

WRITE GOOD OR DIE

Survival Tips for the 21st Century

Published by Haunted Computer Books at Smashwords

Copyright 2010 Scott Nicholson

Edited by Scott Nicholson

<http://writegoodordie.blogspot.com>

Covert art by Kewber

FOREWORD by Scott Nicholson

ART

- 1. IF ONLY I HAD THE TIME by Kevin J. Anderson**
- 2. WRITING AND PUBLISHING ADVICE by Heather Graham**
- 3. IT'S OKAY TO SUCK by Mur Lafferty**
- 4. NURTURE YOUR INNER HACK by Scott Nicholson**
- 5. DISCIPLINE by Kristine Kathryn Rusch**
- 6. NANONONONOMO by Harley Jane Kozak**
- 7. JEERS OF A CLOWN by Adrienne Jones**
- 8. WRITE THE NOVEL YOU WANT TO READ by Robert Kroese**
- 9. PERSISTENCE by M.J. Rose**
- 10. SUCCESS by Kristine Kathryn Rusch**

CRAFT

- 11. WHAT'S YOUR PREMISE? by Alexandra Sokoloff**
- 12. YOU, TOO, CAN RESEARCH by Gayle Lynds**
- 13. A WRITER'S MANTRA by J.A. Konrath**
- 14. TYPES OF WRITERS AND WRITING PROFESSIONS by Jonathan Maberry**
- 15. WRITING YOUR FIRST NOVEL by Brandon Massey**
- 16. SEVEN BAD HABITS OF HIGHLY INEFFECTIVE WRITERS by Scott Nicholson**
- 17. POINT OF VIEW by David J. Montgomery**
- 18. WHAT'S IN A NAME? by Scott Nicholson**
- 19. THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE IN STORY-TELLING by Jonathan Maberry**
- 20. VISUAL STORYTELLING: IMAGERY by Alexandra Sokoloff**
- 21. TALKING POINTS: DIALOGUE by Scott Nicholson**
- 22. WRITE WHAT YOU ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT, THEN TRY TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO SELL IT by Dean Wesley Smith**

BUSINESS

- 23. PITCHING YOUR BOOK by Douglas Clegg**
- 24. NOVEL PITCH LETTER by Jonathan Maberry**
- 25. HOW TO GET A LITERARY AGENT by Brandon Massey**

- 26. THE AGENT/PUBLISHER EPIC** by J.A. Konrath
27. WHAT HAPPENS IN THE PUBLICATION PROCESS by Gayle Lynds
28. GET IT IN WRITING by Elizabeth Massie
29. TEN COMMANDMENTS OF GETTING A BOOK REVIEWED by David J. Montgomery
30. FREE EMAIL NEWSLETTER MARKETING FOR AUTHORS by Douglas Clegg
31. E-GADS, 2009! PUBLISHING E-POCALYPSE OR A NEW AGE? by M.J. Rose
32. KINDLE SALES: 30K EBOOKS IN 11 MONTHS by J.A. Konrath
33. KILLING THE SACRED COWS OF PUBLISHING: SELF-PROMOTION by Dean Wesley Smith

AFTERWORD by Scott Nicholson
CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

FOREWORD

From the moment I decided to get serious about this writing gig—around the time I got my fourth rejection slip—I immediately started researching the business, the craft, and the industry, buying every writing-advice book I could get my hands on, listening to grizzled veterans at conferences, and browsing the Internet for articles when I wasn't writing.

Soon—around the time I got my fourth sale—I was presumptuous enough to start giving advice, posting articles on my Web site and sending them to writing magazines. As I achieved more success and failure, in the back of my mind I thought I would put together a writing book when I became a best-selling author.

There were only two problems. I'm not yet a best-selling author, and as I looked back over my articles, I saw most of them were useless, dated, or conventional, and everything I thought I knew turned out to be wrong. Which was the original name of this guide: *All Writing Advice is Wrong*.

So I tracked down some writers I knew, or some I knew only from the Internet or their books, and I read their advice. And I came to the conclusion that each writer only knows one set of truths, and those things are true only for that particular writer. Even if you imitate everything another writer does, it would be impossible to duplicate her career. You really do have to build your own ladder in this business, and there is too much luck, timing, and ever-changing weather involved to chart a path straight to the top.

These writers have diverse backgrounds, and some of the following advice is unconventional, subversive, and contradictory. Some comes from idealism, some from experience, some from the school of hard knocks—Kevin J. Anderson, J.A. Konrath, and I have amassed 2,000 rejection slips among the three of us. M.J. Rose, Brandon Massey, and Robert Kroese self-published their first novels as the foundations for their success. Harley Jane Kozak and Alexandra Sokoloff went from the Hollywood screen to the New York page, while Jonathan Maberry published thousands of non-fiction articles. Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Dean Wesley Smith share their freelancing trials and triumphs as a

married couple. Mur Lafferty is a well-known podcaster, Gayle Lynds is a bestselling author of spy fiction, David J. Montgomery is a respected reviewer in addition to his fiction writing, Douglas Clegg has worked in various aspects of the publishing industry, Elizabeth Massie has written educational material and radio dramas among other things, and Heather Graham was raising children while making the time to write what has now become 100 novels.

If you love this art, this craft, and this business, it's a lifetime commitment to learning. There's only one way out: Write Good or Die. Sometimes both.

Scott Nicholson
<http://writegoodordie.blogspot.com>
April 2010

WRITE GOOD OR DIE

1. IF ONLY I HAD THE TIME

By Kevin J. Anderson
<http://www.wordfire.com>

During the Olympics, the world watches great athletes from all nations perform seemingly impossible feats with breathtaking skill. When those well-toned men and women receive their medals, we admire them for their almost superhuman abilities. Most of us don't kid ourselves (as we sit on the couch munching potato chips) that we could be just as talented, just as fast, just as strong . . . if only we had the time.

For some reason, though, a lot of people seem to believe such an absurd thing about writing books. I've had many people tell me that writing is easy, that they themselves could do it, if they merely sat down and put their minds to it. Here's how the conversation often goes:

A person at one of my book-signings or appearances: "I've always wanted to be a writer. I could write a novel."

Me: "Oh? Why haven't you?"

Person: "I just don't have the time."

Me: "Hmm. You know, nobody gives me the time, either. I have to make the time, set priorities, discipline myself to get my writing done each day, no matter how tired I am. I worked a full-time regular job while I wrote my first novels, scraping out an hour here or there in evenings and weekends. That's how I've become a successful author."

Person: "Yeah, right. I think you're just lucky."

Olympic athletes usually start their training as kids, practicing, competing, clawing their way up year after year. Some of them get up before dawn just to grab enough hours of training during the day. They strive to improve their performance, stretch their abilities, beat their personal bests, and then beat them again. They practice until they're ready to drop, and then they keep at it. Many are injured along the way. The vast majority of those who try out don't make the Olympic team. They may win

semifinals and regional competitions, but only the best of the best become part of the team—and only the very best of those will win a medal.

I've received dozens of letters posing the same question: "I want to write a bestselling novel. But it seems to take so long, and it's an awful lot of work. Can you tell me what the shortcut is?"

Without doing a full count and comparison, I wouldn't be surprised if there are about as many New York Times bestselling authors as there are members of the various US Olympic teams. The competition among bestsellers is just as tough, and your chances of success are just as slim.

But does anyone really say, "I want to win a gold medal in figure skating, but I don't have the time for all that practice and training. In fact, I don't even own ice skates. Can you tell me the shortcut to winning a medal?"

To make a short answer long, I've wanted to be a writer since I was five years old. I sat in my dad's study and plunked out my first "novel" on a manual typewriter when I was eight. By the age of ten, I had saved up enough money to buy either a bicycle (like a normal kid), or my own typewriter. I chose the typewriter. I got my first rejection slip by the time I was 13, had my first story published when I was 16 (after I had gathered 80 rejection slips), and sold my first novel by the time I was 25.

I have a trophy in my office proclaiming me to be "The Writer with No Future" because I could produce more rejection slips by weight than any other writer at an entire conference. My files now bulge with more than 800 rejections. On the other hand, I also have 94 books published, 41 of which have been national or international bestsellers, and my work has been translated into 30 languages. I've written almost ten million words, so far.

No, I don't know any shortcuts. Sorry.

Where does this notion come from that just anybody can write a novel, if they could only get around to it? I never hear the claim that just anybody can be an Olympic athlete, or a brain surgeon, or a space shuttle commander. Even if we did "have the time" to raise capital and invest wisely, few people could manage to be as rich as Donald Trump.

But somehow, publishing a novel apparently involves nothing more than unskilled labor, stringing a lot of sentences together until you fill enough pages with words.

Every author has heard this one from a friend or a fan: "I've got a great idea for a novel. I'll tell you the idea, you write the book, and then we can split the money." (As if the idea is the hard part!) In all honesty, I'm not short on ideas. In fact, I'll never have time to flesh out all the novel possibilities that occur to me on a regular basis, so this proposition never ceases to amaze me.

I've often wished I had the nerve to reply: "I'm pretty busy right now, but why don't we try it the other way around first? I'll tell you an idea off the top of my head, then you can do all the research, the plotting, and character development. You can write a hundred thousand words or so, then edit the manuscript (I usually do at least five to ten drafts), sell it to the publisher, work with the editor for any revisions, deal with the copy editor, proofread the galleys, then do book signings and promotion after it's published. After all that, we'll split the money. Sound fair?"

Now, I'm not comparing myself to an Olympic gold medalist. I can't even stay up on ice skates. I don't change the oil in my car (though I could probably figure it out, "if only I had the time") or balance the monthly checkbook. But I do have a pretty good idea how to write a novel. I've been practicing and training for most of my life.

Maybe as a public service I'll write a self-help book of shortcuts for these would-be authors who live all around us. I could call it *How to Become a Bestselling Author in Twenty Years or Less*.

Now, if only I could find the time to write it

Kevin J. Anderson—<http://www.wordfire.com>
###

2. WRITING AND PUBLISHING ADVICE

By Heather Graham

<http://www.eheathergraham.com>

I'm often asked for advice, so I'm going to write a page with advice, and to make sure that my advice is taken with a grain a salt, the first piece of advice I have to give is that reading is subjective. I may love something, you may hate it. That's true with any art form, visual, music, movies, and the written word. You must be true to yourself—however, if you have a dozen editors tell you that something is a cliché, trite, or overdone, it probably is, and you need to step back and take a look at your work.

Writing can be different for different people. Diaries are something many people keep, and some, especially those written during historic eras, later become best sellers--often after the record keeper is long dead.

So, there is writing for your own pleasure, and there is writing for publication. First up, and this isn't always easy, know what you're writing. Any bookstore has shelves, and certain books go on certain shelves. Often, when I ask someone what they're working on, they'll give me a vague description of many things. This is fine, because I'm your friend, or I'm trying to help you. But when you're trying to publish with a major commercial publisher, they want you to know exactly what you're doing and what your market is going to be.

My next suggestion. If you're going into fiction, write what you love to read. The world is wide open right now. Mysteries, slashers, horror, romance, sci-fi, fantasy—we've reached a point where publishers have discovered that there is a market out there for so many types of fiction. Even "mixed" fiction, or fiction that crosses the lines and appeals to readers of many genres. But know what you're mixing, and always know why you should be writing what you're writing. That doesn't mean that you have to write books with bridges in them if you're an engineer. It's valid to say that you are working on a cozy mystery because you've spent your life reading every possible book of that genre you can find. Or suspense. Or horror. You spent your life watching Hammer films. You lived for Poe, or even more literary authors. Settle in your mind what you want, what your goal is with your writing, and then take steps to reach that goal.

Smart steps. Writers love company. They love the company of other writers. Writers usually know what's going on. They know when a new house has opened. They

know when an old house has opened a new line. They even know if a particular editor has a bee in his or her bonnet when it comes to a certain type of fiction, or even a place, or name. In selling, these things can make a difference. If you're far away from any known civilization, there are still dozens of talented and published authors offering courses on the Internet. You can be part of Internet readers groups.

I know people who are successful, published authors who have come from every walk of life, from those who have achieved several doctorates to those who might still be working on their GEDs. Men and women. CEOs and stay-at-home moms. They all have one thing in common—they love to read. They may not spell brilliantly, they may not have the most amazing command of the English language. But they are willing to learn, and they read like crazy. They write, because they have loved so much to read.

They are storytellers.

And on to that particular piece of advice—get your story down. Tell your story from beginning to end. Make it exciting. Don't wear yourself out correcting and re-correcting page one. Once you're told your whole wonderful story and you don't think your first page is or first pages are worthy, go back. But don't make yourself sick of a story before you've told it.

Listen to advice, and throw out advice. When an editor who has the power to buy your story suggests you change something, that's really the time to do it.

Learn to take criticism. Learn to weigh it. What is valuable, and what is someone's opinion that might not be shared by a larger audience, your audience. If you've been reading like crazy, you will know what audience you are striving to gather. Again, all opinions can be valid, but the opinions that matter are the ones that come from those who can buy your book.

Don't try to correct things at first—make sure you do correct them before you send them off. They will not reject an amazing story because of errors, but they will put down a "maybe" story if it's costing them their eyesight. Make sure your manuscript is double-spaced, margined, as free from typos as you can make it, and as clean and neat. That's after you've given your heart to the story.

Buy *Writer's Digest's Writer's Market*. The current issue. Or get it at the library, if every penny counts. You can find out who is buying what, and how they want it submitted. Address your manuscript to the name of the editor at the house you have chosen who is actively purchasing your type of fiction. (Or nonfiction!)

People can be born rich. They are not born published. Sure, sleep with the president, and it will be easy to sell a book. Not always feasible! Nor can everyone be a sports star, movie star, or personality. You may have luck immediately, you may spend time looking. If you're serious, you tell your story and make it wonderful. You learn how to write a great query letter that will tell an editor cleanly what your book is about, why it would fit perfectly with the publishing house, and why you're qualified to write it. You will learn how to write a succinct synopsis that excites an editor. Remember, it must tell the whole story—they do not want a synopsis that ends with, "And you won't believe what happens then!"

Be Internet savvy. (I'd have given a lot for that talent!) You can do research on the Internet, you can market on the Internet, you can find out about publishers on the Internet.

The path to publication is never the same for any two people. If you're rejected, hopefully it will be with a note. The note will give you advice. See if you can make it work. Send out to a number of houses. Know whether they do or do not accept multiple submissions. You'll now know this because you'll have Writer's Digest Writer's Market, or lots of friends a few steps ahead of you because you've joined a group. A group that you can find on the Internet, such as (key words) Mystery Writers of America, Romance Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and Horror Writers Association. There are so many more; most regions have fiction groups, most junior colleges offer creative writing.

Don't do it if you don't love it. Don't write if you don't read—you'll really annoy other writers a whole lot! Sometimes, you'll just write something, you'll find an agent, the agent will love your work, it will go on auction, and someone will give you a zillion dollars. Sometimes. That's not the norm. You'll probably go through trial and error. You'll have to get a rejection letter and smile at your wife or husband, girlfriend/boyfriend, and kids or friends, and pretend like a little piece of you isn't insulted and breaking. A little suffering is good, because it's a tough field, and you need to be tough. And, besides, most of the published people out there have been rejected, and we're human, we want you to suffer a little, too.

Keep at it. If you want it, never say die. Tenacity is nine-tenths of law.

Time

Working all day? Ten kids? Laundry? A household to support? Yes, it's very hard. But be committed. If it's a page a day, in a year, that's 365 pages. Whatever it is that you give, do it as religiously as you would pump iron if you were trying to be Mr. or Mrs. America. (Or Ms.)

There's some basic advice, and remember, weigh what works for you. Every person out there is different, and that's the beauty of what we do. If you're down, remember J.K. Rowling had been rejected many, many times. Often, you have to find the right home.

Tell a great story. That's the most important. Tell a wonderful story, and while you're shopping it, sit down and tell another wonderful story. Don't ever stop. Don't ever, ever let anyone tell you that it's a pipe dream. Dreams are lost because we believe they can't be reached. Believe in yourself. Think Nike. Just do it.

Heather Graham—<http://www.eheathergraham.com>

###

3. It's Okay To Suck

By Mur Lafferty

<http://www.murverse.com>

Really.

I think what gets beginning writers down so often is the fact that they have dreamed of being a writer for so long and they think the worlds in their heads will be grand and glorious. The reality usually is they sit down to write such glorious worlds and, well, they suck.

Think about it. If you wanted to run a marathon, would you leave your front door and run 26 miles? If you did that, what would happen? You'd injure yourself. You'd vomit. You might die (didn't the first runner who inspired the marathon actually do just that?). I can promise you that you wouldn't achieve any sense of competitive time. You would fail.

No, to run a marathon you have to leave your house and get in shape, running a little each day¹. You get your body used to running every day (with some rest days in there) and you get stronger and better and faster. Then you can try out a 5K race, and a 10K, and a half marathon, working your way up to the big race.

(I am not a doctor or a personal trainer—take my running metaphor for what it is, and talk to a professional if you want to start running for real.)

People think writing is easy. Of course they do—it's just words, strung together, right? And we all use words, every day, usually speaking, but some of us write emails, or reports, or letters. Storytelling has to be easy, right? We relate our days to our spouses, we encapsulate last night's TV to our coworkers. Language is a core facet of being human.

But writing is a skill. The ability to use the right words to properly indicate what's in your head is something you have to practice. So just as you know that right now you're not an Olympic marathoner (unless you're actually a marathoner, and then insert sport-you-don't-play here), right now you're likely not a novelist.

It's okay. Really. You will be.

Most writers say that Rule 1 of writing has to be “write” or “put butt in chair.” I disagree. Before you can put your butt in that chair and start writing, you have to let go of the illusion of perfection. What you are writing might suck. The closer you are to your first day writing, the more likely you are to suck. But you can look at it the other way: the farther you move from square one, the less likely you are to suck. But it's not time that takes you from square one; it's writing those words.

When I watch kids' TV with my daughter, I find it amusing and sad that so many of those shows tried to teach us lessons that didn't sink in. One of these lessons is that you're not going to be perfect the minute you try something. You have to practice. I have to remind my daughter time and time again that she's not going to be perfect when she tries something the first time. And then I have to remind myself that when I start something new, and I have to tell my listeners that when they tell me they're discouraged.

You will never be perfect. Never. You will eventually finish stories and novels and achieve a sense of accomplishment, of satisfaction, even. You'll start to get confident in your work. But the story will never appear on the page the same way it did in your head. And that's OK. It happens to all of us. Your job is to tell the story in the best way you can. When you're done, put it down and write something else. You can edit later. Right now, just focus on letting go of the perfect shining image of the story in your head, sitting down, and writing it. And if it sucks, so what? Your next story will be better.

I have faith in you. The day you accept that your writing is allowed to suck is your first day of being a writer—the day you set yourself free.

Mur Lafferty—<http://www.murverse.com>

###

4. NURTURE YOUR INNER HACK

By Scott Nicholson

<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>

Most aspiring writers, and even all those millions who are going to get around to being writers someday, have the idea that the Great American Novel is sleeping in their brains and all they need to do is sit down and type. Or maybe they'll wait for voice recognition software to advance far enough that they can babble it out while they drive to New York to pick up their checks. Even Europeans and South Americans want to write the Great American Novel, because nobody has a better chance to win the Nobel Prize for Literature than a foreigner who writes a Great American Novel. Hollywood might even buy it, sight unseen, if enough people who haven't read the book start talking about it.

The only fly in this ointment is all those people out there who could care less whether you win big literary prizes. For most readers, your being compared to Faulkner and Gunter Grass are actually turn-offs rather than selling points. As hard as it is to believe, not everybody analyzes the *New York Times Book Review* for hip clues about what to stick on the shelves. And the highbrow Fifth Avenue secret is not all that many people buy these intelligent books. The secret is now being exposed by BookScan, which reports the actual number of sales with the precision of a computer rather than with the exuberance of an in-house publicist.

What does this mean to you as a writer? Or, for those few of us who still crack a book now and then rather than leave it on the coffee table as a trendy conversation piece, what does it mean to you as a reader?

It means keeping it simple, stupid. Around the campfire, you have the advantage of no electricity, no satellite television, no Internet access, and usually an ice chest full of beer to help keep your audience's attention, although you may have to roast a cell phone or two. You are also relaxed and spontaneous and can pour out your tale in a straightforward manner. "Here is what happened, and here is what happened next." You don't have time for any high-falutin tricks or your audience members will decide they'd rather take their chances with poison ivy in the dark, or go to their tents and play shadow games with flashlights.

It means you'd better learn how to tell a story. And you need to be a hack. I say "hack" with all due reverence, and I believe it is the highest literary ambition possible. The popular image of a hack is someone who grinds out cheap paperbacks every three months, writes in multiple genres, and borrows and steals from every clichéd plot possible. To me, a hack is someone who is writing so freely and unselfconsciously that the material is flowing from some deep inner fountain, a place where true beliefs and feelings dwell. Such a story will automatically have resonance if you have learned enough of the basic writing skills to communicate your soul.

In journalism, reporters are taught to get to the four W's right away: who, what, when, where. That's good advice for fiction as well. As you grow more sophisticated, you can sneak in some "why" here and there, but first you have to hook the reader. They won't care what happens to your characters if they know nothing about them. Conversely, if your characters aren't in the middle of doing something when the reader meets them, the reader may not stick around long enough to make an emotional

investment. “When” and “where” should be revealed in tiny doses while the characters are engaged in the business of the plot.

Yes, the successful writer must do all of these things at the same time. The good news is, it’s the most natural form of storytelling. If you can avoid the grammatical bog of trying to wow English professors with your sentences, then you’re well on your way to getting the reader to turn one page and then the next. If you’re slamming a thesaurus over the reader’s head with every paragraph, a lot of your books will go in the recycling bin, no matter how heavily the publisher promotes them. Not that you shouldn’t occasionally challenge the reader, but most of us work plenty hard enough at our day jobs and the last thing we want is to sweat blood during our leisure time.

One high-profile literary novel got a lot of attention a few years back mostly due to the fact that the author was fairly young and fresh out of medical school. The book was of the sort that Robert Redford will probably adapt into a vapid movie. Out of curiosity, I read an excerpt that was posted online. The author used a strange third-person omniscient viewpoint that had little consistency.

In the first couple of paragraphs, the main character meets a secondary character and an entire paragraph is devoted to describing the secondary character’s appearance and dress, presumably through the main character’s eyes. Several paragraphs later, the secondary character is mentally describing the main character’s appearance and dress with hardly a speed bump to note the point-of-view transition. The author made much of the secondary character’s mustache, and for the next two pages, which is as far as I cared to read, the fellow could hardly speak without his mustache twitching or curling. We knew the characters’ sartorial and hirsute habits, but didn’t learn a thing about their feelings.

Okay, I’ll admit I am jealous, because this author is younger, richer, and better looking than I am. He has some talent for stringing words together. But he broke what to me is the most basic rule of all: don’t confuse the reader. I would assume any book receiving a six-figure advance would be carefully edited by an experienced professional. But most editors I know would have rejected this book after that first clumsy transition, which reflects that this celebrated author has not mastered one of the core elements of storytelling. And, as a reader, I rejected it the minute my curiosity was satisfied.

Pick up any popular hack novel, and I need not mention any names, because there are probably several dozen in your immediate vicinity. Open it and read the first page. By the third paragraph, something is happening. Nine times out of ten, it is something important, life and death, love or loss, something that makes you want to know more. Something that makes you—GOTCHA—turn the page.

As writers, we are often tempted to impress other writers with our stylistic genius. Believe me, I’m still enough of an average reader to know that we don’t care about your genius. We want a story, we want it fast, and we want it to teach us something about being human. We don’t care what you mean to New York. All we care about is what your story means to us. The greatest form of genius is that which isn’t noticed. We want a hack, and if you deliver the goods, we’ll keep coming back to gather around your campfire again and again.

And we may even keep the flames roaring with some of those oh-so-smart hardcovers that tried to be the Great American Novel.

Scott Nicholson—<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>
###

5. The Freelancer's Survival Guide: Discipline

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

<http://www.kristinekathrynrusch.com>

I don't want to write this post. I have half a dozen reasons—some of them very good—as to why. First, my chronic illness has flared this week, so I'm struggling against my health. Second, Thursday is one of my annual days off, and I usually post the Guide on Thursday. If I were working a regular job, this day off would be on my calendar—and would have been since before I was hired. Third, I am moving my office and it looks like this week is D-Day for the desk, computer, printer, and calendar, the very things I use to write 95 percent of the time.

Those are the good reasons. Here are the whiney reasons: First, my office cat died two weeks ago. I really don't like going into my office when she's not there. Second, I gave up my non-fiction career for a reason twenty-three years ago. I don't like writing nonfiction. It's work. Fiction, on the other hand, is fun. Third, I've been doing this Guide for a while now and it's no longer new (or as my husband would say, it's not bright and shiny), so it's become a chore—something with a deadline that must be met, instead of something I look forward to doing.

I might admit the whiney reasons to friends. But here are the final reasons, the ones that come up when I'm tired and not feeling well, like today. First, I'd rather be reading. (Honestly, I'd always rather be reading.) Second, I want cake. (That's Thursday.) Third, I want to watch the news. And get e-mail. And go on Twitter. And surf the net. And, and, and. . . .

I don't want to be sitting in my empty office, groggy from a nap that only left me feeling marginally better, writing part of a book that isn't under contract and might never be.

So why am I here?

Because I anticipated this day. Seriously. I knew this day was coming. And I planned for it.

Here's why I'm sitting in my empty office, groggy from a nap that left me feeling only marginally better, writing part of a book that isn't under contract.

You.

I have met my deadline on the Freelancer's Guide every week since April second. I post, you make comments and e-mail me. Some of you have donated to the Guide, and some of you have subscribed, so I have a very real obligation to hit the mark, week after week, until this project is done.

That's the main reason. In fact, that's the only reason I'm here this week.

That reason negates all the complaints I had in the first paragraph.

But the complaints in the second—the ones I call the whiney reasons—have come up before. And despite the fact that two of them sound project-specific, they're not. They come up, with different rationales, with every single project I work on.

I would always rather start a new project than work through the middle of another project. And the Freelancer's Guide is in the muddy middle. How far into the middle, I can't tell you. I can never estimate easily how much material I have left.

And honestly, some of that depends on you. The questions are getting fewer and farther between. Either I'm answering them or you haven't thought of them yet. But the more questions I get, the longer the Guide will be.

Finally, I love beginnings. Not the actual moment of work, which can be hard as I try to figure out how to approach the project, but grooming the idea and preparing it for the actual writing. That bright and shiny part of writing is appealing to me, and I always have more than one project going just to keep that bright and shiny part of my brain occupied.

I work well at the end of a project as well. Gone are the days when I'd just skip the end (I got tired of Dean looking at me and saying, "You skipped the last 10,000 words again"). When I know how something will end, I want it finished, and I work harder to get it done so that I can move onto the bright and shiny new thing.

