

Writing Fiction

A Course on Writing, Publishing, and Selling Your Fiction

Eleventh Revision

Steven M. Moore

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No animals were hurt in the production of this manuscript...but they are being hurt all over the world, with many being threatened with extinction, if not already extinct. Humans, in their denial of climate change, allow poaching and destruction of habitat to affect all flora and fauna on Earth, including human beings. Let's protect our planet and all living things for future generations. Climate control is an existential problem for everyone and everything living on Gaia—show your concern for the environment and join me to ensure the inheritance of our children and grandchildren and all living things.

If you feel the need to pay me for these lessons—it's open-source software in a sense—please make a donation to your favorite charity. The Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund are appropriate for the message of the last paragraph, for example, but there are many other worthwhile charities. (PACs and the NRA aren't among them!)

Dedication

This eleventh revision of this little course on writing fiction, like the tenth, is dedicated to all the Ukrainian freedom fighters and those innocent victims of that great and courageous nation who are standing up to that evil monster Putin and thwarting his ambitions of European domination, as well as to everyone who battles for democracy against autocracy around the world. Slava Ukrainy!

Preface

My storytelling has continued, maybe even accelerated, despite those “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that I've experienced in the writing business. As my creative writing activities continue, so do the updates to this little course. One's life is usually a learning experience, and an author's life is no different. So, now I offer you the eleventh revision of this little course (hopefully it's an improvement, unlike Windows 11 vs. Windows 10) with changes that reflect my own growth as a participant in the great adventure of writing fiction.

The main goal of this course is simple: To let other authors know about some experiences that I've gathered along the road to more than thirty books. That's a lot of writing and

experiences, so this course can be but a short summary. I hope it's of some use to everyone interested in writing fiction. (By making it free, you can't really complain, can you?)

That's the bottom line, but you might want some details, like what qualifies me to write these lessons? After all, I'm not a "bestselling author," whatever that might mean nowadays. Yes, I've written more fiction than most authors (see the list at the end of this course), but will I really have any good advice to offer you?

First, let me point out that, unlike many self-published authors (the focus is on indie or self-publishing here), I've also tried the traditional route (and mostly came to regret it!), but I did so in the middle of my publishing career when I already had many books in my *oeuvre*. This gives at least some weight to anything I have to say about traditional publishing vs. self-publishing, and hopefully it will aid authors to make the publishing choices they must make nowadays.

Second, as an ex-scientist like that famous sci-fi author Isaac Asimov (whom I greatly admired), I can be an unbiased observer of the publishing business and have been one since I published my first novel, *Full Medical*, in 2006 (and even before that when I had several novels and short fiction pieces in the works). I can apply a scientist's objective logic and reason to my analysis, although the facts that I deal with here are mostly anecdotal and based on my own experiences as well as those of some other authors. (That's mostly because facts are hard to come by in this business—aggregators, publishers, and retailers are clever about hiding them from anyone who might go looking for them, including authors—and statistical sampling guidelines are rarely satisfied.)

Third, I want to counteract some of the optimism found in "the glory road awaits you" picture too many authors, agents, publishers, and PR and marketing gurus paint about book publishing. Too much of what they say is at best misleading and at worst downright dishonest, all offered in order to promote their own self-serving agendas. By providing advice that balances their specious and often dishonest blather and twaddle with my honest albeit personalized assessment, authors can hopefully better prepare themselves to travel their own storytelling journeys with some objectivity too.

Finally, a word about a few particular changes I made in the tenth revision and continue here. Recently the use of they, their, and them with a singular meaning has been approved by whoever approves such things. (This is independent from the "what are your pronouns?" blather found on social media these days.) Because English, unlike many other languages, has no singular neuter form, I suppose this is a positive development. (I certainly can't do anything about it if it's negative.) While still seeming a bit awkward, the awkward s/he alternative that I used in earlier revisions in various lessons has been changed accordingly (if I missed a few, please tell me). Also, the Big Four has been changed back to Big Five until a certain anti-monopolistic lawsuit involving Penguin Random House devouring another large publisher, Simon Schuster, has been definitely settled—"Big Five" is now my shorthand for the huge publishing conglomerates that are neither readers' nor authors' friends.

A new feature in this eleventh edition is that, except for the title page, I've formatted this manuscript as if I were going to publish it using Draft2Digital. It might look run together at times, but that efficient self-publishing platform makes publishing your novel (or short fiction collection) super-easy. (See the appendix for details about how to best use Draft2Digital.)

Oh, and I almost forgot a final change made in the tenth revision that will continue from here on out: I've eliminated the lists of my blog posts at the end of each lesson because I believe this revision is mostly self-contained and sufficiently reflects my (often acerbic!) views about the

writing business. To compensate, I've placed a few posts at the end in an appendix; they mostly complement the first lesson. Some of these are old; others are more recent and never mentioned in previous revisions.

As my publishing career has evolved, my opinions have changed. I've settled into a steadystate for my publishing methods, but the road to achieve that has been curvy and filled with potholes. So, if I can help others find an easier road if not a superhighway, I'll consider these lessons a success.

Of course, our roads might become even more difficult in the future. Publishing what we write has become so much easier, but the flip side of that coin is that competition for readers will undoubtedly increase. Hopefully this little course will help authors make all the wonderful choices available work for them.

r/Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ, 2023

...all fiction writing is artificial. It is the collection of the writer's internal compulsions and preoccupations and external experience in a form which he or she hopes will satisfy the reader's expectations, while conforming to Henry James's definition of the purpose of a novel: "To help the human heart to know itself."—mystery writer P. D. James

Prologue

I love to tell stories. Although I'm an ex-scientist, I recognize that storytelling is also a creative activity...and it's one I've always enjoyed. While I might have been a better scientist than storyteller (others will be the judge of that, although I have some giants in literature like Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein to serve as role models), that past as a scientist taught me that the process from manuscript to published and marketed book can be analyzed and improved. Storytelling always has been a process; today it's mostly a digital one.

Nonetheless, along with art and music, storytelling defines us as human beings. We've been doing it since pre-historic times, and, when Gutenberg made books available to the masses, readers started perusing authors' books. There's been an quasi-exponential growth in the number of books ever since (discounting efforts to ban them), and the digital revolution made yet another quantum leap forward in publishing (print books, ebooks, graphic novels, and audiobooks are all produced digitally now).

Basically, there are two steps authors have to complete in order to tell their stories to readers: Write a good story that hopefully will interest, inform, and entertain readers; and then they must publish it in a manner that allows readers to notice it and read it. I'll go into a lot more detail than that in this course, even though it is a short one. I hope my spiel doesn't try your patience too much.

Many of my readers are familiar with my unconventional and often acerbic comments and opinions found in articles about writing fiction and the publishing business; they're mostly found in my blog archive "Writing" at my website, <https://stevemmoore.com>. (Some of these are reproduced in the appendix.) There are many other articles and even entire books on these subjects, but you're in luck: This little course and all my blog articles are completely free!

Like any fine Irish whiskey, this course is thrice distilled, containing ideas I've developed over many years about writing, ideas from my many articles found in that "Writing" archive, and now a collection of both old and new material for this course. That doesn't mean you won't feel the pleasant burn as you take a sip, though—and maybe learn and/or think about a few things you normally wouldn't consider, or you'll think about them in a different way.

In fact, you might not like some things I have to say at all because I don't sugarcoat my opinions, and I often disagree with the so-called "writing gurus" and snobbish critics. They're my honest opinions at this stage in my writing career. Let's start with one: Consider this little course a much-needed update of King's little book *On Writing*. You don't have to have read his book as a prequel, though. In fact, maybe you shouldn't! It's about as up to date as a T-Rex skeleton.

And, as a final note, why is this free PDF watermarked "Sample"? That's a reflection of MS Word's watermark limitations where I selected one that's appropriate for my free PDFs corresponding to the free fiction downloadable from my website, but the watermark isn't particularly appropriate for this little course. Yet I couldn't have watermarked it "Confidential," could I (another MS Word option for watermarks)? (Of course, then everyone would read it! And a certain US ex-president might try to steal it?)

Onward....

Lesson One: Writing Your Story

The current situation. We're living in a great time for readers. The number of good authors and good books is increasing, so readers have many more choices. The number of readers is decreasing, though—readership is going down, down, down, and worse: The younger people are, the less they read. That means all authors must compete against each other for readers, and some of those competing can command vast sums of money and publicity that average authors can't hope to have.

With the COVID pandemic, this downward trend in readership has decelerated a bit, simply because there are only so many streaming videos and video games even tweens and teens can tolerate before looking for something with better plots, important themes, and interesting characters—good writers don't write screenplays or video-game plots because they refuse to dilute their stories—even their short fiction can surpass what's available on streaming video! So, there are still many authors telling their wonderful stories and readers who read them...at least for now.

I've always been an avid reader, but I've read a lot more during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, I binge-read entire series of British-style mysteries (that influenced my "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" and "Inspector Steve Morgan" series). And all the ebooks I read in 2021, for example, cost a lot less than a streaming-video subscription or computer game! One

series, the “Detective Inspector Skelgill” series by Beckham, had sixteen books (so far)...and many hours of entertainment for about \$50! That shows the entertainment ROI for books—that’s “return on investment,” an acronym often restricted to business, but I don’t see why consumers, readers in particular, can’t use it too: We invest in the products we buy!

All those other authors and their books create a noise background that’s hard for any single author to rise above—your books are the signal, other authors’ books the noise, especially if their books are good. Readers do not have the equivalent of noise-cancelling headphones. That’s a fact of life, and it’s probably only going to get worse.

So, we have to ask: How does an author compete in this environment? If you use your imagination to create a great story, what do you do with that story?

Of course, there’s always that first question, isn’t there? How does one write a great story? I have less to say about that mostly because it depends on what you mean by “great.” Given two readers, you’ll get at least two different answers, maybe more. Same for authors. So, I’ll modestly offer my take on that question in this part of the course, among many other things. (More on this topic can be found in the appendix.)

Relationship of this course to King’s *On Writing*. Along with a few other published books in print, King’s little book figures prominently on my reference shelf (see my reference list in the last lesson of this course). King’s book is there mostly to remind me of the historical fact (ancient history, to be truthful) that King at least took some time to say something about writing fiction. My course is by no means an homage to his efforts! Far from it.

You will find *On Writing* has influenced my own views about writing in mostly a negative way, in fact, as manifested in my many blog posts about fiction writing. (None of King’s formulaic books have had any influence, though, which says something—I’m not sure what.) A sample of those posts is in the appendix. But King’s little memoir/lessons book is terribly dated and irrelevant for most current authors. King never had to worry about the digital revolution...and probably doesn’t now (although he wrote a terrible novel about cellphones). And his name was already a household item when digital became king and usurped his throne (yeah, that’s a terrible play on words/names).

Here I’ll update what was useful in King’s book and go much further than the wee bit of sage advice he offers in the second half of his book (I’ll mostly blow it apart!). He says, “This is a short book [especially if you skip the memoir-style and boring first half and move to that bit of advice about writing] because most books on writing are filled with bullshit.” I couldn’t agree more. His is in the BS category too! Big-league BS. At the risk of adding my own BS, I’ll try to bring King up to date, like I said. I’ll offer just these short lessons because I don’t want to write a book. (I’d rather be writing my own fiction!) King writes sci-fi as well as horror, so he says, so he should know about Sturgeon’s Law. (Look it up. At least King mentions Sturgeon somewhere, but not his important law.) So, caveat emptor: When you’re looking for writing and publishing advice, remember that it follows Sturgeon’s Law too. (This law is more universal than Newton’s law of gravitation; it’s much more applicable, even to human beings.)

Now, let’s assume you were a kid who drove your parents nuts by screaming and jumping around with your toy saber and cape while playing with a crowd of imaginary friends. You were also a precocious reader, taking in what you read, acting it out and adding to it, letting your imagination run wild, even if you were reading just a few comic books at the beginning. Maybe you stood in line for the next Harry Potter book? (Why, I don’t know—they’re too ponderous and verbose to slog through, especially the later ones.) Maybe you discovered some classic authors—Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Martian tales (the original “Jedi masters” are found in

those), George Orwell (FYI: much more than three little piglets), or Conan Doyle (the books, not those horrible, recent movies where Robert Downey Jr. should have stuck with Tony Stark)?

The next step in your path to becoming an author should be to add to that innate imagination you have and become a dedicated observer. You can soak up observations about how humans act and interact, you can keep your eyes open when you visit new places and do new things, and you can absorb nuances of the spoken language (your reading and writing practice will provide the nuances of the written). Become a lifetime observer and you'll have...

What-ifs, plot ideas, themes, character sketches, settings, and dialogue snippets.

Observe and file them away. You can do this for years before writing that first novel, and you should continue to do it after you do. (King differs on this, saying this process requires no creativity. Now, that is odiferous, undiluted BS! Intelligent observation is a creative activity as well as a necessary skill authors must develop. I'm an ex-scientist who worked with creative scientists and engineers for many years; King lacks that perspective, a fault that's all too apparent in his prose.)

When you're reading or observing, you might ask yourself, "What if...?" That can become a more developed plot idea later on—maybe much later on (as in my case). You observe some strange and/or interesting real-life characters and weird interactions between them. File them away for future reference. (A big what-if from my childhood: What if Agatha Christie put Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot together in one book to solve a mystery together? Answering that eventually led to my novel *Rembrandt's Angel*, dedicated to Dame Agatha and her two famous sleuths.)

You experience a simple sunset, a big city rally, a horseback ride along a rocky trail, a strange landscape in a strange country—these are potential settings. File them away for future reference and use too. Jot them down on anything handy if you have a bad memory—even on a napkin from your local coffee hangout.

Even if you have an intense day-job, none of this takes much time—if you have a smart phone, you don't even need a notepad (although the app might be called that!). If you do this often enough, you'll have enough material stashed away that you'll never have writer's block. (Don't know what that is? Good! I don't either.)

Themes and plots. King incorrectly defines them. (Or maybe I'm redefining them for modern writers?) Themes are the threads woven into and around the plot. They give meaning to a plot; otherwise, it's just fluff and droll.

Plot is storyline. King includes a lot of BS in *On Writing*, but this difference between his definition of theme and mine represents an egregious example. Here's one absurd quote from his book (comments in square brackets are always mine): "Good fiction always begins with story [true, because it's plot] and progresses to theme [false, because themes are woven into and around the plot and should be decided upon first]; it almost never begins with theme and progresses to story [false]." The last is false because themes are just elaborate what-ifs that can motivate you to write your story. Any story without at least one theme is dead in the water. (That's what determines those stories that should be called fluff—most cozy mysteries, bodice rippers, space opera, and romantic fantasies are in that category. The latter are also entertainment, but no one can call them profound because of the lack of themes.) Your story will have meat because it starts with good themes and uses them to hold the plot together and make it relevant. When themes are absent, someone might read your story, but I probably won't! Neither will the many readers who want to chew on real meat, not slurp watery broth. (If you're vegetarian or vegan, substitute "tofu" for "meat" and "green tea" for soup.)

Don't avoid serious themes. Today's publishers and authors often do—we've become far too politically correct in this age of #MeToo and anti-cultural appropriation activism. I'm not saying those movements aren't important; they could also be themes. Just don't turn your story into pabulum by trying to please everyone. That's an impossible task, so don't even go there, no matter what other people say.

Outline or free prose? Should you be a plotter or a pantsers? That's writer's jargon for outlining your whole novel vs. writing by the seat of your pants, that is, as you go, without an outline. When you're ready to use some of the material you've collected to spin your yarn—in other words, to let your blarney shine—you need to make a choice between outline and free prose. If you choose the former, don't be rigid about sticking to it. That's foolish because the story and its characters can take you elsewhere, and often do—and that can be a good thing!

Free-prose fiction writing tends to avoid restrictions imposed by an outline, but it can wander and lose focus—you might need a loose outline at least as a crutch to stumble along that creative road. Content editing as you go is needed in both cases—"cut" and "paste" are your friends (as well as that "delete" button—if you're overly attached to some prose segment, save it in another file for later). *Never trust* an editor to do content editing for you! Chances are they'll kill your personal style and make your life miserable as they try to change you into their clone. Even when you're aiming for a first draft and finish it, you can go back and content edit, but it's often best to do it as you go to preserve the flow.

Think you can allow a writing program to do all this? *Scrivener*, maybe the most popular one, isn't even available for all Windows versions last time I checked, and it practically forces you to make an outline. I find anything like that too confining—claustrophobic is perhaps the better word. Even MS Word has annoying features. (Oft-occurring errors in the spelling and grammar checkers, for example—I used to turn them off, but their new editor does such a good job, I tolerate them now. "Trust but verify" should be your motto.)

Writers of old started with some clean sheets of paper. Your best bet is to emulate that with a new and pristine file in your word processing package of choice. I know some people who get fancy and use *LaTeX*. Ugh! (Never heard of it? Lucky you! I used to use it for scientific reports. It's powerful, arcane, and unwieldy.) The more complicated the software, the more you'll be distracted by it, and the bigger its learning curve will be as you get started with your writing.

Let your characters guide you. If you haven't read or seen Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, do so now. I know it sounds a bit schizoid, but your best storytelling might very well occur when you get into that weird zone where the characters seem to write their own story. (Reading between the lines, it seems King went through that process with *Carrie*, possibly his second-best book. Yeah, I did read his memoir-like BS. I actually liked his novel *Misery* better than any of his other novels. It's about an author, after all, and it's a more standard psychological thriller, not horror.)

Writing gurus talk about flow. What I just mentioned is one way to maintain it. If the fire hose runs out of water, do something else for a while and come back to the writing later. *Do not* be strict about putting in a certain amount of time each day or writing a certain number of words per week. Exhaustion often creates bad prose. You need an alert mind when writing, even if the characters take it over! (All of this is why I can never recommend NaNoWriMo—forget about it! If you don't know what that is, all the better.)

Create a genre-appropriate mix of descriptive narrative, flashbacks, action, and dialogue, both direct and internal. These are some of the essential elements in writing fiction.

Those used and their emphasis are often genre dependent (as much as genre has any meaning at all nowadays). A sci-fi saga might have more descriptive narrative, generally called world-building. A mystery might have more internal dialogue than direct. A thriller might have a lot of action broken by the protagonist's internal dialogue. Learn the essential elements of your genre by reading in that genre and use them accordingly. (And don't put too much emphasis on genre either—they were created for the convenience of libraries and bookstores, and nowadays should only be considered keywords that describe a story.)

Here practice makes perfect—the more stories you read and write, the better your next stories will be in general. But be original, not formulaic. That's where themes and good dialogue can help. Many writers avoid controversial themes and colorful language reflecting the milieu of their characters. Okay, but being formulaic is more than that. When you write your next story, make sure you're not emulating any previous ones, nor anyone else's!

Master person and viewpoint. This is more difficult than you might assume. I still struggle with it.

Abrupt changes of a character's viewpoint in midstream often confuse the reader. Use POV (point of view) to get inside a character's head, but only change to a different character's POV when changing sections or chapters. If you use omniscient POV in narrative prose (back story and the like), don't confuse it with the characters' POVs—generally avoid omniscient if you can because it's easy to misuse it.

POV is related to choice of person. Most prose is in first person or third. Don't get cute by trying something else unless you're supremely confident about your writing skills. If you don't have Card's little book *Characters and Viewpoint*, get it. There's some BS there too (a failing of all books on writing?), but it's a place to start.

Some reviewers of my "Detectives Chen & Castilblanco" series had trouble with my use of POV and person: They didn't like that Castilblanco is in first person while other characters are in the more common third person POV. (I actually rewrote the first novel in the series to match the others, not to be obstinate—all the reviews for the first book were of the second edition because Amazon's bots axed all the reviews of the first edition!—but because I liked that style. I'd seen it used elsewhere and decided it was effective. Agatha Christie used it in *The ABC Murders*, which is probably where I first saw it as a wee reader. If it's good enough for Christie, it's good enough for me!)

I'll add here the choice of tense because it doesn't fit anywhere else. Most prose is past tense complemented by past perfect (to put things farther into the past), whether it's in first or third person. Earlier I mentioned Beckham's "Inspector Skelgill" series (British-style mysteries set in Britain's Lake District, not far from the Scottish border). When I started that series, I found his use of third person, present tense annoying (some confusing head-hopping, i.e., POV changes, and omniscient POV too). While third person is common, the use of present tense isn't. I got used to that stylistic choice soon enough, though, and was able to focus on the stories, which are very good. My lesson learned? I need to have an open mind. You should too, as a writer as well as a reader.

Am I ready for second person, present tense? Stay tuned.

