

*The Fiction
Writer's
Toolkit*

**A Guide to Writing Novels
and Getting Published**

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e-reads

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Preface

Point of view is the most critical style element in writing. It is also important in reading this book. I've been making a living writing for well over a decade and with each year and every new manuscript come new lessons learned. Over that time period I've also taught writing novels and getting published at various workshops and for numerous organizations. I've seen numerous ideas, stories and manuscripts in the course of teaching, helping other writers, and judging contests. I've been published by four different American publishers, ten foreign publishers, worked with over a dozen editors, and have had two primary agents.

The pages that follow are my experiences and opinions. They were born out of my desire to give those I taught something solid when they attended a seminar or class. I've been in numerous writing seminars and classes and walked out with nothing but some vague words that seemed to blow away under the harsh glow of my computer screen when I sat down to write.

Too many people lament the state of publishing and the "crap" that fills the shelves in the local bookstore. My goal in this book is not to complain but to explain; to tell you about the craft and art of writing and the business of publishing so you can accomplish your goals.

The world of writing is a very diverse one and there is a place in it for just about everything and everyone. Keep that in mind when you read what I have to say. Just because I'm

not a big fan of self-publishing or fee-charging agents doesn't mean there isn't someone out there who would benefit from either or both of those.

The bottom line is *I write because I enjoy it*. I write because nothing can beat starting with an idea and a couple of years later holding a published book in your hands. Also remember that editors, agents, bookstore owners and managers, everyone in the business all the way through to the most important person, the reader, is in it because they enjoy books.

But being a writer isn't easy. There is a large degree of craftsmanship required to write a novel. It's not magic; it's hard work combined with the ability to constantly accept being critiqued and to critique one's self.

Publishing is a business. Like any other job, there are good aspects to it and bad ones. Like any other job, experience and business savvy count. And like any other art form, passion and desire also count.

I think writers become authors through many paths but there are two major ones. Some come from the craft side of the house. Others from the art side. A few geniuses have both to begin with. If you're the latter, you probably don't need this book. But most of us fall into one of the first two categories. That's the first self-appraisal you have to make: right now am I more of an artist when I write or a craftsman? Once you figure that out, the next several years of your life should be dedicated to doing better what you already do well and learning to do the other half which you know little about.

I started consciously as a craftsman and subconsciously as an artist. I focused a lot of my early energy into techniques and plotting and the business end of writing. As I progressed I realized I was missing something. How did I realize that? Very simple—because I wasn't where I wanted to be and I wasn't satisfied with what I was writing. Once I realized this, I had to sit down and do some hard soul-searching. What *wasn't* I doing? What was I missing? And to do that introspection, I had to drop many preconceived notions. I had to accept that I was lacking in the 'art' side of the writing house. I subsequently put as much energy into drawing that out of me as I had the craft.

That's an advantage to this book. It was written over the course of my writing career so you are going to get information written when I was tightly focused on craft, and you are also going to get information when I was tightly focused on the art of writing. Most writing books give you one or the other—here you get the whole deal.

Another advantage to this book is that I have both succeeded and failed as a writer. My first series of books under my own name stopped at book 6. I was not offered a contract for book 7, even though I pitched an idea to keep the series going. In the publisher's eyes, that series had failed and therefore I had failed. However, by the time I was pitching that book 7 under my own name, I was published under two other names, one of which was starting to hit some bestseller lists. So I've also succeeded as a writer. Thus I speak from personal knowledge when I say "Don't do this" and "Do this."

The bottom line is the book. I love books. I love reading them and I love writing them. So if you love books, the pages that follow are a glimpse behind the mysterious curtain of how they are born in the crucible of passion and idea, then written, and published.

This book will take you step by step on the journey from original idea to the book in the reader's hand.