I'm not anywhere close to that on the Freelancer's Guide.

Then there's the daily battle against "I want to read" and "I want to eat" and "I want to see a movie/news/TV." The battle against "I want to be doing something else, something that sounds fun, because right now, this project isn't fun."

Or as I usually say to someone who complains on television (and dammit, they can't hear me), "Wah."

Discipline gets a freelancer past all the complaints, but it's not the discipline you imagine from all those movies about military school or from watching Tiger Woods interviews about his dogged determination to be the first on the course and the last to leave.

Discipline gets the job done, as Malcolm Gladwell noted in his controversial book, *Outliers*. The musicians who put in more practice hours have more success than those who put in fewer hours. Same with athletes, and same with writers and almost everyone else in the arts. Both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama spent more time on the campaign trail in their initial successful Presidential bid than any of their opponents did—both in hours per day, and days per week.

But how did they do that? How do some musicians, playing the same instrument with the same intensity as other musicians, manage to hit the practice room more often? Why does Tiger Woods work harder than every other professional golfer on the course—especially since he says, quite frankly, that it's the hours of practice that make him the golfer he is.

Let's stick with Tiger for a moment. My husband used to be a professional golfer, so golf is important to our household, and Dean has more insight than most about the sport. We've watched Tiger since he won the U.S. Amateur competition in the 1990s. Dean told me then that this kid would be a phenom, and he is.

More than a decade later, Tiger Woods can rest on his laurels, but he doesn't. He won the U.S. Open last year, playing for four days with a destroyed knee and a cracked bone. Golf days last six hours or so, and golf, for those of you who don't play or follow the sport, hurts knees more than any other part of the body because of an unnatural twisting motion that the golfer must make when he swings.

It takes discipline to go to that course every day, in extreme pain, but you see it not just in Tiger Woods, but in most athletes at the pro level. It's so bad in most professional sports that teams have doctors on stand-by to order a badly injured player off the court/field so that the injury will not become permanent and career ending.

What causes this attitude? Sportscasters call that "heart," but it's more than heart. We've all seen high school players with heart, players who will give their all when the time comes to win the big game.

But it's not the big game that matters. It's the practice. It's sitting down to play scales for the 50,000th time because you need to warm up your hands before getting to Mozart. It's the drudgery of the same thing every day, with no defined ending.

It's the ability to overcome the urge to grab the bright and shiny and interesting to finish what you've started.

It's—and I'm sorry to say this, folks—it's what gets you to your day job five days per week, fifty-two weeks per year.

The problem is that most people don't apply that same discipline to their freelance work. There are reasons for this, which I'll get to. And, before the comments come in, let me add that I do realize that most people at a day job are not working at their best. Maybe they never do as well as they could. Many never reach their full potential. Most don't even try.

So what is it that makes some people work hard at their freelance careers while others work hard enough to get by or can't figure out a way to work at all?

It's not discipline. It's figuring out how to get yourself to work.

Seriously. What gets most people to their day jobs isn't the job. It's the money they get from the job, money that lets them pay the bills and support their family. Sure, a handful like their work, but most like the paycheck and benefits better.

Here's the problem: there are no paychecks and benefits when you work for yourself. If that's your motivation for working, then you're not going to have much luck freelancing—providing you carry that motivation into your freelance work.

Let's boil it down a bit more. When you begin freelancing, you do it for the love. Often you wait for the muse or until you get an order or if a friend asks for your help with something that you're good at. Eventually, you make some money at this, and then you realize you might be able to make a living at it.

Already bad habits have formed. You start doing this as a hobby, after everything else of importance gets finished. It feels natural to do the freelance work last.

Other things are always important. Your daughter skins her knee, the phone rings, a friend needs help moving. You have to learn to make your hobby or the thing you did only when you "had time" become your first priority.

How do you do that?

Unfortunately, I can't tell you. What you need to do is specific to you. There is no magic bullet, no one-size-fits-all answer.

But let me give you some ideas, based on my own experience.

And as I typed those words, I heard my writing friends giggle. They are all convinced that I'm the most disciplined person they know. They're wrong. In most things, I lack discipline entirely.

Unlike most of my writing friends, I have not held a full-time job for years. Why? Discipline. At some point, the paycheck isn't enough for me. I hate having someone tell me what to do, and that always triumphs.

Even the radio job which I loved didn't last long. I quit four separate times. Each time the station hired me to be interim news director at my insistence. I didn't want the permanent job. So I stayed until someone new came on board, and came back as interim director when that someone new left. I remained at the station in between as a volunteer, working a few nights per week. But I didn't want to be an employee there. The only thing that broke that years-long cycle, by the way, was my move out of town.

Discipline has always been a major issue for me. I get bored easily, and I don't play well with others. So hiring a personal trainer, for example, would never work for me. I would do my best to circumvent anything the trainer told me.

In my forties, I had a piano teacher. I stayed until I learned how to play the instrument adequately. Then I realized I was seeing how much practice it actually took to convince the teacher I had spent days at it instead of an hour or two. Once I fooled her a few times, we were done.

This is why I never became a musician. I didn't have the discipline. And I love music. At one point in my life, I played 15 different instruments. (Only two of them really well.) I just don't love music enough to conquer my discipline problem.

I love writing enough to work through each issue as it comes up. How? By figuring out what stopped me from getting a day's worth of work involved.

Each time I solved one issue, another cropped up. Then I would have to solve that one. This pattern continues to this day.

When I discuss this with students, I tell them that gaining discipline is a series of mind games. Your mind will find good and effective ways to stop you. You have to figure out ways around them. The old cliché about when a door closes, go through a window applies here.

I can sense the frustration among you now. I'm not being specific enough to help. So let's go back through my initial points, above, and I'll tell you how I get around them. Maybe that will strike a chord.

First, health issues. But in short, here's what helps me. I imagine making my excuses to a boss. If a good boss would let me go home sick or encourage me to stay away from the office, then I stay away from the computer. But if I can put in a day of so-so work, I do. I store up projects for days when my illness is present, but not so bad that I have to spend the day in bed. Those are the projects I do when I'm not feeling well.

Second, my annual days off. I have a few of them—birthday, anniversary, Christmas, and a couple of others. If I don't take those days, I'm angry at myself. Sometimes I take an entire week around it. That's just reasonable for any job.

Third, moving my office. I haven't done that for years. It's a good excuse not to work, except that I have deadlines, just like you would at a day job. I had to figure out a way to work while I'm in the middle of this transition. Because if it's not this transition, it's another transition. Life is full of them, and you have to figure out how to put in your freelance hours, even while everything changes around you.

But those are bigger events. It's the small ones that interfere with discipline. Let's address what I call the whiney complaints.

First, I would rather read. It took me an entire summer to figure out that reading, for me, will suck all my time out of every single day. I cannot start a book with breakfast or I will read until I go to bed.

How did I discover this? I had a day job that went part-time. I opted to take the afternoons off. When the job had been full-time, I read during my lunch break. So I continued this habit on the part-time schedule—and got nothing done.

I tried “disciplining” myself. I would put the book down and try to go to work, only to find myself reading again. “Disciplining”—forcing myself to quit—didn’t work. No matter how hard I tried, I simply could not stop reading, even when I finished the book. I’d move to the next one.

So the key for me wasn’t quitting reading. It was not starting. I set the books aside until I got x-amount of work done each day.

This isn’t easy. It required actual hiding of the books. I enlisted my then-husband’s help, making sure the books were out of sight.

Eventually, I learned that I worked hard and fast if I knew I could read when I was done. I got my work done, and then I read. Problem solved.

It sounds so easy, but it took months of trial and error. No amount of “forcing” myself got me to change my habits. I had to figure out where the problem started, and nip it in the bud.

Second, I want cake. (Don’t we all?) That’s usually a sign to me that I’m hungry. I need to figure out if I’m really hungry or—catch this—bored with what I’m doing. If I’m bored, I think I’m hungry, because that’s one of the few things I will get up from my desk to deal with. If I need a meal, I eat. But my subconscious loves to trick me (and my hips) by convincing me to leave when I’m not through.

Often, the “I’m hungry” reaction comes when I’m working on something particularly difficult or something I don’t want to do. Again, it took many months (and too many calories) to figure this one out. Now, before I get something to eat, I ask myself this: Do I like what I’m working on? If the answer is no, I generally stay at my desk.

Note that I do not ask myself if I’m hungry. I’ve already identified hungry, and the answer would be yes. But I figured out that my subconscious has learned a mind game to convince me to get away from the computer, one that makes me think I’m hungry (or craving food, like cake) and gets me to leave when I don’t need to.

We all have mind games like this, and they’re hard to identify. The question should always be: Is work going well? Because if it is, and I’m hungry, I have trouble tearing myself away. If it isn’t, I’ll make up any damn reason to leave my desk.

Third, I want to watch the news, download e-mail, look at the internet, do Twitter....in other words, do something else entirely.

This was almost as bad for me as reading was. I learned to keep my office spare. My computer has internet access and it also has e-mail access. I have shut those programs down. I’ve tossed away all games that were initially on my computer. There is no phone or television in my office. I have a stereo and a radio turned to a classical channel. No news of any kind allowed here.

Why? Because they all distract me. Rather than “discipline” myself to overcome the temptation, I remove the temptation entirely. In order to download my e-mail, I have to go to a different computer, one with an existing e-mail program, and download from

there. I need to go to a different room to watch television. I can't even hear the phone ring in my office.

These were all tough things to learn. The internet is particularly sneaky because you feel like you're working when you're online. You are not working—even if, like me, a small part of your business comes through the internet. You're not doing your core business. I have a number of writing friends who refuse to remove the internet from their computer. Those friends get very little done. All of them have spouses who work, and so the writer doesn't have to bring in a lot of money. All of them frown at me when I suggest removing the internet from their writing computer.

Everyone has these leaks, as the poker players call it. A leak is something that drains your income, something that has nothing to do with your work. And it's often something you're not willing to give up.

You have to learn how to control this leak and make it work for you. And, here's the tough part: If you can't control it, seek help. I went into therapy a number of years ago to help with one of my writing issues, something that got in the way of my business. And much as I hate authority, I listened to that counselor, because being a successful writer meant more to me than the leak.

However, had we worked on my discipline issues with music, I probably would have blown off the therapy within weeks. I have never had the discipline there, and I really don't want it. Not deep down.

And that's the final issue. If you want a successful freelance career of any kind, you'll overcome the things that get in your way. You can't do it all at once. You have to tackle one problem at a time. But you're willing to work on those problems.

If you're not willing to solve the problem after years of trying, then you probably don't want this freelance career (whatever it is) as much as you think you do.

Discipline is not about forcing yourself to improve. It's about wanting to get better.

That's the difference between Tiger Woods and all those other golfers. Tiger wants to be the best, and he knows the only way to do that is to work harder than everyone else. But he doesn't define himself as the best right now. He means the best ever. He keeps Jack Nicklaus's stats on his wall, trying to beat them. Tiger's not playing the current field. He's playing the entire field from the dawn of recorded golf history.

And he's doing a good job at knocking down the records.

But here's the key. He's not doing this for his wife or his kids. He's not doing it for his (late) father or for golf history. He's doing it for himself. Because he wants to. Because that's his goal.

So

How do you get disciplined?

Here are a few thoughts.

1. Define what you want to achieve. Not other people's goals for you. Not what your parents want or your spouse wants. What do you want? And how badly to do you want it? Will you die disappointed if you don't achieve it? Will you feel like a failure? Or will you shrug and move onto the next thing?

2. Make a list of what gets in the way of that achievement. If everything you list comes from the outside, then you have another problem. For example, writers often say they can't get published because the publishing industry is impossible to crack or they

need an agent or they can't figure out how to submit their work. Those, my friends, are excuses. Other people have succeeded in your industry. Figure out how they did it, and then try it yourself.

By "what gets in the way," I mean what part of you gets in the way. What are you doing to block your success? How do you change that? Sometimes the change is minor, like asking yourself whether you are really hungry or you are avoiding work. Sometimes the change is major, like the one thing I mentioned (deliberately vaguely) that forced me to go to therapy. I couldn't change that one on my own—but it was my problem, and I had to find a solution. I just needed help doing so.

3. Change your thought patterns. When you decide to go full-time freelance, realize that your hobby has just become your job. That realization alone will take time. Then figure out how to make your freelance work a priority in your own mind. Apply patterns from your day job to your freelance work.

Ask these questions:

What made you go to your day job every morning?

What made you stay there?

What made you work on days when you felt crummy?

What made you work on days when you had somewhere better to go?

And so on. Use those answers to design your freelance work.

For example, my husband Dean works hard when he's under deadline. He has trouble working when he has no deadlines at all. The key for him is to create deadlines—or to get someone from the outside (an editor, usually) to give him a deadline.

I didn't think I had that issue until I started the Freelancer's Guide. Then I realized that I never finish nonfiction unless I have a deadline. I don't like writing nonfiction. I love writing fiction and will do it without a deadline. But the deadline gets me to finish nonfiction projects—my two columns, some articles, and now this.

By meeting my deadline on this Guide every week, I've also established something else. I've got a streak going. I hate breaking streaks, so that's motivation to work on weeks like this one, when I could just as easily post a note that the Guide is on a one-week hiatus.

I learned long ago that I have to love what I'm doing to sustain the work. I loved working at the radio station, but hated it when I was in charge. So I kept quitting the paying work to go back to volunteering.

I love writing fiction, so I continue to do it, even when times are tough.

When I need to be disciplined, I have to find the love at the center of what I'm doing. Here's an example. I have tried to maintain a regular exercise program since middle-aged spread hit in my mid-thirties (thanks in part to that hunger thing, above).

I started with an exercise I love, swimming. But it was inconvenient. I had to drive half an hour each way to the pool. The hours were irregular, and I'd often lose too much work time. So I started riding my bicycle. I enlisted the help of a friend from the gym. I had to meet her a designated time every day. That got me out of the house.

We couldn't sustain the rides. Then I fell off the bike and broke my arm, the second serious bike accident in my life. (The first, when I was nine, smashed my face so badly, I still have occasional dental surgeries to repair the damage.) I realized that cycling on the Oregon Coast along a highway with no bike lanes (there are none for more than 100 miles) is too dangerous for me.

So I decided to run. When I made this decision, I couldn't run for a minute without feeling ill. I didn't like it. I had never liked running. Worse, I got bored quickly.

But I love music. If a song that I like comes on the radio, I crank the volume. If I'm alone in the house, I dance. So I put my favorite CDs on my iPod, and promised myself I could run for the length of one song.

I couldn't, not for weeks. Eventually I managed. But I wasn't running because I liked running. I was using that time as an excuse to listen to my favorite music all by myself.

Two years later, I can run for 30 minutes straight. When I feel like it's time to find a new form of exercise, I realize it's time to change the music in my iPod. I'm bored with what's there. I would rather swim, honestly. I would like to be on my bike. But running works for me now. And I've become so conditioned to it that last week, when my iPod battery died, I played some music in my head and finished the workout.

Could I do that every time? Hell, no. But I know how to make myself go out for a daily run now—and how to enjoy it. Set the iPod on shuffle and see what songs come up.

It took me fifteen years to find a form of exercise I can do every day, rain or shine, one that I will do. And what gets me out there now isn't the exercise or the need for it.

It's the half an hour of music. Which I love.

So the most important aspect of discipline isn't discipline at all. It's this:

4. Find the love. Find what you love about what you do, and channel that each and every day. Acknowledge it too. When I finish a run, I check in with myself. Inevitably, I feel better when I quit than I did when I started. I've told Dean that, and sometimes he's gotten me outside by reminding me of it. (I have to tell you, it sometimes pisses me off that I feel better after a run when I felt so crummy before the run.) Celebrate your achievement, even if that achievement is just getting to your desk.

Celebrate with something you enjoy.

I used to celebrate a day's writing by reading. Then I started editing, and reading ceased to be a reward for several years. In those years, I celebrated with a good movie or a guilty-pleasure TV show. Now I'm back to celebrating with reading.

Which is what I'm going to do now.

Oh, by the way, I'm no longer groggy from the nap, although I still feel under par. I did run today, and felt better afterwards (dammit!). And I got this section of the Guide done, two days early. I'll post it late tomorrow, which will be one day early. Then I'll get my day off. With cake.

That's my reward, along with all the fun things planned for that day.

And that was more than enough to get me into my chair today—even though I didn't want to be here.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch—<http://www.kristinekathrynrusch.com>

###

6. NaNoNoNoNoNoMo

By Harley Jane Kozak

<http://www.harleyjanekozak.com>

This month William—yes, our William, or that William, or that *!@# William, as I now think of him—talked me into NaNoWriMo. It sounds like a new flavor of Haagen-Dasz, doesn't it? Or an active volcano?

Don't I wish.

NaNoWriMo is National Novel Writing Month. Where participants—and any idiot can join, William, it's not like we're special—vow to write 50,000 words by November 30. Which is about 170 manuscript pages.

“Make no mistake,” the NaNoWriMo website says. “You will be writing a lot of crap.”

I've got that part down.

After taking the plunge (why? why?) I was a day late, because William didn't begin haranguing me until he'd gotten a head start, and also, it took me a day just to read the NaNoWriMo website. My strategy then became to not think FIFTY THOUSAND WORDS. Because I'm no Nora Roberts. Or James Patterson. (Not that James Patterson is James Patterson.) I kept that “You will be writing a lot of crap” motto close to my heart and eked out 800 words by November 3. 800 different words, I might add, as you're not supposed to write one word over and over fifty thousand times. But there's no rule (aside from the rule of good writing) that prevents me from saying something is “very, very” and “really really” whatever it is. I do that very, very often.

Another rule: you must write a novel from scratch. No recycled prose. Some authors cheat, but I was raised by nuns, so I closed the file on my real novel-in-progress, started a new document, named it The Khan Man and just continued with where I'd left off. Chapter One begins mid-sentence and doesn't even pretend to be a first chapter. William was all excited about me writing a Star Trek novel, but it's not a Trekkie kind of Khan Man, it's a Genghis kind of Khan Man, and that's all I'm saying about that, because I know there are people out there trolling Dumpsters and blogs and even paper shredders for ideas to steal. And if, 18 months hence, the publishing world is overrun with novels featuring 11th century Mongols, I'll know who to blame, William.

Another NaNoWriMo motto I mutter feverishly is “Fix it in December.” Nancie-the-Gun-Tart has money on me being unable to resist futzing. Sure, I've futzed, but my rule of revision is I can't make it shorter. Still, rewriting is not time-efficient. The Word Count gods demand fresh paragraphs. So I've stopped reading what I've written. That's right. I've no idea what's in those 56 pages. And so if I die this month, and someone (William) tries to read my novel, I'll just . . . die. Thus, I forbid it. If I go, all three computers, plus flash drive, are to be thrown onto the funeral pyre.

So here goes. Current word count: 12,203. But it's not my fault! I've been preparing to teach a seminar this weekend in Nebraska, and now my kids only have school half days this week and then NO SCHOOL next week, and Thanksgiving's at my house and my sister's wedding's in Wisconsin, and what demented mind picked November for this?

The only way to pull it off is to throw grocery lists into my novel, along with my Thanksgiving Squash Soufflé Recipe, William's home phone number, notes to my kids' teachers, and drafts of the text for my Christmas cards, which need to get to the printer.

Why, just by cutting and pasting this blog into The Khan Man and calling it Chapter Twelve, I've bumped my word count up to 12,838.

Next week: I bump off William and steal his novel.

Harley Jane Kozak—<http://www.harleyjanekozak.com>

###

7. Jeers of a Clown: Exploring the Balancing Act of Black Humor Writing By Adrienne Jones

<http://www.adriennejones.net>

Back in college, a bunch of us got called into the dorm lounge one day to receive some bad news—one of our dorm mates had attempted suicide. He was fine, they were able to save him, but he wouldn't be coming back to school. A terrible thing, of course. We all sat mournful and appropriately shocked at the news. Then my buddy Al asked the dorm director how this kid had...you know, done it. Turns out he'd taken an overdose of Sudafed.

I went into one of those inappropriate snicker fits, the kind that happen in church or in a meeting with your boss, where laughter is the worst option. I was weakened by it, sliding off the chair, unable to stop while the others stared on in horror, like I was a monster. Come ON! The guy tried to dry his sinuses to death.

Since I started publishing fiction, my brand of humor as been repeatedly called "dark" or "black," which recently led to pondering the source. Does a dark sense of humor come from the viewpoint of an author, or does the world regularly present us with these scenarios that only a certain personality type recognizes as humorous? Is it the same thing? And where do we draw the line between dark humor and a simple lack of taste?

The late Roald Dahl considered this endlessly, as evidenced in this quote:

"If a bucket of paint falls on a man's head, that's funny. If the bucket fractures his skull at the same time and kills him, that's not funny, it's tragic. And yet if a man falls into a sausage machine and is sold in the shop at so much a pound, that's funny. It's also tragic. So why is it funny? I don't know, but what I do know is that somewhere within this very difficult area lies the secret of all black comedy."

I think most will agree that Roald Dahl found that balance in his own work. I wonder if his was based purely on speculations, or if he too felt plagued with darkly humorous scenarios thrust before him in daily life. This reminds me of another incident that happened while I was skiing with a group of friends at Killington Mountain. We spotted a man with no arms, expertly swishing down a mogul field, and thought, "Wow. That is incredible." There was nothing funny about it. We certainly weren't juvenile and callous enough to laugh at a no-armed skier. We looked on in awe and admiration of his courage.

Yet two hours later we spotted the same man in the ski lodge, casually watching the television as he had lunch with a companion. My friend nudged me and signaled to the TV screen, on which played out the Black Knight scene from Monty Python and The Holy Grail. The knight continued to fight King Arthur even as both his arms had been hacked off by Arthur's sword, jumping and kicking as fake blood gushed dramatically from his stumps. Dear God, I thought, why are you doing this to me? I mean, what are the

odds of watching a no-armed man watching a comedy scene about a no-armed man? I don't want to laugh at the no-armed skier! The universe is NOT playing fair.

There is a certain safety in laughing at such things in the realm of entertainment, and it would stand to reason that suspension of disbelief or the fiction buffer is the key. But there are just as many staunch haters of Monty Python's brand of humor as there are fans. I've seen people come to blows over this topic. Which brings back the theory that dark humor is about viewpoint, in observer and creator alike.

Since I can't dig up Roald Dahl and ask him, I participated in a discussion with some living writers of black humor about their life view and how it affects their writing. Author Aurelio O'Brien used to make his living on the big budget animated kiddie films, but crossed over to the dark side with his first novel *Eve*, a blackly humorous tale of genetic tampering gone awry in a dystopian future.

"For me, so much of life is observably funny and this automatically feeds my writing. When I was creating my all organic, genetically designed future, things like McDonald's Characters directly inspired me to go further than I might otherwise think to go... The little giggling McNuggets are really chunks of dead fowl flesh with cute little smiles carved into them. I find these kinds of things to be so twisted and humorous and odd. Most people don't think about these characters beyond their surface appeal. So, when people tell me my Lick-n-Span© is gross, I think, is it really any grosser than having a hacked-up chicken giggle at you?"

I agree with O'Brien on this, most consumer icons are creepy. Like the Tidy Bowl man and Mr. Clean. Why is it always a little fantasy man helping the lonely housewife with her daily chores? Strange men coming up out of the floor and the toilet? And why does the housewife always keep them a secret from her husband? Notice the way Mr. Clean winks at her when hubby walks in? And what's the actual purpose of that little hand guy from Hamburger Helper? What's he really helping her with?

Speaking of sex and animation, most people know Gary K. Wolf as the creator of Disney's *Roger Rabbit*, but he's also a novelist, and one of the masters of dark humor. For Wolf, the humor definitely comes from a unique way of seeing the world, and is more second nature than calculated creativity.

"There's something unfathomable about humor writers that compels them to look at a situation or a character, twist it, turn it, squeeze it, squash it until it's a round peg that fits into a square hole and looks funny doing it," says Wolf. "Good stand-up comedians have the same ability, taking everyday situations and making them funny. They do it verbally. Most of the humorous writers I know, me included, aren't very funny in conversation. In fact, I'm so boring I could suck the laughs out of a hyena convention. However, give us a blank page and a pen, and we'll have you in stitches. I've been applauded by editors, critics, and readers for the humor in my work. All well and good except they were talking about what I consider to be my serious work. What I'm saying is that there's something perverse about the way I look at reality or, in the case of science fiction, unreality. I see a situation, I make it funny. Can't help it. Don't do it intentionally. That's just the way I write."

Gary makes a good point here about stand-up comedians, which prompted me to speak with one of my favorite and darkest comedians, winner of the 2009 Boston Comedy Festival, Dave McDonough. Dave, who's confessed to needing roughly 70 jokes written for a half-hour set, has a "serial killer on Valium" kind of delivery, and pushes the

envelope with some wince-worthy jokes, but he's booked solid most weeks, so the man has found his groove, and his audience.

"There is a balancing act but you can't make everyone happy," says McDonough. "I cross the line sometimes but that's half the fun. I don't have any material I draw the line at except Muslim jokes, because I need my head. I tell a Jesus Christ/abortion joke and a male-inmate rape joke that often get applause breaks, so there's a way to make the darkest of topics palatable to the public. I'm nowhere near as dark or as crazy as the freak I play onstage, I'm really a positive, introverted person by nature who happens to believe that the world is coming to an end."

So writers and entertainers alike seem to reiterate my previous theory, that black humor is a personality trait, an inherent point of view within the creative mind before the material ever reaches the page, or the stage. But in the spirit of point/counterpoint, I figured there had to be a dark humor writer who didn't necessarily see the real world through gore-colored, Groucho Marx glasses. Someone calculating, a mere craftsman, crazy on the page but with a solid, normal worldview—author Jeff Strand.

If you've read Strand's popular, horror/humor brand of fiction, you're now scratching your head and saying, "Did she just call Jeff Strand normal?" Especially after reading excerpts like this one from his book *Disposal*, which shows off his talent for making gore and violence a casual affair.

"We'll finish slicing up my husband's body, then we'll get rid of the chunks, then we'll take a long shower, and then we'll get some sleep--and no, you can't spend the night--and then I'll pay you."

The reason I thought I'd get calculated normalcy from Jeff Strand obviously didn't come from the content of his fiction. But having had many writing-craft related discussions with Strand, I always end up shaking my head at the logic he applies to the structure of writing, putting himself completely outside the whacky content in order to plot his scenes with almost mathematical precision. He's like the Professor on Gilligan's Island, fixing the radio while everyone else is running around throwing coconut cream pies.

But I was wrong. While Strand recognizes more conventional logic about the crux of black humor, in the end he too opts for the warped theory.