My rules for writing fiction. While you can develop your own, maybe with the help of these lessons, let me finish by listing the ones I've compiled after more than twenty years of storytelling:

1. Writing is not storytelling. You must be good at both.
2. Know the rules to write good prose and break them when convenient.

3. Don't worry about whether a story should be short fiction or a novel. The story will tell you.

4. Forget about what critics will say. Just tell your damn story.

5. Remember your fiction must seem real. Even a fantasy has to seem real.

6. Become your characters. That's not schizophrenia; it's art.

7. Make your stories about what you observe in life—real, ordinary human beings perhaps doing extraordinary things—and observe life to the fullest.

8. Don't be a quitter. If you love to write fiction, keep doing it!

9. Never stop honing your skills.

Let me elaborate on that last point. How do you do that? Read, read, read; write, write, write. No BS here. Those two things are your best teachers, better than any MFA or critique group (both often seem out to destroy an author's voice). By reading, you absorb techniques by osmosis. By writing, you practice them. You don't need a course on the actual writing of fiction.

Okay, those are things you should do. What about those things you shouldn't do? I cover that in "The Eightfold Way" found in the appendix. This blog post has been reproduced on a few writing sites, and the list there (eight don'ts, naturally) together with the above are guiding rules for your fiction writing.

But pay attention to #9 above; the more you write, i.e., the more you practice, the better you will become. That's true of any creative art. Period.

To end this lesson, let me say a few words about complexity. While sometimes fluff sells—bodice rippers, cozies, space operas, and romantic fantasies come to mind—a serious fiction writer will need to write exciting, profound, and complex stories. How does a writer enure all that?

Avoid simple plots. Depending on the genre, this can be done in several ways. A mystery or crime story can have lots of twists and turns and surprises. A thriller shouldn't mimic a Hollywood action flick; build up to the action slowly and explain what's going on. A sci-fi story shouldn't just be weird, and ETs don't always have to be the bad guys. Their civilizations can be as complex as ours! And so forth. Create original plots containing new and interesting situations. Your plot can make or ruin your story.

Don't avoid complex or controversial themes. They not only hold your plot together as they weave in and around your plot, they can get the reader involved. And don't be afraid of controversy. Complex themes often have many facets, and some you reveal might be new and interesting to your readers.

Avoid simple characters. Human beings are complex. (ETs are too, as far as I know!) The full spectrum of behavior you see in real life can't be displayed in a novel (and even less in a movie), but no avid reader will love your prose if your fictional characters don't share the real complexity we see in the real world. Characters shouldn't be two-dimensional caricatures or stereotypes. They should come alive for the reader and seem to be real people. That goes for both protagonists and antagonists. Your hero shouldn't be Dudley Do-Right, and your villain shouldn't be a vicious, snarling, slinking Yosemite Sam.

Settings. Simple can work for short fiction, but many readers are interested in experiencing new venues and revisiting old ones from a new perspective, traveling to different places while reading in their recliner. Even a small town in Middle America can go from the mundane to a setting for action and adventure. (For example, see Topeka, Kansas in my sci-fi novel *Survivors of the Chaos* or New York City in A. B. Carolan's *Mind Games*!)

Complexity's danger is creating confusion. You don't want to lose readers, but I wouldn't worry about that too much. Smart readers enjoy and appreciate complex tales, especially if the complexity makes them think about parallels in their own lives. Anything beyond simple will lose fans of bodice rippers, cozies, space operas, and romantic fantasies. These fans aren't a serious novelist's audience anyway.

End of lesson.

Lesson Two: The Path to a Polished Manuscript

Okay, so you have a first draft. If you've been content editing all along, your story is complete—your first draft is your last one. (You have to know when to stop. Stopping is essential! You need to publish the story you just finished and go on and write the next one.)

You must polish that manuscript (MS) so other people can properly deal with it (hopefully while you write the next story), because it's probably a bit ragged for wear. You might have used too many dialogue tags, for example. (Don't know what those are? Find out. I don't have space here for a lot of definitions. Some are considered in the appendix, though.) Or you made multiple grammar and spelling errors?

Copy editing. You've already done your content editing, so the next step is copy editing. You can do much of that yourself—maybe all of it, because you've been writing long enough to know your own quirks much better than any copy editor you could ever hire. In any case, you need to make a few passes at copy editing before you send the MS off to anyone else to read.

There's a common misconception about indie-authored books. (This is promoted by traditional publishers and their authors, especially those published by the huge publishing conglomerates—I'll call them the Big Five; another merger was about to occur, but the US government nixed Penguin Random House's merger with Simon and Schuster to prevent a larger monopoly. Even Stephen King was against that merger!) The claim is that indie authors self-publish badly edited books. That misconception is often given top billing in any traditional vs. indie debate. It has nothing to do with that debate, though, and it's patently false. Indie authors write books that the Big Five and their associated agents and acquisitions editors refuse to consider because they're risk-averse and prefer to focus on those old reliable mares and stallions in their writing stables who provide them with those formulaic bestsellers.

Whether you're a self- or traditionally published author, you must copy edit your final MS, and you must proofread your final product, or pay for professional help who will do it. (If you don't do those two things, you need a different kind of professional help!) For the latter, beware of editors who also want to edit your book's content, i.e., content edit—they can destroy your style and voice! Just say no, unless you like their suggestions. Many editors have never written a book and likely couldn't, and yet they still might bludgeon you with their own ideas about how to write them that are contrary to yours. And the editors of traditional publishers are often the worst sinners in this respect when they take over a successful indie book or attack a new author's book for editing purposes. Pay for a professional copy editor if you must (you might need to take out a second mortgage to do that) but insist they do only copy editing. Or go DIY, using some of the copy-editing tricks I'll indicate below.

In your own reading (yes, authors should read a lot!), you'll find traditionally published books, especially ebooks, that are terribly edited. I come across them all the time. The main reason is that lazy authors leave it to their publishers' editors, and the latter often don't care as much about polishing an MS as much as the author might. (That's human nature, not an evil conspiracy. These non-authors are often very busy, just not busy writing.) The big publishing conglomerates also push print books over ebooks and won't do much editing attention of later editions of older print books coming out as ebooks. That's where I see most of the editing errors in books published by them, by the way. (They'll also add to their sins by charging almost as much for the ebook version as the print version, which is yet another problem...and completely absurd! An ebook is just an efile!) Some are also using those ebook editions of old print editions to attack indies and small presses' market share now. The latter tend to have a lot more reasonable ebook pricing.

Whatever your publishing choices, remember that your good name will be associated with a badly edited and proofread book. When I'm reading, I can look beyond bad editing and/or auto-correct in my mind, but many readers can't and won't—they'll just get pissed. (Auto-correct attacks at random. On a blurb for one book of mine, it changed foul to fowl—it wasn't an autocorrect mistake, though, but the publisher's! The book was traditionally published.) As with software code, there's always another bug, so don't panic if a few remain, but you should always try to minimize your copy-editing errors.

Spell checking and grammar. This is the least you can do, of course, because it's done for you by software for the most part. (And if you don't do it, you're really crazy!) Most word processors can check these things automatically. Be careful, though. MS Word often gets confused with long sentences and doesn't understand minimalist style (called "hard-boiled" in crime fiction). I've never been able to teach it the difference between "it's" and "its" either. (This dubious "feature" has remained constant through various versions of Word. You'd think they'd fix it!) Trust but verify. (That's good advice for anything dealing with computers and the internet, by the way.) The newest version of Word has a new "editor" with a few other features you might want to try too, but spelling and grammar checking are greatly improved.

Age-appropriate language control. Some versions of MS Word also can check the language level (that's lost in my latest version of Word—at least I can't find it)—it's another automatic tool you have to trust but verify, of course. If you're writing adult fiction, there's probably no need to worry about this, as long as it doesn't seem like a little kid wrote the story but be forewarned that the language tool won't tell you when you're too erudite and pedantic (some sample authors King admires in *On Writing* are exactly that!), but books for young adults (YA) and even younger (middle grade) readers can be trickier. You probably won't be flaunting your extensive and erudite vocabulary if you're writing those (as King implies, looking for that erudite word to replace an easily understandable one can alienate many readers, and this is especially true for a YA reader), but these tools will help you maintain an age-appropriate vocabulary if you want to try them. (Note that the newest version of word doesn't have this!)

Search and modify or destroy. This describes the best DIY editing technique (which you should do even if you're sending the manuscript to an editor). You should make a checklist of your own quirks. Are you a cliché junkie? Make a list of the most common ones and search and destroy. (Clichés are more forgivable in dialogue, though, because they can be the way a character speaks—some people speak in clichés!). Do you overuse -ly adverbs? Search for -ly and kill them. These are particularly egregious in dialogue tags. For example:

"Want to join my conspiracy?" she said seditiously.

That –ly adverb is completely unnecessary in this example. Anything beyond “said” is usually unnecessary, in fact. The ? indicates a question—don’t be tempted to replace “said” with “asked.” Be nice to speed readers who glide by the adverbs and dialogue tags or even obvious pronouns—they read more books! (I’m one of them.) (King emphasizes these points a lot. He doesn’t give a name to it though. I call it minimalist writing.)

Beta-readers. Copy editors generally want to be paid, but frankly you often don’t get much for each dollar spent. (Some are great people, though. Value the exceptions when you can find them!). Beta-readers are often volunteers—they’re people who are excited about reading your story before anyone else can. They’re great people. Be nice to them. Send them your manuscript (MS) *after* you’ve done your DIY copy-editing but *before* sending the MS to a pro copy editor (if you use one). They can be very helpful in finding inconsistencies (during the car chase, the sedan turned from red to blue, for example, although I’ve seen modern cars advertised now that can do just that!). They also can find editing errors that escaped you and/or your own copy editing. (There’s always another editing error.)

Beta-readers are your first readers (King uses the term “first-reader,” in fact), they can save you a lot of embarrassment, and they’ll help you offer a great product to other readers who buy your books. Like reviewers, their volunteerism helps everyone—you, as the writer, and readers of what you write. (The term beta-anything probably finds its genesis in the digital revolution, so we can forgive King for not using it. He’s only digital when trimming his fingernails. How did he manage to write a novel about cellphones? Of course, that was a terrible novel!)

Critique groups. Forget about them. Many MFA programs are based on the critique-group concept. Forget about those MFA programs too. The idea is that person X reads what person Y offers and makes comments (all too often, they’re negative). Unfortunately, this often reduces to person X trying to force person Y to write in X’s style. This a good way to destroy your writing persona, your voice. It’s also a good way to create a homicide suspect when Y is suspected of killing X. (Good plot for a mystery?)

The flip side of that coin is that X tells Y that Y’s stuff is the greatest prose since Hemingway’s. (Hemingway was a quintessential minimalist writer, by the way, as opposed to Cormac McCarthy, who is an erudite maximalist—both are mentioned and admired by King.) That might help motivate Y’s writing, but it also might delude Y into thinking they’re the next Hemingway, especially if Y is an incurable narcissist. (Leave your narcissism for that ubiquitous narcissists’ club, Facebook, or government leaders, one US ex-leader, in particular.)

Of course, Polonius’s “to thine own self be true” has to be tempered with an acknowledgment that Sturgeon’s Law also applies to all writers and what they write. If you’ve read enough, especially in your genre(s), you should know if your stuff is crap or not. Be your own critic. Unless you’re a narcissist, you’ll probably make a more honest assessment. And never pay attention to anyone making a critique who hasn’t read your story! (That includes many Amazon, Goodreads, and NetGalley reviewers—there are too many trolls on the internet!)

What I haven’t told you. Although I’ve occasionally written blog posts about editing, it’s basically about learning the rules (often dependent on the publisher’s editing staff if you go traditional, or your copy editor if you go indie—see the next lesson) and then deciding on the ones you want to break. To that end, I quote Elmore Leonard: “Write the book the way it should be written, then give it to somebody to put in the commas and shit.”

Most traditional publishers use the Chicago Manual of Style in order to maximally abuse authors because writers’ orgs often let publishers join only if their books follow it—talk about a

mafia! (No book written in British-style English would ever satisfy those rules, by the way! That includes my "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" and "Steve Morgan" books.) I prefer the *NY Times Manual of Style and Usage* (same comment about British-style English, though). All of these manuals have different rules and aren't always up to date, so caveat emptor (especially considering the egregious price of the first tome). There are websites focusing on the mechanics too. I find it all bloody boring, but beware of copy editors—they won't call it boring because it's their job! And the ones at traditional publishing houses are often tyrants. Choose your battles carefully.

It's not over. Most writers' writing time is over when they have that polished MS that's gone through beta-readers. They've created a great story and DIY-edited the MS. Now, what should they do with it? Decisions, decisions, and more hard work, that's what! Writing that MS is the most fun. Everything else can be drudgery, but it must be done.

Lesson Three: Indie or Traditional?

It's really a linear spectrum. All authors' books fall somewhere on a linear spectrum between 100% DIY and letting a Big Five publisher make their lives miserable (their point on that spectrum often moves from book to book). Toward the beginning of that spectrum is what's often called an indie or self-published book; at the very end are found the well-groomed books of the old mares and stallions in the Big Five's stables, the big publishing conglomerates' sure bets in the races for those bestseller prizes.

Most indie writers need to make a lot of decisions and do a lot of DIY grunt work before they reach out to their readers with a new release, but most traditionally published writers also need to do a lot of that. So, what's the difference? The first group manages their entire business if they're 100% DIY (later on you'll see that they shouldn't be); the second supposedly pays others to manage the first part of book production that goes from a manuscript (MS) to polished release (the author's payment for that is usually pro bono via shared royalties, with terrible percentages of 15 to 20% for the author), and then maybe gets a wee bit of help in the PR and marketing chores (much rarer as the years pass).

Emphasis on "manage" in both cases. (Later you'll see that no author or publisher manages it all, and they shouldn't.) Writers often dream of a Big Five publishing contract, but even then, they'll still have to work their butts off unless they're one of the privileged old mares or stallions. Don't think so? Are you in for a surprise! The bloodletting will continue for the life of the traditional contract and beyond, and you can generally get out of that contract only by paying the traditional publisher back for his upfront costs. (Here's where I differ from King's *On Writing* in a major way, of course. Not mentioning these choices dates King's book at the very least, or shows he disparages indie and small press options at the worst. It's a damning indictment of that little book. We can excuse King, I suppose—he's a privileged stallion who's so famous he doesn't have to worry about much, except maybe where his desk is placed. Yep, he talks about that in *On Writing*! Not as bad as a certain ex-president's love of gold toilets, I suppose.)

Of course, there are many forms of a traditional publishing contract: They can differ in duration, royalties, number of author copies provided, pricing for additional author copies

(needed for book events if you do them), help with PR and marketing (often zero), and so forth. They cover a wide range, and one could be just what you need, though I have my doubts now...unless the author is a masochist!

But don't kid yourself about avoiding the work. I've had authors who tell me they're looking for a traditional publishing contract so they don't have to worry about what happens after sending in the MS and getting it accepted. That's naïve. Whether you're an indie or traditionally published writer, you'll be working your butt off. (Don't worry. It's a lot more fun than digging ditches. Come to think of it, that's noble work that might be a lot more productive!) The first step is always the same, creating that polished MS. (Maybe that seems like the most fun and less work, but, depending on the novel, but I sweat aspects of the writing too.) The last steps are always the same (see the next two lessons). And you'll pay for at least some of the in-between stuff even when going the traditional route.

Traditional contracts are profit-sharing aka pro bono ones (they always have been, even for King). Your royalty percentage is often low. The publisher's cut is high because he'll say he has a lot of overhead to pay for, although, as years pass in the industry, the publishing company does less and less for you, the author, so ironically and strictly speaking, the publishers now are almost fully digital and get more and more, with a few pleasant exceptions. Moreover, they take more and more shortcuts—digital formatting software, for example—to fatten their profits while leaving you stuck with next to nothing. You often have to repay advances if your book doesn't sell, for example. Many traditional publishers have an interesting way to let you get out of this—they no longer offer advances! (I had none from my two traditional publishers.) And sometimes they even ask you to pay for all or some of the upfront costs, so the publisher takes the lion's share for doing next to nothing beyond putting the publishing house's name on the book! And many traditional publishers only accept a MS that comes from an agent. More on traditional publishers later.

Moreover, while that starry-eyed yearning to see your book on the shelves of a big book barn might be satisfied, it's often there only a few months before all your books are returned to the publisher if the book isn't selling. Most big book barns and even mom-and-pop shops, i.e., “independent” bookstores, are in bed with the Big Five, by the way—that's part of their survival formula. But that return option can work for you: It's hard to get copies into a bookstore if a book doesn't have a return option.

Be forewarned, though: Just because a traditional publisher uses Ingram (the US industry's printer/wholesaler), that doesn't mean bookstores can return your books if they don't sell—that depends on the size of the publishing run *as determined by Ingram*. And too many small presses are using Ingram's POD (that's "Print on Demand") service, which means the bookstore has no chance of returning books it doesn't sell! The only guarantee for the immediate future is that your print book can be ordered by a bookstore if it's in Ingram's catalog. (Warning: That information is already dated a bit.)

You've also signed all your rights away to that book for years to come (the term varies and depends on the contract) unless you pay a hefty penalty. (You might be left with audiobook and screenplay options—many publishers only want rights to the ebook and print versions.) Getting your rights back is so difficult that you're better off forgetting about those books and writing new ones! (Maybe second editions for those others? I've used that trick a few times!) They usually don't do any marketing for your book, so, if you don't, the publishers are stuck with books that don't sell—that's a wee bit of revenge, I suppose, but I doubt you'll feel good about it! I don't.

Of course, there are a wide variety of contracts and lots of fine print—the publishers have lawyers on their staff, and you don't (because you don't have a staff!). Those lawyers are protecting the publisher's interests and rarely yours. (No one protects yours. There's no writers' union! Authors Guild pretends to be one, but they're just Big Five toadies, so don't even think about them!) And be sure you understand what you're signing! Find some legal help if you feel the need, but many times your common sense will prevail. The old adage applies: If it seems too good to be true, run! (I've done a lot of running over my writing career!)

To be fair, using a traditional publisher can be advantageous. Think of it this way: Your publisher can be like a pro bono lawyer. You're paying him nothing, and you're avoiding that indie investment to produce your book, the upfront costs of editing, formatting, and cover art—now somewhere between \$500 and \$1000. (If done right...and that doesn't count marketing costs. I've produced recent ebooks for only the price of the pre-made but unique cover, not counting marketing, but they represent a lot more work and time.)

That traditional publisher is also assuming the risks for making that investment, not you. If you're going to publish only one book, \$500-\$1000 isn't a big investment and therefore its production cost won't be a big personal loss, but if you become a prolific indie and produce 20 books, say, you might be out \$20k, which isn't chicken feed for most people. (I justify it by saying it's probably about what I'd pay for greens' fees over the same amount of time—golf isn't very creative, though.) This consideration is a big plus (and probably the only one!) for going traditional. (Like I noted above, you can pare down costs the more DIY you do but doing so takes more of your time away from writing.)

But let's consider some more negatives and positives.

Negatives and positives for the traditional route. Maybe you're expecting your book to be a huge success, so you're willing to tolerate the meager royalties per book sold from a traditional publisher (how meager is specified in your contract), especially if you plan to be a prolific writer. (Seriously, what writer with any common sense really plans to be one at the beginning of his writing career?) Maybe you don't like the idea of DIY and having to be your own boss (with indie, even if you aren't 100% DIY, you have to manage your business—traditionally published authors do too, to a lesser extent in some cases, even if they don't think they have to).

Maybe you're saying to yourself that you just want to write your stories and forget about all the rest, like that author I mentioned earlier? Okay. If you were indie, you'd still need things that a traditional publisher provides, but the latter might not listen to you if you dislike their cover, and they might not listen to you if you push back on final editorial comments regarding your MS (agents and acquisitions editors for traditional publishers do that too—see below).

Baldacci, Cornwall, Deaver, Grafton, King, Patterson, and Preston, to name a few best-selling authors (the definition of that is often arbitrary because sales don't necessarily imply the book earns any literary respect, especially in genre fiction)...they and other old formulaic mares and stallions in the Big Five's stables might be able to get by with meager royalties—they sell a lot of books!—but you don't have their famous author name recognition. Let's face it: Readers pay attention to authors if they reliably spin a good yarn (that's why any author should mention previous books somewhere in the new one). I can't even guarantee the few authors I've mentioned are household names, but they're known brands in the publishing industry. (The number is surprisingly small.)