I. WELCOME TO THE NOVELIST'S WORLD

Writing can verge from being a burning passion to a mild interest for different people, but the desire to put words on paper is lurking in almost every person who has ever walked into a bookstore and opened a book. If you've ever had those fateful words: "I've always wanted to write a book" scamper across your mind, then the following pages are a guideline to do just that. Or, if you are simply interested in the inner workings of the three critical components that produce a book for the reader—the author, the publisher and the bookstore—then the following pages are a window into that world.

If you desire to write a novel because you want to have a bestseller and make a bundle of money, my advice for you is to play the lottery; it will take much less time and your odds will be about the same, if not better, and I can guarantee that the work involved will be much less. An agent I know reviews approximately 150 submissions a week, every week of the year. That's about 7,800 submissions a year. Out of all those, he accepts as clients approximately four to six a year. And he isn't a publisher—some of the clients he signs up don't make it to publication. The Authors Guild estimates that even among those writers accepted for publication, less than ten percent earn enough to make their living at writing.

I recently read an interview with Michael Crichton where he said that when he was deciding between entering the writing world or going to medical school, he was dismayed to learn that only two hundred people in America make their

living writing novels; then he went to medical school. I think the number is higher than that, but not by much. Stephen Coonts made the interesting point that simply based on numbers, in any given year, your odds are higher of becoming elected to the US Senate than becoming a New York Times Best-selling Author.

At a writing workshop I attended, an editor for a major New York publisher told the novice writers in the audience that writers rate only above migrant workers in pay scale and, when the audience laughed, he told them he wasn't joking. With the shrinking size of the mid-list, those words are becoming more and more true.

With those negative, but realistic, facts out of the way, let's turn to the positive. You write for *you*. You write because you have a story in you that have to come out. This is the core of the art of writing. Pearl Buck said:

"The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: a human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death. Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create—so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, his very breath is cut off from him. He must create, must pour out his creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency, he is not really alive unless he is creating."

I believe passion either is or isn't present. This passion and desire cannot be taught but it can be unearthed. It cannot be

given, like a relay baton, from one person to another. I believe it to be *the single most important factor* and I discuss it in parts of this book. However, I do believe that *too much* discussion on the topic of creativity can actually stifle the drive in some people. They start thinking that they have to do and think exactly like everyone else in order to succeed and that is not true. That is why I say that there are no absolutes, no hard and fast rules in writing. Follow *your* path.

I have listened to many writers speak and while much of what they say is the same, there is often something that is very different. Usually that different thing is part of their creative core, the way they approach their writing. However, on a certain level, I think most creative people operate in a similar manner. I write about this in Chapter 1: Internal Characteristics of a Writer.

In this book, when I discuss how to write a novel, I talk a lot about the craft of novel writing. The art is woven into the craft with deeper insights. This aspect is something that took me many years and much discussion and thought and learning to begin to understand. There are some people who start with the art and then have to learn the craft. Both parts are essential and the line between them is a thin one, transparent at times. The best writers merge them together to the point where this is no line.

For me, the craft is the intellectual aspect of writing. The art is the emotional aspect. A great writer engages both the reader's thoughts and emotions, thus being both a good craftsman and a good artist.

One of the paradoxes of writing and something to keep in mind when going through this book: I am going to present techniques, ideas and formats that are the "accepted" way of doing things; yet the "accepted" way makes you the same as everyone else who can read a writing book and follow instructions, and your work has to stand out from everyone else's. So how do you do that? How do you do things the "right" way yet be different?

Everything mentioned in this book is a template; do not allow anything to stifle *your* creativity. Remember the paradox. The best analogy I can come up with is that if you were a painter I am telling you about the paint and the canvas and lighting and perspective, and how to sell your work to a gallery, etc. etc. but ultimately you are the one who has to decide *what* you are going to paint and *how* to paint it.

Another thing is to understand the techniques and methods, and then use your brilliance to figure out a way to change the technique or method to overcome problems and roadblocks. To be original—an artist—with something that's already been done. Also to mix techniques and methods in innovative ways.

Remember, *most* "writers" don't do things the "right" way. I listed daunting numbers above but simply by reading this far you've lifted yourself out of the pack of "writers". I am constantly surprised at the number of people who want to write novels but don't bother to learn the basics. Or even more amazing, the people who want to be a writer but don't read.