"We're living in dark times, and one theory is that because it's difficult to cope with or even comprehend some of the horrors around us, we use them for comedic effect to help us better deal with them," says Strand. "Which is a good theory. But at the same time, I think most of us are just sickos. The college student who creates an elaborate online animation of *The Puppy Blender* isn't doing it as a defense mechanism. We're all warped!"

Though like Roald Dahl, Jeff finds himself balancing that delicate line between humor and bad taste.

"If I can come up with a genuinely funny angle that's more than just 'Oooh! Look how tasteless I can be!' then my only off-limits material would be specific real-life people suffering tragedies. Cancer itself is acceptable. A real-life person dying of cancer is not. I wouldn't necessarily feel the need to make something funnier just because of the uncomfortable subject matter—it would just have to be handled in a way that justified the material."

And so ends the cage match, the popular vote going to the theory that black-humor writers have an inherently twisted perspective, a real-life view of the world that powers the motor for creating the dark funnies. Limitations are applied when putting pen to page, balancing the scales of humor and darkness to make the mix palatable for human consumption. If the mix is just right, the audience will laugh. Or at least some of them. Because as all humor is in the eye of the beholder, it's inevitable that part of the population will always stare slack-jawed, horrified as you giggle maniacally at the boy who tried to dry his sinuses to death.

Adrienne Jones—<http://www.adriennejones.net>
###

8. Write the Novel You Want to Read

By Robert Kroese

<http://mercuryfalls.net>

If you're like me, when you finish reading a novel you usually think one of two things—either:

- 1) Wow, that was really good. Some day I'd like to write a novel that good.
- 2) Wow, that was really bad. I could write a better novel than that.

Again, if you're like me, #2 happens quite a bit more often than #1. I sometimes say that good writing inspires me to write and bad writing provokes me to write. Yet while the amount of lousy writing that finds its way to the shelves of bookstores can be a source of encouragement, it's a mistake to think that if you write a novel that's better than 90 percent of the crap out there, it will be a surefire success. The fact is, while quality is certainly an important factor in determining a book's success, it's far from the most important factor.

There's only one surefire way to write a bestseller, and that's to be famous before you write it. Stephen King could put together a book of stories about his visits to the supermarket and it would sell ten million copies. Sarah Palin's book is outselling the Bible because she's pretty and she's been on TV, not because she has anything interesting to say. Yes, Stephen King was once an unknown, too, but the point is that as an aspiring author it's a mistake for you to compare your work to Stephen King's and think, "My book is as good as that, so a publisher will snap it up and readers will buy millions of copies."

First, it probably isn't. Second, your book is going to be missing the one element that has been critical to the success of every Stephen King book since *Carrie*: the name "Stephen King" on the cover.

The good and bad news about marketing fiction is that beyond being a celebrity (or at least a known author), no one really knows what goes into making a successful novel. Look at J.K. Rowling, who is one of the bestselling authors of all time (and the twelfth-richest woman in Britain). The first of her phenomenally successful Harry Potter books was rejected by twelve publishers—and that's after she had gotten a reputable literary agent to represent her. If any of those publishers had had the slightest inkling that

the Harry Potter books would be even a tenth as successful as they turned out to be, they would have snapped it up in a second, but they had absolutely no idea.

Imagine if you were to take the Hope Diamond to twelve of the most reputable jewelers in New York and not a single one of them would give you a dollar for it. It would make you start to think that the whole profession of jewelry appraisal is a lot of bollocks, wouldn't it? Now imagine that someone in the know about the jewelry business informed you that most jewelers lose money on most of their sales and only manage to stay in business thanks to a handful of fluke successes. At the very least, you would think twice about trusting one of those jewelers with the success of your own gem. You'd be well advised, in fact, to eschew the guidance of professional jewelers altogether and take matters into your own hands. Replace "jewelry" with "manuscripts" and "jewelers" with "publishers" and you'll have a pretty good sense of how the publishing industry works (or doesn't work).

A moment ago I stated that no one knows what causes a novel to be a success, which isn't entirely true. The one characteristic shared by all successful novels (other than those written by known authors) is that they are books that people tell their friends about. The rub, of course, is that no one knows what exactly causes someone to be filled with the urge to tell another person about a book.

Quality helps, sure, but when's the last time a co-worker brought in a copy of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* or Voltaire's *Candide* and said "You have to read this"? What makes people do this with the Harry Potter books and *The Da Vinci Code* and *Twilight*? Like most people, I have no idea. But I do know this: for someone to want to recommend a book to other people, they have to be excited about it. And how do you know what people are going to be excited about? The best way to answer that question, in my opinion, is to ask yourself what you are excited about – and then write about that.

This is a critical point. Writers are often told to "keep your audience in mind," which is good advice—unless, when you think of your audience, you imagine some amorphous crowd of people who fit some particular demographic. If you target your book at 30-something, college-educated, male science fiction fans or 20-something white single mothers, you're going to fail. No one wants to read a book targeted at a demographic. You want your reader to think, as they are reading your novel, "Wow, this author knows me."

How do you accomplish this? Again, write what you are excited about. No matter how eclectic your interests, there are other people out there like you—and they have friends. Did J.K. Rowling know that there was an untapped market of tens of millions dying to read about British children attending a school of wizardry? Probably not. But she was excited by the idea, and that excitement is infectious.

Don't write for a demographic. Don't write for publishers, reviewers, or agents. Write for yourself and maybe for that handful of people who really "get" you. Don't worry about the appeal of your book being too narrow. My novel, *Mercury Falls*, certainly isn't for everybody. To be honest, I'm surprised that its appeal has turned out to be as broad as it is, considering that it's filled with obscure references to everything from Occam's Razor to Creedence Clearwater Revival to *Wargames*.

What I've learned is that, ironically, by intentionally refusing to pander to my audience, I actually made *Mercury Falls* more interesting for readers outside of what I

originally thought was my target demographic. Readers respond to authenticity, originality and excitement, even if it's not packaged in a way they expect.

The other huge advantage to writing a book that you're excited about is that it's much easier to market. Those of who have witnessed my marketing onslaught for *Mercury Falls* may be surprised to learn that I absolutely abhor sales. I'm probably the worst salesperson in the history of humankind. And yet, I have no problem wholeheartedly recommending my book at every opportunity because it's a book I believe in. I don't mean that I believe that it will sell millions of copies; I have no idea how many people will ultimately want to read it. It's not a book calculated to generate sales; it's simply the best book I could write, and as such it's something that I want to share with people.

I'd stack that enthusiasm against the cold calculations of the clueless publishing houses any day. And that's why I'll say again: Write the book that you want to read. If you can do that, you're a long way toward creating a successful book. Too many writers worry about getting "published" when they should be worried about writing a book that people will want to read.

There's a reason I put the word "published" in quotes in the previous paragraph, by the way: these days, the idea of being a "published" author is an antiquated and virtually meaningless one. Getting "published," in some sense or other, isn't difficult. *Mercury Falls*, for example, was published by St. Culain Press. Never heard of it? That's probably because it's a fictitious company that I created solely for the purposes of publishing *Mercury Falls*.

So am I a published author? I guess that depends on the definition of "published" you use. Frankly, the question doesn't interest me. *Mercury Falls* has been in the top 20 books in the "humor" category for Kindle for the past two months and is going to be stocked by Barnes & Noble. That's the sort of thing I care about.

I'm convinced that these days being "published" by a traditional publisher is a meaningless detour on the road to being a successful author. The only real advantage to going with a traditional publisher is that you'll have an editor to help make your book as good (or at least as marketable) as possible. That was the main reason I attempted to go the traditional route before finally self-publishing *Mercury Falls*. Unfortunately, while I got some positive feedback from literary agents, I just couldn't get any bites. So I started to float the idea of self-publishing it.

The fascinating thing to me was that the people who screamed "NO! DON'T DO IT!" were themselves aspiring authors who had not yet been published. All of the published authors I knew said, "That's a great idea. Go for it. Get your work in front of readers and show publishers that you can sell a few thousand books."

Published authors already know that being published ain't all it's cracked up to be. That's not to say there aren't challenges associated with self-publishing, but compared with the challenges facing any unknown author, the challenges of self-publishing are nothing.

It's true that the odds of a self-published book being successful are extremely small. But to say that self-publishing generally results in failure is to confuse cause and effect. The odds of any book being successful are extremely small. Books published by traditional publishers are more likely to succeed because publishers have the luxury of

cherry-picking the one book out of a thousand that they think will sell (and they are still wrong most of the time!)

Saying that publishers create bestsellers is like saying the NFL creates great football players. The NFL doesn't create great players; all they do is try to predict which players will be great. Similarly, if a publisher decides to publish your book, it's because your book has a good chance at success. The difference between writing and playing football is that writing is a solitary endeavor. While a professional football player would have a hard time succeeding outside the NFL, you don't need the approval of a Big Publisher any more than a marathon runner needs the approval of the National Marathon Runners Association. If you have a book in you, write it.

Again, I don't want to give the impression that if you write a decent book and publish it through one of the many self-publishing companies out there, you'll have an instant bestseller on your hands. Whether you're published by Random House or Joe Smith Press, it's an uphill battle to get your book noticed by book retailers and readers. Making *Mercury Falls* into the modest success that it has become took a tremendous amount of work. I essentially took two months off from work to spend time promoting my book. I'm a web developer by trade, so I was able to capitalize on my technical skill to get exposure for *Mercury Falls*. I promoted the book on my blog, created a separate website with information about the book, created a Facebook page for it, and much, much more. I also spent a fair amount of my own money to send over 200 copies of *Mercury Falls* to potential reviewers.

So, to the question "How do I write a bestselling novel?" I can only answer that I have no more of an idea than anyone else. What I do know is that writing a novel that you're excited about is a very good first step. If you're excited about it, there's a good chance other people will get excited about it—and if one of those people is a literary agent or an editor at a big publishing house, that's a nice bonus. But don't write for that faceless agent or editor. Write for yourself.

Robert Kroese—<http://mercuryfalls.net>
####

9. Persistence

By M.J. Rose

<http://www.mjrose.com>

Like it or not, people say "no" more than they say "yes." But when I started out on my own in business I got paralyzed by the first few dozen "no's" that I heard. Rejection is tough on even the most self-confident person. Like a hammer, each "no" sunk me lower into a funk. My idea was good, was it? But would so many people say "no" if it had potential?

What made it even worse was that I'm a writer and my business idea was based on my own writing, so every "no" sounded even louder and had far reaching repercussions. Was the writing itself bad or just the business idea bad? And if the writing wasn't good and if I couldn't get this idea off the ground, I'd have to give up writing full time and take a nine-to-five job back in the corporate world. "Oh, no!"

I began having dreams where every participant spoke a stilted version of the English language. No matter what the question, the answer was "no." I imagined a character in a children's book named "Princess No-No." I saw the letters "n" and "o" inside of other words: like soprano, dinosaur, piano, and stenographer.

Sometimes I would whisper "yes" out loud to myself just to make sure the word still existed.

I was telling a friend, who is a professional fundraiser, about my dilemma. She laughed and told me that in her business the "no's" are a good thing. "For each "no" you are getting closer to a "yes," she said. She even had a mathematical equation she'd worked out from ten years of experience. She had to get 15 "no's" to get a "yes." And since she was asking for contributions for a worthwhile charity, her no-to-yes ratio would be lower than mine would. Because I was looking for a big investor I could count on a 100-to-one no-to-yes ratio.

So I started to tally the "no's." In June I got 31; in July, 25. (I was starting to get excited, 56 no's down, only 44 to go!) And in August, I got 12 "no's" and then, one wonderful, resonant, "yes."

A funny thing happened to me in those three months. I went from dreading and hating the "no's" to understanding something about them. They represented hard work and determination on my part. I was proud of those "no's." Plus, in order to find the right partner for my business the "no's" were important. They weeded out the people I really didn't want to work with anyway. Only someone who truly loved my idea and saw its potential, only the person who said "yes" was the right person.

So if you are searching for participation in a project, looking for a partner or for financing, expect to hear a lot of "no's." Will you ever become immune to them? Well... No.

But can you get to a point where you can deal with them? Yes, you betcha!

M.J. Rose—<http://www.mjrose.com>

###

10. Success

By Kristine Kathryn Rush

<http://www.kristinekathrynrusch.com>

So...

Success. Why, you ask, would the topic of success take three posts? Success is success is success, right?

I wish it were that simple.

Because success is more complicated than failure.

Infinitely more complicated.

And sadly, success can cause your freelance business to fail. I don't have any statistics, but I do know from anecdotal evidence that success has caused a lot more freelancers I know personally to fail than their repeated setbacks did.

Huh? Most of you don't believe me. But it's true. Success derails people, partly because it's unexpected.

First, let's define success. Even that's not easy. It takes my handy dandy *Macmillan Contemporary Dictionary* (which isn't contemporary any longer since I bought it while in college in 1979) three different bullet points to define the word. It takes my handy dandy *Encarta World English Dictionary* (which is a bit more contemporary since it came with the four-year-old Macintosh that I write on) four bullet points to define the word. Neither dictionaries put the bullet points in the same order.

So, combining the dictionary definitions and putting them in my own words (since dictionary definitions are copyrighted), with my own numerical bullet points (more than four), here are the dictionary definitions of success:

1. Achieving something planned.
2. Achieving something attempted.
3. A favorable result.
4. Attaining a goal.
5. An impressive achievement especially (as both dictionaries note) fame, wealth, power or social status.

6. A person who has a record of achievement especially (as one dictionary notes) in gaining fame, wealth, power or social status.

7. A person who is successful (says the other dictionary, thereby defining a word with the same root word, which has always irritated me. So let's break down successful from the same dictionary which defines it as...attaining success. Grrrr).

8. A person who succeeds (says the other dictionary doing the same damn thing. What does "succeeds" mean? Having the desired result; obtaining a desired object or outcome; coming next in line...um, say what?—oh, as in the prince succeeded his father, the king, who died last week in a horrible dictionary accident. Grumph).

Since I'm dissatisfied with these definitions, I'm going to look in one more dictionary (yes, I have a million of them. Or maybe only a thousand). [Writer walks her library, reads half a dozen dictionary definitions, invades her husband's office, reads three more dictionary definitions, gives up, makes herself a cup of tea, grabs some pretzels and returns to her computer where she types...]

Okay, that was lame. All of these dictionaries are obsessed with wealth and social standing. One says that success is the gaining (the gaining—what a construction) of wealth, fame, or power and/or (get this) the extent of that gain.

That snobby dictionary not only measures success in wealth, power, and fame, but also in expanding that wealth, power and fame—and no, this was not the Oxford Dictionary. It was some paltry American wannabe.

Look at this: I've just spent four hundred words attempting to define success—and here's the really sad thing. While most of us would agree with those definitions in principle, they're wrong in particular.

In other words, each one of you—each one of several thousand people—has a completely different definition of success.

For Reader A, success might be finishing a novel. For Reader B, success might be earning a million dollars. For Reader C, success might mean buying a house. And so on and so on.

Most of us can describe what we believe success to be. Sometimes success is small—selling a short story, for example, or cooking your first soufflé. Sometimes the success is large—hitting The New York Times Bestseller List with not one, not two, but

eight books in the same week like Charlaine Harris just did or running your own well-reviewed restaurant in Paris.

But here's the thing. Sometimes success means nothing to the successful. Nothing at all.

Because, as I said, we all define success differently. Joyce Carol Oates examines this phenomenon in her excellent personal essay "Nighthawk." In a parenthetical aside, she mentions something about the well-known writer Henry James, something I did not know:

"...Henry James's most passionate wish was to have been a successful playwright, not a practitioner of the highest Jamesian ideals in prose fiction. Writing the great novels of his mature career had been, for Henry James, a second-best alternative."

In other words, had you asked Henry James, the revered novelist whose work is still read nearly a hundred years after his death whether or not he was a success, he would have said no.

Got that? He would have said no.

There are so many examples from the world of writing, which is the world I'm familiar with. Remember, I'm the person who studies success and failure, and I do so primarily within my own profession, that of professional writer.

So I know of Frederick Faust who labored over his poems each and every afternoon, sometimes writing only one or two words as he crafted each piece. He published a few poems in his lifetime—and none of you have heard of Frederick Faust.

At least, not under that name. But all of you have seen his most famous pen name on the bookstore shelves, as well as on the credits of television shows and countless movies. For Frederick Faust became Max Brand so that he could pay the bills. He wrote Max Brand stories and novels in the morning to fund his poetry.

Poetry which, by the way, was so bad that almost no one bought it. One editor who wanted another Max Brand story agreed, as part of the contract, to publish a Frederick Faust poem as well.

Was Frederick Faust a success? He would have said no.

Yet by the dictionary definition—wealth, fame, power—Max Brand had more success than he could have dreamed of.

Milos Forman and Peter Shaffer produced an entire movie about this phenomenon. 1984's *Amadeus* is a (clearly fictionalized) account of Antonio Salieri, the most acclaimed, successful musician of his day, who was jealous of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart—not for his wealth or fame or power (Mozart did have fame, but no wealth or power)—but for his talent, a talent the fictional Salieri believed he did not have. (I emphasize fictional here because there is no evidence in the historical record that Salieri believed himself inferior to Mozart.)

Most people see the movie as a story about professional jealousy, but if you go beyond that, you'll see that it's a film about a man whom the world perceives as successful, a man who does not see himself as a success because he has not achieved his own dreams and, sadly, for this character, who believes he is not capable of achieving those dreams.

So defining success is hard. The definitions are individual and generally, they come from somewhere deep. If you ask each and every one of us, we'll all have a glib answer about what we believe success to be.

When asked what he wanted—by anyone, acquaintance, waitress, stranger—a friend of mine would say, “I want to be rich and never have to work again.” He meant it, but he also had other dreams, other measures of success. He certainly would never have attained that kind of wealth by robbing people or scamming people or lying to people. He had specific dreams of ways to make himself that wealthy.

But within that glib answer are some traps. What’s “rich”? Could my friend have gotten by on one million dollars? Five million? Two trillion? What does “never have to work again” mean? Does it mean having a day job where you work for someone else? Or does it mean sitting on your ass all day, having people take care of your every need?

I don’t know. I’m not even sure my friend knew, deep down.

Sometimes your own definitions of success surprise you. In 2000, my novel *Dangerous Road* (written under my Kris Nelscott pen name) got nominated for the Edgar Award for Best Mystery Novel of that year. When I got the call (and they do call you—which is a great courtesy), my knees literally buckled. I fell into a nearby chair. I always thought buckling knees were literary hype, but they’re not. I’ve experienced it.

At that point in my career, I had been nominated for many awards—Hugos, Nebulas, World Fantasy Awards. I’d won quite a few as well, including the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Readers’ Choice Award for Best Short Story of the Year which is a hell of an honor. But the Edgar was something else to me.

It took me a while to figure out the difference. From childhood on, I went out of my way to read novels marked “Edgar nominee.” I hadn’t done that with any other award, not even the Hugo (although I did buy *Dune* because it mentioned the Hugo on the cover). Edgar nominee was, in my mind, the rubber-stamp of approval, a sign of high quality. I never even dreamed of being nominated for an Edgar—I thought it was so far beyond my skills that I couldn’t even look at that achievement as possible.

So when it happened—and, that same year, my short story “Spinning” was also nominated under my Rusch name—I just about came undone.

I had achieved the impossible. The mystery field had branded me a success—in terms I understood. I felt...honored. But I also felt like a fraud. I was a science fiction writer who just “dabbled” in mystery. I knew nothing about the field. But the two nominations in the same year under two different names made the success hard (impossible) to discount.

Why would I want to discount success?

Good question, *mes amis*, which I shall leave for Part Two. (What I have just done is what some writers call suspense, but we experts call it withholding information to create false tension. Yep. Guilty. I don’t want to get sidetracked from definitions here.)

The point of my Edgar story is twofold. First, I had achieved success as I defined it but second, I hadn’t even realized that definition lurked within me until the success happened.

Success can ambush you that way. It’s happened to me a few other times as well. My first full-page review in *The New York Times* made me feel like a “real” writer, even though I’d been a full time freelancer for twenty years at that point. What had I been before? A fake writer?

I had the same response to my first ad in *The New Yorker*—there was my name in an ideal spot up front, along with reviews of my book and all kinds of laudatory quotes. Never mind that the ad had no measurable effect on the book’s sales. Never mind that the

ad wasn't a favorable review or even a short story published in their pages. It was the sight of my name in the *New Yorker*.

Obviously, within me, lurks a writer with vast literary pretensions. I mostly ignore her because I don't think of myself as vast or literary or pretentious. But that person is clearly there.

Yet if you catch me off-guard and ask me what success is for me, I'll tell you that I believe a successful writer makes a good living, year in and year out, writing fiction.

I do believe that. It is success. In fact, I'm living that success, and have been for nearly two decades now.

But do I feel successful? No. Because I haven't achieved half of my writing goals. Or if I have, I cheapen the achievement. I've made the *New York Times* Bestseller List more than once, but only with tie-in novels. I've had bestsellers all around the world with my own novels, but never in the United States. I have not had a movie or television show made from one of my stories, although Hollywood has knocked several times and optioned my work. I am not a household name like Nora Roberts or Stephen King.

In fact, the older I get, the more I realize how lucky I am that I didn't become a brand name like Nora Roberts when I was young. Not because I'd be arrogant (I already am; there's no changing that fact), but because so many bestsellers get pigeonholed into writing the same thing over and over again. Some enjoy doing that. Others don't.

I don't want to be pigeonholed at all, but as a younger person, I would have given it my all, and that success—the brand name, the money, the vast readership—would have hurt me.

Ooops, and there we go into another part of the topic, which I won't deal with until a later post. Because we're still on definitions.

Here's the fascinating thing about persona definitions of success: We often formulate them before we understand what success really means.

Twenty years ago, if you had asked me how I defined success, I would have given you my standard "making a good living" answer. If you had pressed me, and asked me what my biggest dream is, I would have told you that it would be to have a career like Stephen King's or like Nora Roberts' (she was still in the early stages of her bestsellerdom, not the phenom she is now).

At the time, I didn't know all the pros and cons of that kind of career. I only knew what I saw from the outside—lots of books on the shelves, books adored by the fans, books that climbed the bestseller lists. The movies didn't thrill me as much as the books did, although a movie deal or two would be nice. And so would the money which, in those days, was "I want to be rich and never have to work again" money.

In those days, I did not know that vast sums of money required vast amount of money management. I did not know the downside to fame (like the struggle to maintain some kind—any kind—of privacy). I didn't know that writers like Stephen King (back then) or Dan Brown (right now) can cause entire publishing houses to have a good or a bad year just by releasing a book.

I didn't understand the pressure.

I simply thought that a brand name bestseller had a damn cushy life of writing whatever she wanted and getting it published and then sitting on top of her pile of money. And I thought I wanted that.

Yet I heard myself questioning things. Like the “never have to work again” part of my old friend’s quip. Um...but I like writing. I want to continue working. So what would happen if I became rich and never “had” to work again? Would I quit? Would I feel required to quit?

Would I be greedy if I continued to work while being filthy rich?

Such questions. Questions that I did not then have the answer to.

I do now. You can probably tell from all the various freelancer posts that I’m an avid researcher. So I’ve researched those early dreams and discovered that I don’t want some of them. Money, yes, of course. Brand name status? (shrug) If it happens, it happens. It’s no longer a goal. *The New York Times* Bestseller List? Yes, at least once with my own book before I die. And so on.

I have worked very hard to not only define what success means to me, but to understand what it is I’m hoping for. And even then, I know I’ve missed a few things.

For example, this summer, Neil Gaiman accepted the Newberry Award for his wonderful novel *Graveyard Book*. On Twitter, he posted a picture of the ceremony where he got the medal and where he had to give a speech.

The picture (from Neil’s place on the dais) was of a typical hotel ballroom, filled with earnest-looking faces looking up at him over plates of rubber chicken.

Mercy me, I’d always pictured the Newberry Award Ceremony at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, filled with lots of beautiful people in spectacular designer gowns. I was actually disappointed to see that hotel ballroom filled with well-dressed but non-glam people.

It took me a day or so to figure out where I had gotten that impression. My sister Sandy gave me books every year for Christmas and my birthday. As I grew up, I got Newberry Award winners at least once, sometimes twice a year.

The only awards ceremony I had ever seen as a child was the Academy Awards, which my mother watched faithfully each March. The only school night that I was allowed to stay up until midnight was Oscar Night.

So, to child-me, all awards ceremonies took place in pavilions with lots of cameras and lots of pretty well dressed people. And my subconscious had held onto that image of the Newberry awards (which was the only book award my child-self had ever heard of) for more than forty years.

See how the definitions of success get corrupted? Had it been me getting that award before I came to my adult senses and remembered what an extreme honor it is, I would have been momentarily disappointed by that ballroom. Note that I did not expect the Edgars to be in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Nor did I expect it of the Hugos or the Ritas. Just the Newberry, because that definition got set long before I understood the way the world really works.

I’m not done with definitions yet, and I’m already farther into this post than I wanted to be. So next week’s post will expand a bit on definitions before I stop withholding information about some of the topics I’ve touched on above.

As you prepare for next week’s post, see if you can figure out what your superficial definitions of success are and what your lofty secret never-tell-a-soul definitions of success are.

You might be surprised,

Kristine Kathryn Rusch—<http://www.kristinekathrynrusch.com>
###

CRAFT

11. What's Your Premise?

By Alexandra Sokoloff

<http://www.alexandrasokoloff.com>

So I was at some author event the other night and doing the chat thing with people at the pre-dinner cocktail party and found myself in conversation with an aspiring author who had just finished a book, and naturally I asked, “What’s your book about?”

And she said—“Oh, I can’t really describe it in a few sentences— there’s just so much going on in it.”

WRONG ANSWER.

The time to know what your book is about is before you start it, and you damn well better know what it’s about by the time it’s finished and people, like, oh, you know - agents and editors, are asking you what it’s about.

And here’s another tip—when people ask you what your book is about, the answer is not “War” or “Love” or “Betrayal”, even though your book might be about one or all of those things. Those words don’t distinguish YOUR book from any of the millions of books about those things.

When people ask you what your book is about, what they are really asking is—“What’s the premise?” In other words, “What’s the story line in one easily understandable sentence?”

That one sentence is also referred to as a “logline” (in Hollywood) or “the elevator pitch” (in publishing) or “the *TV Guide* pitch” – it all means the same thing.

That sentence really should give you a sense of the entire story: the character of the protagonist, the character of the antagonist, the conflict, the setting, the tone, the genre. And—it should make whoever hears it want to read the book. Preferably immediately. It should make the person you tell it to light up and say—“Ooh, that sounds great!” And “Where do I buy it?”