Chances are your book won't sell well during that two- or three-month trial period in the bookstores, in spite of all the coddling and kudos from your agent and publisher, and your Big

Five publisher won't give a rat's ass in the long run because he always has many other authors to exploit (too strong a word? check the contracts!). You will care, though, especially after you decide, "Oh hell, I'll just go indie with this book now!": Getting back your rights to that MS after the fact is a lot more difficult! (I've never tried it although it was justified a couple of times. Just ask Barry Eisler or Joe Konrath, though, two authors who struggled to go indie and probably tell the world all too often about that struggle. Say, what happened to those blokes?) Again, small presses, the Hobbits of the traditional publishing world, tend to be a lot friendlier than the Big Five, the huge Orcs, but small presses are an endangered species now (if at all successful, they're gobbled up by one of the Big Five).

You're your own boss as an indie writer. That also has negatives and positives. You might save a lot of time and grief by going indie *ab initio*. It's your choice. Choose wisely. Truth is, chances are slim you'll be the next Deaver or King, no matter what road you choose. These authors and other "traditionalists" I've named have been doing their shtick quite a while, and they got in on the ground floor. (Of course, they'll soon be dead, so if you're a young writer, just wait!)

Patience is a virtue, and it's also a necessity in this new era of digital publishing, no matter which route you choose. (And here King is wrong again: There's a conspiracy afoot against indie writers. All Big Five traditional publishers and writers like King hate them—many have said so publicly, the real and often hidden reason being that they feel threatened. They even have an organization called Authors Guild that has institutionalized this hatred—it doesn't represent authors in general, of course, not even midlist authors sponsored by small presses.)

Going indie is probably more efficient—there's less bureaucracy to deal with, and your book doesn't have to wait in the publisher's queue, which can be a long time (but there are queues for the people you might hire as an indie too—editors, formatters, and cover artists!). How long do you have to wait to be traditionally published after your MS is accepted? One year, as a minimum (two to three years for the Big Five, unless you've written some fiery tome like *Fire and Fury*—in case you didn't know, that's not a novel; or a sappy celeb book that tells all with a ghostwriter. That doesn't count the time you spend writing and getting your MS accepted (this can also be painfully slow—see the next topic, for example). But a publisher, any publisher, will help you get through the waiting game, so that's one reason for not going 100% DIY.

Chances are you won't have 20 novels to your name soon either if you go traditional, at least for a while, because of traditional publishing's inefficiency. If you're just focusing on one book, that "great American novel" (or British, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and so forth), indie might be your best bet. You can always go traditional later, believe it or not. I did. And if you win the lottery like Hugh Howey (*Wool*), or E. L. James (*Fifty Shades of Grey*), or Mark Weir (*The Martian*), your successful indie book will even have the Big Five salivating and eventually knocking on your door! They're not dumb—they'll bet on any nag that's already won the Kentucky Derby!

Agents and small presses. Agents are usually pariahs (ever rented an apartment or bought or sold a house?), literary agents in particular. The latter can be helpful sometimes, but more and more they're just gatekeepers for the Big Five and completely annoying. (Instead of St. Peter at the pearly gates, though, they're guarding the gates to Hades, as you'll see below, and they flood the river Styx to make it even wider so you can't get back across.) Literary agents filter out all those books they think the publishers won't care about (meaning they're the first determiners of so-called "market value," even though no one on planet Earth can predict which books "take off," especially them!).

Give me an intelligent publisher/acquisitions editor from a small press who knows the business any day! Agents, after all, generally don't write books; that publisher/editor might have written some and guided a lot of others with some degree of success. They've seen a lot more books too, while agents come and go and are lucky to even get an MS they represent onto a publisher's slush pile. Moreover, that acquisitions editor and staff from a small press can give you some TLC you would never receive from anyone representing Big Five authors and publishers (unless you're someone like Stephen King, of course).

Too many literary agents, especially younger ones, are failed and disgruntled wannabe authors who couldn't, can't, and shouldn't write; and too many are also young, recent MFA graduates who love books but get lost in the morass of traditional publishing's out-of-date business model. More and more, their rejections are form emails without any useful information that might help the querying author. It's been that way for the last twenty years at least (more, if you believe King's tales of woe). Authors like Tom Clancy and J. K. Rowling were completely overlooked by agents far too long (proof enough that agents can't predict "market value").

And don't dance the happy dance if they ask to read your MS—they can sit on it for months and then blow you off with nary an explanation beyond "Sorry, not *for me* after all" (emphasis mine, because there's no recognition of the possibility that someone else might be enthusiastic about your book, including readers!). Of course, that can also happen with that small press publisher/editor, but at least you got your foot in the door (or is it just a toe?).

If you go the agent route, or, better still, approach that publisher/acquisitions editor from a small press, you will have to learn to write blurbs (you'll need that skill anyway when you release your books) and query letters (you'll probably also need that skill to get reviews, so it's good to learn these skills). You need to read the agent's or publisher's rulebook carefully and follow it—some want snail-mail query letters (fewer these days), others are okay with email; some want sample chapters with the query letter, sometimes in the text of an email (no one wants spam or a virus); and still others want a complete MS (but most will request the MS only when they're at least a bit interested in the story idea, hence the importance of the query letter).

Most will want your MS to be finished and polished no matter what portion they ask for, because they don't want to coddle you while you putter around with it—if they accept your MS, they want to send it right away to *their* editors. (Only Big Five VIPs like King are coddled these days. But who wants to be coddled anyway? It sounds too much like "curdled." I'll accept some TLC on shepherding the book, though, but I wouldn't expect it from any agent or Big Five publisher.)

Prepare the MS to their specs (you'll probably need a new version for every agent or publisher who asks for it!). Get used to pat phrases in agents' responses: "Sorry, your MS has potential but needs a lot of work" translates to "I think your idea sucks, so go away"; "I have too many novels in that genre" translates to "Write in another genre because you sure suck at this one." They're also experts in letting you off easy. Some offer gratuitous critiques: You send an MS for a sci-fi novel and get the response, "Your novel has too much narrative." That translates to "I have no idea how to write sci-fi," which is true, because the agent doesn't understand the need for world-building, a special kind of narrative used in sci-fi stories. (All this has happened to me, by the way...and you have my guarantee these responses aren't exceptional.)

The turnover among agents is legendary; small presses are often absorbed by the Big Five eventually, especially if they're successful. Unlike incompetent teachers (those who can, do; those who can't, teach—oops, I'm writing lessons about writing!), pay and benefits are low for literary agents at the beginning, and there are no unions to improve things for them either. (Only

the Big Five's worker-bees occasionally belong to a union, part of that overhead so that you have to receive fewer royalties.) Still, if you can find an agent you can work with, more power to you. There has to be some good ones somewhere. Same for small presses. That can make a difference in an author's life, I suppose, especially to those writers who like some TLC (that increases a lot after you sell a lot of books, of course!). A good agent or good small press can help you in your writing career. Unfortunately, there aren't many of them left; they're an endangered species too.

Is there a place for traditional publishing? Sure, but as time goes on, less and less. The actual production of the book for the indie writer is fraught with difficulties—as I said above, a good small press can guide you through those production steps and pay for the book production. (See the next lesson for details about what you have to do if they don't.) The traditional publisher might still offer an advance—you could get some money up front, in other words (less and less as the years roll by, and most small presses say they can't afford more than the risks they're already taking with your book by paying for the upfront costs). Caveat emptor: you usually won't see any royalties until you pay for that advance, and if your book doesn't sell, many contracts require a payback.

Your publisher might even line up a few book signings, interviews, book tours, and the like to help with marketing ("live ones" all but disappeared during the COVID pandemic, but who knows what the future will bring?). All those things might be a positive for some writers. You might even find a literary agent you like who has your best interests at heart and does their damndest to get your book accepted by a major Big Five publisher (an improbable event, though, because the Big Five generally bet only on the sure winning horses in their stables, remember, and rarely on new authors).

With today's many publishing options, though, I don't know why you'd try to land a Big Five contract. When I first tried to publish my work, there were only two options: traditional publishing and vanity presses. I didn't want the latter (they no longer exist—hooray!—although snooty Big Five publishers and authors often disparagingly call anything not traditional vanity!), and one of my many sins is pride in my work, so I tried the former. Big mistake! I wasted many years (2000 – 2006, approximately) and collected many rejections (over 1000). Before the ebook revolution, and out of frustration, I finally went POD (print-on-demand), and then I tried the new rage, indie ebooks (I've made some print versions, both self- and small press-published, but I recommend to all self-published authors to forget about print). After many indie books, I found a home for some books in small presses, though, for the reasons I mentioned above. (That didn't work out too well for me, but it might for you.)

Although I've hinted at it, let me repeat: Don't let anyone tell you indie (self-publishing) is vanity press! That's like saying a beautiful, modern elephant is an ugly, wooly mammoth, except vanity presses never had the positive qualities of mammoths, even though they were just as hairy and ugly. And, most of all, if anyone says your indie book is vanity press with a smirk on her or his face, restrain yourself—that ignoramus doesn't know what the hell they're talking about (you can write about homicides like I do, but don't commit them!).

On the flip side of the coin, if you've landed a Big Five contract for your new book (a statistical anomaly these days, and I pity you), or found a good home with a small press (less of an anomaly and a bit better for your sanity...sometimes), don't let any writer who's gone indie berate you about how stupid you are (aforementioned indies Eisler and Konrath often did that). You might not want to invest all that money up front for book production, or you like that small press's catalog and want to be associated with all its great authors. (Both were factors in my decision to try traditional publishing with my two small presses.)

For whatever reason, you've made your choices intelligently, so you can ignore the naysayers from both traditional and indie camps. (By the way, many authors do both, and they're not schizoid. I might be crazy, but not schizoid.)

I'd never want a Big Five contract, though, not that I expect to ever get one. There are two basic reasons: I loathe their antiquated business model and how they treat authors, and I have never heard of unknown authors receiving the TLC I need in my publishing journey. Small presses are far better at providing that, and my association with Carrick Publishing (editing, formatting, and cover art) provided that too.

Finding the middle ground. I must insist that there's a middle ground. Most of my books are "published" by Carrick Publishing. I remain in charge but pay for things I don't do well, either from lack of skills, impatience, or laziness. I could learn all the different ebook formats and graphics arts and then go 100% DIY, for example, but I'd rather be writing fiction. Maybe that's laziness, but formats are constantly changing, so keeping up with them is like trying to keep up with security and other rules on Facebook—it's a huge drag. I'm not a graphics artist, so I also pay for original cover art (even stock stuff if I get exclusive rights—who wants to have the same cover as everyone else?). I can do a bit of social media, but I'm not otherwise good at PR and marketing, so I've paid for some of that too.

There are organizations like Draft2Digital (see the appendix) that formalize the relationship I have with Carrick Publishing. I preferred that more personal relationship I had with Carrick—that TLC aspect again—but one of these organizations might work for you. They usually only handle ebooks, though, so you have to be more creative if you also want print versions. (Print versions will eventually go the way of the dinosaurs, though. Besides those sagging bookshelves, they produce cramps in your arms when you're reading. Some readers might have read President Obama's first memoir in print version, for example—it weighs at least ten times more than my Kindle.)

Maybe a small press might be your middle ground. Hopefully you have more luck than I did. (Penmore Press and Black Opal Books both eventually disappointed me, in different ways, and the latter more than the former. I published the first two "Esther Brookstone" books with Penmore, and the first "Last Humans" book with Black Opal.) Many authors do some DIY, some partial DIY, and traditional with small presses. You might want to experiment, especially if you end up with a lot of books in your *oeuvre*.

I'm a mongrel—both a traditionally and self-published author—and I'm proud of it. In the process of getting to that point, I've met (mostly online) a bunch of wonderful people who, like all good friends, enrich my life and tolerate my quirks.

Know your options and decide what's best for you. If you're not happy, reset with the next book. Take charge of your writing life after writing that MS. I'll discuss more details in the remaining lessons.

Multiple choices for distribution. If you're going indie, please be advised that Amazon is no longer your friend. Frankly, there's just too much focus on Amazon and not on authors because the bots run everything (maybe Bezos is just a bot?). Some authors still swear by Bezos's behemoth, though, and some PR and marketing "gurus" (an ironic term here) will tell you that you can sell a truckload of books by using them. While this somewhat relates to formatting choices (see the next lesson), I should point out that Amazon wants you to be exclusive with them for ebooks (maybe for print too, because Create Space is now part of Kindle Direct Publishing, or KDP). They make more money that way; unfortunately, you'll make less,

because they don't distribute to anyone else. In fact, they don't distribute, period. They're just a giant retailer now, not a bookseller!

So, what should you use instead of Amazon? Draft2Digital and Smashwords are your best options. Both even offer the .mobi (Kindle) format without DRM (Digital Rights Management)—readers don't like the latter because they can't share ebooks on other reading platforms, not even if they purchased the original ebook. Print books can be shared with family and friends; why not ebooks? (Okay, in both cases, sharing borders on piracy, but I can give a wink and then look the other way for a family member or friend.)

Every author should "go wide," i.e., avoid an exclusive handover to Bezos's bots, and use Draft2Digital or Smashwords because they distribute to their affiliated retailers (Amazon has none) and lenders (I guess Amazon counts *their Prime* as a lender, but that's a scam perpetrated against authors and readers). Draft2Digital and Smashwords' affiliated retailers include Apple iBooks, Barnes & Noble, and Kobo; their affiliated lenders include Scribd, Overdrive, Gardners, and others, and many also supply public libraries that now lend ebooks themselves. Both Draft2Digital and Smashwords allow you to have separate pricing for libraries. Moreover, if you like to adjust your prices (see Lesson Five), it's a one-time chore, because both will adjust them for all their affiliated retailers. And Kobo, an affiliated retailer for both Draft2Digital and Smashwords, signed a deal with Walmart—your ebooks will be available in Walmart stores and at Walmart online.

There came a time (not that long ago!) when I wanted to try 100% DIY (mostly because my old standby formatter Carrick Publishing took a year hiatus). I looked at the Amazon and Smashwords MS-crunchers, what Carrick Publishing has used for years, and decided they weren't appropriate for my DIY efforts. Most MS-grinders can use MS Word .doc or .docx files, but they have to be formatted especially for the grinder. Both Amazon's and Smashwords's are a bit long-in-the-tooth in that sense, so I tried Draft2Digital. There are tricks to learn about formatting that Word MS for them too, so I tried it first on the little collection *Sleuthing, British-Style*, and then on a full novel, #2 in "The Last Humans" series. Let me say that it does a fine job preparing a quality ebook. It also is the best alternative to Smashwords with a similar list of affiliated retailers and lending and library services, and it's much better than Kindle Direct Publishing. (A short lesson about publishing with Draft2Digital is found in the appendix.)

Those are three choices for ebook production—Amazon, Draft2Digital, and Smashwords; I'm certain there are more. Print books are another can of worms entirely—that whole issue is confused by POD options like Create Space (recently absorbed by Amazon's KDP) and Ingram Spark or Lightning Source (the first often used by many small presses and as an option akin to Draft2Digital, and the second for indies) and many old-time, dying PODs like Xlibris and Infinity that aren't worth your consideration anymore (formatting work to be done there too!)—most are close to being scams! (Xlibris now among them.) Old-style Ingram is now only accessible to traditional publishers, preferably from the Big Five with their big print runs. If you go indie, I'd recommend Create Space for print, even though it's dealing with the evil Amazon ogre—at least until Draft2Digital gets its print option out of beta-testing. If you go with a small press, they'll make the choice—that's usually out of your hands, but hopefully it's old-style Ingram so bookstores can return your books (that's often a requirement to display them, by the way).

Either way, it's up to you. The last lesson in this course is about PR and marketing. No matter what point you choose on that linear spectrum between 100% DIY and a Big Five contract, that chore will be mostly yours. No one will buy your book if they don't know who you

are (name recognition aka author branding) and know about your book (book recognition aka product branding). But more on that later. First, we need some more discussion about formats. In this new age of digital publishing, there are many as the definition of “book” acquires new meanings.

Lesson Four: You’ll Need Help

Do you only want to write fiction? That used to be enough about four or five decades ago when the good old mares and stallions in the Big Five’s stables were sure bets for those ogres of traditional publishing because they basically had no competition. The secret they didn’t want to share? Anyone can write a damn good story! They and their publishers knew it, but they tried to keep the competition limited. Well-established authors like Baldacci, Child, Deaver, King, and many others before them—that’s the sweet monopolistic deal they had and some still have.

Am I envious? Most certainly! Time was on their side because they got in on the ground floor. Nowadays authors have to do so much more to even have a chance for recognition (I’ve given up on that and never really felt that pressure because I never tried to make a living from writing), and much of what’s needed after finishing the MS they don’t do well because they’re good at writing and not particularly good at other things like editing or marketing that *might* help them sell books. There are also too many people who want to take their money and do those things for them so they can “just write,” but most of today’s authors still have to manage everything. This lesson deals with the first part; I dedicate a whole lesson to marketing for the masochists among you.

Some of the service providers an author might use, whether self- or traditionally published, are hard workers; and an author can develop some personal friendships with them that will help a writing career. Generally speaking, the smaller the service organization is, the better the quality of service, which is logical. (That’s another reason to boycott Amazon, by the way.) For large organizations—the Big Five and their affiliated agencies and bureaucracies are the worst—each author-client is basically just a number. I’ve been lucky in this sense for years, getting even TLC from my small presses until times got tougher for them (one possible explanation for our divorce, at any rate). But there’s a truism about these small organizations: They can become victims of their own success. With minimal personnel, they’re efficient in their supplying of services and TLC, until their number of clients increases to the point where they can’t do as good a job, or they’re bought out by one of the traditional conglomerates.

Please don’t be naïve. What comes after finishing that MS is hard work! It’s also often frustrating. And, up to a certain point, that’s all positive. The author who has storytelling skills and hones them with each book, finds writing and publishing a novel easier each time. If that were all there was to it, we’d have a lot more good books and authors (increasing the competition even more!). In storytelling nowadays, to complete the job, you must earn your stripes by doing the hard work that comes after if you even want some name recognition. Even those old, established authors had to do that to get established! Sure, they might deny it, and there wasn’t that much competition back then when they did it—lucky them!—but they also didn’t have

advantages that today's authors have—the digital revolution has changed everything! (And those old, established authors generally hate that!)

If it's any comfort, that can balance things out. But you still have to do some things beyond just writing.

Three hurdles. There are three hurdles to jump over along the route to publishing and marketing your book: Producing a polished MS, turning it into a book, and letting people know about you and your book. Every author has to jump over those hurdles. A traditional publisher will do most of the second step but usually very little of the first or third (more on this third step later). This lesson is aimed mostly at indie writers. They'll usually need help with some of that second hurdle.

Again, King ignores all this in his book *On Writing*. He can afford not to give a rat's ass, of course, because he has it all done for him and probably hasn't worried about these issues since he wrote and sold newspapers and stories in high school. He probably doesn't know Arial font from Times New Roman either. You should be aware of these issues and seek help when you need it. You're not King. He lives in a different, alternate plane of reality now, in that Big Five stable of formulaic old mares and stallions. You can perhaps ascend to that blessed plane of existence someday ("blessed" might be a questionable description, of course, because it's often replaceable with "cursed" and not all that desirable for true and original storytellers), but you won't if you don't pay attention to those details King doesn't have to worry about.

Formatting. Most indies prefer ebooks to print books. I originally thought that was a mistake (I know many in my own generation like print). Ebook sales had plateaued and print book sales were holding steady. I was going to try to do both. (Yeah, I barely got started adding print versions for my "evergreen books"—novels that are as entertaining and fresh as the day I finished the MS—but I was working on it! Print's expensive.) Although I now recommend you exclude print versions, I'll still consider both here. The Covid-19 pandemic, by the way, showed that ebooks have a tremendous advantage: A reader can order online and get instant gratification. When I binge-read an entire series, for example—ideal for evergreen books—I can finish one, and a few minutes later, start the next! (Revenge is sweet. Traditional publishing emphasizes print, so the popularity of ebooks now is yet another reason the big conglomerates will become the dinosaurs of book publishing with self-publishing their asteroid.)

You're faced with a plethora of ebook formats, though. You might also want a paper version of your book. (Maybe trying to prove me and other pundits wrong? Go for it!). These are all multiple formatting chores. While it's possible to be DIY here, it's time consuming, like I said above, and there are multiple learning curves to climb in order to negotiate all the different bureaucracies at Kindle Direct Publishing aka KDP (.mobi ebook formats), Smashwords (all ebook formats, including .mobi, but first comes .epub in the formatting production line), Draft2Digital (.epub and .mobi formats) and Create Space (POD, or print-on-demand, now part of and a choice in KDP)—these are the main ways to produce your indie book. Given these complications, you might want help with formatting. This runs the gamut from informal to formal. (Businesses corresponding to the latter often take a cut of future royalties if the organization accepts your book, making them something between DIY and a small press—Wild Rose is an example—but I generally don't recommend them, not with Draft2Digital so easy to use.)