What are the basics? The first one is write a lot. The second, and it actually comes before the first, is be a voracious reader. The third is learn the proper way to do business things in the world of publishing such as the right format for a submission, how to prepare a manuscript, how to write in the correct perspective, use proper style and syntax, do chapter breaks, etc. etc. etc.

The majority of people who want to be published novelists don't want to learn anything because they already think they know all they need to know. If you are reading this, then you have already accepted that you don't know all you need to know and therefore you are truly well ahead of the pack.

The purpose of this book is to expose you to the tools and methods to express your creativity, and to increase your odds of rising above those other writers languishing on the slush pile. I do believe the tools that are used in the craft of writing can be taught. As I mentioned above, the one tool that I don't believe you can "teach" is the passion and the creativity, the force that drives all the tools enclosed within this book. However, we can discuss it and you can gain insights into the creative force behind writing and the artistry that produces stories that draw in the reader.

Beyond that passion and personal insight, though, in most cases, a lot of published writing is *not* a special gift or a mystical talent. It requires hard work and can be learned, just like any other skill. I liken it to bricklaying; you learn one brick at a time and you get better the more bricks you lay. And you start by building a house, not a palace. More on that later.

I am somewhere between the house and the palace stage. I've had people come up to me at writing conferences and say that I incorrectly used one of the tools listed in this book and I sometimes agree with them. If I could use every tool in this book perfectly I wouldn't be taking my time to write it; I'd be too busy lying on the beach in Hawaii waiting for the royalty checks from my mega-bestseller to come in. Actually, that's not true because I write more for the enjoyment of creating than making a buck. I'll talk about this more in the business end. Also, as time has gone by, I am doing more of what I say in this book than ever before and becoming a better writer because of it.

Why should you read this book rather than one of the many others books on the market about writing? You shouldn't read this instead; you should read this in *addition* to those other works. The advantage of this book is that my perspective is much closer to yours, the beginning writer, than, say, the perspective of a best-selling author, although they all started where you are. I began writing this book shortly after my first novel was accepted for publication in 1990 and have been adding to and modifying it ever since. Thus this book presents a spectrum of my experience, not just my current experience. In here you will find me writing in present tense about things that in real time happened years ago, but I've kept many of those passages because they offer insight from varying levels of my writing experience and thus give other writers at various levels more opportunities to connect their experiences with mine.

I think it is an advantage for you, the "new" writer (I say new only in terms of being published; you may have been writing for decades.) to read a book written by someone who shares your view.

I believe it is important for me to say more about writing as a career. Quite honestly, when I participate in writers' groups, if there are ten people in the room and we all read our work, I recognize that sometimes one or two of the people there can "write" better than I can. By that I mean they can put words and sentences and paragraphs together much better than I can. In many cases they can also get across their thoughts and feelings better than I can. Yet somehow I am the "author" and they aren't. Why?

There are several reasons. One is that there is so much more to a book than simply writing words; there is a story that must grow and come to life and interest the reader. And, also, because besides being an art, writing is both a **craft** and a **business**.

If I wanted to be an architect I should not be satisfied that I only had grand visions of what the design for my buildings should be. Nor would anyone be impressed with my visions if I couldn't put them into the proper format. Nor would anyone be interested if my design was so impractical that it couldn't be built. I would have to learn the craft of design and also the business of building and then apply my vision to that. I would also need to understand how the people who actually build the building operate, and interact with them in a professional and knowledgeable manner. And, perhaps most importantly

and most often forgotten, I would not have any success if no one wanted to buy my designs.

The majority of writers fail because they may have the innate ability and drive, but no direction or focus. That is another purpose of this book: to allow you to direct your vision into a mode and medium that others will want to buy and read.