Writing a premise sentence is a bit of an art, but it’s a critical art for authors, and screenwriters, and playwrights. You need to do this well to sell a book, to pitch a movie, to apply for a grant. You will need to do it well when your agent, and your publicist, and the sales department of your publishing house, and the reference librarian, and the Sisters in Crime books in print catalogue editor ask you for a one-sentence book description, or jacket copy, or ad copy. You will use that sentence over and over and over again in radio and TV interviews, on panels, and in bookstores (over and over and OVER again) when potential readers ask you, “So what’s your book about?” and you have about one minute to get them hooked enough to buy the book.

And even before all that, the premise is the map of your book when you’re writing it.

So what are some examples of premise lines?

Name these books:

-When a great white shark starts attacking beachgoers in a coastal town during high tourist season, a water-phobic Sheriff must assemble a team to hunt it down before it kills again.

-A young female FBI trainee must barter personal information with an imprisoned psychopathic genius in order to catch a serial killer who is capturing and killing young women for their skins.

-A treasure-hunting archeologist races over the globe to find the legendary Lost Ark of the Covenant before Hitler's minions can acquire and use it to supernaturally power the Nazi army.

Notice how all of these premises contain a defined protagonist, a powerful antagonist, a sense of the setting, conflict and stakes, and a sense of how the action will play out. Another interesting thing about these premises is that in all three, the protagonists are up against forces that seem much bigger than the protagonist.

Here's my premise for *The Harrowing*:

Five troubled college students left alone on their isolated campus over the long Thanksgiving break confront their own demons and a mysterious presence—that may or may not be real.

I wrote that sentence to quickly convey all the elements I want to get across about this book.

Who's the story about? Five college kids, and "alone" and "troubled" characterize them in a couple of words. Not only are they alone and troubled, they have personal demons. What's the setting? An isolated college campus, and it's Thanksgiving—fall, going on winter. Bleak, spooky. Plus—if it's Thanksgiving, why are they on campus instead of home with their families?

Who's the antagonist? A mysterious presence. What's the conflict? It's inner and outer—it will be the kids against themselves, and also against this mysterious presence. What are the stakes? Well, not so clear, but there's a sense of danger involved with any mysterious presence.

And there are a lot of clues to the genre—sounds like something supernatural's going on, but there's also a sense that it's psychological—because the kids are troubled and this presence may or may not be real. There's a sense of danger, possibly on several levels.

The best way to learn how to write a good premise is to practice. Make a list of ten books and films that are in the same genre as your book or script—preferably successful—or that you wish you had written! Now for each story, write a one-sentence premise that contains all these story elements: protagonist, antagonist, conflict, stakes, setting, atmosphere and genre.

If you need a lot of examples all at once, pick up a copy of the *TV Guide*, or click through the descriptions of movies on your TiVo. Those aren't necessarily the best written premises, but they do get the point across, and it will get you thinking about stories in brief.

And now that you're an expert—go for it. Write yours.

Alexandra Sokoloff—<http://www.alexandrasokoloff.com>

###

12. YOU, TOO, CAN RESEARCH

By Gayle Lynds

www.gaylelynds.com

I'm often asked how I research my novels. Much of research is intuitive, but here's a short trip into this addictive, mysterious realm of the unknown.

The common wisdom is that only about one percent of research ends up in a novel. That's a very small fraction, but my experience is it's actually far less—closer to a tenth of a percent, even when the research involves a plot line. For instance my new novel, *The Book of Spies*, has a critical historical element—the lost library of Ivan the Terrible—that required intense research.

I first read about this fabulous collection of illuminated manuscripts twenty years ago in *The Los Angeles Times* and was instantly intrigued. After all, Ivan's remarkable library had allegedly been the heart of the Byzantine Empire's grand imperial collection and contained priceless works dating back millennia to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Embedded with precious jewels, the books were bound in glittering gold. As I read that, I gave the collection a name—the "Library of Gold." Tragically, it vanished at Ivan's death, in 1584.

My problem was I couldn't see a way to use any of this in a contemporary spy story. But at the same time I was so interested I began collecting clippings that were even tangentially related, when I came across them in other research.

Then finally, after nearly two decades, the constant drumbeat of this intriguing subject meshed with an idea I had for a modern tale. I had a way to use the Library of Gold.

Excited, I began serious research. There is no actual name for the library, so I Googled "Ivan the Terrible," "lost library," "lost books," "hidden library." You get the idea. I waded through thousands of mentions, most of them irrelevant. Still, there were perhaps twenty pieces I printed out, read, and filed. I also needed to understand the environment in which the library had been assembled in Constantinople, how and why it had ended up in primitive Old Moscow, what it had looked like, where it had been located there, and why it had disappeared at Ivan's death. More Googling.

Meanwhile, I was buying books on such subjects as Ivan the Terrible, burned books, lost libraries, and the art of collecting books. In my reading, I discovered gems—Sigmund Freud once wrote he found book collecting an addiction second only to nicotine. That's quite an admission from the world's most famous shrink.

Of course I investigated the calligraphy, inks, paints, and book binding of illuminated manuscripts through the ages, too. As you can imagine one question led to another, and then to a third, and then to a fortieth. I was cutting out articles from newspapers and magazines on almost a daily basis.

Are you getting tired? I wasn't. The secret to research is to be fascinated by your subject, and I was truly fascinated. And if the writer is fascinated, chances are good he or she will be able to pass that compelling feeling on to readers.

I've always looked upon research as an opportunity to satisfy my curiosity. But the other side of the coin is one must not be so caught up in it that one never gets the book written. What happens to me is I finally feel immersed—and overwhelmed. That's

when I began writing *The Book of Spies*, never particularly certain what I would need. But because I had kept my files orderly and my research books stacked close to me, on the floor around my desk, I was able to work well. And yes, I still had to stop now and then to do more research, but nothing on the scale as before, and I enjoyed every moment of it.

Gayle Lynds—<http://www.gaylelynds.com>
###

13. A WRITER'S MANTRA

By J.A. Konrath

<http://www.jakonrath.com>

1. It is inevitable, if I keep trying, that someday I'll be published. A professional is an amateur who didn't quit.

2. I won't take rejection personally. Each rejection is one step closer to publication. Most rejections have nothing to do with how good the writing is.

3. I will have faith in my work, but always remain open to suggestion and change.

4. I will keep writing, keep submitting, keep marketing, and never surrender.

Ultimately, getting published rests squarely on one person's shoulders—mine.

SEVEN TIPS FOR GETTING INTO PRINT

1. Always listen to industry pros; even if they wind up being wrong, you'll learn from the experience.

2. Seek criticism, not praise. Knowing what's wrong will help you improve.

3. Be ready and willing to rewrite and edit, a lot.

4. Read what's currently selling.

5. Don't take rejection personally. This is a business, so be businesslike.

6. Make sure the Work is free from typos, spelling errors, and formatting problems.

7. Never give up..

FIVE WAYS TO LOOK LIKE A PRO

1. Have your own website. The publishing business is becoming increasingly internet dependant. Editors spend a lot of time online. A good looking homepage, with a bio, writing samples, and contact information, is a cheap and easy way to get noticed.

2. Roll with the punches. If an editor suggests changing something, go with it. Always. This is a business, and should be treated like one. Pros don't let their egos interfere with their work.

3. Be personable. Editors and agents don't want to work with someone who isn't enjoyable to be around. Writers who are easily upset, depressed, anxious, or overly enthusiastic don't last very long in this business.

4. Make deadlines. Always. No excuses. If you're always early, you'll be loved for it.

5. Act professional. Make sure you have business cards and letterhead, a fax machine, an email address, and an office phone. I answer my phone, "J.A. Konrath." It's much more effective than "Hello?"

STAYING ON TRACK

1. Develop a routine. Writing every day isn't necessary, but you should regularly schedule time to write, and stick to that schedule.
2. Set writing goals. Daily. Weekly. Monthly. Yearly. Reward yourself when you reach these goals.
3. Unplug the internet while you're writing.
4. Spend an equal amount of time on self-promotion as you do on writing. This means making contacts, creating a website, attending conferences, and submitting short stories. Short stories pay poorly, but they're extremely important for getting your name out there. Try to send out a few every month.
5. Get feedback. It's tough to write in a vacuum. As writers, we need readers. Family, friends, peers. Luxuriate in the praise, but pay close attention to the criticism-- what isn't working is often more important than what is working
6. If you get a story or a novel rejected over and over again, MOVE ON. There's no conspiracy keeping you from getting published. You've been rejected because your book isn't good enough, or it doesn't seem profitable to the publisher. Get over it and write something else.

J.A. Konrath—<http://www.jakonrath.com>
###

14. TYPES OF WRITERS AND WRITING PROFESSIONS

By **Jonathan Maberry**

<http://www.jonathanmaberry.com>

Acquisitions Editor

Most often associated with book publishers, an acquisitions editor supervises the process of finding potential writers to write for their publisher. They often are in charge of negotiations with the writer.

Advertising Writer

See copywriter

Agent's Assistant

An agent's assistant does whatever tasks need to be done for a literary or talent agent. They often act as manuscript readers for an agent, who generally receives far more manuscripts than they have time to read.

Assistant Editor

Serves under the managing editor or editor in chief. Generally takes over some of their duties, such as managing writers or making story assignments. Often they are assigned a specific section within a publication or broadcast.

Author

An author is what people classically think of when they think of writers. An author writes books. These books can be fiction or non-fiction.

Columnist

The writer of an ongoing, generally scheduled feature for a publication. They may also syndicate their articles to multiple publications.

Copy Clerk

See editorial assistant

Copy Editor

A copy editor prepares text for publication. They proofread articles and often act as fact-checkers as well.

Copywriter

A copywriter writes advertising and product descriptions (know collectively as copy) for print and online catalogs, direct mailings and so forth.

Critic

See reviewer

Editor-in-Chief

Editor in charge of the overall content and production of a publication.

Editorial Aid

The editorial aid is similar to an editorial assistant, but generally with even less status. They mainly run errands.

Editorial Assistant

An editorial assistant provides administrative support for editors and associate editor and other editorial staff. They often perform scheduling, filing, note taking, and other administrative tasks.

Editorial Secretary

See editorial assistant

English as a Second Language (ESL) Instructor

ESL instructors teach the basic or advanced skills of speaking and writing in English to students who did not learn English originally. They often work in foreign countries.

English Teacher

An English teacher generally works with high school or junior high school classes to teach them English grammar and writing.

Fact Checker

See researcher

Gag Writer

A writer for cartoonists, comedians or reviews who writes humor, generally in short form.

Ghostwriter

A ghostwriter is employed to write on behalf of another person and give the authorship credit to that other person.

Grant Writer

A grant writer researches and responds to grant opportunities for an organization, often a non-profit one. Grant proposals must often adhere to strict rules spelled out by the organization providing the grant.

Indexer

An indexer analyzes the text of a book or other published materials and creates an alphabetized or otherwise organized list of key terms and their locations.

Journalist

A writer who collects, writes, edits, and presents news or news articles for the Internet, magazines, radio, television and newspapers. A journalist may or may not be a permanent employee of a publication or media outlet.

Joke Writer

See gag writer.

Lecturer

See speaker

Literary Agent

A literary agent represents an author in their dealings with publishers. It is their job to get a manuscript read and sought after by the right people.

Managing Editor

A managing editor administers and directs the editorial activities of a magazine, newspaper, book publisher or other media outlet.

Manuscript Evaluator

See manuscript reader

Manuscript Reader

A manuscript reader reviews submissions from writers. Generally it is their job to weed out less suitable work and pass on the best of the submissions to an editor such as an acquisitions editor.

Monologist

Much like a storyteller, this person writes and then performs an anecdote or series of anecdotes. Monologist is considered a more prestigious title than storyteller. And is usually applied to people who work with an adult audience.

Press Agent

See Publicist

Production Editor

A production editor often has duties similar to that of a copyeditor, but they are focused more on putting the article into its printed form, often using page design packages such as FrameMaker, PageMaker, or Quark Express.

Public Relations Writer

A public relations (PR) writer creates materials that establish and promote a business or other entities' image and relationship with the public.

Publicist

A publicist's job is half public relations and half advertising. A publicist promotes an individual, business, or group. They arrange for and often write newspaper articles, and schedule interviews, lectures, or other public appearances. They may also arrange for paid advertising if the client desires it.

Publicity Writer

See Publicist

Publisher

The person in charge, often the owner, of a publication. It is their job to oversee the preparation and distribution of printed material for public sale such as books, magazines, and newspapers. They also tend to set editorial policy, often with the aid of an editorial board.

Reading Tutor

A reading tutor teaches reading skills to young or underdeveloped readers.

Researcher

A researcher must provide or confirm information for published materials written by other people. They do not receive writing credits for their work.

Resume Writer

A resume writer works with job seekers to create resumes, cover letters and other materials that will help them find a job.

Reviewer

A writer who evaluates the quality of things such as books, films, food, art or theater.

Scriptwriter (Business)

A business scriptwriter writes sales scripts and presentations.

Scriptwriter (TV, Film, Radio, Theater)

A scriptwriter writes copy to be used by an announcer, performer, or director in a film or broadcast.

Speaker

A speaker lectures on a topic or series of topic for an audience, often in an educational or motivational capacity.

Speechwriter

A speechwriter writes presentations, lectures, and speeches for other people.

Staff Writer

A writer employed by a business, publication, or broadcaster to write articles and rewrite press releases or other information.

Storyteller

A storyteller is a performer who generally writes and then performs aloud the telling of a story. This is often associated with children's tales. When the performance is mainly for adults the performers are generally called "monologists."

Technical Editor

A technical editor reviews the work of technical writers or technical professionals to make sure it is accurate from a technical, legal, and editing standpoint.

Technical Writer

A technical writer analyzes and writes about specialized subjects such as computers, engineering, science, medicine and law.

Translator

A translator rewrites in one or more languages materials originally created in a different language.

Writing Consultant

A writing consultant is a sort of editor-for-hire that examines someone's writing for ways that it can be improved upon.

Writing Instructor

A writing instructor generally works at the college level but without tenure. They are hired to teach one or more writing classes that are generally focused on composition or grammar.

Writing Professor

A writing professor is a tenured instructor who has generally been published many times. They are often required to teach only two or three classes a semester and spend the rest of their time writing new materials for publication and mentoring students.

Writing Tutor

A writing tutor works individually with another person to improve their writing. Unlike a writing consultant, the writing tutor focuses on a person's general writing skill rather than a specific piece of writing.

Jonathan Maberry—<http://www.jonathanmaberry.com>

####

15. Writing Your First Novel

By Brandon Massey

<http://www.brandonmassey.com>

Here's an important fiction writing tip for you: your first novel will probably be awful. That may seem like a harsh message for me to deliver, but the sooner you accept that I am 99 percent correct on this, the better off you'll be.

Hey, why are you saying this about my novel? I can hear you saying. You don't know me, Brandon—I've got talent to burn. Just you wait and see, I'm gonna give Stephen King a run for his money.

Really? I've got a newsflash for you: Stephen King wrote five manuscripts before he penned one that was good enough to publish.

It took King so long because when he wrote those first few books, he was still learning the fundamentals of the craft. Just as you, my friend, ought to do.

(All of us, even those of us with many books in print, are still learning. Anyone who says he knows everything there is to know about writing is either lying, or a fool.)

Approach your first novel as a learning experience, not as your surefire plan to become rich and famous. Don't even think about hitting a bestseller list. (Well, dreaming about it is okay, but don't get carried away.) The odds of you writing a bestseller your first time out of the gate are so astronomical that you'd be better off playing the lottery.

Instead, focus your time and efforts on learning the craft. View your first novel as a training ground, your opportunity to hone your ability to dramatize a story, bring characters to life, paint backgrounds, develop your prose, and the thousand other things you need to be able to do in order to write well.

And you must finish the manuscript. I can't tell you how many people I meet who say they've had a book in progress for years. But guess what? No one cares about an unfinished story. Of all the lessons that are essential to your future as a fiction writer, learning how to finish what you've begun is one of the most critical.

Finishing a story requires perseverance, a dogged determination to gut it out and plow through it, even when—especially when—you feel it isn't going well. When you're depressed about the story, when you're convinced that it's garbage, resist the temptation to throw it away. Keep going, hammering away until you reach the end.

Back to Stephen King. When he was working on *Carrie*, his first published novel, he hit a rough spot and threw it in the trash. His wife came home, saw the book in the wastebasket, took it out, and started reading it. She liked what she read and encouraged him to finish.

He listened to his wife. *Carrie* went on to earn him a gigantic sum of money and was adapted into a successful film. The rest is history.

None of that would have happened if King had given up on the manuscript. So, finish it. Yes, it will probably be bad, because you are still learning the ropes, but that's okay. You'll know a lot more about novel writing than you did before.

But. . . let's say that you think I'm wrong about the quality of your story and are convinced that it's good. Should you try to get it published?

Sure, go ahead. You may be one of those exceedingly rare authors who can publish his/her maiden effort. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, you know?

But don't count on it. Ray Bradbury once said that you have to write a million words of fiction in order to become proficient. Your first manuscript, if it ended at a hundred thousand words or so, is just ten percent of that. You have a lot of work ahead of you.

But your journey has begun.

Brandon Massey—<http://www.brandonmassey.com>
####

16. Seven Bad Habits of Highly Ineffective Writers **By Scott Nicholson** **<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>**

While writing, editing, representing, and publishing are all highly subjective skills, or even “arts” depending on your definition, repeated exposure to certain unsuccessful traits make them easy to identify. In short, it’s much easier to find what is failing rather than explain what makes a piece of writing succeed.

After working as a freelance editor for several years and logging a decade as a journalist and copy editor, I’ve found a number of minor problems that sap vitality from an otherwise compelling story. Some writers even believe those small errors will not hurt their manuscript’s chances, not realizing they are competing with hundreds or thousands of similar manuscripts. Careful editing is especially important in an era when editors spend more time meeting with the sales staff than scrawling notes in red ink. Whether you carefully pore over your manuscript on your own or trust someone else with the task, the ultimate goal is to have a manuscript that’s as flawless as possible.

In the manuscripts I’ve edited, I have encountered a number of recurring practical errors that make even a blockbuster story lose a little luster.

1. Comma usage. The convention of serial commas, as made famous in the book title *Eats, Shoots, And Leaves* appears to be undergoing a change, as some small publishers are now accepting the Associated Press style common in newspapers and magazines (where the preceding example would be published as “Eats, Shoots and Leaves.”) While I use Strunk & White’s *The Elements of Style* as my bible, even publishers that stray from long-established rules still want consistency, so pick a horse and ride it.

Understand the function of clauses, as they are one of the basic building blocks of sentence structure. If you insert a clause in the middle of a sentence and start off with a

comma, you might need another comma to close off the phrase. Don't simply throw in a comma because you feel a sentence is running long or if you want a natural pause in the middle. Rewrite the sentence if necessary. Better yet, learn the simple rules of commas.

2. He said, she said. Some writers avoid using a character's name too often because it might seem unnatural, but clarity is the ultimate goal of all good writing. A sentence like "He went for his gun, but he shot him first" could have several different interpretations, even if only two male characters are involved. Crooked Tom could be trying to steal Johnny Cop's gun or Crooked Tom could be reaching for his own gun, and either could be squeezing off the first shot. If there are three characters in this scene, you'd really have a circus. "Crooked Tom went for his gun, but Johnny Cop shot Innocent Abe first" is clearer, even if the paragraph is already littered with their names. You don't want your reader to pause and figure out which "he" is which. If your reader pauses too often, she is soon likely to stop altogether.

3. Wry Saidisms. There's absolutely nothing wrong with using "said" over and over, and readers are trained to accept the word as easily as they do standard punctuation. You can get away with a character's occasionally "whining" or "demanding," but use them as spice and save them for moments when you need a little extra punch. Avoid "stating" altogether, as it is a hallmark of badly written press releases, and the word only applies to a formal statement such as one given in authority or for a police report. "Whispering" and "shouting" are fine, because they are as much action as stage direction. If you insist on someone hissing a line, make sure it contains at least one sibilance, or "S" sound.

"Ly" adverbs slow down the sentence and often foil the writer's intent. For example, "Bill quickly crossed the room" is slower than "Bill crossed the room," and the word "suddenly" is its own oxymoron. Such adverbs are especially cumbersome in dialogue tags. Indeed, they often become comical, as popularized in Tom Swifties such as "'You're going against the grain,' he said wryly" or "'The sun is out,' he observed brightly."

4. Overexcitement! Hoard your exclamation points and only dole them out when necessary. Some preach avoiding them altogether and instead relying on dynamic writing to convey the excitement. In general, they can be effective when used sparingly in dialogue, but they quickly become boring when overused and should rarely if ever conclude an action sentence. Generally, dependence on exclamation points indicates a lack of power in your action sentences.

Adding a bit of visual oomph or dialogue tag is a better choice: "'Look out,' he shouted, diving for cover as bullets zinged overhead." The word "shouted" does the work of the exclamation point, though if you are in the book's climax or a particularly brisk and intense scene, then one or two can do the work of unnecessary words, too. In this case, I'd let "Look out!" slide, assuming exclamation points weren't already hopping all over the page like drunk celebrities begging for tabloid coverage. Anyone using two or more exclamation points together will not only be rejected but taken out and shot!!!

5. Heady confusion. Point of view is one of the fundamental keys to good fiction writing. Stories that keep a clear point of view immediately move themselves to the front of the class or the slush pile. Simply put, find out who is telling the story and stick with that character until there's a clear shift to another point of view. In third-person limited viewpoint, make sure the character doesn't "know" things happening outside her range of

perception. Make sure the character isn't experiencing the thoughts of another character unless one of them has ESP.

Omniscient viewpoint gives you the authorial power of God, knowing all and seeing all, but it can be a bit aloof and less successful at emotionally engaging the reader. If using first-person viewpoint, then you must be doubly sure you're limited to your "I" character's thoughts and sensations. Second-person is a bit artificial and calls attention to itself but can be effective if that's what you're after. Mixing first, second, third, and omniscient viewpoints can be hazardous to your reader's (and your career's) health.

6. Keeping Your Distance. Newer writers tend to rely on "He saw," "He felt," "He smelled," "He tasted," or "He heard" instead of just letting the actions or sensations occur. It shows a lack of confidence. If you have done a good job of securing your character viewpoint, then when that stack of dishes clatters to the ground, the reader knows who hears the smash. Like any mechanism, it has a time and place, but several of these in the same paragraph really sap the energy: "He felt that what he heard was an elephant that sounded like it was in the jungle." Better: "An elephant trumpeted in the distant jungle." The more immediate the imagery, the more powerful.

7. Slow Death. Too many useless mannerisms, bits of business or trivia, and descriptions can bog your tale down right out of the starting gate. While the color of someone's coat can be a revealing detail, make sure there's a reason for its inclusion, and beware stacking up lots of physical description before the reader has a chance to build her own image. The reader's less likely to care that Susan is of medium build with brown eyes and auburn hair than the fact that Susan is carrying a bouquet of wilted flowers, has wet mascara runs, and is missing one earring.

Whatever you do, don't have a character enter a room waving a cigarette, inhaling between every two lines of dialogue, flicking ashes, lighting another, and repeating until the scene is mercifully expired from emphysema. The same goes for meals: avoid them just as you would avoid showing a character going to the bathroom. Unless there is a plot purpose or intriguing piece of character development at stake, let that type of business take place offstage or mention it in passing.

Now for the final bad habit of unsuccessful writers, one which makes all the above meaningless: the habit of not writing. In my career, I've only seen two kinds of writers. Those who succeed and those who quit. Be one of those who succeed.

Scott Nicholson—<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>

###

17. Morrell's Point of View

By David J. Montgomery

<http://www.davidjmontgomery.com>

I attended a CraftFest panel as part of the warm up for ThrillerFest. Thriller writer David Morrell talked about point of view, that element of the craft that has bedeviled so many writers.

David Morrell has been in the business for 37 years, so he knows a thing or two about writing. You probably know who he is. (I will briefly note that in addition to be an

enormously successful writer of thrillers, David was also a professor of American Literature at the University of Iowa for many years.)

What follows are David's thoughts, which I hastily scribbled down. I only captured the basic details of what he said and not much of the flavor. (He accompanied his discussion with many examples drawn from literature, including an impressive number of memorized quotes.) POV seems like a basic aspect of writing, but it's amazing how many authors still get it wrong.

Point of View

The decision of which POV to use when writing a novel is one of the most important a writer can make. POV is one of the fundamental tools of writing and must be chosen wisely. Regardless of which POV you choose, you should do so deliberately, knowing why you chose it and what you're doing with it. The wrong choice of POV can doom a project.

First Person:

Written from the POV of the narrator, in the "I" form.

When used properly, the first person is "a glory." But alas, it is usually not used properly.

First-person is especially popular with new writers, because it seems so easy -- you just write like you're talking, right? Wrong. That's the pitfall. If you write like you talk, like you're telling a story orally, your writing will probably fail.

The first person makes it easy for writers to fall into common mistakes:

It's wordy and rambling (just like the stories we tell orally)

It's too easy to tell, not show

It tends to rely almost exclusively on the sense of sight, leading to writing that is flat and one-dimensional

Morrell notes: It is not the writer's job to make the reader see what is going on, but to make the reader feel what is going on.

It's usually logically inconsistent—Why is this narrator taking the time to sit down and pen a 300-page account of his/her life. Does that make sense?

Some of Morrell's favorite books (*Farewell to Arms*, *Rogue Male*, *The Great Gatsby*) are in the first person, but if you're going to do it, you'd better have a damn good reason and you'd better know what you're doing.

To paraphrase Henry James, it's a "trap for the unwary."

However, if you can pull it off, it can be brilliant.

Third Person Omniscient

The all-knowing voice, a story told from a god-like perspective.

Classic example: Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* ("It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.")

A style of storytelling that takes a historical perspective—this is what happened, this is what people thought and felt and did.

This was the standard form for much of the 19th century.

It tends to lead to a story that is slow; not immediate. The story is told rather than being dramatized. Thus it can be hard for the modern reader to appreciate.

Today, it is old-fashioned and seldom used except in parody.

Second Person

The "you" tense. (e.g., "You walk down the street, not knowing what you're going to find around the corner.")

Largely experimental and only used for a very specific kind of story.

Used by McInerney in *Bright Lights, Big City* to show the character's drug-addled state.

Third Person Limited

Told through one character's viewpoint, seeing just what that character sees and thinking just what s/he thinks.

Can switch POV away from that character, but the story should only be told through one character's viewpoint at a time.

The POV usually breaks between chapters, but can be done within chapters. However, the writer should give the reader a visual indication that POV is being changed—just skip down a few lines or give some other form of break.

Third person limited is the most-often-used POV and the one that, by default, is the best choice for most stories.

[I'm sure David had more to say on this topic, but he ran out of time.]

Bottom line: In Morrell's judgment, most first-person novels could be improved by a shift to the third person. First person is very hard to do—harder than third person limited—and should only be done with great care by the writer, and only when the story demands it. Otherwise, especially for new writers, they're probably better off going with third person.