Deciding on formats is important. Most represent investments of your time and money. Beyond ebooks and pbooks (electronic and print versions), there are audiobooks. Given current trends, I wouldn't be surprised if multimedia books aren't in our near future. I'm a bit too old to

jump on that bandwagon, but the idea of replacing non-words describing sounds is still attractive! (A silencer on a gun produces a textual pfft!, but that non-word doesn't begin to carry all the emotional content for the detective who hears that sound! Or the reader who might want to hear it for realism.)

Like I said, a lot of formatting can be done DIY. If you're just beginning, you'll have a learning curve in order to learn the ropes (not much of one with Draft2Digital—see the appendix). Pbooks are especially challenging (spines and back covers are needed), audiobooks even more so. If you have any doubts (or simply don't want to spend the time), reasonably priced help is available. And, for audiobooks, never read your own books unless you have a voice like Judi Dench or James Earl Jones.

A word about PDFs: Don't offer them! (Okay, I offer them as freebies, just like theis little course, but that's different: I'm not expecting royalties, although I often suggest that readers make a donation to their favorite charity.) Your formatter can provide you one because websites like NetGalley like all ebook formats, and they count PDF as one. But PDFs in general are attractive to book pirates, so don't offer that option on Smashwords, for example. Draft2Digital also offers a PDF version you can download, but I don't think their retailers or library and lending associates use them. Use PDFs wisely. (NetGalley avoids any problems via a special software lock that isn't DRM—it's better quality than Amazon's version. Smashwords never worries about pirating, so don't look for any sympathies from Mark Coker.)

I've used only one formatter (Carrick Publishing, that doesn't charge royalties) in my role as a partial DIY indie and have always been more than satisfied with their work, so I can't rank others. (I tried once to use Wild Rose but bailed when I realized that they pretend to be a small press so they can charge royalties.) Be a smart buyer, because formatters in general can be (1) unreliable and (2) expensive (even tapping a lot into your royalties). Caveat emptor.

Of course, aggregating services like Draft2Digital and Smashwords provide software that does the formatting for you if you've pre-formatted your MS Word MS correctly. Carrick uses the second and Amazon's; I've used the first. Amazon, Draft2Digital, and Smashwords all take a cut of royalties once your book is published (far too much when considering the services they offer beyond formatting, especially Amazon!).

And let me add that aggregating services are also suffering growing pains with mergers: Recently Draft2Digital and Smashwords merged! I haven't seen any positives or negatives from this yet, though. (See the appendix about my experiences using Draft2Digital.)

ISBNs and all that. These are what determine "officially published," not the damn copyrights, which you can put on any MS. You'll probably want a different ISBN for all four formatting options described above (.mobi, .epub, print book, and audiobook), at least different ones for ebooks and print books. Small presses might only offer ebook and pbook ISBNs—that's okay too. You should get them, though. Don't be satisfied with only Amazon's ASIN—that's not an industry standard. (You'll need one to put your book on Amazon, of course, but make it *in addition to* the ISBN. Again, I don't recommend using Amazon for anything anymore! Not even to buy dust mops!)

Front and back text. This is placed *inside the covers* of your print version and also included in your ebook version. You should mention your previous books and coming attractions. You also might want to include a few review excerpts. You should thank your readers at the end and ask them for a review. You'll want an acknowledgement section and an author's bio (include a pic). And don't forget to include online info, like URLs for your website and author pages at online sites (Amazon, Smashwords, Goodreads, etc.).

Proofing. “Wait!” you say. “I did that.” Nope. Proofing is often confused with editing, but they’re very different. You edited that MS into polished perfection. Formatting it into an ebook or pbook or creating an audiobook can introduce all kinds of errors. A line or paragraph might get dropped. Italics are often lost, for example (not important in an audiobook, I suppose—how does an audiobook even indicate italics?), and you might need to make a list of special type characters for your ebook and pbook formatter (Arabic, Chinese, Cyrillic, Hebrew, etc., even if your formatter is you) or suffer the consequences. You (or someone else) aren’t content or copy editing here—you (or they) are checking the final version of your book to ensure it’s as pristine as your MS was. (Even traditionally published books must go through this process; every book should. Many traditional publishers fail here. I have a collection of Agatha Christie novels where that happens—the errors might even go all the way back to copy editing!)

You’ll also often be surprised if you use one of those online converters. You can generally start with an MS Word file or PDF, but results are mixed. I’ve had more luck with .epub than .mobi. (The first is a generic file for ebook readers, the second is only for Kindles—or Kindle apps available for most devices.) Bottom line: To get a professional ebook file, I often can use some help. (I no longer need that with Draft2Digital, though.) The pbook is even more troublesome (see below). Formatting services generally cost less than copy editors, probably because more can be computerized with the former, but they don’t lend themselves to DIY as much, either.

Don’t release a book until it’s been proofed. All the most common ways to publish an indie book—Kindle (.mobi file), Smashwords (many ebook file types, including .mobi), Draft2Digital (basically .epub and .mobi) and Create Space (print)—permit final adjustments. These organizations want to sell your books, and they know a professional-looking book is one of the first requirements to be able to do that. Proofing clearly doesn’t require as much time as editing does, but it’s essential. The more complicated and lengthier your prose is, the more chances there are for formatting errors.

Cover design. I don’t recommend DIY at all for cover design unless you’re an accomplished graphics artist as well as a writer. Even downloading stock covers is better if uniqueness is guaranteed. Hiring an artist to make a professional and original cover is even better if you can afford it. (Traditional publishers usually provide them, of course, although many of their covers really suck, looking something like what a high school kid might do on PowerPoint. Maybe they’re done on Powerpoint? I’ve seen some really bad ones from the Big Five!)

You’re a writer, so it’s unlikely you’re also a good artist (unless maybe you’re an author who has written a book about graphics art!). Your cover (and your title!) should be related to your story in some way, but don’t try to put a lot of your book on your cover—avoid clutter. (I’ve often used a scene from the book; that could mean your cover artist needs a summary, at least of that scene!) Stock covers often fail in that regard, but not always. (I’ve had good luck with mine.) And abstract design is fine for linoleum floors, but it doesn’t look good on a book cover. (Bill Gates came out with a book on climate change recently. Even I could have done his awful cover on PowerPoint. Hmm. Maybe that’s what he did? PowerPoint is a Microsoft product, after all.) I need to redo a few of my covers. I’ve already done that for some books. (Yeah, I sometimes cut corners I shouldn’t have! Guilty as charged. No one’s perfect!)

Cover design for a print book is even more complicated. Ebooks don’t have spines or back covers, but print books do. On a shelf, a reader might see all three, or look at them off the shelf. But they can be useful if you do print versions. That back cover can contain a blurb, endorsements or review excerpts, and your bio and picture, for example. Take advantage of the

space. (Think of the book's page on Amazon. All the same info should be accessible when a prospective reader takes your book down from the bookstore or library's shelf. The "peek inside," of course, is the customer in the bookstore browsing through the book.)

While the cover doesn't make the book, an attractive and/or clever cover can get readers' attentions. (So can a clever title, which is part of that clever cover.) And every format, ebook or print, will have a thumbnail image at an online retailer that can and should attract readers too, so make sure cover details don't get lost when the cover image becomes that small.

Many graphic artists make book covers. The pricing is all over the board, though. Again, the adage "You get what you pay for" isn't necessarily true. Well-established artists can be expensive; ones getting started often less so but just as good—maybe even better. And, if you establish a relationship with your cover artist, she might give you deals even when she hits the big time (but maybe not if you hit it)! Stock covers, even if unique, can be inexpensive. I once purchased a unique one for \$25. (Your best bet is to peruse some online catalog, which takes patience. A lot of graphics artists make stock covers as a sideline!)

Bottom line. You've worked hard on your indie book's MS. You don't want to mess it up on the final steps before its release. Hire pros when you need to do so—admit your limitations. That might require shopping around a bit, but you want a final product you're proud of. So do your retail outlets...and your readers.

A note for traditionally published writers. You don't have to concern yourself much with any of the above. Nevertheless, if you can manage to avoid the "we'll take care of it" attitude of your traditional publisher (meaning most of the time, "You have no damn say in this because we know best!"—okay, that's unfair, because a traditional publisher, especially a small press, will often want from you a book summary and/or cover ideas for their graphics art staff) and be on top of some of these things, that personal touch might bring big dividends in the long run.

I've seen many traditionally published books that needed more TLC in these steps than the traditional publisher is willing to provide (they're often trying to cut costs too, you know, unless you're Stephen King—remember Bill Gates's book?). It's fine to want the publisher to take care of the production details, but the book still has your name on it. The presentation of your book still reflects on you, the author.

Lesson Five: How to Market Your Book

The good and bad news. The bad news first: On the average, 4500+ new books per day are published. (Hmm. That stat sounds suspicious because it's so low and a round number. I don't remember the source—maybe Amazon? Maybe some marketing site? The important thing is that the number is huge! There's an unknown date associated, so it's probably already higher if only for that...and maybe Covid-19? People had a lot more time for reading and writing if they weren't wasting it on computer games and streaming video.) That's lots of competition, from many good authors and good books, even though there's a lot of crap too (that universal Sturgeon's law always applies).

Most writers only sell a few hundred copies or less of each book; that implies you probably shouldn't give up your day-job! Here's a corollary to that advice: Only a few authors hit the jackpot; that implies that achieving success for your book is like winning the lottery. This is true for Big Five books, 100% DIY self-published books, and everything in between (e.g., books from small presses). As the number of readers dwindles (and that's happening too), it can only get worse.

The good news: There are still many rewards for just being a writer that are independent of having incredible sales figures. First, it's damn satisfying to create some stories; it's fulfilling and it's fun. Second, it's rewarding to be part of a community of readers and writers. Reading and writing are quintessential human activities that actually mean something, and storytelling is a part of human culture that goes all the way back to human beings' prehistory (those cave paintings in France tell stories). Third, writing gives you peace of mind. I don't know about you, but my muses badger me all the time (they're banshees with Tasers), but, above all, they know I have many stories in me that need to be told, and I really enjoy telling them. I couldn't have survived all the boredom associated with the Covid-19 pandemic without reading and writing!

Why does an artist paint or sculpt? Why does a musician write music? Why does an author tell a story? If you write a book as a narcissist who wants to prove you're better or smarter than everyone else, you've got it all wrong! (I suspect many celebs and politicians' books fall in that category.) A true creative individual can't imagine doing anything but what they're doing. If I ever put a bumper sticker on my car, it would say, "I'd rather be writing." (Um, now there's a marketing idea!) I must write each day (or do something related to writing) as much as I need to eat and sleep. Yes, writing is addictive and it can become an addiction, but it's a lot safer one than gambling or tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. Every creative person should feel that way.

But back to all that competition: No one will read your book but family and friends (maybe not even them!) if you don't tell people about it. In fact, no one will even know you're an author if you don't tell them, simply because most people aren't authors and they assume you're not either. Whether you're indie, midlist (small press), or a Big five newbie, this is an absolute must. There's a lot of DIY that can be done in marketing, so watch how you spend your money—there are “gurus” just itching to take it from you. (And they'll sell you their books too—truth of the matter is, those are the only books most gurus ever write, so their “knowledge” is always suspect, and Sturgeon's Law always applies to them.)

In the following, you will find a to-do list where every item is optional—at least, how much you do with each item is optional. There are no guarantees here—don't believe anyone who says they have a sure-fire method to make your book a success (whatever that means these days). None exist, and they never have existed. Having a successful book is like winning the lottery, more so each day, but for the latter you need to buy a ticket at least. Same for your book—you can't win if you don't publish your book and play the marketing game at least a little bit afterward.

A lot of idiots don't like me to say that it's a lottery. (I was once kicked out of an online discussion group for that very reason—wounded egos, I suppose, or maybe just morons.) But I'm a realist and they are not. For some things I'm a glass-half-full guy, an eternal optimist, but not for writing success. I'll celebrate what little successes and fun I have, of course, but I'll never have unrealistic expectations. You should have the same attitude...or you'll go crazy!

In marketing your book, you have two basic problems: Letting the world know who you are (also called *name recognition*) and letting the world know what you write (recognition that your book exists, or *product recognition*). (The much ballyhooed “establishing your brand”

really applies to the case when you've written many books, which automatically does that establishing.) Some things below work for one or the other; others work for both.

Much of this now involves your internet presence—it's an electronically connected world nowadays. That means you can reach out to many people all over the globe. It also means most other writers you're competing with are doing exactly the same thing, so the signal-to-noise ratio is bad, to use some engineering terminology. (You're the signal and they're the noise, as far as you and they are concerned.)

Again, King ignores all this in his book *On Writing*. Today most authors aren't coddled like King is. Somehow you must get your head above that average sea level of other authors' books (the noise) so people notice you and your books (the signal). No one says or should say it's easy, including me. In fact, today it's almost impossible. (I repeat: One stat I saw from Amazon says that most authors sell less than one hundred copies of each book. I believe it! I believe I've given more books away than ones I've sold, but I haven't counted those I've sold at book events....or how many have been pirated.)

Marketing is often the last task you want to spend time on as a writer, but grin and bear it and try to do a little. You've had all your fun writing and publishing the book (probably more for the former than for the latter—that's me!). Now's the time to get down to the nitty-gritty and sell it. "Sell it" is loosely speaking, of course, and your first job is to write a great story. Beware, though—like I said, there are many good stories and good authors and possibly great ones out there no one knows anything about. Or, being extremely modest, not such good or great authors but prolific ones, like me. We're all trying to find readers in a very competitive environment.

Create an author website. You need one. Even King has one (someone else probably created it and runs it, of course). Your website will be and should be the center of your writing universe. Guy Kawasaki foolishly thinks that's your Amazon author's page. That's BS and indicative of marketing gurus' over-emphasis on using that retail giant! He's 100% wrong, in other words, and that's my first warning about the so-called "marketing gurus": They believe Bezos is God and Amazon is heaven! (Don't know who Guy is? Congrats! He's one of those "gurus" who likes everyone to focus far too much attention on Amazon. Penny Sansevieri from AME and many others also mislead you in this way.) As authors we have to tolerate Amazon—they're a huge book retailer, after all. (That's a small part of their business now, which includes space travel, but they're not an author's friend in general, so it's best to ignore them wherever and whenever possible. You should have an Amazon author's page, though, just so people can search or click on your name and see all your books—otherwise they'll never find you in Amazon's retail chaos. (You'll need one in both the US and the UK. You can set up both from your laptop.)

Some gurus say you must have one website for each book. That's also complete BS! (Maybe propagated by people who construct websites? It makes you question that label of "guru" even more.) Your website is about you, the author. Talking about your books is secondary, albeit important. And, if you have an extensive *oeuvre*, having one webpage per book is out of the question—no one will slog through all those web pages! Not even your Amazon author page does that! (The books there are on a rolling track. Mine on my website would be too except that I have rolling quotations that are quips from authors and often critiques against gurus in some way or the other. So, I just have a long list of books! See the "Books & Short Stories" web page at my website.)

Be sure that you have new content every week, either via a blog or by posting short stories, book reviews, interviews, and articles about the writing business (all easily done with

blog posts, of course). Fresh material brings more visitors and brings them often, and that new material keeps Google bots and other bots happy. Don't worry about old-fashioned ideas like meta-this and meta-that. [That includes Meta, Facebook's parent company now, of course.] SEO (look it up if interested) works best when you just include fresh material, not when you're meta-ing yourself to death! (By the way, unlike Facebook, Google doesn't care about meta anymore either...or so I'm told.)

Fiction writers are often in a quandary about what to write in their blogs. My website's architects suggested I have one. I was initially at a loss too, so I checked out other author websites (always recommended to obtain ideas for yours). There are too many dedicated to the book business—book reviews, writing and grammar lessons, PR and marketing advice, and so forth. Some even sell books there. Ugh!

While you might bring something new to the table along those lines (I always put my own spin on things, but I never sell from my website or accept ads from others), it's unlikely that it will resonate because of the competition. I knew that I wouldn't stand out in the beginning even if I felt like writing that stuff (which I often do, by the way, as a politically incorrect old curmudgeon—Kurt Vonnegut is my model).

So, I decided to comment on current events. That's called op-ed, and I started having fun with that. (I suppose even my posts on those more common publishing themes can be called op-ed too—a book or movie review is an opinionated editorial!) I now just consider my blog as another part of my writing life—by my opinions, reviews, etc. you shall know me (for better or worse). I realize not everyone will agree with those opinions, so allowing comments could certainly generate some lively discussions. (By the way, if you don't read an author because of his opinions, you're missing out on a lot of good fiction—a good writer just tells a good story and doesn't pontificate or rant. I think Orson Scott Card and Michael Crichton were both jerks, for example, but I still read their stories. Intelligent readers probably shouldn't make the mistake of assuming everything and everyone's polarized like the US Congress either, or the body politic, as exhibited in the 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and probably future elections. And they shouldn't have to pay attention to those who lack the brains to realize that.)

For 2018, I made a New Year's resolution, though, which I didn't keep, of course. First, I thought the themes in my books were a better way to let the world know about the different sides of a hot topic or controversial issue. I've always included them, of course, and many old posts elaborated on them. Second, I post a lot of short stories on my blog now because short story collections don't sell well, and those contain a lot of those same themes too. And third, the op-eds on non-publishing-related current events required a lot of time spent on background searches and validation I'd rather spend writing fiction (which also often requires some of that, of course). So, I decided to cut out the op-eds about current events for a while. But I've returned to them, just fewer. (And they're now found at another website, <http://pubprogressive.com/>). I went on a rampage for the 2020 election and lately for Putin's war against Ukraine), and I've continued.

The important thing is always to add content to your website, whatever you decide to feature. Lots of real visitors to your site mean it's successful. (You measure that number with web analytics—read up on it.) Results will be dismal if you yourself only visit your website once per month—you have to be active on your own site, more so than anywhere else. A Field-of-Dreams attitude isn't a good policy to have here. The average time between landing and leaving a site for someone visiting it is often measured in tens of seconds—you need stuff there that captures visitors' attentions so they hang around a bit and feel it's worth their while.

On the business end, though, money spent on creating and maintaining your website is often worth it (and usually tax deductible as a business expense). And the situation is similar to the one with book covers: DIY website design is certainly possible (I did it for my political site because DIY has become easier than when I launched my author site in 2006), but it's not advisable. Spending up front can also allow you to tell all those optimization and other web gurus to go fly a kite later on when they email you with the promise of making your site the best on the web. (I receive a couple of those promises every week, some of them in blog comments that go into the spam folder.)

And now the nitty-gritty: What web pages do you need? A home page, some sort of calendar of events, one for your books, author bio, blog, and contact pages are essential. I often commit the crime of being too verbose. Don't be, especially on the home page. You have only a few seconds to grab a visitor's attention. Check out other authors and see what they do. I assure you that you'll see some good ideas. You can visit mine at <https://stevenmmoore.com>. It's not a great example, though. I've seen a lot better, but I'm partial to my quotes, banners, and layout, so I'm not changing, at least for now. (That costs a lot of money too.)

Author Photos. I include this after websites—you should have one on the home page—but they're really important for many of your marketing and promotional efforts. Remember the duality: author's brand + author's product(s). Your photo is part of your brand (unless the pic is of you holding one of your books, in which case it's both). A nice, relaxed head shot does wonders for letting your readers know you're just a regular gal or guy, not some robot who happens to like storytelling.

A sexy grin and lots of cleavage might look good on the Next Generation's Counselor Troi, but it might also cause readers to take you less seriously. (There might be exceptions for certain genres—romance and erotica come to mind.) An imperious scowl, a rebellious snarl, or a hair-sprayed multilayered coif that should be on a political poster doesn't make a good impression for guys. (I'd cover those tats too, again depending on your target audience.) In some cases, cleverness is appropriate: A patch and bandana if you write pirate stories, ER PPE if you write medical thrillers, and so forth.

You should have several different photos so you can sprinkle them around. I started out with the Clancy-look—my first book *Full Medical* (2006) had me in sunglasses. They hid my baby blues, of course. Later photos had me with and without my bifocal glasses. The photos have to be posed in some way, of course, but the more relaxed and natural they are, the better. A pensive look might be a good one for a mystery/crime writer. A smile, maybe a Mona Lisa one, without showing a lot of teeth can be better than a serious photo, though. You will probably have a good idea about the quality, but second opinions are often useful.