Colleges abound in creative writing courses. "Write what you feel," I was told in one fiction-writing course I enrolled in. Fine. In fact the more I write, the more I realize that is an excellent concept. But beyond those excellent words, practically nothing was taught. The class consisted mostly of critiquing, but even the critiquing didn't seem to have a *positive* purpose. Too many flaws were unearthed without suggestions for fixing the flaws. Critiquing serves a critical function in the writing process (pun intended), but it should be directed in a positive way with possible solutions offered. You not only have to write what you feel, but you have to do it well enough so that the reader can feel the same thing.

I've talked to and taught many creative writing students and they all seem to want to scream something along the lines of the following at their instructor: *"Don't just tell me what not to do, tell me why I shouldn't do it and give me some ideas for ways to improve my work. At the same time allow me to write what I want and don't impose your feelings and prejudices on my content. And maybe, just maybe, you could also teach me something positive before you ask me to write and start critiquing me."*

But let's take the architecture theme a little further. Would a professor look at an architecture student and say: "I'm not going to teach you anything about blueprints, building design or materials or anything else that has to do with the job. Just go ahead and design your building according to what you *feel* it ought to be and when it collapses, I'll tell you why." How many students would he have?

All the above is not to put down creative writing courses or to add my two-cents to the chasm between the "literary" field and the "genre" field. I think the two have much to learn from each other and the line separating them is an artificial one. You must write what you feel or it will be flat and false (*and* there would be no reason to write it), but you must remember that to make another person feel what you want to impart through the sole medium of the printed word is a very difficult task and requires discipline and conscious awareness of technique.

Creative writing courses tend to emphasize books focused on characters, what most people call literary writing. The only difficulty with that, quite frankly, is that in order to sell a character-oriented book, you must pretty much be a genius at writing. Above I said that "most" writing could be learned. I think the genius that produces books that are almost entirely about people is very difficult to learn. There are only so many Faulkner's and Fitzgerald's and Anne Tyler's and Clyde Edgerton's every generation. That is not to say those people didn't work very hard at crafting their style, but there is a certain amount of something they have style-wise that is very hard to define and capture.

However, if you walk into a bookstore, you will find that well over ninety percent of the fiction that lines the shelf is not character oriented, it's plot oriented. (A caveat here. Although a story may be plot oriented it should be character driven. I will explain this apparent paradox later in the book, but it's taken me almost fifteen manuscripts to work out so let's take it slowly.)

By plot-oriented that I mean the story line is the core of the novel. Think about why people read fiction: primarily for entertainment. I have listened to and read extremely well written words in writers' groups; material that made tears come to my eyes. Coming of age stories; personal crisis stories; moral dilemma stories; etc. etc. But I also knew the odds against those stories selling was tremendous. Most people *live* those things. They only want to read about it if it is *superlatively* written. However, they will read a *well-written* story if it is about something they don't know much about or haven't directly experienced. Hence the popularity of Stephen King, Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton and all those other "genre" authors.

However, also notice how well drawn out the characters are in most of those books. Just because a plot initiates a story, that does not mean you throw the characters out. In fact, once the plot initiates, the characters come alive and dictate most of the course of the story. The opposite can be true also—characters can initiate and the plot follows them. To me, the key about the art side of writing is more psychological than literary. I think insight into the human condition, into people, is critical for the writer. As important is

the ability to make this applicable to a broad spectrum of readers; too often, writers who focus on character, focus on themselves and situations they know, and are unable to broaden it to the 'human condition' and not just their condition.

I just judged a contest on submissions and almost every story idea was very personal and character-oriented. I got to the point where I longed for someone to say: "Hey, I've got this great western, or sci-fi story, or any genre."

I am not trying to dissuade you from writing about whatever it is you feel you need to write about. I am simply pointing out reality. I believe for most of us it is better to start at the simplest level and work our way up, rather than try to start at the top. I will talk more about this in Chapter 3: What To Write, because, based on what I have seen year after year in the form of submissions, most people pour their souls into personal projects before they have learned the skills necessary to write that type of story and also before they understand the craft and business of writing. I am sure that the man who built the Brooklyn Bridge did not start with that project. He built many smaller bridges first over the years before he created his masterpiece.