David J. Montgomery—<http://www.davidjmontgomery.com>

###

18. What's In A Name?

By Scott Nicholson

<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>

Shakespeare said, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Gertrude Stein said, "A rose is a rose is a rose." John Davidson said, "O which is the last rose? A blossom of no name." An adolescent Scott Nicholson once wrote a snarky line in a wretched poem that went "A rose is a rose is a risen."

So we could assume we could name every character "Rose" and it would make no difference. Tokyo Rose would be the same as Emily Rose, and *Rose Red* and *Rose Madder* could be interchangeable titles in works by Stephen King. The character of "Rose" in the world's most popular movie, "Titanic," could have been "Sue," and Johnny Cash's song "A Boy Named Sue" could have been called "A Boy Named Rose" and theoretically the universe would have continued expanding intact.

But naming a character "Rose" doesn't connote blandness or homogeneity. The word comes loaded with a number of associations: a flower notoriously challenging for the home gardener; a pinkish-red color in the box of Crayolas; a food source rich in Vitamin C; Shakespeare's quote; an oft-used symbol for the fleeting and ephemeral nature of love; and all the

Roses you have personally known, as well as all the fictional Roses we encounter, whether the name is first or last.

Names do matter, and one of the quickest ways that fiction spoils itself is by having an unbelievable character. You don't want the name to throw up a speed bump for the reader. The name should fit, go unnoticed and therefore easily accepted, or else be an intentional ploy to draw attention. These last can be tiresome: the big biker named "Tiny," the pathetic loser called "Romeo," etc. The name doesn't have to do all of the work of character building, but it's an important part of the package deal.

Uncommon names are fairly common, as evidenced by a quick thumbing through your local phone book. A thirty-second scan of mine reveals Rollin Weary, Edward Wax, Oletta Waycaster, Webb Weatherman, and Forest Weaver. These real names would probably cause your reader to pause upon initial encounter. This isn't necessarily bad, but even real names can be loaded. If your fictional Edward Wax is a candle maker or your Webb Weatherman is a meteorologist, you'd better be writing comedy or satire.

One of the most common mistakes is making your character name sound too "namey." In other words, the name sounds like that of a fictional character instead of a real person. For all my admiration of Dean Koontz, his character names sometimes sound artificial, as if churned out by some "random character generator" (Jimmy Tock, Junior Cain, Aelfric Manheim, Martin Stillwater, Harry Lyon, Joanna Rand). However, he is the only writer skilled enough to name a serious character "Odd Thomas" and get away with it.

A fanciful name, even if memorable, can turn your readers away. My first encounter with Kurt Vonnegut was through his short story "Harrison Bergeron," in which the "bad guy" is a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. I was a little too young to grasp the subtleties of Vonnegut's satire, and the name annoyed me so much that I put off reading his work again for years. Now I understand what he was doing, and I still remember that name though I haven't read the story since.

The sound of the name adds tone to the character. While a stone-faced character might well be called Stony, he's probably more interesting if he's a Chuck or Dirk, which are both punchy, "hard" names (*Mystery Science Theater* fans may remember "Biff McLargehuge"). A Richard is different from a Dick is different from a Richie is different from a Ricardo. Sue is not Suzannah, Suzie, or Susan. We expect an appliance repairman to be named Danny, not Danforth, or Fred instead of Frederick. An attorney or stockbroker will more likely be Charles than Charlie, or Lawrence instead of Larry. We'd probably be more comforted to have a doctor named Eleanor instead of Muffy, or an airline pilot named Virginia rather than Brittany.

A character's name is often the first and most vital clue to a character's ethnicity, which may or may not be important to the story. Vinnie, Su, Ian, Darshan, Mohammed, Yoruba, Yasmine, and Felicia are probably going to create reader expectations. Names also carry generational weight: we envision Blanche and Vivian as older, more serious people than we do Dakota, Madison, or Mackenzie.

On the other hand, just as stereotypes are often full of holes in real life, you can use expectations in a delightful turn of the tables. Instead of a truck driver named Mac, he can be Milton, a sociologist who enjoys traveling. Your New York cabbie doesn't have to be Armaan, who may or may not be a terrorist; he can be Orlando, studying acting in

night school. Just make sure the people, and the motivations that propel them through the plot, are valid.

Villains are in their own special nominal class. Dracula is probably the perfect example. It's practically impossible to pronounce without sinister implications. Freddie Krueger, Darth Vader, and Gollum are fraught with darkness. Stephen King shines at this: Leland Gaunt, Randall Flagg, George Stark (actually a pseudonym for writer Donald Westlake), Percy Wetmore, and probably the best one of all, "It."

Of course, King also gets away with a character having the ubiquitous moniker "John Smith," but even this name choice serves a purpose, because King's protagonist in *The Dead Zone* is an everyman Christ figure. You probably don't want to call your soul-stealing, heart-munching bad guy "Bradley Flowers," though you might sneak that in as a mild-mannered, Walter Mitty-type serial killer. Real-life killers like Charles Starkweather and Richard Speck sound ominous, while other killers like Albert Fish and Ted Bundy sound like somebody's kindly uncle, so your character names, like all other elements of your fiction, have to be more real than reality.

Female names offer their own opportunities for striking gold or striking out. "Thelma and Louise" are two names that, to me, conjure up images of rough, trailer-trash women (I have an aunt named Louise, so that obviously colors my association). In the movie, they become self-reliant while simultaneously depending on each other. Though they are doomed, they are also strong survivors. I don't think it would have worked if the characters were "Cissie and Amber." Save that for the Cameron Diaz and Reese Witherspoon road movie.

In the 1950's James Bond world, you could get away with naming a character "Pussy Galore," a lesbian who can be "cured" into heterosexuality by the right hired gun. That won't work today, not even in genre fiction. Aside from the fact that the great majority of book purchasers are female, you don't want to look stupid. Janet Evanovich's cute, perky, yet often hapless bounty hunter is named Stephanie Plum, while Kathy Reich's tougher and darker-edged forensic anthropologist is called Temperance (Tempe) Brennan. You can tell just by the protagonists' names that the two series will have different tones.

A recent trend in genre novels is the name-dropping of other writers. This immediately pulls me out of the story, reminds me I am staring at the fabricated sentences of an actual human being, and I have to fight past the "Nudge, nudge, wink, wink" if I bother continuing at all. A manuscript I recently read had a pair of juvenile delinquents named "Anthony Bates" and "Norman Perkins." As if this wasn't painfully obvious enough, after the introduction the characters repeatedly refer to one another as Norm and Tony. I don't think the association is worth the cost. If it's plainly an homage or tribute, then it's fine, but it's already hard enough to keep the reader in a state of suspended disbelief. Save that kind of thing for the acknowledgements.

So where do you get names? You can turn to the phone book, but you'll want to mix and match first and last names so you don't inadvertently create a character that's too close to home for some real person you've never met and who might be litigious. I once encountered a real person who had the same two names as one of my fictional characters, and it gave me pause. Using local surnames can add authenticity if your fiction is set in the area where you live. I often scour the obituaries because I use a lot of rural characters with long local lineages. "Baby name" books are great resources, especially if you have

multicultural characters, though you won't always find help with surnames. The Internet is an obvious and easy tool, and don't forget your own imagination.

Once you decide on a name, you can always change it later, though having the name will help you start building the character in your mind. Whichever name you choose, sound it out, and make sure you want it in your story. See if it matches the character and his or her personality and, more importantly, actions. Especially if it's the protagonist, choose a name that can hold up for an entire story, book, or even a series.

While the name you bestow on your character may not be as important as the name you give your child, in some ways your fiction is just as much an offspring of your life as is your genetic contribution. Take it seriously, and make it matter.

Scott Nicholson—<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>
####

19. The Three-Act Structure in Storytelling

By Jonathan Maberry

<http://www.jonathanmaberry.com>

All stories are told in three acts, whether it's a joke, a campfire tale, a novel, or Shakespeare. The ancient Greeks figured that out while they were laying the foundations of all storytelling, on or off the stage.

Sure, there may be many act breaks written into a script, or none at all mentioned in a novel, but the three acts are there. They have to be. It's fundamental to storytelling.

Here is the "just the facts" version of this.

The first act introduces the protagonist, some of the major themes of the story, some of the principle characters, possibly the antagonist, and some idea of the crisis around which the story pivots. The first act ends at a turning point moment where the protagonist has to face the decision to go deeper into the story or turn around and return to zero. Often this choice is beyond the protagonist's control.

In the second act the main plot is developed through action, and subplots are presented in order to provide insight into the meaning of the story, the nature of the characters, and the nature of the crisis. Also, supporting characters are introduced, and we learn about the protagonist and antagonist through their interaction with these characters. The second act ends when the protagonist recognizes the path that will take him from an ongoing crisis to (what he believes is) a resolution.

In the third act, the protagonist races toward a conclusion that will end or otherwise resolve the current crisis and provide a degree of closure. Most or all of the plotlines are resolved, and the protagonist has undergone a process of change as a result of his experiences.

Now, here's the Three-Act Structure applied to the movie version of *The Wizard of Oz*.

ACT ONE

In Act One we meet Dorothy, who is an obnoxious and self-involved child who seems unable to recognize the existence of beneficial relationships (with her aunt and uncle, the farm workers, etc.) and doesn't value these connections.

She is so self-absorbed that she fails to accept that anyone else's needs/wants matter, as demonstrated by the fact that she is fully aware that her dog damages a neighbor's garden and doesn't care. Actually, she may be mildly sociopathic because she cannot grasp that "her" dog has done anything wrong and ignores the fact that the dog's lack of training is her own fault.

Dorothy's whole focus is on what she feels she does not have and what she deserves if only she can get to a better place (in her view, on the other side of the rainbow). So, she's shallow, vain, sociopathic, and unlikable. A perfect character to have at the start of a novel, since character growth is a primary element of all good stories.

The crisis comes initially from pending consequences from her dog's vandalism. Then a big storm comes along and whisks Dorothy away to another place where (a) she has killed her antagonist through the proxy of a witch who chanced to be standing where Dorothy's house was landing; (b) everyone she meets is substantially shorter, and therefore apparently inferior to her—and her distorted self image; (c) a maternal figure appears and tells her she's special and that she has to go on a journey in order to solve her dilemma; and (d) she gets cool shoes. Dorothy steps out of Act I and into Act II when she places her ruby slippers on the yellow brick road.

ACT TWO

In Act II, Dorothy begins a process of growth that will expand her consciousness, increase her personal store of experiences, help her develop meaningful relationships, and get her the hell home.

When she meets the Scarecrow and learns that it can talk and is in need of help, Dorothy has her first opportunity for real character growth. Instead of bugging out of there (a choice she may well have taken back home in Kansas), she helps the Scarecrow down and even offers to share her adventure with him. If the wizard she's been told to find can help Dorothy get home, maybe he could offer some assistance to someone in need of a brain. Off they go to see the Wizard. Dorothy has performed her first selfless act. She may not be beyond hope after all.

When the Scarecrow and Dorothy meet the Tin Man, there is another opportunity to perform a selfless act of charity. She does this; but this encounter also requires her to do some problem solving. The oil can shows intelligence and practicality. Good for her. Now she has helped two others in need, and at the same time she has increased her circle of valuable friends. This adds to her bank of useful experiences and also increases the odds of success.

The three of them (and her little dog, too), then encounter a frightening attack by a lion. In a real-world setting this would end badly, except for the hungry lion. But in this metaphorical tale, the lion is also a complex and damaged individual whose violent nature is a cry for help. However Dorothy doesn't know this at first. The Lion attack and Dorothy stands between this threat and her friends—and even attacks the Lion (albeit with a slap across the chops). This is a brave act that is selfless to the point of sacrifice. Dorothy is actually pretty cool now. Hero Dorothy.

Luckily the Lion is a coward, and we see Dorothy shift from attack to sympathy. Again this shows character growth in the form of a refined insight into the needs of another. Dorothy, now in the role of matriarchal clan leader, accepts the Lion into her pack, and the four of them go off to see the wizard.

All through this the Wicked Witch of the West, sister of the house-crushed Witch of the East, is after Dorothy and her ruby slippers. We never truly learn why (a storytelling shortfall explored later in novels and Broadway plays), but as a threat the Wicked Witch is constant and pervasive. She is enough of a threat that her presence, or the fear of how her anger might be manifested, influences the actions of every character in the story.

Dorothy and company overcome all obstacles and finally make it to Oz, home of the Wizard. There they present their case and the Wizard agrees to help but throws them a plot twist. He'll help only if Dorothy undertakes a quest to steal the broom of the Wicked Witch. Dorothy, however reluctant, agrees.

This is huge. The Dorothy we met in Kansas not only could not have accepted this mission; she would not have. However the Dorothy who stands before the great and mighty Oz is a far more evolved person who has benefited from adventures and experiences that have revealed her own strengths, demonstrated the power of friendship and collaborative effort, and basically served as a boot camp for Hero Dorothy.

As Dorothy and company step out of the Emerald City to begin this quest, they step out of Act Two and into...

ACT THREE

In Act III, Dorothy and her team covertly assault the stronghold of the Wicked Witch. They formulate a master plan and carry it through, albeit with some unforeseen complications (we love complications, catastrophes, challenges, calamities, and other C-words that make it more of an effort for the good guys to win).

They sneak into the castle, and there is the long-anticipated showdown between Hero Dorothy and the Wicked Witch. We get a twist when the Witch catches fire and Dorothy, in a demonstration of compassion even to her enemies, tries to douse the flames with water. And this leads to one of those "Ooops!" moments that enrich a story: the water is fatal to the witch. (Leading one to wonder why she has a bucket of it to hand. Depression? Thoughts of suicide? We'll never know.)

With the Wicked Witch dead, Dorothy discovers that the Witch was also a tyrant and now the people of her land rejoice for freedom with a rousing chorus of 'Ding Dong the Wicked Witch' (which they sing in immediate harmony, suggesting that this is a long anticipated eventuality).

Dorothy and her posse bring the broom back to the Emerald City and BIG TWIST: the wizard is a fraud. All smoke and mirrors. No real powers. Damn. Did not see that coming.

However the Wizard has a heart of gold in his deceitful chest, and he hands out some baubles that symbolize the things Dorothy's friends need: recognition of innate intelligence, acknowledgment of dedication, and a reward for valor. Nothing for Dorothy.

The Wizard then attempts to take Dorothy home via hot air balloon, but that ends badly and the Wizard floats off to who knows where, alone. And, one wonders if that escape had been planned all along. Devious bastard.

Finally the Good Witch shows up and in another BIG TWIST, tells Dorothy that she had the power to go home all along. The ruby slippers are apparently good for interdimensional travel.

We see another element of Dorothy's growth: restraint. She does NOT leap on the Good Witch and kick the crap out of her for not telling her this way the hell back in Oz. The Good Witch apparently recognized the need for a vision quest and played the ruby slipper card close to the vest.

So, Dorothy bids farewell to her friends in Oz, clicks her ruby slippers and wakes up in Kansas where she is surrounded by her Aunt and Uncle and the farm workers, all of whom are ciphers for the characters she met in Oz. Or, perhaps, vice versa.

Dorothy now recognizes the value of what she has and is properly grateful for it. Which allows us the change to step out of the story, since we now know that it's safe for Dorothy to continue on her journey. We trust that she will do well because we've seen her growth, and we know the cost.

If you look at the first *Star Wars* flicks, you can see an almost identical process in Luke's journey from annoying dust farmer to someone who can blow up a Death Star.

So, that's the short and long of the Three Act Structure. You may not be able to watch Wizard of Oz the same way again; and if you're a true writer, you'll be forever plagued with trying to identify the act breaks in every book, TV show or movie you ever watch. Don't blame me...blame the Greeks.

Jonathan Maberry—<http://www.jonathanmaberry.com>

###

20. VISUAL STORYTELLING: IMAGERY

By Alexandra Sokoloff

<http://www.alexandrasokoloff.com>

In film, every movie has a production designer—one artist (and these people are genius level, let me tell you) who is responsible, in consultation with the director and with the help of sometimes a whole army of production artists) for the entire look of the film – every color, costume, prop, set choice.

With a book, guess who's the production designer? YOU are.

As it happens, Michael brought home the anniversary edition of the ALIEN series recently. I could go on all week about what a perfect movie the first ALIEN is structurally as well, but for today - it's a perfect example of brilliant production design—the visual image systems are staggering.

Take a look at those sets (created by Swiss surrealist H.R. Giger). What do you see? Sexual imagery EVERYWHERE. Insect imagery—a classic for horror movies. Machine imagery. Anatomical imagery—the spaceships have very human-looking spines (vertebrae and all), intestinal-looking piping, vulvic doors. And the gorgeous perversity of the design is that the look of the film combines the sexual and the insectoid, the

anatomical with the mechanical, throws in some reptilian, serpentine, sea-monsterish under-the-sea-effects—to create a hellish vision that is as much a character in the film as any of the character characters.

Oh, and did I mention the labyrinth imagery? Yes, once again, my great favorite—you’ve got a monster in a maze.

Those are very specific choices and combinations. The sexual imagery and water imagery opens us up on a subconscious level and makes us vulnerable to the horrors of insects, machines and death. It also gives us a clear visual picture of a future world in which machines and humans have evolved together into a new species. It’s unique, gorgeous, and powerfully effective.

Obviously *Terminator* (the first) is a brilliant use of machine/insect imagery as well.

I know I’ve just about worked these examples to death, but nobody does image systems better than Thomas Harris. *Silence of the Lambs* and *Red Dragon* are serial killer novels, but Harris elevates that overworked genre to art, in no small part due to his image systems.

In *Silence*, Harris borrows heavily from myth and especially fairy tales. You’ve got the labyrinth/Minotaur. You’ve got a monster in a cage, a troll holding a girl in a pit (and that girl is a princess, remember – her mother is American royalty, a senator). You’ve got a twist on the “lowly peasant boy rescues the princess with the help of supernatural allies” fairy tale – Clarice is the lowly peasant who enlists the help of (one might also say apprentices to) Lecter’s wizardlike perceptions to rescue the princess. You have a twisted wizard in his cave who is trying to turn himself into a woman.

You have the insect imagery here as well, with the moths, the spiders and mice in the storage unit, and the entomologists with their insect collections in the museum, the theme of change, larva to butterfly.

In *Red Dragon*, Harris works the animal imagery to powerful effect. The killer is not a mere man, he’s a beast. When he’s born he’s compared to a bat because of his cleft palate. He kills on a moon cycle, like a werewolf. He uses his grandmother’s false teeth, like a vampire. And let’s not forget—he’s trying to turn into a dragon.

Now, a lot of authors will just throw in random scary images. How boring and meaningless! What makes what Harris does so effective is that he has an intricate, but extremely specific and limited image system going in his books. And he combines fantastical visual and thematic imagery with very realistic and accurate police procedure.

I know, all of these examples are horror, sorry, it’s my thing—but look at *The Wizard of Oz* (just the brilliant contrast of the black and white world of Kansas and the Technicolor world of Oz says volumes). Look at what Barbara Kingsolver does in *Prodigal Summer*, where images of fecundity and the, well, prodigy of nature overflow off the pages, revealing characters and conflicts and themes. Look at what Robert Towne/Roman Polanski do with water in *Chinatown*, and also—try watching that movie sometime with Oedipus in mind . . . the very specific parallels will blow you away.

So how do you create a visual/thematic image system in your books?

Well, start by becoming more conscious of what image systems authors are working with in books and films that YOU love. Some readers/writers don’t care at all about visual image systems. That’s fine—whatever floats your boat. Me, with rare

exceptions, I'll toss a book within twenty pages if I don't think the author knows what s/he's doing visually.

What I do when I start a project, along with outlining, is to keep a list of thematic words that convey what my story is about, to me. For *The Harrowing*, it was words like: Creation, chaos, abyss, fire, forsaken, shattered, shattering, portal, door, gateway, vessel, empty, void, rage, fury, cast off, forgotten, abandoned, alone, rejected, neglected, shards, discarded... pages and pages like that.

For *The Price*—bargain, price, deal, winter, ice, buried, dormant, resurrection, apple, temptation, tree, garden, labyrinth, Sleeping Beauty, castle, queen, princess, prince, king, wish, grant, deal, contract, task, hell, purgatory, descent, mirror, Rumpelstiltskin, spiral...

Some words I'll have from the very beginning because they're part of my own thematic DNA. But as the word lists grow, so does my understanding of the inherent themes of each particular story.

Do you see how that might start to work? Not only do you get a sense of how the story can look to convey your themes, but you also have a growing list of specific words that you can work with in your prose so that you're constantly hitting those themes on different levels.

At the same time that I'm doing my word lists, I start a collage book, and try to spend some time every week flipping through magazines and pulling photos that resonate with my story. I find *Vogue*, the Italian fashion mags, *Vanity Fair*, *Premiere*, *Rolling Stone* and of course, *National Geographic* particularly good for me. I tape those photos together in a blank artists' sketchbook (I use tape so I can move the photos around when I feel like it. If you're more—well, if you're neater than I am, you can also use plastic sleeves in a three-ring binder). It's another way of growing an image system. Also, it doesn't feel like writing so you think you're getting away with something.

Also, know your world myths and fairy tales! Why make up your own backstory and characters when you can tap into universally powerful archetypes? Remember, there's no new story under the sun, so being conscious of your antecedents can help you bring out the archetypal power of the characters and themes you're working with.

Alexandra Sokoloff—<http://www.alexandrasokoloff.com>
###

21. Talking Points: Dialogue

By Scott Nicholson

<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>

Sometimes you just have to talk it out, even when you don't know what you're talking about.

That's why narrative fiction so heavily relies on dialogue. It creates conflict, gives information to the reader, moves the plot, develops the characters, and builds a sense of place. In short, it does everything, all the time, just like every element of your work should, whether it's fiction or non-fiction.

Speech denotes class, racial, cultural, educational, and geographic differences. Make sure each character speaks consistently. In real life, our grammar can change depending on the company we're keeping, but in fiction you have to keep it simple for the reader. The character who says "ain't" on page three shouldn't be saying "most certainly is not" by page 300, unless that character has gone to Harvard during the middle chapters.

Beware of dialect. When conveying dialect, a little is usually plenty. Otherwise, it becomes parody and you lose the reader. For example, your Dodge City sheriff shouldn't say, "I'm amblin' over yonder to wet muh whistle." Your Southern character shouldn't lose all the g's in her action verbs: enough "fussin' and feudin'" and your reader's eyesight will blur. Use colloquialisms in moderation, and let your grammar do most of the work instead of relying on tics, tricks, and dropped letters. "We don't have no pumpkins," or "We ain't got no pumpkins" is fine, but make sure all the characters don't talk alike. And you might need to only drop the effect once or twice to plant the idea in the reader's mind.

In my novel *The Manor*, I have a minor character who is a Southern belle. She is educated, and therefore I simply said she was from the South and didn't attempt to drench her with slang, moonshine, and magnolias. In fact, the only direct reference to her accent is when she is mocked by her lover: "Why don't ya'll get yosef gone with the wind?" She never actually says "ya'll" herself. I know Southern speech patterns fairly well, and much of the effect is oral rather than literal. It's not just Southerners who drop the g in -ing words, and they're not doing it because they're dumb, shiftless, and lazy. In fact, much of the Appalachian speech often seen as backwoods and backward ("I'm afixin' to feed the chickens") is the remnant of very formal Celtic speech that crossed the Atlantic several hundred years ago.

In the same novel, I have a character who has adopted a fake British accent because he wants to appear classy. He's atrocious and almost a parody. He says things like, "Bloody hell," and "Righty right," and a lot of the little phrases you hear in movies like *Shaun of the Dead* and *The Full Monty*. It works because that's where he "learned" his accent. If I had used a real British character, I would have had to work much harder, because most of my exposure to British speech is through movies and the occasional book, which can't be fully trusted to convey authentic speech.

I am not a huge Lovecraft fan, and I think a lot of it has to do with his attempts to tag rural New England dialect. "Ye can have ye're money back. I don't want truck with any kin o' Septimus Bishop. It's jest aoutside my door. Snufflin' araoun." Lovecraft's educated characters display few distinctive speech patterns. It's lazy, it's classist, it's just plain bad writing, Lovecraft's unique ideas aside.

For the opposite reason, I love Elmore Leonard's work. Somehow even his nasty characters seem to have a dignity about them. This is from the mouth of a black houseman: "Mmmm, that musta impressed him. Yeah, Jacktown have riots and everything up there. What the man likes is to rub against danger without getting any on him. Make him feel like a macho man. You know what I'm saying?" To me, this reflects a streetwise voice but one that is not generic. The line about rubbing against danger makes it smart and Leonard doesn't have to diminish his black character with, "You sho' got that right, homey."

It's not only spoken dialogue that can create pitfalls. Internal monologue, and even the point-of-view voice, must ring true. There's a great line by mystery writer Margaret Maron: "I is not me." Your first-person fictional character doesn't have to speak the way you do. If you are writing your autobiography, then your voice will emerge, but even then your "writing voice" will be different from your speaking voice. For example, a large number of people add the "th" sound to the end of "height" when they say it, which is plain stupid, but it would be even stupider if you spelled it "heighth" in your dialogue.

Most modern novels feature third-person-limited viewpoints, meaning the reader gets into the character's head and views the world through his or her eyes. This allows you to make the most of internal monologue. I don't know about you, but I talk to myself a lot inside my own head. That voice is different than what I would be saying if I were actually using my tongue. And if you let your characters talk to you, chances are good they will emerge with their own individual voices and rhythms.

You can read pieces of your dialogue aloud to make sure they work for the ear, but remember that written dialogue functions differently than actual speech. It doesn't have to be real, because real speech is filled with ums, ers, and utter banalities. Don't let a character ask about the weather unless you're writing a natural-disaster thriller. Even if you're writing non-fiction and using actual quotes, you'll still have to decide which sentences are of interest and value. Most of all, make sure there's a reason your characters are saying what they are saying, and pay attention to how they are saying it. There's enough hot air and blabber in the world already.

Scott Nicholson—<http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>
###

22. WRITE WHAT YOU ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT, THEN TRY TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO SELL IT

By Dean Wesley Smith
<http://www.deanwesleysmith.com>

The myth: Agents can give good career advice to writers.

This chapter on agents to me is the most important of all the agent chapters. Agents thinking they can give career advice to writers is so wrong in so many ways, it's going to be hard to figure out where to start first. And it disgusts me in so many ways, I'm going to have a certain level of problem keeping balanced on this. Fair warning. I think this myth is flat dangerous to any artist working.

So let me start first with the "art" aspects of writing and work to the business.
ART vs. AGENT CAREER PLANNING MYTH

Every long-term writer I know does their best with every project. We all put our hearts and souls into every story, into every novel, into every project. There are no exceptions. Sometimes we hit, sometimes we miss, sometimes we love what we wrote and can't sell it, sometimes we love what we wrote, critics hate it. Sometimes we hate what we wrote, critics love it.