I've only had one pro headshot made (smart phones have good cameras nowadays!). Pro photographers are expensive, but I piggy-backed that one photo with a different photo session.

Just don't neglect your author photos. Your brand depends on them.

Reviews. They're overrated! A few good ones are probably enough. That has to be qualified, of course.

Here's the bottom line: Amazon treats books like any other product, even though they had their start selling books. (In a NW US garage—what's this with garages and high tech?) Therefore, they treat book reviews like product reviews. They ask the reviewer to assign a rank (i.e., stars) so that their computers can calculate an average ranking—that's all they really care about anymore. A book can have over 1000 reviews—the more there are, the more Sturgeon's Law applies to the overall set of reviews, of course—but Amazon loves this. 1000+ reviews

mean (sometimes!) they've sold 1000+ books. (With those numbers, though, it's a safe bet that each reviewer didn't get a freebie in exchange for an honest review...if they're actually honest reviews.) Your best reviews are those where reviewers take more than two lines or so to say what they liked or disliked about your book and why. Most of those 1000+ Amazon reviews fail miserably to meet that simple criterion.

I'll be called a contrarian or something much worse, but I think that ten (10) or so reviews are plenty, if they're original and not formulaic, positive, honest, well-written, and informative (which includes being non-trivial). Not only does Amazon mostly ignore or even discourage these qualities, but they also often don't even show a book's best reviews. They never repost reviews from competitors or other reviewing sites. I've also lost a few because Amazon either eliminates them for obscure reasons or loses them when a new edition of a book comes out (or confuses two books in a series, which also happened to me). Some of my best reviews (ones satisfying all those conditions, so they take more than a couple of lines) aren't even on Amazon—they're on book blog sites or paid sites.

Yes, paid! Let's get something straight. It's not too hard to understand, but Amazon is too stupid to understand this: If I pay a service so my book is considered for review, reviewers will not necessarily write a positive review—in other words, reviewers can and do say what they want to say (there are trolls who download books from NetGalley, for example, and get off on dissing books without giving any reasons whatsoever). When I pay to get a review, all I'm doing is sending a query to a gang of reviewers, offering a free book to one of them if they choose my book in exchange for an *honest review*, instead of sending a query to each one individually. (It took me a while to learn this.) Even places like Feathered Quill Reviews and Midwest Book Review do *not* guarantee a positive review. (The latter doesn't even guarantee a review—they reviewed *Rembrandt's Angel* but not the next book in the series, *Son of Thunder*.) In all cases where I pay, I consider that what I pay is a reading fee. Isn't that the same as entering a contest and paying a reading fee? (More on that later!) There's no damn guarantee whatsoever that I'll win the contest! (On the contrary, I never have—at least, not any big one.) Amazon has done no service to the publishing industry with its distortion of the reviewing process!

Be sure and put a note at the back of your book asking your readers to review it, though—anywhere, maybe even including Amazon. There are many reasons they will ignore that request, of course. One big one is that high school English teachers teach their students to hate writing book reviews aka book reports, a ubiquitous and droll English homework task. Rather than dwell on the damage high school English teachers can do to creative minds, let me say that your readers won't need to write a critique like they might have to write in an MFA course—readers don't even have to know about story elements to write an intelligent review, or know about the Freudian hang-ups of certain of your characters. (Where MFA professors and students get that crap is beyond me, but I once ensured an A+ in N. Scott Momaday's college English course by putting Freud into every damn essay I handed in to the TA—it was a large lecture class with TAs, so Momaday, later a Pulitzer winner, never saw this Freudian nonsense the TA so loved!) Readers can write quality reviews that wouldn't even pass muster in a high school English class, Sgt. Joe Friday style: "Just the facts, ma'am," meaning a statement about what they liked or disliked in the book and why, like I said. On the flip side, you don't want zero-content reviews that reduce to something like "atta girl," "atta boy," or "this stinks!" either—they don't help readers, who shouldn't even consider such reviews, nor you, the author.

Once you have a review, what do you do with it? Generally nothing, if it's in an accessible place (I'll at least give Amazon credit for that), but you can use excerpts from good

reviews for promo purposes (I like to ask the reviewer for permission to do that, but I'll often forget or not even know their contact info). By good review in this sense, I mean one that has some positive things to say, even if the tone of the whole review is that the reviewer's negative about the book.

A general rule for an author to follow is to never comment on a review, whether it's positive or negative. If you like the review, try to find some way to thank the reviewer privately (email, for example). And, if you don't like the review, shrug it off. Learn to accept that reading tastes vary and are subjective, most reviewers are doing both authors and readers a favor by reviewing, and there are some reviewers out there who have an agenda or are just generally nitpicking or belligerent ogres (the trolls). That's life. (If you could please all the people all the time, Barnum and Bailey would still exist and have elephants, and NYC.'s ex-Mayor De Blasio and maybe new Mayor Adams would still want to have carriage horses in Central Park.)

Reviews can either be solicited or unsolicited. For the former, you need to learn how to write a query. It's a bit like trying to find an agent for your book, only easier in regard to time you spend and the personalities you have to deal with (some of the latter are tough, though). First, always personalize the review query. You can use a form query, but personalize it—at least use the reviewer's name and maybe mention some of their likes (i.e., study them a bit, even if it's only through previous reviews). You also need to provide all the information the reviewer or reviewing website requests, as a minimum. The query usually includes a blurb but try to provide a bit more information than what you use in marketing the book. You should never say that your book is like other books. "My book is like title X" can backfire—there's a chance that the reviewer hated X! (That goes for agent queries as well, of course.) I said my YA sci-fi mystery *The Secret Lab* is *not* like Harry Potter in space, though; that seemed to work. (It's now in second edition, completely rewritten and reedited by my Irish collaborator A. B. Carolan. [wink])

Many reviewers don't like books from a series other than the first one, or books that are cliffhangers. The latter is reasonable—as a reviewer, I hate cliffhangers too! The first is because too many authors think a book in a series is like an episode in a soap opera. Like the *Star Wars* movies (where they still stupidly use the word "episode"!), each of your books in a series should be a complete and independent story that just reuses a few previous characters and continues the timeline into another independent story. Make sure your series book meets this criterion and tell reviewers that it does—they might bend their policy.

Here's an excerpt from a recent review of my book *Son of Thunder*, the second book in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series": "This is an exceptionally well-crafted and well-researched novel. Even though I haven't read the previous novel in the series, I had no trouble becoming invested in the story and getting involved in the protagonists' lives. I enjoyed the connection between Esther and Bastiann and how they seemed to balance each other out. While Esther is a firecracker, Bastiann is the calm soul that brings her back to earth while helping her fly. I also enjoyed how Esther seemed to bring a lot to the story. From her quirky personality to her great sense of humor, she made things work while having a grand time. The development of the story was great, the plot was incredibly rich and the characters were super entertaining. It is a great story and I cannot wait for more."—Rabia Tanveer, in her Readers' Favorite 5-star review. Note that second sentence. I insisted on that point in all my review queries for the book, and I've done the same for any book in a series. In fact, even if I already have the next book in a series almost ready to go and want to announce it, I still don't use a cliffhanger—I add an excerpt for that next book. That excerpt, of course, is not complete—it's more like an ad telling readers that

more fiction with some of these same characters in an independent story is on the way. In brief, the reviewer should not have to refer to previous books or future ones.

Many reviews are unsolicited—for example, most reviews on Amazon. I recently received an unsolicited two-star review on Amazon. (I wouldn't mind that so much, but too many readers think that anything below four stars is crap these days, whereas three stars should be taken as average and work from there—in other words, Amazon has committed another sin in the reviewing department.) I broke the cardinal rule indicated above and started an interesting e-conversation with the reviewer. Why would I do that? I rarely do, but because his review, although negative, went above and beyond the usual Amazon review in both length and content, I wanted to thank him for that.

That e-conversation probably helped both of us, I imagine, so there are always exceptions to the rules. But be careful—don't be confrontational. Trolls are that way by definition; don't lower yourself to their level by playing their stupid game. (If they go low, you should go high.) Don't be on an ego trip either. I had two authors berate me in my reviewing capacity, saying I didn't know anything about writing, but they had signed up for an honest review! Hell would have to freeze over before I review another book written by them. (And I do know something about writing!)

Never pay for a review except in the sense I've already mentioned. Stay away from that Kirkus circus if you're an indie or small-press author, for example, because they expect you to pay big bucks—they and their ilk are spoiled by the Big Five traditional publishers who will pay them those big bucks, expecting and getting positive reviews for their money (no honesty required, of course, making the review basically worthless). Many online sites want you to pay too (Self-Publishing Review is an example). If you like to think your freebie in return for an honest review is pay, okay, but reviewers and reviewing sites who offer to speed up your review for \$X are a bit suspect—caveat emptor. (I do that for Readers' Favorite sometimes—see the review above—because I know from previous experience that they still will write an honest review and excerpts from that speedy review can be used in my book launch campaign.) Those who tell you that you need N Amazon four- or five-star reviews before they'll even consider your book (BookBub is a particularly egregious example) also deserve a special place in hell (anyone can see that Catch-22!).

Book bloggers used to be safer and timelier, but they're generally swamped now and their numbers have been greatly reduced. And many limit their reviewing time to blog tours. (The list at Indie View, for example, has many who no longer review! And that list is completely chaotic. I've stopped using it because the percentage of queries resulting in a review was so small, but you might have better luck.) The book bloggers' business model is also wrong. Back in the day, they decided to review books to get freebies to read; they let anyone submit, so many of them never learned to discriminate—and there are too many good books and good authors out there now for them to accept all comers.

Some of your best review sites are selective up front—you query them, they offer your book to their staff of reviewers, and, if you're lucky, your book gets chosen by one for a review. (I "officially review" for a site like that, Bookpleasures.com.) Their reviews tend to be more professional and less trivial than almost any review you'll find on Amazon.

Some reviewers weasel out of a commitment, though, by not accepting or responding to queries while receiving all the freebies, and then only reviewing if they read and liked the book. In particular, avoid any reviewer who says, "Send me your book and I'll see if I like it enough to review it." That's just abusive. If that reviewer asks for an .epub or .PDF file, you're also risking

that they're a book pirate (see below). In any case, even with a positive query response before sending the free book, I've never received more than a 10% return, so don't set your expectations too high.

As readers' numbers diminish, so do reviewers' numbers. Good reviewers are avid readers. If you're traditionally minded, not indie, finding a reviewer is a bit like finding an agent. Midlist authors (using small presses) won't be helped here by their publishers either. Indie writers have to be completely DIY. It's a slog.

You could just make your offer of a free book in exchange for an honest review on your website and/or Goodreads and leave it at that—you'll probably remain saner that way and better off in the long run. NetGalley might help things along (I often launch a book by posting it on that site). Having a new book available there for a month and advertising that availability can lead to a few reviews, but it's generally not cost-effective either.

The other side of the coin is questionable too. I still think authors should give back to the community of readers and writers by reviewing books, but it's often a thankless task. An unsolicited review I offered in good faith (it was a positive one, by the way!) was received negatively by the author. (By the way, I had purchased two of this author's books, and I didn't even ask for freebies!) The reasons were obscure, and I still don't understand the reaction; the author clearly went beyond the event horizon into some mental black hole. I don't need that kind of angst, but most authors are more receptive than this one author. I've had more than one author thank me for my careful review, in fact; that thanks is good karma trumping all the bad karma received from disgruntled writers. And, if you review books you read, it's bound to help your own writing!

A word to the wise that's worth repeating whether traditionally or indie published: Do *not* send reviewers plain text, MS Word, or .PDF files. All are clearly asking for pirating, or even stealing your hard work; and, contrary to public opinion, .PDF files can be hacked and another author's name inserted, and they can certainly be copied and put up on illegal websites featuring pirated works (and not just on the Dark Web). While the latter is true for *all* ebook formats, especially .epub (ebooks are just computer files, after all), at least the other formats can't be so easily hacked, just copied. In the old print days, pirating wasn't such a problem (but it still is for print). Now it's a major one!

Another bit of scurrilous behavior: I've recently noticed a growing trend where "famous" authors endorse newbie authors...or even lesser-known authors doing that. This mostly occurs for books from Big Five publishers. The endorsements are often very incestuous. I don't know why those famous mares and stallions from the Big Five's stables are doing these endorsements or what they get out of this (maybe money?), and they just prove they haven't read the book or are too lazy to review it, but I ignore these endorsements and will not waste my time pursuing them as an author. (Do you think Oprah Winfrey or Jake Tapper read every book they recommend?) And it's a bit like comparing your book to title X and taking the chance that the reviewer doesn't like X. If "famous Y" endorses your book and the reader hates what Y writes, you're in hot water. And never forget: An endorsement is *not* a review!

And finally, there's a new game afoot in this review circus: While not necessarily scurrilous behavior, I should say something about "review exchanges." Be forewarned that Amazon and other online sites watch for them! Social media sites (see below) often have participants that offer them—"I'll review your book if you review mine." Generally speaking, there's a wide spectrum here, from the benign to the egregious.

I see nothing wrong if I buy an author's book for my R&R reading (remember, my "official reviewing" is done on Bookpleasures.com) and like it enough to review it in my blog, and that author sees my review, decides to buy one of my books, and returns the favor. Authors should read and review books, and more often than not, their reviews are quality reviews. This only becomes egregious when an implicit contract is made via "I'll review your book if you review mine." In other words, there should be no contract, oral or written—no quid pro.

Here's a nasty example (courtesy of Amazon): As stated above, I'm a mongrel now, traditionally publishing with small presses as well as < 100% DIY indie. The first has taught me there is a wealth of good books to be found in small press catalogs (that's how I find my small presses, after all), which are usually much easier to peruse than online retail monsters like Amazon or Smashwords. I've selected books from these catalogs, with no pressure from the authors contained therein; and read, enjoyed, and reviewed them. That's no exchange because I have no implicit contract with the authors of those books!

Unfortunately, Amazon's bots are so mindless they can be utterly unreasonable (or maybe the blame lies with the stupid people who program them?), so they'll axe those reviews (either mine or theirs) because—horrors!—the authors write for the same small press. I'm often limited to posting those reviews on my blog (now I'm boycotting Amazon, so that limitation is now enforced by me—I'll avoid Amazon if at all possible). If the authors are looking for more Amazon reviews in that eternal review circus, mine could be a good one and welcome, but that's unlikely now. (My blog reviews are generally shorter than my reviews at Bookpleasures.com, but often longer than anything else an author might receive on Amazon.) However, thanks to the mindless, myopic Bezos bots (and their programmers!), I can't help these authors. (Those bots can do other damage, like eliminating reviews or even one of your books!)

That doesn't mean you can't try a benign exchange along these lines. Be sure and buy the books, though—that helps because the bots see a purchase and not a free book. Amazon, after all, wants to sell books. Moreover, you can help those authors in a small way by giving them a few more sales!

Interviews. Writing is a solitary activity, so it's not surprising that many writers are introverts. If you have no trouble speaking in public, live interviews might work for you—radio, TV, podcasts, and blog radio appearances could let a large audience get to know you. Of course, it's a crapshoot how many in that audience are readers and not just curious souls—rubberneckers interested in the blood and gore of the traffic collision, as we say in the NYC area.

Guest non-live interviews on websites and book blogs might have some resonance too, and they're easier for the introvert; so are interviews done on the phone—just you, the interviewee, chatting with another person, the interviewer. Don't limit what you say only to your books in any case—people are also interested in you as a person. Maybe even more the person; they want to know who this crazy gal or guy is who writes all that stuff.

Videos etc. The introvert factor can really do you in here, so be careful. (Think of Nixon in the Kennedy/Nixon debates—that might date me, but CNN had a fairly recent special on them.). But if you're focusing on the book by enacting a scene or flipping through a few of the book's scenes with a great cover shown at beginning and end, it might work for you, and you don't even need to look the fool like James Patterson often does on TV. (He's not a fool, of course—he's just trying to get kids to read his kiddie books, and their parents to buy them, when he has no business writing kiddie books, but that's Patterson Inc. for you, an independently owned Big Five book factory with his assembly line of many co-authors.) A professionally

produced commercial for your book isn't cheap, though, but no pro PR and marketing campaign ever is.

Here's a way to get a twofer: Give a talk somewhere and have someone videotape the talk. The people at that talk will get to know you as well as your book(s), and then you'll get more notice with the video on YouTube. Besides, by giving the talk, you won't have time to be shy (unless you're terrible at presenting in a public forum—there are books to help, like Joanna Penn's *Public Speaking for Authors, Creatives and Other Introverts*—weird that an English woman doesn't believe in the Oxford comma), in the same way that you might be if someone just videotapes you by your lonesome. You'll be watching your audience and connecting with them, and that will carry over into the video for your virtual audience.

I'm going to add book trailers here, just because I don't know where else to put them! They've gained popularity but aren't very useful, at least anecdotally (I'm providing the anecdote). (Patterson's videos might fit in that category if he weren't in them.) I tried one once, but I can't say it resonated—okay, with me, but not many others if the YouTube count is reliable. You might have better luck, though. I'm talking about a video that features your book—you're not in it, just an audiovisual blurb of a few minutes (mine was just one) that supposedly gets readers interested. The major negative is that they're expensive. Mine was free, though. My post-apocalyptic thriller *The Last Humans* won a consolation prize when I entered it into a Readers' Favorite contest. (An author-friend recommended I do that.) Hey, I'll try anything once, especially if it's free! The prize? A book trailer, a \$300 value (at the time—after adjusting for the contest's entry fee, I still came out a bit ahead). I used that prize for my mystery/thriller *Death on the Danube*. (*The Last Humans*' publisher had since caused me far too many headaches, so I was lucky to have that option.) You can find the link on my website's home page. I rather liked the trailer, but, as I said, it didn't seem to increase sales figures for the book. And you can get a complete book-launch campaign for that price! (Warning: Contest wins must be reported to the IRS if they have monetary value!)

There's also Skype and Zoom now (maybe more useful for interviews and book clubs?). TikTok influencers are selling tons of books (some of them are being paid by the Big Five). If you have the chance and are motivated (the FBI says they're collecting TikTok users' personal data), try them, especially if the only thing you have to lose is time. (And here it is again: I'd rather be writing!)

Virtual book tours. Many are offered, most charge you money, and I'm not convinced they'll do much for you. One problem is represented by the lack of metrics. (This is generally true for all these marketing methods.) The main issue is not how many readers participate; the key is how many visitors to the tour site will buy your book afterward. Still, it's a way to let people know about you and your book(s). If 1000 people participate, and 10% buy your book, that's 100 copies sold. Whether that pays for the podcast or tour is another question.

If you traditionally publish, your publisher might finance a real book tour. Rare these days, but possible. It usually involves many traditional book events like those in the following list....

Book signings, book clubs, etc. COVID-19 put these activities on their deathbeds, which is understandable. I suppose you could use ZOOM or some other virtual meeting software, but it's just not the same thing. These are events that allow authors to meet and greet fans and potential readers and discuss a variety of items—sometimes the book business becomes irrelevant and the human factor dominates. Observation and discussion give authors a recalibration. So, let's analyze some of the possibilities for when these face-to-face events

become popular again. (Introverted artists might also have a tough time in all the events mentioned below.)

Club visits are probably the best for getting acquainted with readers. Most clubs are small groups rotating book choices among member readers, so getting on the docket might not be that easy, and the members might not want to talk to you either...or even read your book! (Too many focus on the so-called “bestsellers”!) Your best bet is to let them know you’re available and leave it at that—they’ll contact you if interested. (I’ve had interest but in the end no takers. Of course, none of my books would be considered bestsellers by the NY Times, but what do they know? They’re sycophants of the Big Five.)

Signings can be an ego trip or cause major depression, and they’re usually a waste of time too, especially for indie writers—most bookstores won’t even carry indie books! Many traditional publishers will set up signings as part of a PR and marketing plan, or as part of a book tour, but the internet allows you to reach out better on your own and to a lot more people. Interactions where you flash your smile and you sign one of your books aren’t lengthy and don’t help you know readers and fans that much, and when the crowds don’t arrive, it can be depressing. Brick-and-mortar stores are the usual sites for book signings, but don’t limit yourself to them. You can do signings in a women’s club (I have, following a lecture), supermarket, barbershop, Irish pub...whatever, with the choice often determined by your book’s plot and themes.

