius.

Q: Really? You were a True American Literary Genius?

A: At one time, yes. Looking back now, I can see that I was closer to a True American Literary Moron. Luckily, I was dumb enough to keep writing until I advanced to a True American Literary Mediocrity.

Q: Really? And you got published that way?

A: Let me finish, will you? The answer is no. Mediocre writing is hard to sell. I was so dumb, I kept writing until I became--

Q: A True American Literary Genius?

A: [Bowing head modestly] You said it, not me. But I won't deny it.

Q: Ah, humility.

A: Achieved at great price, too.

Q: So then, what's the answer?

A: What's the question?

Q: Is excellent content defined by pop culture?

A: No. Excellent content speaks for itself. So does excellent craft. When you have both of those, if you make any sort of effort for any decent length of time, you will develop excellent connections. Then you WILL get published.

If, for some reason, you aren't making connections with the content and craft you have, then (this is going to be really hard to take), maybe your content and craft aren't as excellent as you think. Maybe you're narcissistic, egotistical, or delusional. Maybe it's your content and craft that suck, and not the rest of the cruel, unfeeling universe.

Q: Wow, that's . . . hard to take. I guess you'd be the expert on that narcissistic, egotistical, delusional stuff, right?

A: Who me? I think you mean us, don't you?

Q: Whoa look at the time thanks for being with us today now please get out of here goodbye.

A: Good--

6) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

June has been a busy month for me. I have a contract winding its lazy way through a corporate publishing behemoth. I don't discuss contracts in public until they're on paper, so I'll say no more about it here. By next month I hope to be free to talk about my Tiger Marketing plan for that book. You'd better believe I've got one. Rrrrrrr!

I'm also the new webmaster for a group of authors that has formed a publicity/marketing co-op. I wish I could say more on that right now, but my efforts are not quite ready to show just yet. I expect it to be ready in the next few days. Next month, I plan to talk some about what we're doing. Maybe that'll jog a few neurons for you.

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth ten 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, 2005.

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.

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

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

Randy