But, without fail, we always do our best at the time we were writing the project. That's Given #1.

Given #2 is that every writer should write what makes them angry, what makes them passionate, or what they love. From the passion comes true art. (I have started two comic book stores and own over 100,000 comic books. When I got to write X-Men and Spider-Man, I was writing what I loved deeply and felt frightened and challenged to even have the chance.)

Given #3. No writer ever should think for one moment about a project selling either before or during the writing phase. Ever. You try writing to market, to fad, to trend, and you might as well find another job.

So, putting all three together, you come up with a very clear statement that I repeat over and over and over.

Write what you love, what you are passionate about, (or as King says, what scares you), then figure out how to sell it when you finish.

Let me repeat: SELL IT WHEN YOU FINISH!!!

So along comes the agent myth about helping a writer plan a career.

Now understand, I have said over and over and over again that I have no problem with a writer hiring an agent. But for heaven's sake, do it with solid business practice in mind and a clear head. Clear out the myths. You might just very well end up with an agent you can work with for a very long time.

So back to this myth about agents. Writer believes that some agent can help them plan their career and what to write next. They take advice blindly from an agent who doesn't really know them or their work or what they love and hate, some agent who they have not even bothered to check out (see previous chapters and comments), a stranger who is more concerned with their own business than what is best for an artist.

Here is the problem. Some young writer gets excited, does all the work, learns the craft, and writes a book he is passionate about. And then starts following the myths.

Myth: Rewriting is good, so agent tells young writer how to "fix" the book, so young writer dumbs his passion in his work down to what some stranger (agent) thinks might sell. (Yes, rewriting is career advice because the agent always says something along the lines of "I think this will sell better if you do this and this.")

Myth: Agent takes the book out to a bunch of editor friends and actually gets a small advance. Author is happy about the sale and ignores the fact that it's not his book much anymore. It sold, that's all that is important. Any thought of art is long gone at this point. His name is on the cover and he has made it. That's where all the thinking is for the writer.

Myth: Agent now thinks they know what the young author needs to do, so tells them what to write next. Young writer hates it, thinks he has already written that book the first time, doesn't want to write the same thing again, but does as agent says. Doesn't like the final product because it has no passion, agent doesn't like it, and off into rewrite myth they go.

What I have seen hundreds of times is that young writers stop their careers right there. Second book was no fun, third book was pure torture, why bother, sales were not that good anyway, and writer stops writing. I would, too.

This myth kills artists.

This myth, combined with all the aspects of the other agent and sales myths, force young artist after young artist to compromise, think about selling before they write a word, move away from passion into safe sales, and thus into losing the very reason and passion the writer was writing in the first place. And when you lose the reason to write, the love of writing, the passion to write, you soon just stop writing.

It takes a very, very powerful self-belief to stand up to these myths and just write what you want, at the speed you want, and mail to whom you want after you are finished. Yet to be a true artist, a true long-term professional writer, you have to learn to stand up for your writing and your art.

Is all this easy to learn? No. Darned hard, actually.

But to be a true artist, write what you want. Never write to market.

PERSONAL BELIEFS vs. AGENT CAREER PLANNING MYTH

Now, this is a fun area because when you look at it, this myth becomes just flat silly on the surface.

You live in Outback small town. You were raised by some combination of humans, have friends that make up some combination of humans, believe in some combination of religious beliefs, have some combination of writing talents, and have a very certain combination of fears, passions, and likes and dislikes.

In other words, you are an individual, a one-of-a-kind writer. That's what makes your voice unique and your writing different from everyone else.

The agent is also a unique person, with certain likes and dislikes and beliefs in what sells and what doesn't and who will buy what and why and how every writer should follow the recent trend and have a vampire do something on page three.

So you, young writer, believe in this myth of career planning and trust some stranger to tell you what to write. The stranger has a different upbringing, a different set of values, and no idea at all who you really are as a person. They don't know your voice or what makes you unique. In fact, to them, you need to be more like everyone else.

Yet you let the stranger tell you what to write. And then you wonder why you are not passionate about your writing anymore. Duh.

From the fact that each of us is different, each of us is unique, it should become clear that no writer should ever listen to anyone else, family, spouse, kids, workshop, or agent to tell them what to write next.

Just write your own book. That way lays success. Anything else is just a disaster or failure waiting to happen.

BUSINESS vs. AGENT CAREER PLANNING MYTH

Agents flat don't know a writer's business. That is a truth. Some may think they do, but they don't understand writer cash flow, don't understand how writers make money, let alone how much time and effort it takes us to produce a product. They don't know and shouldn't be expected to know. (If you think all your writing money comes through your agent, wow, do you have a lot to learn about the business of being a writer.)

But to an agent only concerned with their own business (which writers do not understand, either), they want to sell books. And if there is a current trend, agents want their clients to write into that current trend, even though a trend is usually two years old by the time an agent catches a whiff of it.

I had an agent call me four years after the vampire craze started and ask if I had a vampire novel. Wow, that was a human ahead of the curve. Not. Another agent called me

after the Titanic movie became a hit and said, “Didn’t you publish a book about the Titanic once?” I said I had a novel that partially set on the Titanic, but that was it, and it didn’t fit. Agent didn’t believe me and wanted to see it, so I sent it and then agent wrote me a snippy note asking why I thought that book would ever fit being reprinted. I just laughed and said nothing.

So, because the agent thinks it would be good business for you to sell another book just like your last one, or worse yet, just like the one they just sold for another client, they tell you to write that. And if that one sells, they tell you write it again. And again. And again, until finally it doesn’t sell anymore and they drop you.

Now understand, I am not talking about series characters, or writers who love to write just mysteries or just science fiction. Back to the top. Write what you love first and foremost, then worry about how to sell it. If you love mysteries, write them. If you love science fiction, write that. If you have a series character you love to spend time with, keep writing books with that character.

But if the only reason you are writing the next mystery is because your agent wanted you to write it when your passion has moved to romantic suspense, then you are in trouble.

To an agent’s business, it makes great sense to tell writers to write the same book over and over again.

To a writer’s business, it makes no sense to write anything they are not passionate about. To do anything else dooms the business.

Speed Advice from all three perspectives: Art, Personal, and Business.

Well, every agent I know will utter the phrase: “Slow down and take your time and do your best work.”

That career advice shows ZERO understanding of how writing is done from the creative side of the brain, how each writer writes at their own natural speed, how slowing down and writing from a critical perspective usually creates complete crap. The statement shows no understanding at all of how art is created by great writers.

And, of course, it shows no understanding at all of you as a person. Or even your writing methods. You are unique and maybe the best advice to you would be speeding up, or cutting down on rewriting, or doing some rewriting. The agent doesn’t know. They just spout a myth at you like it’s good career advice, even though every writer is completely different.

To an agent’s business model of only needing one or so books a year from an author, it makes complete sense to say such stupidity.

But to a writer’s business model, where more product means more money, more chance of hitting it big, more chance of creating art, unnaturally slowing down is just stupid business advice.

Some projects write fast, some write slow, some art has been created quickly, some art took longer. Study the history of writers and how long it actually took artists in the past to write something to completely understand this.

But the key is, you are unique, write at your own speed what you want to write.

PUTTING A BOOK AWAY CAREER ADVICE.

This is yet again the stupidest career advice ever given to a writer. Some agent will say, “Why don’t you put that book away and work on the next one?”

My response is “While I’m working on the next one, why don’t you quit looking for excuses to not work and mail the book to five more editors?”

But, of course, you would never say that because they would mail it dead, meaning they would kill it in their cover letters to editors just to prove themselves right. But what you do is fire them, take the book back, and mail it yourself while you work on the next book. Duh.

Never let anyone tell you to shelve a book for any reason. ANY REASON. And reasons agents give that seem logical to young professionals are things like:

—“Your career isn’t ready for this book.” Huh?

—“This book clearly isn’t strong enough for you to break in with.” Says who?

—“We got five rejections and it’s not working. Write the next book and we’ll see what we can do.” Lazy SOB.

Let me say this again. NEVER let anyone tell you to NOT market a book. Not your spouse, not your workshop, and certainly not some stranger who has a business card that says agent on it. Put your work in front of people who can buy it and keep it there. That’s good business. Nothing short of that is.

Again, back to a point I have made over and over in the other agent chapters in this book. Agents are not trained in any fashion. They have no schooling for agents, no organization that polices them. They have not gone to any publishing business school. They have nothing but a business card and an opinion.

So it’s bad enough that we writers trust them with our money, with picking editors to mail something to, with trying to get our books into Hollywood or overseas.

But it gets worse when we let an agent step into our writing offices in any fashion and give career advice. They are not writers, so they wouldn’t know good career advice if it hit them. They are not interested in writers’ careers, only their own anyway. So any advice would just be focused on what was best for them, not for you.

And they don’t know you as a person.

In summary:

—Write what you love, what you are passionate about, what scares you, what you want.

—Never, ever write to market. Just go into your writing space or office and be an artist.

—Then, when the project is finished, worry about how to sell it.

—Never, ever let anyone tell you what to write. It will kill your writing and your career faster than anything ever will.

Trust your own skills, your own voice, keep learning, and enjoy the writing.

Dean Wesley Smith—<http://www.deanwesleysmith.com>

###

BUSINESS

23. PITCHING YOUR BOOK

By Douglas Clegg

<http://www.douglasclegg.com>

If you're an aspiring writer, the game of getting published seems hard. No one really tells you what to do, and as games go, the publishing game seems mysterious from the outside. Agents and editors both are busy, and to get your book or story across, you need to capture their attention quickly so they'll take a second look and want to read your finished book or partial.

You can improve your chances in having your book—or books—seriously considered by a publisher or an agent by creating a winning query letter.

This is my current tip for aspiring novelists that I hope will help you cut through the confusing clutter of advice about pitching your novel—whether in a query letter to an agent or an editor, or if you actually get to meet an editor and sit face-to-face at a convention or other gathering.

I know how rough it can be, particularly when starting out. Believe in yourself, in what you write, and keep learning the craft.

The DO NOTS:

1. Do not go on and on in your query. No matter how wonderful you are, and no matter how fascinating it is to you to describe hundreds of pages of your novel in loving detail—it's boring. Accept it and move on.

It's the reading of the book that needs to be engaging and engrossing, and the only way an agent or editor may get to that is if your synopsis in your query letter is engaging, too.

2. Do not suck up. Seriously. No kissing of the derriere will sell your novel to any editor or agent, even if it works with your boss.

On the other hand, don't insult 'em either, obviously.

Be direct, respectful, and as brief as you possibly can (but make sure you get across the gist of what's great in your novel.)

All right, here goes.

This was part of a letter I sent to an aspiring novelist who asked about the query. It includes two "off the top of my head" synopses of novels of mine put in the form that I believe it is good to think about.

Do not imitate what I've written. Get the SPIRIT of it.

Your book has got to sell itself. The best you can do is pitch it, and step out of the way so your novel can work its magic on the editor or agent.

Having said that, you absolutely need to make your story come alive in a few sentences. I can't do that for you, but you can.

HERE'S THE DEEP DARK SECRET OF PITCHING YOUR NOVEL:

Imagine you have less than a minute to tell your friend about a great movie you just saw, or a terrific book you just read. In fact, pick one that you loved.

Describe it quickly, on paper. I bet you can do this in under a minute. If you can't, then practice, practice, practice.

Find out what is unique and compelling in your book and put that into a few sentences.

Work on it.

Cut, shape, and take ten minutes afterward to make sure these sentences work.

The premise of your novel needs to be strong enough to be summed up quickly—otherwise, it stands a chance of sounding like a muddle or a series of abstractions that can't find anything concrete to rest upon.

Plus this synopsis has to be interesting. And brief.

If you really want this book to sell, you have to be tough on this kind of stuff and make the leap to professionalism.

It's simpler than you suspect.

If your novel has a strong premise, and you understand this premise (as you should—you had to believe in it enough to write an entire novel, right?) whittle those words down to three to six sentences that are compelling and at least tell what's most important about the story:

Think in terms of the big picture.

EXAMPLE ONE

Here's an example for my novel *Bad Karma*, written under my pen name Andrew Harper:

"A beautiful, murderous patient of a psych hospital for the criminally insane is obsessed with the psych tech who cares for her. When he and his family vacation on Catalina Island off the coast of California, she goes on a rampage and escapes to hunt them down—because she believes that he is the reincarnation of a lover from her past life—Jack the Ripper. This is a fast-paced thriller dealing with reincarnation, human madness, and murder—set at both a psych hospital as well as on Catalina Island, with flashbacks to 19th century London with the Jack the Ripper scenes."

THREE SENTENCES. Admittedly, two of 'em are a bit long. But not all that long.

And you know what? When I look at those few sentences now, they're not perfect—I know that. But they convey the story briefly, and if an editor or agent isn't interested in seeing the book, they'll know in under a minute and can move on with their lives.

And so can I.

By the way, that book sold in under 10 days to a NY publisher, and was later picked up for the movies (admittedly, it was made into a very bad movie, but the check was good and the popcorn tasted great.) I later sold two sequels, as well.

EXAMPLE TWO

Another for my recent novel, *The Priest of Blood*:

"In this tale of swords, sorcery, and vampires, a boy grows to manhood in a brutal medieval world. Rising in his station through his talent as a falconer, he falls in love with the baron's daughter—but when their love is found out, he is forcibly conscripted into the Crusades. There, despairing of life, he seeks death—and finds his destiny as a messiah of vampires in the bloody embrace of a female vampire called Pythia.

Filled with ancient buried kingdoms, battles against the Saracens, as well as a quest for a legendary Priest of Blood who will bring power to this falconer, this is the first book of a proposed dark fantasy trilogy called *The Vampyricon*.

FOUR SENTENCES. I bet you're so smart, you could whittle these down further, couldn't you? You're smart, I know! You get a gold star for smarts.

Bear in mind, I'm a novelist, not a short-order copy writer.

I don't expect to have written deathless prose in the query. But, as you can see, this gets the gist of the story across.

I did not sell this query, by the way, because I wrote the novel before selling it and already had an agent. I'm not trying to present this as "Only THIS will sell in a query letter."

I want to give you a sense of how simple this is—but keep the secret to yourself!
Just kidding.

Truth is—what piques the interest of an editor or agent is what will pique MANY readers' interest, too. Editor and agents are looking for . . . wait for it: what people will want to read, as well as what they believe they might want to read, per the taste of the editor or agent.

It's their business, and they know what they're looking for and sometimes are surprised by what they didn't think they were looking for.

I can't spend my life second-guessing them, and neither can you. All I know is what fascinates ME—and I've learned how to convey that fairly quickly and simply. But it takes a bit of practice. Nobody says you can't practice first.

BUT you can learn to get your story or plot premise down in a brief synopsis and get on with your next novel while you wait to hear back.

And you thought I was going to tell you how to write the entire query letter for a novel?

Nope, but there are books for that. I can't tell all my secrets at once!

However, my QUICK TIP!

Just write a regular letter as you would to anyone at a company where you wanted to:

- (a) not waste their valuable time on unimportant things and
- (b) get a job.

This involves being respectful, not whining, demanding, threatening, or appearing pitiful. It also involves self-respect, if that wasn't apparent from my previous sentence. Double-check your spelling and look for grammatical errors.

I make errors all the time, and it's oh-so-easy to go back and revise before sending the query off. Admittedly, I leave typos in these notes just so I can hear from those among you who love pointing out errors to people.

Here's a basic query letter for a novel:

"Dear _____,

My name is _____, and I've written a novel of _____ words that fits most comfortably in the genre of _____. It's called _____, and I would very much like to send it to you for possible publication/representation.

_____ is a story of...(and here's where you write that 3-5 sentence synopsis that includes the basic premise, a brief highlight or two, with the idea that you're telling the story to a buddy as if you just saw a really great movie.)

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

YOU"

I know some might argue that this wouldn't work for literary novels, but I don't know: if you want to believe that, feel free. Life is short, and in the long run, you can do what you want.

Thus, endeth my lens for the day. Please link to this, and let your writing friends and writing groups know about it. Heck, argue over what I've written here—but if it works for you, I'm glad I could help.

If it doesn't help you, go forth and find something that does. Disagreeing with me will get you nowhere, but finding out what you need to do will get you everywhere.

Douglas Clegg—<http://www.douglasclegg.com>
###

24. NOVEL PITCH LETTER
By Jonathan Maberry
<http://www.jonathanmaberry.com>

Jonathan Maberry
PO Box 84
Southampton PA 18966
Email: Jonathan_maberry@yahoo.com
www.jonathanmaberry.com/blog

August 22, 2008

Joe Bloggs
The Big Literary Agency
100 Success Street
New York, NY 10000

Dear Mr. Bloggs,

If you have to kill the same terrorist twice in one week then there's either something wrong with your skills or something wrong with the world...and there's nothing wrong with Joe Ledger's skills.

Patient Zero is a mainstream thriller in which a Baltimore cop is recruited by a secret government organization to help stop a group of terrorists from releasing a plague that can turn people into murderous zombies. The story is grounded in hard—but very scary—science and follows Joe Ledger as he goes from a cop with a troubled past to a hero leading a unit of first-team shooters against the world's deadliest threat.

Joe Ledger and the DMS (Department of Military Sciences) would immediately excite readers of James Rollins' *Sigma Six* novels, Vince Flynn's Mitch Rapp series and Lee Child's Jack Reacher books. Joe Ledger is a hero with heart: conflicted, compassionate, idealistic and extremely dangerous. *Patient Zero* is the first of a proposed series of fact-paced character-driven high concept thrillers that pit Joe Ledger and the DMS against terrorists with cutting edge bio-weapons. He's the hero we need for these troubled times.

Patient Zero is 140,000 words and is ready for immediate mailing. I would be happy to send a synopsis, sample chapters (or the complete ms.) along with a competitive analysis that clearly shows how strong and active this genre is, and has been. I'm very experienced with social networking and will be an active participant in co-promotion,

using Facebook, Twitter, podcasting, blogs, websites, forums and other forms of viral marketing to build buzz for this book. I'm working on a follow-up novel and can provide e-stories as incentives for cultivating readers during the run up to release.

Your own remarkable track record with thrillers of every stripe is impressive, and you've done so well with best-sellers as well as first-time authors such as Joe Schmoe, Jane Doe and Bessie T. Seller that it's clear you *get* this genre. I look forward to hearing from you via email.

Sincerely

Jonathan Maberry

Jonathan Maberry—<http://www.jonathanmaberry.com>
###

25. HOW TO GET A LITERARY AGENT

By Brandon Massey

<http://www.brandonmassey.com>

Let's face it, every writer serious about publishing needs to find out how to get a literary agent. These book professionals, considered the "gatekeepers" of the publishing industry, can be critical to your success as a novelist. But how do you get one?

In this article, we'll cover three steps you can follow to get a literary agent for your novel. Keep in mind that the steps I'm going to present are just one effective way to go about this process. I discuss various others in my weekly writers' newsletter on my web site.

1) Write a marketable novel.

This is one tip that will never change. Before you have any chance of landing a reputable agent, you have to write a marketable manuscript. It literally opens the door.

Don't make the mistake of contacting agents before you've finished your book (unless you are a celebrity or veteran writer, in which case, few of these rules apply to you). Complete your novel first.

A writer with a top-notch novel will be able to pick and choose quality representation. It's the key to everything, and should be your first priority.

2) Use listings in directories.

You may be familiar with these guides. Typically, these directories feature hundreds of listings of literary agents, and include their location, contact info, preferred markets, recent sales, and submission guidelines.

Pay close attention to these listings, because they contain just about everything you need to know in order to get serious consideration from a particular agency. Don't query them about a horror novel if they say they don't represent horror. Don't email them if they say they want snail mail submissions only.

Just follow the query guidelines to the letter, and you'll have a real shot.

3) While submitting, start working on a new novel.

I can't stress enough how important it is for you to get busy on a new manuscript while your other novel makes the rounds of the agencies. It's a key tip, for several reasons.

First, writing a new novel will keep your mind occupied, and will minimize your obsession over the status of your book currently on submission. Second, it can take several months to secure representation, and it's always a good idea to keep new books in the pipeline. Third, if all of the agencies you query reject your first manuscript, you'll have something else to shop, allowing you to maintain positive momentum.

Brandon Massey—<http://www.brandonmassey.com>

###

26. THE AGENT/PUBLISHER EPIC

By J.A. Konrath

<http://www.jakonrath.com>

After my sixth novel failed to sell, I knew it was time to get serious.

My Rejection Book was filled to bursting, slips divided into agent and editor categories. Close to four hundred of them. With the baby's first birthday approaching and a new house recently purchased, my friends and family were beginning to wonder when I was going to give up this "hobby" and get a real job working nine to five.

I made my living waiting tables. The flexible schedule allowed me plenty of time to write. My wife worked in the same restaurant, and I would often trade shifts with her if the muse was in overdrive. She'd always been supportive, even when we were dating and I had my BAD AGENT EXPERIENCE.

Rewind to three years earlier. I was fresh out of college, where I majored in Television. I'd switched my major to TV from Film, because I heard it was too hard to get a job in film.

I found out it was just as hard to get a job in television. Though I had good grades, and a killer show reel, I'd graduated in the middle of a huge recession, and was going up for entry level positions against people with years of experience.

I tried my best, failed, and then wondered what the heck my education was good for, other than teaching me how to make my own beer bong and how to add watermelon Jolly Ranchers to a bottle of vodka for killer shots.

Since writing is what I wanted to pursue in both Film and TV, and since I had a love of books and had already written dozens of short stories, I decided to take the plunge and write a mystery novel.

It took a few months. When I finished, I picked up a *Writer's Market* book, picked out six agents, and sent them copies of the book, figuring it was only a matter of time until one of them called me.

Believe it or not, one did.

He was a respected, well-known agent with some big name clients, and I immediately signed on the dotted line. I drove to New York to meet him soon after, and

he took me to a five-star restaurant and filled my head with promises of fame and riches while I fought a losing battle trying to match him martini for martini.

Life was good.

When I came back home, I considered quitting my job. After all, the sale would come quick, and the money would roll in.

A week passes. A month. Three months.

I call my superstar agent and get an assistant, who explains that sometimes it takes a while to sell a book.

That hadn't been what Mr. Bigshot told me over Grey Goose, but I still trusted the guy.

Six months pass. A year. By this time, I've written a sequel to the first book, and I send it to Mr. Bigshot.

A few weeks pass, and I call him to see if he's read the new book.

His assistant explains that he's really busy.

Another six months go by. Finally, I call up Mr. Bigshot and insist on speaking to him personally. The assistant won't allow it. So I insist on getting a list of all the publishing houses that have rejected my book.

The assistant sends me a list. A list of two houses.

In nineteen months, he'd shown my book to two editors.

Even though I was ignorant about NY publishing, I knew this was bad. There were dozens of publishing houses who bought mysteries. Only going to two of them proved this guy wasn't doing a thing for me.

I fired him, deciding to look for a new agent. After all, he was easy to get. All I had to do was buy the latest *Writer's Market*, pick out a few more agents, and wait for them to call.

No one called. I tried every agent in NY, and couldn't get anyone interested in my series.

This led to a bout of depression. My girlfriend (who later became my wife) offered to cheer me up by buying me a unique gift. A tattoo.

"That's very white-trash of you, honey," I told her.

But she explained that she had 100 percent faith that I'd someday be published, and a tattoo would inspire me to keep trying.

Well, we went to Jade Dragon in Chicago, and I had them put a little frowny face on my right shoulder.

But now, after six unpublished novels, all the frowny face did was depress me even more.

Should I continue pursuing the dream of becoming a published author? Or should I do the responsible thing and get a well-paying office job?

"You aren't allowed to give up," my girlfriend (now my wife) told me. "You're a writer, whether you get paid for it or not."

She was right. I'd be miserable doing anything else.

So I decided to write a blockbuster.

My previous approach to writing was very free-form and unstructured. I'd write when I felt like it, about whatever I felt like. My growing pile of form letter rejections was testament to how well this worked for me. I needed to regroup.

The term “high-concept” is often bandied around Hollywood, used to describe movies that have strong, central hooks. Blockbuster novels have hooks as well. "Shark kills swimmers on New York beach." "Little girl is possessed by the devil." "Science learns to clone dinosaurs." "FBI trainee interviews a captured serial killer." I wanted to write something like that—something that could be described in a brief sentence, but still perfectly conveyed the story idea.

Coming up with a catchy hook on which to base ninety thousand words was easier said than done. I took a break from writing to brainstorm. How could I put a new spin on an old concept? What topic could capture the public’s imagination?

I decided on something with universal appeal. The hook: Satan is being held and studied in a secret government laboratory.

It would be a cross between Jurassic Park and the Exorcist. A thriller that pits cutting-edge technology against thousands of years of theology. Plus, it had the biggest monster of them all—an eight-foot-tall, cloven-hoofed Beelzebub, complete with bat wings, horns, and a predilection for eating live sheep.

To do the story justice, I knew I had to research the hell out of it, so to speak. When I had a confident grasp of the science and religion involved, I worked on developing characters that would interact with the demon, and then a storyline that would do the concept proud.

A year later, my techno thriller *Origin* was completed.

Now what was I supposed to do with it?

I went back to my Rejection Book to review my previous queries, and was surprised to see how poor they were. The letters fell into two distinct categories: egocentric and desperate. Rather than succinctly pitch my novels, I had been begging for them to be read, or stating how rich I’d make the publisher once they bought me.

Plus, I was shocked to see typos and poor grammar, not only in the queries, but in the sample chapters I’d submitted.

For *Origin*, I needed a different approach. I decided to do the same thing publishers do to sell books. Namely, an ad campaign.

Rather than a standard query letter and sample chapters, I put together a four-page package. The first page was a two-paragraph excerpt from the novel, when the hero first sees Satan sitting in a gigantic plexiglass cage. The second page was styled like back-jacket copy, describing the story and the hook in a few sentences. The third page was an author bio, with black-and-white photo. The final page was a simple note stating that the book was seeking representation, and my phone number.

No SASE. No return address. I didn’t even personalize the note.

I made one hundred and twenty submission packages and sent one to every agent in the Writer’s Digest *Literary Agent Guide*.

I sent these on a Thursday.

By Tuesday, I had five agent phone calls, all demanding to see the book.

I was in shock. Usually, an agent response took between three and ten weeks.

Now I had them fighting over me. What should I do?

Luckily, I had previous agent experience, so I knew how to approach the situation.

When I finished my first novel, I sent it to six NY agents, and one of them took me on. I sat back and waited for the money to roll in.

Eighteen months later, and the agent isn't returning my calls. When I finally pin this person down, I find out the agent submitted my book to a total of two editors in a year and a half.

This time, I wanted to hire an agent who would work for me. I wanted to be involved in every aspect of the submission process. My next agent would keep me informed, be my biggest advocate, and help me build a career.