I didn't long for a genre story because I don't like personal or character-oriented stories—quite the opposite, those are my favorite books. The problem was that most of these people weren't quite sure what it was they were doing. They weren't skilled enough to focus their energies on such stories.

Remember something about the art of writing: **It is the only art form that is not sensual.** You can see the colors

and strokes that make a painting, feel a sculpture, and hear music. The manner in which each individual piece in those fields impacts on the senses is different. But every writer uses the same letters on a piece of paper. You have twenty-six letters that combine to form words, which are the building blocks of your sentences and paragraphs. And most of the time you are stuck with the words of the language, although that is not necessarily true for those of you truly enterprising persons. Everyone has the same words, and when I write that word and you write it, that word goes into the senses of the reader in the same way. It's how we weave them together that impacts in the conscious and subconscious mind of the reader that makes all the difference in the world.

A book comes alive in the reader's mind. You use the sole medium of the printed word to get the story from your mind to the reader's. To me, it is the wonder of writing to create something out of nothing. Every book started with just an idea in someone's head. Isn't that a fantastic concept?

Throughout these pages, I speak not only from my personal experience, but from the experience of other authors, agents, readers, teachers and editors I have met and talked to; from reading interviews with very successful writers; and from intense study of the field of writing. I say this because I believe you can and should learn as much as possible from every source you latch on to. Take what you need and leave the rest.

I listed the grim statistics of getting published on the preceding pages. But I tell you one thing that I very firmly believe: If you are willing to put in the effort and the time and

become open-minded enough to recognize and understand the realities of the writing and publishing business, you will put yourself far ahead of those who believe that there is some mystical force at work. I have seen numerous cover letters where the prospective author has written something along the lines of "I hope I am lucky enough to be selected for publication." Luck comes to those who put in the sweat and blood and time.

For some strange reason, fledgling novelists seem to think they should be able to bat a 1.000; that their first manuscript should be accepted and their career started. The reality is that even among published authors, the acceptance rate is usually nowhere near the perfect mark.

Screenwriters are often hired on the basis of what is called a 'spec screenplay'. Spec stands for speculation which means they write the screenplay on their own time, without anyone paying for it. Then they send it around, not so much to get *that* screenplay optioned or made, but rather to let people who read it know what their abilities are and perhaps hire them for another project. An unpublished novelist is writing on spec, but also understand that that first novel is rarely the one that is purchased. It is an investment in time to learn the art and craft.

Too often I see writers hold on to their first manuscript too tightly, spending so much time rewriting it, that they could have written two or three new, and better, manuscripts during that time period. In part III of this book, the first thing I tell writers to do after finishing their first manuscript, *before* trying to market it, is start writing the second manuscript. At

the Jackson Hole Writer's Conference I was on a panel with Sue Grafton and this was a point she emphasized: too many people were holding on to their first manuscripts and they needed to let go and move on.

Some more words about making a living at writing. I just recently cut out a newspaper article about a writing conference where the distinguished panel was going to discuss "real" writing which the article defined as "writing that springs from within, as opposed to writing to make money." I've run into that sort of thinking quite often. Dean Koontz's book on writing has an entire chapter dealing with this issue. Suffice it to say this: the more money you make writing, the more time you can devote to it, the better writer you become, and ultimately, most importantly, the more people that read your writing.

On the other hand, if you are quite happy to write something of great import only to you or a select group of people, then most certainly do so. Ultimately, *you* are the one that has to be satisfied with what you write. The bottom line, in my opinion, is there does not need to be an "opposed" in the sentence in the above paragraph. It should be an "and".

I take neither side of the genre vs. commercial writing because I don't believe there are two sides. Jean Auel, the author of *The Clan Of The Cave Bear* series had an interesting comment to make. When her first novel came out it was very well received critically. However, once it became a bestseller she noted that the same critics were now turning against her because she no longer had simply a literary success. It was now a commercial success and those same minds couldn't

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