Book fairs are something in between book clubs and signings, but if their focus is on traditionally published books (always the case if traditional publishers organize and/or sponsor them!), forget about the fairs (unless your book is traditionally published). And these are more activities introverts aren’t very good at! In fact, they’re the worse venues for introverts because the crowds are often more numerous—you’re facing a lot of people whose first question is always, “Should I be wasting my time chatting with this author?” because fairs have a lot more authors present, not just you.

Other venues between clubs and fairs might work for you. For example, I’ve sold many books at craft shows where I’m the only author at the show (although writing is a craft!)—it always helps to be the only game in town, so this is a way to be the center of attention when it comes to book publishing. And people love to stop by and chat about books and publishing even if they don’t buy—at least that adds to your name recognition! Same with the talks you give. If you have a large *oeuvre*, which is my case now, improving your name recognition is often better than pushing just one book.

Contests. Most ones you enter are just ways for the organizers to make money (greed drives most business dealings, of course, and publishing is no exception). Reading fees are often added to the entry cost (even when the “judges” are volunteers!). You might buy an ego trip and a fancy gold seal to slap on your paper versions by paying what’s required and somehow winning (doing that with the lottery is more likely, and it pays a lot more), but does anyone care? Five good reviews are better than winning a *WD* contest, for example (that’s *Writers’ Digest*, in case you didn’t know—they used to have a real magazine, and I used to subscribe to it). Even the freebie contests are probably not worth your time.

Creating your own contests for free copies of your books is another can of worms—and that can work! (Or should I say should? It hasn’t worked for me, but I still think it’s a good idea.) Both Amazon and Goodreads (the first owns the second now, a bad thing) formalize book giveaways; at the latter site, they’re essentially contests. I’d skip all of those, and Amazon and

Goodreads's marketing in general. (Goodreads now charges for giveaways, a practice that started when Amazon bought them. Imagine, paying someone to give away your books!)

I've entered a few contests just for the hell of it (see the discussion of book trailers above). Always remember: Winning one is like playing the lottery. I don't recommend them in general, because winning one generally doesn't help at all to sell your books.

Paid online promotion and marketing. Don't believe the adage, "You get what you pay for." Pricey PR and marketing campaigns just enrich bloated and bureaucratic PR firms, and they don't do anything special for you. There are good values to be had, though, so be a smart consumer and watch out for the bad ones. BookBub, for example, charged \$400+ to list a mystery or thriller book last time I looked, and all they do is add it to a mailing list for their newsletter that spams the world—you're paying a lot of money for maybe ten minutes of their time. (Yeah, what a racket! And yeah, I know, they initially invested in accumulating and maintaining that mailing list, but readers sign onto it for free, so BookBub is doing no real work to accumulate that list, and they make a lot of money off it. Maybe they've changed, but their reputation remains.)

If you have that kind of money, go ahead and waste it. That doesn't get you onto NetGalley or allow you to send press releases about your new book. And every book appearing on BookBub has to have so many 4- or 5-star reviews and be discounted in some way. You're spending money to lose money. Huh? That doesn't make sense! What if you think your book's price is already reasonable, that you're already offering good entertainment at a reasonable price? BookBub and its ilk are the last places you should use, sites appropriate for those who have money to burn.

Choose carefully any services you use. There are too many people and organizations out there ready to take your money but provide little benefit to you in your quest to improve readership. Be especially aware of those marketing services offered by POD publishers, for example (that includes Amazon's Create Space!). They can lead to negative results because their "marketing gurus" (usually people in India or the Philippines) spam the entire world, making sure everyone will be so annoyed at you that they'll never buy your book...or any other one you write.

There are good outfits that provide lots of bang for your bucks. Contact me to ask about the ones I use. (That list changed a lot in my initial publishing years, but it's settled down recently as the number of my books has increased.) You can choose differently for your book launch and your steady-state marketing of a book. The former needs to be the most aggressive. Again, find reliable pros to help you with this. Authors generally know very little about marketing! (Even though many write books saying they do—they're often just regurgitating what everyone else says, so you're often just paying for something you can find elsewhere for free...like here in these lessons.)

I can't emphasize enough: Don't get scammed! There are big marketing firms with staffs of publicists, and they all need to be paid! Even little ones with small staffs, who often focus on just one thing (just Amazon, for example, and never mentioning the benefits of non-exclusivity and going wide). Guess who they want to pay them, and pay upfront? There's a correct business model for this, but they never use it. A traditional publisher foots the bill for upfront costs in return for a share of the royalties. Why can't a PR and marketing firm do the same thing? (If I get 15% royalties for a traditionally published book, I'd be willing to fork some of that over to a publicist, and they should be receptive too, if they believe in their wonderful marketing strategies.) The fact that they don't tells me that they are offering crapola that doesn't work.

Even lawyers offer pro-bono agreements. Why not publicists? I've never seen a PR and marketing firm that does this. My conclusion in this case: Their methods don't really work!

Be frugal in your PR and marketing efforts. You'll be a lot happier. And, as you'll see in the next subsection, there are marketing efforts that only take your time, not your money.

Social media. This can be completely DIY and a lot of fun, so it's generally zero cost to you, except for your time. Go to where the readers are. Other writers want you to buy *their* books; they're generally not interested in selling or buying yours. You can discuss promotion and marketing ideas and other book business topics with other authors but participating in a community of readers *as a reader* can produce dividends. (You're not a reader? You should be!) This once was a way to generate more attention for your book(s). (Now I'm not so sure because the crowds are bigger.)

First a warning: Beware of any author group and especially of the authors who set them up. On the negative end of the spectrum, they can go from the narcissistic interplay on Facebook ("Hey, that's wonderful!" and "Great cover!" and "What a great plot!") to comments from attack dogs and trolls. I've experienced all of that. I tend to be frank with my comments, so saying things like "Having a successful book nowadays is like winning the lottery" causes a lynch mob to knock on your e-door, and they can tell the group moderator to ban you. (Yes, that happened to me!) On the other hand, when I first began to think about publishing my material, I learned a lot about the business from those old discussion boards. Even Joe Konrath's group, with its obvious slant toward indie, taught me a few things. (I no longer participate there—they'd probably now consider me a traitor because I have some books that are traditionally published.) Those groups that offer help to author/members can be invaluable to newbies for their writing and publishing, but not so much for selling their books.

Goodreads, for example, used to be the best social media site for reaching out to readers (its main negative now is that it belongs to Amazon, but see below), Facebook and Twitter probably the worst, especially Twitter (now Elon Musk's toy). Your Goodreads, Amazon, and Smashwords author pages are far more important than your Facebook author page, but it's good to have the latter because the audiences are a bit different. (Anyone visiting your FB author page is probably a curious reader—I used mine to sometimes complement my blog or broadcast new info. I've since left Facebook and am thinking about doing it for Twitter, both of them run by jerks.) And remember: *None of these should replace your author's website!*

Goodreads continues its downward spiral since Amazon took it over. It has become a segregated us vs. them website where "us" = anti-author readers and "them" = authors. (Maybe the former are traditionalists, readers who refuse to read indie authors or books from small presses?) To be fair, a few authors abuse the site's groups (and readers' discussion groups elsewhere), but I've been kicked out of two groups, once for benignly expressing some political facts of life (so maybe that was justified—there are lots of hotheads, bigots, and weirdos everywhere), and another time just because I'm an author (perceived as a snake-oil salesman by the readers, I suppose, although the group leaders tend to be tyrants who protect their fiefdoms). I ended all my participation in Goodreads' discussion groups at that time because I have no use for this nonsense, so here's the bottom line: *Do not participate in discussion groups anywhere when they're run by tyrannical moderators who hate authors daring to express their opinions.* (I'm sorry but I can't provide a list of the sinners. The moderators only announce these attitudes through their actions.)

I'll continue with my GR author's page, but frankly, just like Amazon, or because of Amazon, GR is no longer an author's friend! That's sad, because this us vs. them attitude in the

GR discussions is segregation not based on fact: Many authors (like me!) are first and foremost avid readers, and we have every right to opine about books and reading choices. Most moderators don't think so, it seems.

If I focus on any sites, they're now Twitter and LinkedIn. (Always subject to change!) For the latter, don't ask me why I have so many connections. I joined originally to get connections to people who could do things I can't do well or at all, or don't want to do (that < 100% DIY form of going indie that I recommended above). I used to participate in discussion groups there too, but, just as in the GR/Amazon merger, the LinkedIn/Microsoft merger has mostly destroyed everything I joined LinkedIn for. I can say I've helped a few other people there, though. I periodically receive a list of writing jobs that I pass on to others. There are many jobs for writers out there, just not for writing fiction (unless maybe political campaign material now qualifies as fiction?).

Here's an interesting update maybe you didn't notice: Facebook was slammed with a \$5 billion fine (yes, that's billion!). They have been lax in their monitoring, so be careful. That goes for other social media sites, Twitter especially with Elon Musk at the helm. There are many trolls around who slam anyone they disagree with (slamming goes from attacking your books to cursing your progenitors—and that's not counting the Chinese, Russian, and Iranian hackers). You have to learn to ignore them if you want to use social media. On the other hand, you can reach out to many more readers on social media than you can at a local book event...often without the personal connection that an in-person participation brings, of course.

HARO etc. Help-A-Reporter-Out and similar services might be worth your time if you become somewhat of an expert doing "research" (i.e., acquiring a lot of background material) for your fiction book. For example, between my father (he was a painter) and background work for *Rembrandt's Angel* and other novels in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series (the protagonist is an art expert), I thought I might be able to help a reporter out, but I haven't seen anything like that. I'm also an ex-scientist. I responded to one of their requests for info on some science question and wasted my time because they didn't link me to the reporter. Bottom line: Their emails just add spam to my in-box, which I delete. (Non-fiction writers might be able to offer their services, though, and get some free publicity that way.)

I see little use for HARO and similar services for fiction writers. Publicists should stop recommending them (among a lot of other useless garbage).

Pricing. Why is this part of marketing? Consider any smart buyer. If they think a product is a bargain, they might buy it, knowing that the economic hurt won't be so great if the product turns out to be crap. On the other hand, something that has an outlandishly high price will make her pause. She might think the high price is related to quality (it often isn't, just people out to make a buck—I always distrust Big Five books because their prices are inflated). Hitting that sweet spot in between those two extremes is definitely part of marketing the product!

It used to be that \$2.99-\$3.99 was a sweet spot for ebooks. (Big Five ebooks are rarely in that sweet spot, by the way, but that's what they want—they're still back in the 20th century, pushing print books over ebooks.) The \$2.99 price is the minimum for 70% royalties from Amazon, but \$3.99 is acceptable for longer books. That might be changing, so let me offer some opinions.

I'm probably like many readers. While I rarely pay more than \$6 for an ebook (I have a bundle priced at \$5.99, but that bundle contains three novels!), I'm suspicious of low-priced ebooks too. Here's my new fiction price list for ebooks, for what it's worth (pardon the pun): 45 kwords to 55k, \$2.99; 55 kwords to 65k, \$3.99; 65 kwords to 75k, \$4.99; 75k to 85k, \$5.99; and

85 kwords up, \$6.99. That's for indies (and smart small presses). There's some flexibility on those prices depending on genre, but that's the idea. Your publisher will set your ebook's price if you go traditional; you have no input in that case (but publishers also have sales on their websites!).

For print, Create Space sets a minimum considering some obscure algorithm dependent on what it costs Amazon to print the POD book—they do their own printing, so I take all their considerations with a grain of salt. Same for other PODs. I suppose traditional publishers do the same thing. Traditional prices tend to be much higher than indie prices for print, of course, and the number of copies in a publishing run seems to be a factor (they charge more for a book that's not expected to sell many copies, it seems).

By the way, Smashwords's Mark Coker each year offers stats that indicate prices are trending up (my suggested prices reflect that a bit), even for indies (most books sold by Smashwords are indie ebooks, but not all—both my small presses used Smashwords to solve their distribution problems, just like I do for my indie books, although Draft2Digital is the new kid on the block—the recent Draft2Digital/Smashwords merger might change things). Stay tuned...and stay smart. You're in control of pricing if you're an indie. You probably don't have to worry about it if you're not, although your publisher might not sell many copies of your books if they overprice them.

What about free for promo purposes? I'll admit I'll download a free book on occasion—what do I have to lose?—but a lot of time I never finish it. (That percentage indicated by Sturgeon's Law often seems to increase for freebies. I'm especially happy with that price for books on promotion and marketing--\$0 is what most of them are worth!) I personally like free. Sure, offer occasional sales of your books, but never give them away, no matter how much you want that Amazon bestselling status! (It's ephemeral at best.) Setting the price at \$0 is the same as saying all your hard work is worth nothing! Don't do it! (Yeah, I know, this goes against what many gurus say. They're morons! What good does it do you if someone downloads a free ebook and then doesn't read it? And readers are smart. Why should they value being able to read your book if you don't value your work in writing it?)

Pre-Orders. While they often interfere with marketing an author does for a book launch, once the book has a price and a cover, they can be offered. I don't do it for my self-published works, but one of my small press publishers (Black Opal Books) did it for me, so I was okay with it (but wondered why a week or two of pre-order time was good for anything!).

What's the advantage? Authors often promote their books with "Coming soon!" and "Will be released on [fill in the date]" messages on social media. (You can always do that!) Another message that goes beyond those to stir up interest is "Available for pre-order on [fill in the date]," at least many marketing gurus say to do that. (So did Mark Coker of Smashwords when his company decided to start offering the pre-order option).

I'm not convinced. As a book buyer, I pay my money only after the book is out. (I sample the retailer's page for the book, which invariably includes cover, blurb, and a "peek inside" feature.) Consequently, I usually ignore the above hype too. (The Big Five are notorious for it, even having book trailers in theaters and on TV long before the book is released!) I'm also busy reading other books when all that pre-order hype begins. My TBRoR list ("To Be Read or Reviewed") increases faster than I can read, and I'm a speed-reader! I might note that the book is coming out, though, if I've read a blurb I liked and/or have liked the author's other books (especially true for series, except for the "[some letter] is for [something]" books that were far too formulaic).

Blurbs are always important, but more so for pre-orders where the reader usually cannot peek inside the book.

Author Organizations. Don't join author organizations if you think they're a place to market your books. Other authors want to *sell you* their books, *not* necessarily *buy yours*. You must reach out to them just like you do for other readers...if they're readers. (I question an author's sanity when they say they don't read! Even railed against it and other things authors do that irk me in my novel *Death on the Danube!* You can't improve your prose in a vacuum, so don't try!)

But these organizations often have events and marketing info that might help you reach out to readers. They also might offer courses on how to improve your writing—that improvement helps your marketing because no one wants to buy a badly written book. If you read the spiel on an organization's website and think what they offer might be useful to you, go ahead and join. But caveat emptor: They can be expensive!

I belong to the International Thriller Writers. I've stopped getting their newsletters, so maybe I should take that off my email signature? Oops! They just started up again. Maybe a Covid-19 problem? To be truthful, though, they never did a damn thing for me, and they're run by Big Five authors, like many author orgs. It was an honor to be accepted, I suppose, but frankly, although the aforementioned reasons were important in my decision, I chose to apply for membership only because it's free! They also make those aforementioned reasons expensive. (ITW has a different business model from other organizations where the dues cover some of those attractive reasons for joining. Neither sci-fi and fantasy nor mystery organizations have that business model, so I'll avoid them for now.) But here's an update: Somehow ITW changed the rules and I'm locked out of their website...nyah!

But never, never join the Authors Guild. The word "Guild" is key here. As in days of yore, only certain people, Big Five publishing VIPs and those favorite old mares and stallions in the Big Five's stables, can be full members of this guild, and everyone else is considered an apprentice author who must not rock the sinking ship of the Big Five publishers. The Guild doesn't do anything for authors in general and is basically a tool of the Big Five. It's more like those old English gentleman clubs that are filled with stuffed shirts and pompous toffs—and many activities of the Guild are actually designed to attack anyone who isn't a Big Five author. (Of course, they won't admit to that!)

Marketing a series. Many online retail sites finally woke up and decided to promote book series in one way or another. In general, it's hard to promote a series. Book marketing services invariably focus on individual books, which is stupid, especially when things like Covid turn readers into binge-readers who read through entire series at a time (I'm one). The aforementioned retailers' mere recognition of a series goes a long way in advertising it, but, until publicists get their act together, your best place to advertise a full series is right on your blog. I place all ads at the bottom of a post, but when I mention one of my books—bang!—the cover image is now displayed. For advertising a series, you can use the cover of the series' first book...or include them all (unless you're someone like Sue Grafton—hopefully not, because she's dead...and I don't think she ever got to Z!). (There's more on marketing series in the appendix.)

Going wide. Let's blast Amazon yet again! They think they're the center of the book universe. They're not. No way, no how! (Books aren't even Bezos's main business now.) And you should be aware of a marketing truism: The more retail sites selling your products, the more products you will sell! (I put the "going wide" topic here precisely because of this maxim!) Amazon is just one site. You're much better off when your book(s) are displayed on many.

In fact, starting on March 1, 2021, I won't even put any new ebooks on Amazon. And I stopped being exclusive with Amazon ages ago. Book aggregators like Smashwords or Draft2Digital aren't only retailers, they also distribute to other retailers. *Bezos is so arrogant that Amazon does not distribute to anyone!*

Go wide in your book distribution. You'll be happier! It's the best and most important thing you can do to sell more books. You automatically sign up to go wide when you publish your book with either Draft2Digital or Smashwords...and Draft2Digital even distributes to Amazon (after some onerous Bezos restrictions are met!). Now, if only Draft2Digital gets its print-book service going [sigh]! (Again, how the Draft2Digital/Smashwords merger changes all this remains to be seen.)

Other little things. All of the above are things you can do either for name recognition or recognition for your books, or both. There are many little things you can do too.

By all means, buy a good supply of business cards and hand them out anytime someone asks what you do. Your answer to "What do you do?" should always be "I write books, and here's my card." (You should do that even if you have some other day-job, because probably that day-job usually doesn't require PR and marketing! One author-friend answers in another way: She says, "I kill people." She's a mystery/crime writer! She gets some attention with that answer.) Stuff a card in every bill you pay via snail-mail. (Yeah, I still pay many bills that way—what happened in Texas when the utility companies took \$5K direct payments from people's bank accounts confirmed my belief that direct payments are super-dangerous. Of course, many other things occurring in Texas are. Not the best place to live!) Your business card might fall on the floor, but someone might pick it up too. Hand cards out to service providers. A doctor or nurse might be an avid reader, for example. (I've seen both reading their Kindles on breaks. And one nurse was super fascinated by the religious history found in my novel *Son of Thunder*.) People in security jobs are often avid readers—they have a lot of free time on their hands. There are fewer readers with each passing year, so don't pass up approaching the remaining ones when you can find them.

Bookmarks? Business cards and bookmarks are cheap at VistaPrint. Make the first general and the second specific, but you won't even need the second unless you use print books in some way in your marketing efforts. (I usually stick a business card *and* bookmark in my print books at an event and leave both on the table for people to take as well.)

Press kits are out-of-style these days but often provided by a promotion and marketing service on your behalf to those interested (or by your publisher, where sometimes they're given the terrible name "sell sheets"). More important might be a single sheet with your bio, pic, one or two thumbnails of book covers, and a list of your books. You can use that to introduce yourself in a book club, book signing, book fair, and other events.

Being available to the reading public can't be overemphasized. Check your emails for correspondence from readers, reviewers, and other authors. Answer those emails. And check your spam folder. (Don't forget that most blogs have spam folders too.) And make sure your own emails have a signature like "XYZ, author of..." followed by your list of books (or your latest ones, if you have a lot) and your website's URL.

There are many little things you can do. Be inventive. Read the free promotion and marketing hints available on many book marketing sites and author blogs, and then try some of them. (Smashwords's Mark Coker always updates his ebook of hints, and Penny Sansevieri has several free ebooks with hints, or did—her services as a publicist are costly, though, and she focuses them on Amazon.) Authors who think they know something about promotion and

marketing often believe in free promos on Amazon—watch for them and download a few (never pay for them). Ideas are out there. It's almost impossible to predict what will resonate these days.

Necessary conditions vs. sufficient conditions. All of the above might be called necessary conditions. In other words, they are things you can do to achieve name recognition or let people know about your books, but they do *not* guarantee that you will be recognized or sell a lot of books. Don't delude yourself. *There are no sufficient conditions!* There's *absolutely nothing* you can do that will guarantee success. Anyone who tells you, "I have a surefire way for you to become a famous author and sell thousands of books" is a snake-oil salesperson who probably has a hand open and ready to receive your money in exchange for a trainload of BS (it's amazing how much there is in the marketing business—even Theodore Sturgeon of Sturgeon's Law would be surprised). There are no silver bullets to ensure book success.