After several phone interviews with ultimately twelve agents, I decided on Todd Keithley from Jane Dystel Literary Management. Todd was my age, had a specific plan to market me, and most of all, loved the book.

There was rewriting. And more rewriting. And more rewriting.

Todd generated a buzz in NY about the book and went out to the top 15 publishers with an expiration date on the manuscript.

It was very exciting and a thrill to be a part of.

The rejections were the hardest of my life.

On the plus side, many editors said wonderful things about me and my book. I got many compliments, and finally vindication from the publishing world that I indeed had talent.

But *Origin* was ultimately rejected because it slipped through the genre cracks. Editors didn't know how to market it. Was it horror? Sci-fi? Techno-thriller? Comedy? Where did this book fit on the shelves?

To compound the injury, Todd then left the agency to pursue a law practice in Maryland.

I was devastated.

Luckily, his boss saw potential in me. Before Todd bid his final adieu, I received a phone call from Jane Dystel who succinctly asked, "What else have you got?"

I did have something else, another high-concept idea that came to me while writing *Origin*. I pitched it over the phone to Jane.

"Write it," she advised.

I did.

Another year passed, research and writing. When I finished, I gave Jane the same kind of ad campaign I'd designed for *Origin*.

Jane loved it. She generated a buzz and went out to 17 publishing houses.

The rejections mirrored those received by *Origin*. What kind of book was this? Was it a thriller, or a comedy?

But one publisher liked it. There was a problem, however. The book was a hundred and thirty thousand words.

"Can you cut thirty thousand?"

I said I could. The effort was one of the most frustrating, and at the same time rewarding, episodes in my writing career. Because I didn't want to affect the story, I delegated myself to trimming the fat.

And there was fat. A lot of it.

When I finished, the editor read the revision and said, "Cut another ten thousand words."

Now there was no choice; I had to cut story. It was very difficult to do. I was forced to confront my novel and determine what was essential to the plot and what could be left out without disturbing the narrative flow.

But I did it. And it improved the book, a lot.

The editor read this version and said, "You know, I think I like your concept more than your execution of the concept. Can you start over from the beginning?"

Jane stepped in before I popped a blood vessel.

"We'll move on to the next book, Joe."

For my third book with the agency, I decided to make sure I wrote in a specific, distinct, defined genre, the medical thriller. Also, because editors seemed puzzled by the amount of humor I was putting in my books, I completely cut out the jokes.

After another year of writing and research, I gave the results to Jane.

She HATED it, and refused to represent it. Jane liked my sense of humor, and a novel without jokes had no spark.

Back to square one.

Again, I took time away from writing to brainstorm. I liked Jane a lot, as a person and as an agent, but I didn't think she'd keep me on as a client if I kept giving her books she couldn't sell.

My last three books were failures, but they were important failures. They taught me how to rewrite. They taught me that I needed to use humor. They taught me that techno thrillers and medical thrillers weren't working for me.

So what genre was left? What would be the best vehicle for my sense of humor?

I went downstairs and began perusing my library. A pattern emerged. Janet Evanovich. Robert B. Parker. Lawrence Sanders. Robert Crais. Donald Westlake.

All my life I loved mysteries. My favorites were series characters, especially ones that were funny.

Why hadn't I thought of that before? This was a genre I knew and loved, and something that would allow me to zing the one-liners and have fun.

I created Violent Crimes Lieutenant Jack Daniels of the Chicago PD. I used every convention popular in successful mysteries—a flawed but funny hero, a recurring cast of oddball characters, a catchy title that instantly identified the series, a spring-loaded plot.

A few months later, I gave *Whiskey Sour* to Jane, along with proposals for the second and third books in the series, *Bloody Mary* and *Rusty Nail*.

Jane loved it.

She helped me tweak the concept, and after two requisite rewrites, she went out with the book.

In the meantime, I started work on another high concept novel, so when *Whiskey Sour* got rejected, I'd have something else to pitch to Jane.

But the damndest thing happened. A few days after Jane submitted the book, she gave me a call.

"We have an offer. It's for six figures."

She named a number. I jumped around my house like a wind-up toy.

"That's great! We're accepting it, right?"

"No. Another editor is interested. I think I can get more. In the meantime, Leslie Wells at Hyperion wants to talk to you. Is tomorrow morning good for you?"

Leslie was a hero of mine, having edited two of my favorite authors, Ridley Pearson and Robert Crais. The thought of working with her awed me.

But what should I say? How should I act?

"Just be yourself," Jane advised. "I think you'll like each other."

Leslie and I instantly hit it off. She loved my book, but more importantly, she had great plans for the series, and great ideas on how to make *Whiskey Sour* even better.

I got off the phone hoping Hyperion would wind up with the book.

The call came two days later.

"Joe? Jane Dystel. Are you sitting down? Hyperion made an offer..."

After 10 books, 12 years, and 460 rejections, my dream had finally come true.

My wife took me out to celebrate. But we didn't go out to eat. We didn't go to a concert, or a show, or to France.

We went to a tattoo parlor.

Now, on my left shoulder, there's a smiley face.

To match the other smiley face I wear all the time.

J.A. Konrath—<http://www.jakonrath.com>

###

27. WHAT HAPPENS IN THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

By Gayle Lynds

<http://www.GayleLynds.com>

At last I can give you a publication date for my new novel, *The Book of Spies*—March 30, 2010. It seems a very long way away, nine months, but for those in the business, it will whip past at supersonic speed.

Why has it taken so long to settle on a publication date? Ah, the fine art of publishing. I thought you might enjoy an insider's take on what's going to happen next....

As many of you know, co-op is an important part of the business. Book stores—both the chains and the independents—make their own decisions about which books to feature at the front of their shops. But the chains want financial investment from publishers for that all-important first look by customers who walk in the door. They won't take a publisher's money—co-op money—if they don't want to feature a book.

There can be several reasons for this: they think the book isn't strong or good enough, they have two almost identical novels arriving at the same time from different publishers and therefore want to highlight only one, or the author's reader base has been declining and the chain is losing confidence in its ability to sell the author's latest title.

At the same time, publishers face similar decisions. They work to balance their lists so they don't have two big novels coming out in the same week to compete for readers' attentions—or to compete against other publishers' books.

I'm fortunate in that you, my good readers, have been increasing, buying and enjoying my novels in greater numbers with each title. As a result, my fine publisher, St. Martin's Press, settled on March 30 as a date in which *The Book of Spies* will have less competition in-house and in the marketplace and therefore optimum chance at great co-op and attention from readers and reviewers.

So what happens next? I have one more round of editorial input from my terrific editor, Keith Kahla, and then the manuscript goes to a copy editor, who checks my facts and looks for misplaced commas. Each publisher has its own style, and commas fall into that. I've given up. All the rules I learned seem to change with the weather. Still, copy editors play an important role, and I'm grateful for those who do excellent work. I've

gotten copy-edited manuscripts that were tattered, decorated with brown coffee rings, and aromatic with pipe smoke. Those copy-editors were beaver-ing away.

Then the book is set into type—yes, typesetters haven't completely vanished, thank God—and I'll be sent the page proofs to read for errors. It's amazing how long reading proof can take, and by then I'm ready to chuck the whole thing out the window because I'm tired of reading my own book and just want to be writing the next one uninterrupted. Discipline, Gayle. At the same time, it's a thrill to see the story in type, and that keeps me going.

All during this period the cover is being designed and settled upon, marketing meetings are taking place, publicity is being consulted, and a budget to support the novel is put into place. Any of this can change, too, as the publisher keeps its eye on what's selling and how it's selling. Some opportunities vanish, while new ones arise. It sounds tricky, and it is. It makes me tired just thinking about it and very glad my job is mostly to write the book and chat with readers like you. Being with readers is high on my list of favorite things to do.

By the time *The Book of Spies* is in your hands, hundreds of people have worked on it in various capacities. And that's why the nine months will evaporate for the publisher. For you and me, it can seem an eternity.

Gayle Lynds—<http://www.gaylelynds.com>
###

28. GET IT IN WRITING

By Elizabeth Massie

<http://www.elizabethmassie.com>

We're writers. We work with words. Words are our tools, along with our imaginations, our knowledge of the craft, our reference books, and our pens, papers, and computers. You'd think that because words are so important to us, we'd be sure that not only did we work with words but also that words worked for us.

You think by now, after 25 years in the writing biz, I'd know better.

When I consider contributing a story to an anthology, one of the first questions I have, besides what is the word length limit, when would it be due, and what other guidelines might be in place, is "What does this pay?" That's not being mercenary, it's dealing with business.

Now, I understand that some brand-new writers aren't as concerned about what a publisher pays as much as they hope their work will be deemed publishable.

That's understandable. My first two years "breaking into the biz" had me sell stories for contributors' copies or 1/4 cents a word at times. I was just thrilled to see my name, and my words, in print. Now this isn't to say I didn't want more money for my efforts, but I didn't avoid a magazine (some were, almost literally, "rags") because the pay sucked. However, I always knew what I was getting into when I submitted. It was there in writing, in the guidelines. Nowadays, I not only want to know what the pay is going to be, I *have* to know what the pay is going to be. I need to know how much is

coming in when. I need to know that the bills will be paid, I can put gas in the car, eat, and go to conventions.

Now, a public library isn't a publisher. A public library is our friend, full of books we can't afford to buy or have no room for in our homes, a place where we can go to research, can relax with a magazine, and pick up some good reads. I'm all for supporting the library.

Last spring, I got asked to be the keynote speaker at our public library's annual "Friends of the Library" dinner. Cool, sounds like fun. A chance to chat to people who love books, to do a little promotion myself. To talk about the craft of writing. And, the guy told me on the phone when he invited me, "There is a \$100 honorarium." Not a windfall but a nice offer, and I'm always calculating how each bit of income will be used for the aforementioned bills, gas, etc. (Cue little toy cash register: cha-ching!)

So I prepare my talk. I focus on my historical fiction. I bring props from different time periods to add some nice visuals. The talk runs about 45 minutes. I even do a sample activity with the group to show how ideas are generated. Everyone has a good time and say so after the talk. Then the president of the Friends of the Library gives me a card and a medium-sized, nicely wrapped box.

I go home and open the box. Inside is a lovely hand-carved wooden bowl from the local Artisan Shop. Nice, an extra goodie! Then I open the card. Inside is a note saying "Thanks for being our speaker!" and signed by all the FOL members. Hey...wait a minute. Where's my check?

Maybe they plan on mailing it, I think. I wait a week. No check. I send a polite e-mail to the FOL president noting that the bowl was lovely, thank you for the gift, but the check wasn't in the card. Was it going to be mailed at the end of the month, perhaps?

I get an e-mail back almost immediately, that tells me, "The bowl was the gift we selected for you. It is worth approximately \$100. We do hope you enjoy it."

WHAT???

I calm myself, get a Pepsi, pace around thinking this through, and then compose another polite e-mail: "The bowl is lovely. However, it would have been good to know ahead of time that it would be a gift instead of the cash. As a full-time freelance writer, I keep track each month as to what events I have scheduled and what income will be generated from each. Not that I'm trying to sound mercenary, but it just wasn't clear from your invitation that there would be no actual income from this."

A few days later I get an e-mail back with an apology that things were "vague" and that if I wanted to, I could return the bowl and they would give me \$100. As weird and uncomfortable as it is, I wrap the bowl back up, take it to the library, and a week later I receive the check in the mail. If I was J.K. Rowling, I could have let it slide. But I'm not and I didn't.

This is a long story to make the point: Get it in writing. When you write a story, a novel, an article, or a proposal and prepare to send it out, know the pay scale and basic terms if they decide to accept your work. Don't send a story to a publisher, hoping they pay well, only to get a contract that says you'll earn two contributor's copies for your troubles. Know as much as possible *before* the contract stage so you don't find yourself in an awkward situation. Ask; if these folks are professionals, they'll be happy to let you know. Get it in writing, either via e-mail or snail mail. If you chat on the phone, ask for a follow-up letter. Mysteries make good stories but don't make good business.

A young, unpublished writer recently told me he'd submitted material to a publisher who has an online site. The site has guidelines of all the wonderful, creative things they want to see and want to publish. However, there is no mention of pay. I asked this young man if they told him their pay rates by e-mail or letter. He said no. He said he guessed that if they accepted his work, they'd tell him at that point what they would pay. A newbie mistake but a mistake nonetheless. Going in blindly is bad business. Even if you stand to make only \$2 for your work, you should know that. You should have enough respect for yourself as a craftsman to expect to be treated professionally. Even if a publisher/editor/FOL president tells you something, get it backed up in writing. Words on the air have a funny way of morphing; words on paper remain unchanged. Well, unless it gets erased or somebody burns it up, but you know what I mean.

If you aren't diligent, you may end up trying to buy a tank of gas with a lovely carved wooden bowl.

Elizabeth Massie—<http://www.elizabethmassie.com>

###

29. TEN COMMANDMENTS OF GETTING A BOOK REVIEWED

By David J. Montgomery

<http://www.davidjmontgomery.com>

1. Thou must send the book to the reviewer. This is the most important point, and it's something you'll hear me say repeatedly. There simply is no way around it. If I don't get the book, I can't review it. And, unfortunately, that happens more often than you'd think.

2. Thou must make sure the book arrives in time. Usually this means 6-8 weeks prior to publication date. If I don't get the book until it's available in stores, there's very little chance that I'll be able to review it.

3. Thou must tell the reviewer when the book will be published. Sometimes it seems like it would be easier to get the formula for Coke than to find out when a book is actually going to be available. It's very time consuming to scramble around, trying to nail down the publication date of a book. So please, spare me the trouble and just tell me. That way, I know how to time my review.

4. Thou must learn who the reviewers are. In any genre or area of publishing, there are certain reviewers who write most frequently about your kind of book. Learn who those people are and get them the book. Have I made it clear yet how crucial it is to get your book in the right hands? There are no reviews without achieving this. None.

5. Thou must put your name in the mind of the reviewer. If a book arrives on my desk and I've never heard the author's name before and never heard of the book, all I have to go by is a press release and the jacket copy. It's very hard to make an impression from such a cold start.

6. Thou must make the book stand out from the crowd. I can't tell you how to do this—that's why I'm not a publicist. But if the book arrives as just one of a pack of dozens, the chances of it getting noticed are rather slim. There are just too many books and too little review space.

7. Thou must print and distribute your own ARCs if the publisher doesn't do it for you. This is especially true of PBOs (paperback originals). Some critics won't review PBOs, but some will. I do. But if I don't get the book until it's already in the store, it's probably too late.

8. Thou must not alienate, infuriate or otherwise piss off the reviewers. I know, it's not fair. They can write whatever they want about your book and you aren't allowed to respond. It sucks -- but who ever said that life is fair? A review is just one person's opinion, even if it is printed in the New York Times. It's not worth getting in a pissing match over. Authors never win pissing matches with critics.

9. Thou must be persistent. The harsh reality is that the chances of any given book being reviewed are slim. I get a minimum of 100 books every month, and the number is usually closer to 200. Out of those, I review 6 or 7. That's why you have to plan for the long term. Maybe this book won't be reviewed, but if you're able to build word-of-mouth, you've got a better chance with the next one.

10. Thou must write a book that's worthy of being reviewed. This is the hardest commandment of all to follow. Most books are very similar to other books. They tell the same old stories in the same old ways. Critics want to write about interesting books. They want to review books that are new or different, books that excite them, that move them. They want to write about books that cry out to be read. If you write a book like that, your chances of being reviewed increase substantially.

David J. Montgomery—<http://www.davidjmontgomery.com>

####

30. FREE EMAIL NEWSLETTER MARKETING FOR AUTHORS

By Douglas Clegg

<http://www.douglasclegg.com>

You're an author with a book coming out—and you need to communicate with readers on a regular basis. My top recommendation to any author is to have a free email newsletter to send to readers who subscribe to it at your website or blog. Here are some tips and bits of advice about the basics of this to help you launch your newsletter online. And remember: "free" is king online. Offer a free email newsletter to everyone who comes by your website—and increase the awareness and sales of you book and your name.

1. Set up a newsletter in one form or another. You can find various newsletter services online—see what other authors use and if you know them, ask them how they like the delivery service. My advice is: if you have a very limited budget, use a free service and then later on, take your group to a paid service. If you're a programming whiz, you can set up your own on your computer. For a more professional look, a paid service is the way to go.

2. Put a sign-up form on your website. Include a "Please subscribe to my free newsletter..." note and then add any additional text you want to put in there. Let people know they get a free incentive to subscribe such as a chapter excerpt, an original story, or

a reprint of a story. Think of what one of your readers might want from a writer online. Downloads like desktop wallpapers, avatars, and screensavers work well for this, too.

3. Decide how often you want to put out the newsletter. I used to think it was better to send it more frequently, but I've come to the conclusion that the fewer newsletters I sent out each year, the better. That is, unless you have things to offer your subscribers all the time or want to inform them about events they'll benefit from a bit more often. I used to send the newsletter out weekly, but I found that the more frequently I sent the newsletter, the less it was opened by the subscribers (although for awhile there, I did have a "get a free bookstore gift certificate" trivia quiz each week that got nearly everyone to click open that email!) Now I only send out an email newsletter when I have specific news, offers, or upcoming events. When a serial novel is in the works for my subscribers, the newsletter posts more frequently.

4. Do not sign people up to your newsletter—ever. Even if they ask. Instead, show them where to sign up on your website so they can do it themselves.

5. Make your newsletter as appealing as you can to anyone who hears about it. It is your communication channel to the people most likely to want to hear from you regularly about your writing—these readers are important to you. My experience is that they're a good group of readers, too. As you hear from them over the years, you'll learn a lot as they tell you about their lives and the books they're reading. You'll gain valuable insight into how readers approach your fiction.

6. Each reader is important. I don't care if you have 10 subscribers or 100,000. No matter how large or small your subscriber base is, it'll keep growing over time so long as you treat the subscribers well and don't abuse their inboxes.

7. Keep your list clean. What this means is you should check for bounces, disabled accounts, old email addresses that are effectively "dead," because someone changed their email service—and check your list of subscribers regularly. It's usually fairly painless to do this and might take you a few minutes a week if you keep up with it.

8. Do not abuse the subscribers. Use your newsletter to give information that benefits your readers. This would include updates about your writing, anything you're doing of interest at your website, and more. Remember to benefit the readers. Do not send bulk invites to anyone. Instead, let people know you have a newsletter sign-up at your website. Share this on message boards as you would any information. If you use a social networking site, let the friends in your network know about the newsletter, as well. No tricks, no abuse, no sharing your list with anyone.

All right, this is just a basic outline for the author email newsletter. Go subscribe to various writers' newsletters to see what they're doing. Some of the writers are very personable and chatty while others simply announce a book when it comes out with a brief, nice note. Still others get more elaborate. The more valuable the information you offer readers, the more subscribers you'll get.

Douglas Clegg—<http://www.douglasclegg.com>

###

31. E-Gads, 2009! Publishing E-pocalypse or a New Age?

By MJ Rose

<http://www.mjrose.com>

As we come to the end of 2009 there's only one thing we know about the future of publishing—it's going to keep changing. Like it or not, no matter what industry you're in and how hard you try to hold onto the past, fighting change is not only futile, it's often what kills you.

When Change is Pain

The changes we're in the middle of are cause for alarm for many people:

Kirkus is gone.

Fifty-four percent of people now find out about books via online ads. (Yes ads! Not reviews.) Sixty-seven percent of people buying a book didn't know what they were going to buy before they walked in the store.

There are millions of readers who post about what they're reading on their blogs and social networks like Twitter, Facebook and Goodreads.

People can read e-books on their iPhones on line in the supermarket, go home, turn on their Kindles and be instantly synced up.

HarperCollins has an online slush pile called Authonomy. Harlequin has a similar testing ground called Carina.

And Steven Covey, author of the perennial backlist bestseller *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, just gave exclusive rights to his e-books to Amazon and not his publisher.

Bookstores are publishers and authors are publishers and publishers are bookstores.

And yet, the one thing everyone seems to fear the most is Amazon's slashing e-book prices and selling them at a loss.

Last week almost all the major publishers announced they would be holding back e-book releases on select titles until three to four months after the hardcover release.

Now? The time to have gotten involved in timing and pricing was two years ago before when the Kindle came on the market. When experimentation would have made sense. When there were no precedents set. But to do it now?

Kassia Krozser at Book Square blogged that the way some agents and publishers are reacting is fetishistic: "We must worship the all-mighty hardcover," she wrote, "without worrying about the actual impact to overall sales. Without even considering the reader. Of course, why would publishing ever consider the reader?"

Why indeed?

As someone who has spent her life in advertising doing endless research about the end user, I'm continually shocked by the lack of information publishers have about readers. And even worse their lack of concern about the info they don't have.

E-books vs. Hardcover

There is a lot of information about readers that is key to what the future holds and how it's going to play out. And we need to be paying attention to it.

For instance, 40 percent of hardcovers are either resold online two or three times or lent to friend and family two to three times. Or swapped two or three or more times.

None of those transactions pay a penny to the publisher or the author.

But e-books can't be resold. Or borrowed. (Barnes & Noble's Nook offers publishers the option to lend once, but few allow it.)

So, on the one hand, you have an e-book that is priced to sell and sells more copies because of it.

On the other hand you have a hardcover few can afford that is re-read/re-sold or swapped several times at no profit to anyone.

Publishers say they are afraid that low e-book prices will devalue the “book,” so their solution is to hold back e-books and not release them when the hardcover comes out. Agent Nat Sobel, in a plea to publishers to hold back e-book releases said: “In just a few years we have seen electronic sales of bestsellers go from 2 percent to 12 percent to 15 percent of total sales. Next year, they may constitute 20 percent. Who knows where this will end once bestsellers are on cell phones, Blackberries and the like?”

Does that mean we should punish excited new readers?

And if we do, don't you think they'll notice? The consumer isn't stupid. She knows the difference between a hardcover, a mass market and a digital file. She knows you're withholding one version to try to cash in on another.

Moreover, from a marketing perspective it's not smart to make her wait three or four months to buy the e-book because the e-book reader is part of a buzz machine that is one of the most potent we've ever seen.

Early adopters are also the first to talk up a product or service—or in this case—a book. That's why movie companies have free screenings. It's why publishers have always spent so much on reviewer's copies. But media is fractured.

There are 60 percent fewer reviews than there were five years ago. Even Oprah is going away. We don't have identifiable groups who set trends and talk up books, movies, and restaurants anymore—we have hundreds of thousands of savvy consumers.

E-book Readers Make Noise

People who read e-books are not only early adopters, they're active online tweeting and blogging. They're the social networkers who turn things viral, who make noise.

And noise sells books.

At a time when the marketing dollar has shrunk to mere pennies and few books get any meaningful advertising once co-op is taken care of, can we afford to keep the buzz machine quiet for four months?

Plus, if you hold back e-books, then you need to market hardcovers alone and then re-market the e-books four months later and then re-market paperbacks four months after that because we know you can't count on the reader to remember books they heard about last week let alone three months ago.

My company, AuthorBuzz.com, recently conducted a poll with 200 people who own e-reading devices. Every one of them reported they were buying at least two times more books because of their e-purchases. Some reported a 300 percent increase.

No matter how bad at math I am, I know selling 3,000 books at \$10 is better than selling 300 books at \$25.

Don't we want more people reading more books?

Be Not Afraid

The inescapable truth of doing business in the 21st century, according to author and CEO of BookTour.com, Kevin Smokler, is that you have to give the customer what they want. “There are more of them than there are of you. Should you choose to make it

difficult for your own purposes, said customers will simply abandon what you are offering them and go elsewhere.”

Yes, it’s a scary time.

If we lose the one-two punch of hardcover releases followed a year later by a mass market or trade paperback release, it might affect our advances but that doesn’t mean we won’t be able to earn a living as writers.

It could mean we sell some work directly to readers. Or that our agents become entrepreneurial managers who help us find other kinds of paying gigs.

It might mean that more of us have to keep our day jobs longer.

But based on how much authors are doing now to market their own books, advances need to be re-adjusted and the royalty structure needs to be restructured anyway.

As Mike Shatzkin points out on his blog, authors might notice that the digital world offers alternative sales channels that don’t involve traditional publishing—especially at a time when traditional publishing isn’t so traditional anymore and publishers are expecting authors to do more and more marketing.

What’s not scary is that people haven’t stopped reading. They’re just embracing more ways to read the printed word—whether it’s ink or e-ink. And nothing matters more than that.

We won’t be facing apocalypse as long as we are forward thinking, embrace change and find a way to work with it. We will be doomed if we cling desperately the old models simply because that’s the way it always worked.

I’m a founding member of ITW—International Thriller Writers. In 2007, one of our board members, the amazing crime writer David Hewson, suggested we abolish dues and find another way to support the organization financially. At first the board balked. No writer’s organization had ever made it without dues. That’s how it was always done. How could we do something so crazy?

Hewson’s answer became ITW’s motto: “When we imitate we fail. When we innovate we succeed.”

ITW is succeeding and publishing can succeed, too, as long as we don’t try to preserve the past at the expense of the future.

M.J. Rose—<http://www.mjrose.com>

###

32. KINDLE SALES: 30K EBOOKS IN 11 MONTHS

By J.A. Konrath

<http://www.jakonrath.com>

I uploaded my first self-published ebook for Amazon Kindle back on April 8, 2009.

As of this morning, March 4, 2010, at 9:23 a.m., I’ve sold 29,224 ebooks.

I’m currently selling \$1.99 ebooks at the rate of 170 per day. That means I’m earning around \$120 per day just sitting on my butt. If this trend continues as-is, I’ll earn

\$43,800 this year on previously published short stories and novels that NY print publishing rejected.

But I don't expect this trend to continue as-is. I expect it to explode.

In July, Amazon is doubling royalty rates for self-publishers, going from 35% to 70%.

I have no doubt, by the end of the year, I'll be making \$5k per month on Kindle. And that's probably a low estimate.

So how am I doing this? What's the secret?

Here are my guesses as to why I keep selling well.

1. Being known. I already have some name recognition from my print books. There are half a million books of mine in print worldwide, and some of those readers go looking for me on Amazon and find my self-pubbed Kindle titles.

2. My blog. I have a blog called A Newbie's Guide to Publishing where I often talk about ebooks. That blog gets over a thousand hits per day, and some of those readers wind up becoming ebook buyers.

3. Low price. I've found the sweet spot for pricing to be \$1.99, though that will go up to \$2.99 when the royalty rate changes. Perhaps I could make a bit more money selling at \$2.99 now, but that would mean some fewer sales, which would negate:

4. Being on the Kindle genre bestseller lists. The bestseller lists are chances for browsers to find you when they're looking for well-known books by well-known authors. In my case, they'll buy a Stephen King, James Patterson, or J.D. Robb, see me next to that author for only \$1.99, and it's a one-click impulse purchase. It's worth a lower price to stay high up on those lists. Last week I had ten titles in the Police Procedural Top 100. I believe these lists become self-fulfilling prophecies. The more you sell, the more you sell.

5. Word of mouth. Or in this case, word of Google. If you Google me, you get a lot of hits. Lots of folks link to me, review me, read and recommend me. I did a lot of self-promotion for my print career, and that foundation still stands in over 100,000 mentions on the world wide web. This extends to Twitter and Facebook, and the kind folks who retweet and link to me.

6. Promotion. Strangely, I don't do much self-promotion for my Kindle books. Especially compared to my print books, where I've signed at over 1,200 bookstores. I've posted my titles on a few Kindle forums, done a few Amazon blogs and Listmanias, and been lucky to get a lot of reviews and a few mentions by the mainstream media. But for the most part, my Kindle promo strategy has been hands-off. In fact, I know that Kindlers hate too much blatant self-promotion, and will label you a spammer if you toot your own horn a lot.

7. Cross Pollination. It's no secret that I write scary books under the pen name Jack Kilborn. I want all JA Konrath readers to know this, and all Jack Kilborn readers to know he's really JA Konrath. So I've tied the two names together by writing the novella Truck Stop, featuring my series character Jack Daniels, and my villains from Afraid and SERIAL. I wrote SERIAL with Blake Crouch, ensuring his fans discover me. I wrote novellas with Tom Schreck, Jeff Strand, and Henry Perez, to make sure their fans know who I am. And I recently put ebook excerpts from my other titles in the back of my ebooks. Plus, I'm now trading excerpts with Robert W. Walker to hook even more readers. Remember my Virtual Paper blog?

8. Decent stories. Name recognition and cheap prices only go so far. If the ebooks aren't any good, sales will drop off. Not only should the writing be stellar, but the Kindle formatting should be perfect. A great story with terrible word formatting won't sell. Period.

9. Good covers and product descriptions. I just improved some of my covers, and saw an immediate uptick in sales. I'm also constantly adding to/tweaking my book descriptions. I've found that more information leads to stronger sales (as opposed to teasers with less info.) I also make sure my first line of description is "Only \$1.99 for a limited time." By announcing the low pricing is limited, I encourage impulse buyers.

10. New content. Every few months I try to add another ebook to my Kindle store. The more books you have on Kindle, the greater your chances of being discovered. And if someone discovers you, and likes you, they'll buy more of your ebooks.

J.A. Konrath—<http://www.jakonrath.com>
###

33. KILLING THE SACRED COWS OF PUBLISHING: SELF-PROMOTION

By Dean Wesley Smith
<http://www.deadwesleysmith.com>

The myth simply is: "All self promotion for a writer is good." Nope. Completely false. The truth is sometimes self promotion of your own book can hurt you, sometimes it can help you. The key is not falling for the myth that all self promotion is good.

Right now, in late 2009, the publishing industry is changing so fast that it is often hard to keep up for a writer with his head buried in writing the next book. Things are changing month to month, and the major publishers in New York and around the world are struggling to even stay a year or two behind. Where exactly is all this change happening? In the distribution system, which in turn is causing changes throughout the rest of the system.

For a very easy way to understand publishing, write at the top of a piece of paper the word WRITER. Then draw a line down the center of the page a few inches and write the word PUBLISHER, then continue the line a few more inches and write DISTRIBUTION, and then continue the line to the bottom of the page and write the word READER.

WRITER
PUBLISHER
DISTRIBUTION
READER

Everything flows from the top to the bottom. For hundreds of years, that was, and still is, the basic structure of the publishing business. The writer supplies product to a publisher, who then creates the book product, promotes, and gets the books into distribution (which includes bookstores), finally ending up in readers' hands.

On your slip of paper, draw a line across the page between the writer and the publisher. That's the contract between a writer and a publisher, the paper that defines the

terms between the supplier of product and the producer of the product. For a long time, the common knowledge was that a writer never crossed that contract line unless a publisher asked for their help on a tour. And, of course, the publisher always paid all the writer's expenses for such help. It still works that way with major book tours for writers.

Then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a few romance writers decided they could help their sales by talking to the truckers, handing out treats early in the morning to truck drivers, creating bookmarks, and so on, including paying for their own book tour. It worked for a few early on, then every writer seemed to jump on the bandwagon and in short order the bookstores didn't want to see a writer come through their doors with more crap. Mail boxes were full of junk produced by writers and mailed to everyone they could think of. That sort of self promotion of a book basically became worthless. And very expensive for a writer to do.

And thus, the myth of self promotion was born. Writers coming in since the early 1990's have heard over and over that you have to self promote your own book or fail.

Hogwash. Let me simply say that what sells a book, both to an editor and to a reader, is a well-told story written well and presented well. The better the book, the better it will sell. If your books are not selling, learn how to write better books and learn how to write better proposals, and then mail it all to editors. It really is that simple.

Now, that said, here we are in late 2009 and the world has shifted once again. Kindles, Nooks, ebooks, POD, and a dozen other ways of getting a book from a publisher to a reader has arrived. Finally.

Why do I say "finally"? This change has been thought about and talked about for almost two decades. It was just slow arriving, but when it did finally arrive, it hit the system with an impact.

No one, including me, is sure how or where all these changes are leading. All we can do is follow the news and keep learning. But does it change the fact that a good story, well written and well presented will sell? Nope.

Do the changes in the industry change the self-promotion thinking? Yes, some.

So, at this point, in late 2009, what can an author do to help a book get better sales for their publisher?

Before I get to a few ideas on that question, let's talk about how return for self promotion is measured for a writer. It's a simple formula, actually.

Time Spent + Money Spent = Total cost.

Compare Money Returned in Sales to Total Cost.

Remember that every moment you are spending self promoting an old book is a moment you are not writing a new book. So just as with any business, figure time lost and put an actual dollar figure on that time. (Say it took you three months to write the last book and your advance was \$6,000. If you spend one month self promoting the old book, it cost you \$2,000 in time lost.)

An example of silly thinking: An author manages to set up his own book tour, spending two weeks traveling, hitting bookstores, doing some signings and such, promoting his new paperback release from Bantam Books. The author will spend upwards of three weeks total time on planning and traveling, three weeks not spent on writing the next book. The actual out-of-pocket expenses will total \$5,000 at least not counting the time lost costs.

What will the author get in return? With luck and being very personable, the author manages to sell an extra 500 copies of the book (that's a lot). The author gets an 8 percent royalty rate on the \$6.00 book, so 48 cents per book. The author will return about \$250 bucks. Okay, that's just silly. Spend \$5,000 and three weeks to make \$250. A great way to quickly go out of business for any business.

Here's the worst part. Remember, publishing is bottom-line focused. Let's assume that's the author's first book for Bantam and he doesn't do the exact same thing for book number two. What would happen? The second book sales will decline from book number one. The sales trend will be DOWN on the accounting sheets. Not a good thing in publishing and he won't sell book number three. His promotion tour cost him not only money and writing time, but his book series with Bantam. (I have watched this happen with a good dozen writer friends in the last twenty years. Some changed names and kept going, others are still wondering what went wrong.)

So, why do publishers with major bestsellers push their authors on intense tours? Simply to increase the velocity of sales. Bestseller lists are measured by the sales per week. If a publisher can push up the numbers in certain areas over a short period of time and shove the author onto a bestseller list, then sales pick up overall. In other words, publishers know what they are doing, authors don't. That simple.

An author's job is to write a good book. A publisher's job is to create the book and promote it and sell it. And all that is detailed out in the contracts between the two parties.

So, back to the point of what is good self promotion these days? Following are a few suggestions.

- 1) A web site. An active one, where you post a few times a week and have photo and buying information for your books. Key to the web site is make it a name that people can find. Notice, my name is this web site. Easy to find. My pen names have web sites as well. It's simple and takes very little time and allows readers to find your work and your different work.

Also, this helps for sales to editors. An editor with a manuscript in front of them they like will pull up your web site and look at it. If you are badmouthing New York editors or are a real pain on your web site, they will see that and decide life is too short. But if you have a professional web site that promotes your work, then they will look at that as a good thing. It still takes a good book, well written and presented well that fits their line to sell to them, but it never hurts to look professional on your web site. And they are easy to do these days, even for an old fart like me.

- 2) Facebook and Twitter accounts. I seldom post at the moment on either, but will change that starting this month, now that I have everything moved and the master class is finished. Again, be professional and not too personal. No one really cares what you had for lunch unless you had that lunch with Dean Koontz.

- 3) Do a signing for your local independent bookstore. That won't make you enough sales to hurt your numbers, but it is good support of a bookstore that I assume you go into regularly. It will make the stores a few bucks and let your family and friends celebrate your book with you. In other words, it's fun. But just do one per book. One is enough.

Anything more? Maybe. If you sold your book to a smaller or regional or University press, they might ask you to help some with promotion, because a few extra

sales can make a huge difference to a small press. In that case, work smart. Understand what you are good at, what you are poor at, and where you can help sell a few more copies without hurting your writing time. Keep it in balance.

If you are the publisher of your own book, that's another matter. You are responsible in that case for all promotion, and even the smallest amount can help. Again, the key is to keep it in balance and write the next book.

General Rule of Thumb on Self Promotion: If you are spending more money than a tiny fraction of your advance on self promotion and more time than it took to write the book on self promotion, you are doing it very, very wrong.

Second General Rule of Thumb on Self Promotion Make your next book a better book. That's the best thing you can do to promote your career and your writing.

Remember that self promotion is in the distribution area of publishing. That is part of the publisher's job to handle. If you self-publish your own book, then it's your job, but if you are selling books to New York publishers, keep your focus on the next book.

Dean Wesley Smith—<http://www.deanwesleysmith.com>
###

AFTERWORD:

There you go. Now you, too, can be an award-winning, best-selling writer, preferably one who doesn't end up like Hemingway. The only conventional wisdom I'd add is to take the advice that works and leave the rest. You decide which is which.

Thanks for reading and good luck with your writing. Please visit <http://writegoodordie.blogspot.com> and share your writing advice and interact with other writers and readers. This volume will be continually updated as we come to realize everything we knew was wrong, or if smarter writers come along, or if for some reason we don't survive.

While this book is free wherever possible, any proceeds generated will be donated to Literacy Inc. (<http://www.literacyinc.com>), a non-profit organization that promotes reading for teenagers. All works are the property and copyright 2010 of the respective authors, but may be freely shared, reprinted, or published, as long as the writer's byline and web address are included.

Scott Nicholson

#####

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES:

Adrienne Jones is an award-winning humor writer and author of three published novels, *Brine*, *Gypsies Stole my Tequila*, and *The Hoax*. While her work has often been described as “defying genre,” her tastes lean toward off-beat science fiction and dark fantasy. She's also completely defiled her journalism degree by writing a series of unreality based essays and articles for various horror, science fiction, and humor magazines, and has little interest in sliding back into reality any time soon. Her latest humor/sci-fi novel, *Blender Children*, has been picked up by Diforio Literary Agency, and she's currently working on a new novel and co-writing a black comedy screenplay. Jones' Web site is <http://www.adriennejones.net>.

Alexandra Sokoloff is a screenwriter who has sold original suspense and thriller scripts and adapted novels for numerous Hollywood studios, for producers such as Michael Bay, Laura Ziskin, David Heyman, and Neal Moritz. Her adaptation of Sabine Deitmer's psychological thriller COLD KISSES was filmed in Germany.

Alex's debut ghost story, THE HARROWING, was nominated for an Anthony Award and a Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel. Her supernatural thrillers THE PRICE and THE UNSEEN are also now out from St. Martin's Press, with BOOK OF SHADOWS and a paranormal suspense for Silhouette Nocturne, SHIFTERS, coming in 2010. Alex recently won the International Thriller Writers Thriller Award for Best Short Fiction of the year for her short story, “The Edge of Seventeen”, in THE DARKER MASK. She is also the author of SCREENWRITING TRICKS FOR AUTHORS (AND SCREENWRITERS!), a workbook based on her internationally acclaimed blog and workshops.

Alex has served on the Board of Directors of the WGAw, the screenwriters' union, and the board of Mystery Writers of America, and is the founder of Writraction.com, an online community and resource center of 2000+ professional screenwriters. In her spare time, she sings as a Killerette in the ITW's Killer Thriller Band and performs with Heather Graham's Slush Pile Players.

Visit her website at <http://alexandrasokoloff.com> and her blog on Screenwriting Tricks for Authors at <http://screenwritingtricks.com>.

Brandon Massey is the award-winning author of several thrillers and story collections, including *Dark Corner*, *The Other Brother*, *Don't Ever Tell*, and *Vicious*. He lives with his family near Atlanta, GA, where he is at work on his next suspense thriller. Visit him online at <http://www.brandonmassey.com> and sign up for his free newsletter, The Talespinner, to receive book news updates and writing tips.

Dean Wesley Smith has written more than 90 popular novels, both his own and tie-in projects, including well over 100 published short stories. His novels include *Laying the Music to Rest* and *X-Men: The Jewels of Cyttorak*. With Kristine Kathryn Rusch, he is the coauthor of *The Tenth Planet* trilogy and the motion picture novelization *X-Men*, along with more than a dozen *Star Trek* books and two original *Men in Black* novels. He has also written novels in a number of gaming universes, including Vor and the novelization for the movie *Final Fantasy*. Currently, he is writing thrillers and mystery novels under another name. His Web site is <http://www.deanwesleysmith.com>.

David J. Montgomery is the thriller/mystery critic for *The Daily Beast* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He has written about authors and books for several of the country's largest newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *Boston Globe*. His reviews and journalism have also appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, *Kansas City Star*, *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* and *National Review Online*. An occasional writer of fiction, David's short stories have appeared in *Mira's Thriller 2: Stories You Just Can't Put Down*, *Plots with Guns* and *Demolition Magazine*. His Web site is <http://www.davidjmontgomery.com>.

Elizabeth Massie is a two-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of horror novels, historical novels, media tie-in novels, radio dramas, short fiction, and educational readers. Her books include *Sineater*, *Welcome Back to the Night*, *Homeplace*, *The Fear Report*, *Dark Shadows: Dreams of the Dark*, *The Tudors: King Takes Queen*, *The Tudors: Thy Will Be Done*, and many more.

Beth is also the creator of the Skeeryvilletown menagerie of bizarre cartoon characters, which are featured on clothing and other items at <http://www.cafepress.com/Skeeryvilletown>. Recent works include the psychological horror/dark humor novel *DD Murphy*, *Secret Policeman*, co-authored with Alan M. Clark, and the comic book *Julie Walker is The Phantom in Race Against Death*. She lives in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with illustrator Cortney Skinner. Her Web site is <http://www.elizabethmassie.com>

Douglas Clegg published his first novel, *Goat Dance*, in 1989 and has since written more than 20 books. He has primarily written supernatural fiction—from horror to fantasy to psychological suspense with a paranormal edge. An innovator in electronic publishing, Clegg's novel *Naomi* was the first serialized electronic novel to be sponsored by a major publisher. In 2001, *Purity* became the first fiction to appear on a cell phone.

He's won the Bram Stoker Award, the International Horror Guild Award, and the Shocker Award and his work has been translated into nine languages.

Additionally, he's been Director of Marketing for a publisher, editor for a bookstore's Web site, a marketing consultant for publishers, publicity firms, and booksellers. He also co-authored *Buzz Your Book* with M.J. Rose. His Web site is <http://www.douglaslegg.com>.

Gayle Lynds is a N.Y. Times bestseller and the award-winning author of nine spy novels and has been called the Queen of Espionage. Her newest, *THE BOOK OF SPIES*, is the beginning of her first series. Lee Child writes she's "today's finest espionage writer," while BookPage claims: "Lynds has joined the deified ranks of spy thriller authors like Robert Ludlum and John le Carre" and the London Observer says simply she's "a kick-ass thriller writer." Please visit her at <http://www.GayleLynds.com>.

Harley Jane Kozak, at age 19, headed for the Big Apple and into the professional acting program at NYU's School of the Arts (now Tisch School of the Arts). After completing the program, she was cast in the feature film *The House on Sorority Row*. This enabled her to retire her waitress shoes.

Then came a trio of principle roles in soaps—*Texas*, *Guiding Light* and *Santa Barbara*—that came to a smashing halt when Harley's final character (a nun) was crushed to death by the giant neon letter "C." But that "C" gig had gotten her to L.A., where she went on to star in feature films and prime-time television programs. Ten years later she began to write novels, have babies and acquire dogs, cats, fish, and rabbits—and the rest, as they say, is history. Her books are *Dating Dead Men*, *Dead Ex*, *Dating Is Murder*, and *A Date You Can't Refuse*. Her Web site is <http://www.harleyjanekozak.com> and she participates at <http://thelipstickchronicles.typepad.com/>.

Heather Graham is a New York Times and USA Today best-selling author. Heather Graham majored in theater arts at the University of South Florida. After a stint of several years in dinner theater, back-up vocals, and bartending, she stayed home after the birth of her third child and began to write, working on short horror stories and romances. After some trial and error, she sold her first book, *WHEN NEXT WE LOVE*, in 1982 and since then has written more than 100 novels and novellas including category, romantic suspense, historical romance, vampire fiction, time travel, occult, and Christmas holiday fare. She wrote the launch books for the Dell's Ecstasy Supreme line, *Silhouette's Shadows*, and for Harlequin's mainstream fiction imprint, *Mira Books*.

Heather was a founding member of the Florida Romance Writers chapter of RWA and, since 1999, has hosted the Romantic Times Vampire Ball, with all revenues going directly to children's charity. She also writes as Shannon Drake and Heather Graham Pozzessere. Her Web site is <http://www.eheathergraham.com>.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is an award-winning mystery, romance, science fiction, and fantasy writer. She has written many novels under various names, including Kristine Grayson for romance, and Kris Nelscott for mystery. Her novels have made the bestseller lists and have been published in 14 countries and 13 different languages.

Her awards include Ellery Queen Readers Choice Award, John W. Campbell Award, two Hugo awards, two Asimov's Readers Choice Awards, the Best Mystery Novel award, UPC award, the Endeavor Award, and is currently nominated for the Romantic Times Book Review's Reviewer's Choice Award for Best Science Fiction novel.

Rusch is the former editor of prestigious *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Before that, she and Dean Wesley Smith, started and ran Pulphouse Publishing, a science fiction and mystery press in Eugene. She lives and works on the Oregon Coast. Her Web site is <http://www.kristinekathrynrusch.com>.

Jonathan Maberry is a multiple Bram Stoker Award-winning author, magazine feature writer, playwright, content creator and writing teacher/lecturer. Novels include GHOST ROAD BLUES, DEAD MAN'S SONG, BAD MOON RISING, PATIENT ZERO, THE DRAGON FACTORY and ROT AND RUIN, as well as THE WOLFMAN novelization. In addition, Maberry writes for Marvel Comics and is the co-creator (with Laura Schrock) of ON THE SLAB, an entertainment news show in development by Stage 9 for ABC Disney / Stage 9. In addition to teaching, career counseling, and martial arts expertise, he's penned a number of nonfiction books on fictional monsters, such as ZOMBIE CSU and THEY BITE! His Big Scary Blog is at <http://www.jonathanmaberry.com>.

Joseph Andrew Konrath was born in Skokie, IL in 1970. His first novel, *Whiskey Sour* (2004), introduced Lt. Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels. Others in the series include *Bloody Mary* (2005), *Rusty Nail* (2006), *Dirty Martini* (2007), *Fuzzy Navel* (2008), and *Cherry Bomb* (2009). The books combine hair-raising scares and suspense with laugh-out-loud comedy.

Joe is also the editor of the hitman anthology *These Guns For Hire* (2006). His short stories have appeared in more than 60 magazines and collections, and his work has been translated into 10 languages. Under the name Jack Kilborn, Joe wrote the horror novel *Afraid* (2009). He is also author of numerous ebooks, including the Kindle bestsellers *Serial* (with Blake Crouch) and *The List*.

Joe's been nominated for several awards, including the Anthony, Macavity, Gumshoe, Dagger, and Barry, and has won the Derringer, Bob Kellog, EQMM Reader's Choice, and two Lovie awards. His blog, *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing* (jakonath.blogspot.com), has had over 400,000 hits since 2005. His Web site is <http://www.jakonrath.com>.

Kevin J. Anderson is the author of more than one hundred novels, 47 of which have appeared on national or international bestseller lists. He has over 20 million books in print in thirty languages. He has won or been nominated for numerous prestigious awards, including the Nebula Award, Bram Stoker Award, the SFX Reader's Choice Award, the American Physics Society's Forum Award, and New York Times Notable Book. Anderson has co-authored ten books in Frank Herbert's classic DUNE universe with Herbert's son Brian. For further information, see the official "Dune" site, www.dunenovels.com. Herbert and Anderson are also co-producers on a major new film of DUNE from Paramount Pictures.

Anderson's highly popular epic science fiction series, "The Saga of Seven Suns," is his most ambitious work. Anderson is working on an epic nautical fantasy trilogy, "Terra Incognita," about sailing ships, sea monsters, and the crusades. The first volume, THE EDGE OF THE WORLD, was out in 2009 and THE MAP OF ALL THINGS is out in 2010.

Anderson has also written or co-written (with his wife, Rebecca Moesta) 20 STAR WARS novels, as well as three X-FILES novels. He has also coauthored a major bestseller with Dean Koontz, *PRODIGAL SON*, which sold more than a million copies in a single year. He has written original novels *SLAN HUNTER* (a completion of SF grandmaster A.E. van Vogt's last novel), *HOPSCOTCH*, *CAPTAIN NEMO*, *THE MARTIAN WAR*, *BLINDFOLD*, *RESURRECTION, INC.*, and the thrillers *ILL WIND* and *IGNITION* (both with Doug Beason). For the Horror Writers Association, he edited the bestselling anthology of humorous horror stories, *BLOOD LITE*.

Anderson has scripted numerous bestselling comics and graphic novels, including Justice Society of America for DC, Star-Jammers for Marvel, Star Wars and Predator for Dark Horse, X-Files for Topps, and Star Trek for Wildstorm. He and his wife Rebecca Moesta also wrote the original comic series and graphic novel, *GRUMPY OLD MONSTERS* for IDW. His Web site is <http://www.wordfire.com>.

M.J. Rose is the international bestselling author of 10 novels: *Lip Service*, *In Fidelity*, *Flesh Tones*, *Sheet Music*, *Lying in Bed*, *The Halo Effect*, *The Delilah Complex*, *The Venus Fix*, *The Reincarnationist*, and *The Memorist*. Rose is also the co-author with Angela Adair Hoy of *How to Publish and Promote Online*, and with Doug Clegg of *Buzz Your Book*.

She is a founding member and board member of International Thriller Writers and the founder of the first marketing company for authors: AuthorBuzz.com. She runs two popular blogs; Buzz, Balls & Hype and Backstory. Getting published has been an adventure for Rose who self-published *Lip Service* late in 1998 after several traditional publishers turned it down. After selling over 2,500 copies (in both electronic and trade paper format) *Lip Service* became the first e-book and the first self-published novel chosen by the Literary Guild/Doubleday Book Club as well as being the first e-book to go on to be published by a mainstream New York publishing house. Rose has been profiled in numerous magazines and television shows. Her Web site is <http://www.mjrose.com>.

Mur Lafferty has written for over 15 role-playing games, one textbook, one book on podcasting, one novel, countless stories and podcasts, and several magazines. Her column, Geek Fu Action Grip, appears regularly in the magazine *Knights of the Dinner Table*. She has published fiction with the podcast Escape Pod, Scribe Press, Murky Depths and Hub Magazine. Other podcast projects include "Heaven," I Should Be Writing, Playing for Keeps, Pseudopod and The Takeover. She currently blogs and podcasts for Tor.com and her Web site is <http://www.murverse.com>.

Robert Kroese is a writer and software developer who lives in Ripon, California. He self-published his first novel, *Mercury Falls*, in October, 2009. As of March, 2010, *Mercury Falls* had received 93 five star reviews on Amazon and has been in the top 1,000 bestselling books for Kindle for more than five months. Kroese's success with this novel caught the attention of Amazon, which will be re-publishing *Mercury Falls* through its Amazon Encore program in late 2010. His Web site is <http://mercuryfalls.net>.

Scott Nicholson is author of 10 thrillers, including *The Red Church*, *Drummer Boy*, *Disintegration*, *They Hunger*, and *The Skull Ring*. He's published more than 60 stories in seven countries, and many of the stories are collected in *Flowers*, *The First*, and *Ashes*. In addition to six screenplays, he's written or edited a number of comic series, including *Dirt*, *Little Shivers*, *Grave Conditions*, and *Dreamboat*. A freelance editor and journalist in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, his web site is <http://www.hauntedcomputer.com>.

Kewber is a Brazilian artist who draws *Sleeprunners*, *Dirt*, *Chaos Campus*, and *The Gorge*. His work can be seen at <http://kewber.deviantart.com/>

About Literacy Inc.: Literacy Incorporated is a non-profit organization on a mission to fight illiteracy across America by reaching out to high school students in all corners of the continental United States. A person's social responsibility is also affected by how much he or she reads. Literary readers are 27% more likely to volunteer or do charity work than non-readers and are 31% more likely to vote. Deficient readers, on the other hand, are far more likely to drop out of high school, are 33% more likely to be out of the workforce, and are more likely to be put in prison

To help battle these problems, Deborah LeBlanc, the founder of Literacy Inc., decided in 2005 to create an incentive-based program that would encourage America's students to read—the LeBlanc Literacy Challenge. To participate in this annual Challenge, students must read two books, take an on-line quiz and submit a short essay. The participant with the highest score wins a grand prize of \$5,000 in cash, plus an additional \$1,000 that is given to the school or library of the winner's choice. As an added incentive to further education, if the winner chooses to put the \$5,000 in a college fund, Deborah will personally set up a matching funds program at the college of the student's choice. In addition, once the student is enrolled in the university, his or her dedication to education, as made evident through grades and attendance, will be rewarded with additional funds to cover subsequent semesters, all the way through a four-year bachelor's degree program. Other prizes include a desktop computer as well as gift certificates to bookstores with values up to \$275.

As an added incentive to get students to read, the books needed to take the Challenge are provided to students in high schools across the nation at no cost. At the conclusion of an inspiring and motivational presentation, Literacy Inc. places the books directly in the students' hands, giving them one less reason not to take the Challenge and read. By combining excitement and reading through concrete, valuable incentives along with an inspiring presentation, Literacy Inc. encourages high school students to take that crucial first step in creating a more literate society—reading a book, cover to cover.

For more information on the organization, visit <http://www.literacyinc.com>.

Join us at the organic, interactive writing manual *Write Good or Die* as a blog at <http://writegoodordie.blogspot.com>, where you can read more tips and share writing advice.

Thanks for reading and good luck with your writing!

###