Pros have their place, though, because (1) they can help you because they have expertise and experience you don't have (don't take their word for it, of course—look for other authors' recommendations), and (2) they can spend more time doing them than you can and can do it faster (you pay for their expertise, experience, and time, of course). Your most effective strategy is DIY as much as time permits and hire some professional help if you don't have the time or skills, especially at book-launch time when your schedule is tight. You can spend as much money as you want for the latter, but it might not be well spent. Same goes for the time you put into DIY. Reset and try new tactics when old ones don't work. By all means, don't keep beating a dead horse (even if it's one of the Big Five's formulaic old mares and stallions).

King was probably right in avoiding all this discussion in *On Writing* (not that he has to worry about any of it). I've reset and tried new tactics many times. Nothing seems to work. I'm one of those authors King mentions, a person who knew I could tell stories as well as the authors I was reading, maybe even better, and I still believe that. That might seem immodest and/or optimistic, and, if anyone judges me by my book sales numbers, probably not justified. But I blame my lack of success on the stat that gobsmacks me every time I find myself reading a damn good book no one knows about—there are so many good books and many good authors to read, whether indie or traditionally published or in-between. It's like heaven for readers, but hell for authors! (As both avid reader and prolific author, I guess maybe I'm just in purgatory?)

So, heed my warning: Don't have any wild expectations. Readers don't owe you anything, and, in the marketplace of books, they rule. It's better to be a pessimist than an optimist here because you could then be pleasantly surprised. I insist: Having a successful book is like winning the lottery—it's not likely, but you can't win if you don't play. And playing, i.e., telling your stories, is fun, right? That's what it's all about. (At least, it's what keeps me going.)

Your credo should be: If I can entertain at least one reader with each one of my books (besides a relative or friend, of course—they're not unbiased and might want to avoid hurting your feelings), those books are a success. Declare success and write the next book!

Phew! That's a lot to digest! Yeah, but promotion and marketing are important. Whether you're traditionally or self-published, they're important. I don't do it well, but there are a lot of ideas out there—I've told you about a few here. I want to help you do it smartly. That's why this section is so long. (It's also why I've written so many blog posts on the subject.) There are a lot of ideas here. They might work for you. Try them! And by all means, look for new ones. (And if they work for you, tell me about them!)

Epilogue

That's the course. It's so distilled that it's just an outline of what must be done to write a fiction novel, publish it, and sell it. As such, it's only a start on a long journey. I hope it helps you on that journey, but it doesn't end here. You should read more on these topics but take everything with a grain of salt—even what I say above—and map out your own book-business strategies...and update them often.

Don't spend too much time on this crap, though. It's better to read fiction and write your own, over and over again. No one, absolutely no one, knows what will work, most of all because every damn book is different! (Thank God.) It's all a crap shoot (different meaning of "crap"). And that's part of the fun!

Just remember: Book success starts with a fine story up front, but it ends with winning a lottery: Absolutely nothing guarantees that anyone will read your story! I know. I've written lots of them and still only have only a few readers [sigh]. (That I know of anyway, because that's not counting those perusing my pirated works or the pirates of both ebook and print versions, of course—hard to count those!) Or even those visiting my website for the free fiction downloads that I offer.

Good luck on your writing journey...and God bless!

References

I've already mentioned King's *On Writing*. You can forget the memoir-like drivel at the beginning and end. You can also probably forget about his *oeuvre*. They're all mostly horror novels with next to no science fiction, even though he claims an author must read in the genre where they write! (Maybe he's only a horror writer? Did he ever read Asimov or Heinlein? Not obvious.)

King's book is outdated too. There's no mention of indie (he'd probably just call it vanity press—he mentions those, but vanity presses are dead and indie has taken over, which he probably hates). The only non-paper publishing option he mentions is the audiobook. (I'm sure I've seen some ebooks by him, although they might be reissues. The Big Five often release them to help combat those upstart indie authors!) Some of his advice is spot on; some of it's just BS, especially in today's marketplace; and it's mostly only about producing the MS. (He doesn't worry about the hard work after that, of course, because someone does it for him.) Read it for what it is, use what works for you, and read what other authors say too (again, there's a lot of BS), especially online where more up-to-date material can be found.

Here are some other books I've found useful: Card's *Characters and Viewpoint*; Bryson's *Dictionary for Writers and Editors*; and Knight's *Creating Short Fiction*. (Note that, besides King's book, which is just about writing fiction in general, like these lessons, I don't have a book about novel writing in my list. There are no good ones!) I probably should add the *Bible* (Old and New Testaments) and the *Koran*. Knowing those two major religious reference books is a good idea, even if you're an atheist. I haven't found one on Buddhism, so pick up a copy of Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen*. Some kind reader can recommend one about Hinduism, or one on

comparative religions in general. Religion is part of culture, and fiction portrays human culture (or ETs’).

I have many posts either appearing on my blog or archived in the “Writing” category of that blog that you might find useful because they offer more extensive discussions of points made in this course. In previous revisions of this course, I listed many of them, but the current appendix now provides a good enough sample, at least enough to whet your appetite. There are a lot of posts, so I’m not adding any links to these articles either because I think it’s best that the reader of this course browse through the posts in that blog archive and cherry-pick those of interest for their own writing. Fair warning: None of them are intentionally PC, which is overrated, and they often express my acerbic and non-standard opinions about this writing business. I might not sell many books, but I’m one opinionated SOB when it comes to writing. King is a cute Vermont teddy bear compared to me. (There’s a factory in Vermont that makes teddy bears, by the way. It’s called the Vermont Teddy Bear Factory—surprise! I wonder if King is a shareholder. Maybe with Bernie Sanders?)

For different themes, start with some non-fiction works on the topics...or documentaries. Travel. Observe. Read newspapers and online news. And, if you want a list of fiction books (as well as nonfiction) that I think are fine examples on how to write fiction (unlike King’s list), check out “Steve’s Bookshelf” on my website. These aren’t all the fine books I’ve ever read, maybe not even the best, but a complete list isn’t possible because I read a lot. In my blog archive “Writing,” you will also find my list of best mystery and thriller books, best sci-fi books, and best sci-fi short fiction (all my opinion, of course)—you might want to look at some of that classic prose for motivation in your writing.

There are no good books on marketing, primarily because there are too many outrageous claims and thousands of cow pies already out there for you to pay a lot of money to step into, but some are less atrocious than others. You’re better off just reading about some ideas online and trying them out. I have. Nothing works for me very well, but you might have better luck. Well, okay, here are some ebooks (when I downloaded them, they were free): I often refer back to Mark Coker’s *Smashwords Book Marketing Guide* (it’s regularly updated); and Penny Sansevieri’s *52 Ways to Sell More Books*, mostly lists of things to try that include or complement what I’ve listed in the marketing lesson. And for those authors uncomfortable about speaking in public, try Joanna Penn’s *Public Speaking for Authors, Creatives and Other Introverts*.

Appendices

In the previous revision of my little course, as noted in the preface, I eliminated the list of blog posts at the end of each lesson. While you’re still welcome to access the most recent ones in the “Writing” archive of my blog (and ask for copies of posts no longer archived seen listed in previous revisions of this course!), I’ve decided to include some selections *from all my posts* here in this appendix—some old, some new, some long, some short, all hopefully informative. I believe this selection represents the most useful ones for writers.

You will find an emphasis here on the elements of storytelling, though, and a deemphasis on publishing and marketing. The first is because I skimmed on those elements in the first lesson or two, but I don’t want King or other Big Five authors to get away with dominating that

discussion; the second is because I said more than enough about publishing and marketing in the lessons, especially marketing.

A. Writing Your Novel

Tech Hints

I've barely mentioned how high tech has influenced writing, and I apologize for that. As an ex-scientist, I was familiar with computers, both hardware and software (some of both now going far beyond anything I could or would ever need as a writer), and the internet (I experienced a lot of its growing pains as well). It's always been a love-hate relationship, of course—often wondering why something happened, or why I couldn't make something happen. Other authors might not have that background, so I'll throw out some hints here. The important thing to remember is that writers don't require a lot of fancy hardware or software to publish their fiction. (Warning! No software can write your novel for you. You have to master the elements of writing fiction indicated in the lessons and this part of the appendix.)

Most any laptop will serve your needs, as long as it's reliable. (I'd stick with American manufacturers—they've always led the industry—and why send money overseas, especially to our enemies like China!). Just be careful setting it up. Windows machines come with a lot of bells and whistles many writers don't need: Cortana, OneDrive, cameras, speakers, and so forth. Apple machines have similar questionable bells and whistles. You'll need a B&W laser printer, but not an inkjet—laser printers aren't that expensive now (Brother makes reliable, inexpensive ones), and if you write a lot, the ink becomes more expensive than the laser cartridge.

Data storage is always a question, but you don't need much for writing—those MS Word files, even for a full novel, are small compared to your photos and videos (they'll determine how much storage you need, in fact). I use two external solid-state drives for double backup because I don't trust anyone's cloud (OneDrive, iCloud, and Google Cloud are examples, and your security software company probably offers one too). \$100 or so for an external drive seems little to pay for your peace of mind in knowing that Russians won't be downloading your cloud files. (Remember the Russians hacked Apple, Google, and Microsoft! No matter what a certain ex-president says, they are *not* our friends! The Ukrainians will shout out their agreement to this.)

Connection to the internet can become a headache. Most ISPs (that's Internet Service Providers) provide the necessary equipment to establish a household LAN (that's Local Area Network), and most computers now will help you recognize it and connect to it. Some offer a direct connection via an ethernet cable as well as Wi-Fi, but the Wi-Fi option, beyond the convenience of moving around your house, usually provides two firewalls (basically privacy filters to protect you and your data), one for the goes-into-the-modem side and one for the goes-out-of-the-modem side—I don't think the direct connection does (but check with your ISP). Modem and router can either be two boxes or just one. And be careful: Your ISP might have a

default setting where you become a generic Wi-Fi hub for your entire neighborhood! (I once spent several hours with Comcast getting that damn default turned off. I'm not an ogre; I just hate to compete with kids and immature adults who waste all their time on online games and streaming video.)

There isn't a lot of software required: A good browser, a good email package, and MS Word are all you really need. I use Excel to keep track of ISBNs and other book details—my publicist shares files that help keep track of reviews; most are either PDFs, Word or Excel files. (I mentioned in the lessons that you don't need a writing program like Scrivener—that's a waste of money!) And because I don't think you should be making your own book covers, I won't recommend any graphics package—you'll already have one if you think you're artistic enough to create book covers.

Security software is an absolute necessity. I've lost a lot of valuable time getting rid of malware. Get some security! Windows Defender comes with Windows, but I'd add something additional that updates a bit more often and does a bit more (like McAfee, Norton, or MalwareBytes). You might want some comfort features like headphones and iTunes if you like to write accompanied by music (beware of Apple trying to sell you their iCloud—you don't need any clouds!).

Formatting your MS Word manuscript can be publisher dependent (even if you use an aggregator like Draft2Digital or Smashwords as the publisher). You can adjust margins and fonts to your needs, but formatting software, as well as publishers who use it (they all do!), often have arcane requirements like no tabs and so forth. No problem. Most have user guides. Follow them.

That's about it. Start writing!

The Eightfold Way: What *Not* to Do when Writing a Novel

[Note from Steve: This is a classic. It even appeared in Penny Sansevieri's blog! It still offers some great general advice.]

The media once was fixated on spontaneous symmetry breaking and the Higgs boson (the so-called "God particle," a name that would surely have made Professor Higgs cringe). The Higgs mechanism (i.e., the spontaneous symmetry breaking) is necessary to give mass to some of the vector bosons in the electroweak or weak and electromagnetic interaction theory. (Can there be more than one God particle? Interesting question!) Forgotten in all this media hoopla was the theory that led to the idea of quarks and gluons, the "eightfold way" of symmetries popularized by Professor Gell-Mann. (Note that I refrain from using the term "discovered." In theoretical physics, the math is "out there." You just have to figure out what math matches up to the experimental data—not a trivial task by any means. Experimental physics is where "discoveries" are made.) I'll now concede that maybe the Higgs boson has been found. Now the uproar's all about whether dark matter and energy exist. (I reviewed a book on Bookpleasures about those two phantasms; the answer is: We don't know yet!)

Now that I've had some fun imagining your eyes glazing over as if you'd just had tequila mixed with sleeping pills (not recommended, by the way) while puffing on a few joints (if it's legal now where you are), let me say that this post is not about physics. (My eyes are glazed too,

because the above is hardcore physics, and I've been sipping my Jameson's while writing the sequel to *Rembrandt's Angel* like a madman. [This shows the reader how old this post is!]) The Eightfold Way I consider here is the shining path that leads you to a finished novel that someone might want to read. It's my distillation of rules for writing a novel—a distillation that doesn't have quite the quality of a fine thrice-distilled Irish whiskey, but I've put some thought into it and would like to share. (I'd like to share the Jameson's too, but the internet hasn't discovered e-drinking yet.)

What are the rules for successful novel writing? (Note that my bar for "successful" is low here and is defined as producing a manuscript that someone might want to consider for publishing—of course, that someone might be you if you're indie.) There are many rules, and everybody has his or her own list. All writers are not equal—what works for one might not for the other. Moreover, since I'm not Stephen King, you might think that I'm being a bit presumptuous—I am not a successful novelist. I might be considered prolific, but, by my own standards, I'm not successful (in the more general sense)—I would certainly like to have more readers. Nevertheless, I'm an avid reader. Since I'm also a novelist, when I read a novel, I read with a critical eye, especially in my capacity as a reviewer. (That's usually two reads, the first as a casual reader, the second as a reviewer—the two hats are different, of course.) Readers rule, especially nowadays when there's a plethora of novels available just waiting to be read. My Eightfold Way is reader-oriented. It's a list of DON'Ts if the writer wants to keep his readers happy. Are you ready?

Don't just write about what you know. In fact, the adage "Write about what you know" is completely off-base. [So why do so-called experts say it so often?] I don't know who said it initially, but he or she clearly wanted to eliminate the competition. Here's the scoop: If you have no imagination, you shouldn't be a novelist. I'm not just talking about sci-fi, either, where this rule is obvious. If you're writing a romance novel about vampire love or a thriller about finding a serial killer, I bet you have no direct experience with either (not \$10k—how about one of my ebooks?). Your imagination has to rule your writing. Moreover, what you imagine has to be put into words that will move and still make sense to the reader.

Don't confuse your readers on time, place, or point-of-view (POV). The action in my novel *The Midas Bomb*, for example, covers only a week. (That's the first novel in the "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco" series.) I had the timeline laid out, of course, but I soon realized that the reader could be confused by the rapid succession of events, especially since flashbacks and back story are mixed in. Consequently, the day and time are a subheading to each chapter. (One reviewer expressed appreciation for this, so I know I made the right choice.)

For POV, I'm not a purist. Switches within a chapter are okay as long as they're clear—for example, at the beginning of a new chapter section. However, it's a little weird when Susie knows what Bob is thinking, unless Susie is a mind reader. Bottom line here: Don't make your reader say, "Huh?"

Don't write overly explicit and excessive character description. I hate it as a reviewer; I avoid it like the plague as a novelist. Leave something for the reader's imagination. If you're too excessive, you might contradict the image your readers already have in their minds. Your character might have a dragon tattoo, but it's unimportant to the reader if it's unimportant to the plot. Minimalist writing should be your goal. Of course, you have to be clever enough to provide some logical but misleading clues in a mystery, for example, or the reader will have no fun. The key to description is that old slutty Goldilocks—you want just enough, no more, no less.

Don't be verbose or erudite, especially in dialogue. Many "literary experts" call Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* the greatest American novel. I disagree. (It's almost blasphemy to say there's only one, but *Moby* ain't it.) It's number two on my list of "worst books in the English language," primarily because it's an overly detailed manual on how to turn whale's blubber into lamp oil. If anything, Greenpeace should ban it. In fact, most of the books in that list suffer from verbosity and eruditeness. One reader talked about the pages and pages in *Giants of the Earth* describing the motion of grass (maybe that's where the phrase "boring as watching grass grow" came from?). The 70+ page speech in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is another turn-off. The pages and pages of description of sea flora and fauna in *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* is yet another. You get the idea.

I reviewed a book once where the author obeyed his grammar checker to the nth degree and omitted all contractions in his dialogue. Oops! Contractions are an important part of natural dialogue; the latter should always reflect everyday speech. Anything else sounds pompous. Of course, you might want your character to sound pompous, but handle that with care. Street jive is the other extreme, of course. The trick is to entertain your readers, not bore them or annoy them.

To me, verbosity also includes an overuse of adjectives and adverbs. That's the minimalist thing again. Consider: "You're a cad!" she said angrily. The "angrily" is unnecessary as are most variants of "said." These latter are wraith-like words that a speed-reader passes over. Of course, artistic license allows you to spring a surprise. Consider: "You're a cad!" she said with a wink. Now the adverbial phrase "with a wink" expresses possible flirting instead of the obvious anger. It's no longer superfluous.

Don't dwell on minutia. That's the minimalist idea yet again. *Moby* and *20,000 Leagues* again come to mind. Assume the reader already has a good idea about how to brush his teeth, for example—I'm reminded of those websites (do they exist anymore?) where one watches someone go through their day. Boring! I have better ways to spend my time. If a character goes from point X to point Y, the reader doesn't need to know what happened between X and Y, unless it's essential to the plot (he sits on a butterfly and changes the space-time continuum?).

Don't be cute. The TV series *Lost* had many followers, but most people were turned off by the convoluted pseudo-spiritual meanderings and multiple endings, and the many flash-forwards were confusing, to say the least. The writers were too cute. I've seen this happen in novels I review. I might be old-fashioned, but I avoid flash-forwards entirely. Garcia-Marquez in one of his novellas, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, gets cute and announces the ending right up front, then spends the rest of the novella telling the reader how that came to pass. He gets away with it—he's a Nobel prize-winner, after all. Generally speaking, though, you won't. (Deaver's worst book was one he wrote in reverse—way too cute! I stopped reading after Chapter Two, i.e., the second chapter from the end.)

Don't use clichéd plots. Yeah, I know, there are only so many different story types, but I've read about too many twins separated at birth, too many aliens that seem like mafiosos, a plethora of amnesia victims running from bad guys, hordes of star-crossed lovers with families that don't understand them (*R & J* is not Shakespeare's best work), and so forth. In particular, if I can map your story into one of Shakespeare's plays by any stretch of my own fertile imagination, I'm suspicious. Clichés also reduced my enjoyment of the *Star Wars* trilogy—too many plot elements were lifted straight from Isaac Asimov and Edgar Rice Burroughs' work, as well as ninja and fairy tales.

If I were an agent (thank goodness I'm not), the last thing I would want to read in a query is "My book is like...." (I did tell agents that my first young adult novel *The Secret Lab* is *not*

like Harry Potter in space, but that's different—Harry and friends are okay, but every YA agent in the world was looking for the next Harry. By the way, I ended up not using an agent for that book, and A. B. Carolan rewrote and reedited it to make a second edition.)

Use your imagination. If your novel's plot seems clichéd, it probably is, so at least throw some plot twists in that wake up your reader. And, as a reviewer, I love a reversed cliché. (Unlikely heroes fall into this category—remember the tailor who “killed six with one blow”?)

Don't name your characters without some serious consideration. In an old *Writer's Digest* article, “Namedropping” by Elizabeth Sims, she lists many good ideas about how you should choose a character's name. Like Ms. Sims, I take character naming very seriously as a writer. As a reader and reviewer, I cringe at some authors' choices. Jeff Smith isn't Latino, Jane Brown isn't Chinese, and so forth. Again, think of your reader. He or she will be upset if all your names sound like they're taken from a first-grade reader (although those who remember Dick, Jane, and Spot are probably in their declining years by now...or dead). Moreover, the appropriate name for a character must somehow fit that character's personality. Some best-selling writers violate this rule—a pox on their house, I say, or on their editor's, at least.

What's not in this list? Many details. That's the easy answer. All the grammatical details, for example (rules upon rules about split infinitives, ending a sentence with a preposition, etc.). Rules about not switching from third to first person or excessive use of the passive voice. Rules about appropriate punctuation. Learn the rules...and then break them if that works for you. Rules are meant to be broken and writers often do so, even famous ones (should I say, especially famous ones?).

Nonetheless, my Eightfold Way contains what I consider essential that you *not do* as a novelist. I might still find your novel entertaining if you break one of my rules, but that's unlikely. There are many books out there, indie or traditionally published, that are not worth your time because they break many of these rules. Same goes for some bestsellers that have passed through the Big Five's traditional publishing gantlet.

So, there you have it, the eightfold way about what not to do when you write your novel. If you're a reader, you're very lucky, because there are many good books and good authors out there—you just need to be discerning, find them, and enjoy them.

Pompous Titles

Not long ago—with COVID-19, it now seems like eons—I was amused when a local Montclair, NJ paper had an ad for an event at the local university here. An “Information Designer and Data Humorist” was going to give a lecture at the business school. My kneejerk reaction? “Hey, that's me! I'm an information designer and data humorist now. I write novels!” (Generally, I don't write comedies, but I do have a sci-fi romantic comedy, *A Time Traveler's Guide through the Multiverse*.)

I suppose some people were impressed by that woman's title (not me, of course). And I suppose some people need their pompous titles to buoy up an insecure or egotistical personality—or maybe Facebook is a substitute for that? (I'm not accusing that lecturer of doing that; let's just say I was suspicious.) For example, from that ex-president's daughter and son-in-

law to House and Senate committee and subcommittee names, DC is full of pompous titles. The world of sports and Hollywood personalities have their fair share too.

But I'm a full-time writer, so I'm more concerned about book titles—the ones for the books I read, and the ones for my own books. Book titles can be pompous too, or, to borrow one of the bard's, they can be “much ado about nothing.” They can even be too cute. For example, Nobelist Paul Krugman's book, *Arguing with Zombies* (reviewed in my blog), is an excellent non-fiction book, but that title is both a bit both pompous and cute...and it made me pause. (It was probably created by someone else. His Big Five publisher?)

I originally thought Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* was about spies because of the word “code,” and I thought Jeffery Deaver's *Garden of Beasts* was sci-fi horror, the word “beasts” reminding me of one of the Man-Kzin novellas I'd just finished. (These were the first two books from these authors that I read many years ago, the first bad and the second excellent, and probably Deaver's best—forget about Lincoln Rhyme.)

Considering my age at the time I read it (I was in my teens) and family upbringing, I can be excused for thinking that Asimov's *End of Eternity* was either post-apocalyptic (I'd just finished C. M. Kornbluth's *Not This August*), or something about the Second Coming (all this occurring long before the “End of Days” theme became popular with Christian writers, or faux-Christian writers like Chad Daybell—gee, how fast that man's name disappeared from the news!). I'd also just concluded that the “Book of Revelation” should really be in the Old Testament because its apocalyptic God wasn't the loving God of the New Testament.

And that's the problem with book titles, whether they're pompous, cute, much ado about nothing, or otherwise: They can, and often do, mislead readers. Worse, they could just be stupid. What the hell is *Gone Girl* about? If you read the book or saw the movie (I did the last...and regretted it, although I dozed through most of it), you know it really should be *Missing Woman* if the author wanted to keep it to two words. (Worse, that book, with its success that left me baffled, spawned a whole series of *Gone X*-titles where other authors tried to benefit from the similarity of their titles.) Stephen King has some doozies too: *It* could mean anything, *Cell* is so general that it could be a microbiology text, and *The Stand* implied a copse of trees to this environmentally concerned author.

“Classics” weren't immune to this disease either. While *Tale of Two Cities* had something to do with Dickens's plot, *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly did not. And what the hell does *Wind in the Willows* mean? (Mr. Toad almost ran me over with that one.) And Jane Austen's titles are just blah (and so are her books).

Maybe this is just more proof that titles are important. They are for me. And, after all, Harry kept most of his! (That's the Duke, not the magician.)

“MacGyvered” and “pumpkin spice”

No, this article isn't about a racy pumpkin who's become a spy! But you might be able to guess that the quotation marks indicate something unusual. If you do, you're correct. This post is about English slang...or should I say American slang (because I also write British-style mysteries)?

I've touched on dialects and slang in various articles over the years and in this little course. Are slang words dialect? Not really, but they can be part of dialect. English dialect is what's used by a Cockney or a Texan, and Brits might think American English is a dialect of British English (and vice versa), but slang words can be taken from dialects and used in the principal language, or created and used singly, and *not* vice versa. I'm no linguist (okay, maybe every author is an amateur one, and I'm an author), but both slang words and dialects must drive professional editors nuts. First, how can they know if an author is using either one correctly? Second, how can readers wade through a novel filled with slang words and dialects they don't completely understand?

The two items in the title are labeled as new slang and are now found in Merriam-Webster this Septemeber [2022]. "MacGyver" is a verb: To MacGyver something is to use common materials at hand to make something useful. Its origin is found in the first TV show of that name, which was much better than the second ever was with a better actor playing the main role, although people might only remember Richard Dean Anderson in *Stargate*. I'm not quite sure about the origins of "pumpkin spice"—I'd hate to think that it comes from that ubiquitous coffeshop slop sold along with other horrible concoctions at Starbucks.

The Brits have their own slang, of course, and, like American slang, it's often regional. I include some of it in the list I started in the short fiction collection *Sleuthing, British-Style* and have carried over to the later novels of the "Esther Brookstone" series and those in the "Steve Morgan" stories. These lists are more for Americans who are unfamiliar with British slang words and dialects (like me!).

But that's all beside the point, isn't it? Editors will still have those two worries indicated above, and authors should too. One only has to listen to Brits or Yanks to know the living language employed by them always has local variations and nuances. Using the latter adds some pumpkin spice to the dialogue in an author's prose. Abusing them, though, might reduce the number of readers who can enjoy reading that prose.

As in most things associated with the art of creative writing, the Goldilock's Principle tells us what to do as authors: MacGyver your dialogue with snippets of slang and dialect, but just enough to add pumpkin spice to the mix—not too little, not too much, but just enough.

Openings, Back Story, and Flashbacks

Let's consider *The Last Humans: A New Dawn*, #2 in "The Last Humans" series. Or #1 in that same series, or #3 in the "Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries" series. All their openings tell readers there are some thrills to be had. I then go on using back stories and flashbacks to continue the plots, often alternating between these story elements and dialogue and character development that normally will entertain at least a few readers.

This isn't "traditional storytelling," by which I mean that ancient oral tradition associated with members of the tribe gathered around campfires in prehistoric times listening to a storyteller. As much as modern storytelling owes to this oral tradition, the written word, especially in more recent fiction after Gutenberg cast it into print form, is much more complex. I'm amused when reviewers complain about my novels' complexity and ask myself, "Are they stuck in medieval times?" Of course, they might think simplicity is what's needed—many readers love cozy mysteries and bodice rippers, for example, that are just parodies of the human

condition with cardboard cutouts for characters. I generally ignore reviews of my books, though, except for promo purposes (excerpts from them). Reviewers are entitled to their opinions, of course, but reading preferences are so subjective that I know I can't please everyone.

The opening is sometimes called "the hook," a bit insulting to readers because they're being compared to fish. Hmm, are books just bait then? All three novels I mentioned above open with action. Other novels might open with psychological stress, using the internal dialogue of a main character. The purpose is the same: Get the reader interested. That's necessary at the beginning of the novel-writing marathon.

Even with psychological stress, back story (e.g. why the character is stressed) or flashbacks (a quick remembering of the stressful situation) can be used with character description to construct a solid opening. Authors must grab the readers' attentions, but they also must also explain why it's important to do so.

I probably do better when opening with action than I do describing a person's stress. That might seem to be a contradiction to the complexity I desire, but personal thoughts might lead to meandering, which is deadly at the start of that literary marathon known as the novel. In *Celtic Chronicles*, I start with Bastiann's thoughts about Esther's plans for them to volunteer to help at an archaeological dig. Banter accompanied those thoughts, though, something akin to action, and I kept things simple.

In other words, an author can combine the two, mixing thoughts with action. The fundamental goal is to begin with something that's happening. The why can come later when the reader needs a breather, unless it's not that complicated. Critics often say a story is like a rollercoaster ride (a description overused to the extent that it has become a cliché), but that's what an author wants to achieve—the ups and downs of his marathon race (more like the Boston course than the NYC one) that the readers can run with him. At the beginning of the race, though, the author might want to put the reader at the top of the rollercoaster so the downhill thrill comes right away. Future uphill climbs are then akin to back story and flashbacks.

Dialogue Tricks

Dialogue can slow me down as a reader. I love to write it, but, as a reader, I often observe that some writers have problems with it. Here are some rules for dialogue:

Be natural. When we talk to someone, we don't say his or her name with every spoken sentence. In fact, if Peter and Martha are speaking, and you're alternating between what Peter and Martha are saying, you don't need to repeat "Peter said" or "Martha said." An occasional reminder suffices—your reader is intelligent and will figure it out. It's trickier with three people speaking—more reminders are required. (I've reviewed books where the persons speaking are named every time they speak. The novels end up sounding like those Dick and Jane readers—I hated them in grade school!)

The general rule applies: Don't lose your readers, but don't bore them either.

Don't be natural. Human beings, in natural speech, say many superfluous things. "How are you?" "I'm fine. How are you?" "Okay. Think it will rain?" "I don't know. I didn't see a weather report." That conversation might actually occur between two colleagues who meet each other at work. It's boring to the nth degree in prose, though. You should write something like: After the usual workday greetings, Ben started to tell me about the new project. Or you start off a

new section with: “I found some anomalies in this new project,” Ben said when we saw each other. Concise and to the point—minimalist writing.

Break up the dialogue. Use description of body language to do this. It can reinforce what the person is saying and make things more interesting for the reader. You can even do this between pieces of dialogue, especially if you’re adding some body language to help the reader understand the emotional content of the dialogue (words can’t express all the emotions, but body language, and other sensory responses beyond vision, can add tremendously to your prose). Writers who practice this will find readers who appreciate it.

Don’t try to be clever and try to look for different words to substitute for the simple “said.” “I can’t get my head around that,” Peter groaned. Readers will have to pause longer on the “groaned,” especially if they are speed readers. Besides, try groaning and saying something at the same time! Replace groaned with said and let the reader skip right through to what comes next. If you must, use “Peter said with a groan.” Even better: Express the groan with body language: “Peter said, shaking his head and wringing his hands.” (That’s a bit verbose, but it’s your novel not mine.)

Similarly, you don’t have to use “asked” with a question: “How are you going to do that?” Paul asked. That should be replaced with “How are you going to do that?” Paul said (if Paul has to even be identified). We speed readers can just pick up on that it’s a question from the question mark, that it’s Paul speaking, and then forge ahead. Good readers won’t ever care about all the many uses of “said”—they’ll gleefully skip by them.

Don’t use –ly adverbs in your dialogue tags. “I can’t get my head around that,” Peter said angrily. Maybe if he’s angry you should write: “I can’t get my head around your damn concept,” Peter said. That also shows where the anger is directed. (-ly adverbs should be minimized everywhere in your prose, but especially in dialogue.)

Be careful with dialect. Maybe start with a bit of it, but don’t overuse it. Even if your reader tends to use the same dialect, he might not read that way. And, by all means, use dialect corresponding to each character. Sure, your Detective Higginbottom can be a master of dialect like a male Meryl Streep, but readers can become tired of it.

Similar comments go for using foreign language phrases or slang. Maybe a bit for color but be careful. “*Diablo*,” Papa said, “you sprayed water all over me!” works because most people know what “diablo” means in Spanish. Anything beyond that would require something like: “[foreign bla-bla],” Papa said, meaning “[English bla-bla].” (I’ve become more careful with this over the years, for various reasons.)

Both dialect and slang have to be handled carefully. You don’t want readers thinking you’re writing in a foreign language.

Also, don’t overdo babytalk English. Sure, speakers whose native language isn’t English, might not speak the language well. You can indicate that a bit at first, but then write standard English. Or just say the character doesn’t have a complete mastery of spoken English (who does in these days of internet gobbledygook?)

Do check the flow. Dialogue should flow as well as the rest of the prose and not interfere with the story. Sometimes it’s good to say it aloud, but always be aware of advice #2. Tape recordings of people talking don’t have much flow to them in my opinion (I always pity those poor legal stenographers at depositions), and that’s disastrous for your novel.

Body Language vs. Dialogue

Authors have a variety of tools and using them throughout a story can make it more interesting. I'm better at dialogue than body language, but maybe that's because I think the first is more effective than the second. But the second can be effective in a mystery because it might contradict the first...and that's one positive for using a variety of tools.

A good detective, for example, learns to read body language, especially in interrogations, because there are tells that often contradict a suspect's words. I'm certain that most readers don't have that ability; I certainly don't. So, even if I describe some body language in a story, assuming I do it correctly, I have to ask myself whether a reader will recognize "what's being said" without me explaining. That goes against my general minimalist writing philosophy, where I like to give the reader just enough information so they can participate in the creative process. Moreover, it interrupts the flow of the fiction.

I suppose the use of body language can be considered an example of "show, don't tell," but "don't tell" is referring more to excess narrative. Using body language is generally very short narrative, but its overuse could be excessive and boring.

In the abstract, dialogue is better than body language, and, whether "writing experts" like it or not, that's how human beings communicate. Your pet uses body language because it's not human. Maybe some animals' innate languages (chimps, dolphins, etc.) are mostly a mix of sounds and body language, but dialogue is more important for us simply because we are human. Writers are human; so are readers.

Perhaps what's more important are the words used to describe body language and dialogue, direct or indirect. I've seen -ly adverbs overused for both, for example. The flow in the prose determines the quality of both body language and dialogue. If the use of either one hinders that flow, that's not good. Even within a flashback or backstory segment, the flow must move the story forward, not create swirling eddies. Flow isn't a tool; it's a process that's supported by an author's toolbox and much more important than any single tool.

POV and Person

While I've written about this topic before, I still see a lot of confusion out there. Let's go over the basic ideas again.

Most fiction is written in a main character's point of view (POV): The fictional world of a novel is seen from the eyes, ears, and other senses of one or more protagonists, or even a villain's. But that POV can change from chapter to chapter or even section to section, either because there isn't just one main character. Authors (even famous ones) mangle POV, their "head-hopping" often confusing readers.

Another POV is omniscient or God's-eye view of what's going on. In other words, the author knows all and let's the reader see all that he knows. It's limiting, and it can make internal dialogue awkward. I can't recommend it.

POV is related to *but not the same* as person. If I write a story or parts of one in first person, it's clear that the POV is of that first-person character. If I write a story in third person (much of fiction is written that way), there can be multiple POVs.

Because I like to experiment, the entire “Detectives Chen and Castilblanco” series has Castilblanco in first person and other main characters in third person with their corresponding POVs (without head-hopping in the same section...unless I’ve made an error). In *The Time Traveler’s Guide through the Multiverse*, I alternate between the two main protagonists, Gail and Jeff, in first person—it’s a sci-fi rom-com, so I thought readers might be interested in observing the intimate thoughts of each one.

Mangling POV and person is easy to do; managing it is hard. A teeny mangling isn’t a great sin, though, unless it creates a lot of confusion in readers. If readers stop to wonder how Sam knows what Samantha is thinking (and Sam doesn’t have ESP!), the author has a problem.

Many authors don’t understand POV and person. In some of my interviews, I’ve asked the interviewee, “How do you use POV?” I receive a broad spectrum of answers. It’s often not considered an element of storytelling as important as plot, characterization, dialogue, and so forth, so it’s often neglected and mishandled. When I started putting my stories “out there,” I mishandled it. An author friend set me straight. Checking for head-hopping is now part of my copy-editing check when I finish a manuscript. I go through every section and ask myself, “Whose POV am I using?” and “Is there more than one?” If I can’t answer either question, I know I have to fix something.

First-person Storytelling

Using the first person in storytelling has its pros and cons like most writing techniques. Using it means both readers and the author can become a character. A reader might be uncomfortable “being” a criminal, of course, but what a way to get inside a criminal’s mind...if it’s done well. Same goes for good and noble characters, of course.

First person is *not* point of view (POV). POV is about who’s the center of attention in a section or chapter; the reader is observing what’s going on using one character’s senses and mind. First person is already in one character’s POV, hence the confusion. Authors generally tell a story in one third-person POV that might shift from section to section or chapter to chapter, all in the past tense. But both first-person past and present and third-person present are common as well. (Complicated? Not really. Read on.)

First-person storytelling works well when one character has a lot of internal dialogue, i.e., narrative that represents personal reflections on what has happened, is happening, or will happen. Using it exclusively means you can’t get into another character’s head, but that can help an author to not give anything away, like a detective considering the significance of clues or evidence and others’ mannerisms and actions. (That can also be done in third person, of course.) Sometimes this gets clumsy, though. I wrote the first novel in “The Last Humans” series all in first person—the story is about how Penny Castro copes with surviving a worldwide pandemic—but in the second novel, I had to alternate between first person (Penny) and third person (other characters). I’d had practice doing that, though, because the “Chen & Castilblanco” novels, all seven of them, were written in that style.

I first saw alternating first- and third-person storytelling in Patterson’s early Alex Cross novels. (I don’t know if he kept that up. I stopped reading Patterson. Like many old mares and stallions in the Big Five’s stables, Patterson soon became boring and formulaic.) Many readers

don't like that mix. I can't understand that. It's no different than changing third-person POV from section to section or chapter to chapter. Maybe the negative opinions stem from the fact that the third-person POV is more common? (I must have really upset readers of *The Time Traveler's Guide through the Multiverse* where I alternate between first-person Gail and first-person Jeff, the two main characters.)

First-person storytelling isn't as new as some writers or readers might think either. H. Rider Haggard used it in *King Solomon's Mines*, for example (published in 1885!), writing as if he were Alan Quatermain. That novel is a saga, and I'd venture to state that first-person storytelling is perfect for sagas. ("The Last Humans" and *Time Traveler's Guide* novels can be considered sagas, even though the latter book is a bit tongue-in-cheek.) Melville used first-person storytelling in *Moby Dick* (1851). Would that novel be the same without that famous opening first line, "They call me Ishmael"?

I just can't envision Ugh the Caveman sitting by a flickering fire and telling his stories to his comrades in anything but first person in order to make those comrades feel like participants in the story. That was how storytelling originated. Modern writing techniques have come a long way since then, and writers can experiment with them. I'm not sure I'm ready for second-person present-tense storytelling, though. I'd like to read your opinions, reader or writer.

Fast and Furious vs. Increasing Tension

While my novels have plenty of action scenes, I've never tried to compete with Hollywood's. Forget the soundtracks, special effects, and other audiovisual aspects of Hollywood movies. I'm analyzing something both books and movies can offer—many do in fact—fast and furious action over and over again. As a writer, I prefer to build tension leading to those action scenes being the climax of that tension, not the be-all and end-all of the story.

This is evident even in my sci-fi novels (*Rogue Planet* is a prime example), but it's also seen a lot in my mystery and thriller novels. For example, in *Intolerance* (another free PDF download), the tension builds as the three cases involving Esther Brookstone evolve and culminate in action scenes.

The fundamental question is whether a reader savors more the buildup than the action scene itself. This reader does! In fact, I also prefer movies that do that too. I only saw "Fast and Furious" movies in previews, but that was enough for me to decide they weren't for me. Likewise, I'm turned off by any book that tries to emulate an action flick.

I suppose one could argue that movies' audiovisual media lends itself more to action scenes, but I think that's just a cop out. A famous director said he liked to blow up things. I prefer to know why someone wants to blow up things, and how good people can step forward and try to stop that (that's one theme in *The Midas Bomb*, for example).

For writers, this is a question of style. For readers, it's more about a preference for complexity—real life is complex, so complexity in fiction mimics real life, a prerequisite for any good novel. It's a question of preferring depth to shallowness.

It's still a free country, so both sets of readers are free to follow their own preferences. I hope I've made mine clear. They're reflected in my fiction, for better or worse. I never do shallow, not even in a short story!

Scenes

Plays aren't the only literary works that have scenes. They naturally occur in short fiction and novels (maybe even biographies?). Authors can, in fact, forget about outlining if they move from scene to scene, not that this is necessarily recommended because other story elements are important too.

If a newbie author is struggling to figure out where to break the prose into chapters and sections when point-of-view (POV) doesn't do that naturally, scenes can help make that determination. In fact, readers might get upset by abrupt scene changes within a section or chapter as much as they do with abrupt POV changes (often called "head-hopping"), so both can help authors decide where natural breaks occur. Moreover, scene changes and POV changes often go hand-in-hand: Different scene, different POV, because the scene features a different character!

Even when settings remain the same in flashbacks or back story, there's a scene change because a scene involves time as well as space. A setting might remind a character of what happened in that flashback or back story, yet there is a change even though the setting is the same: A jump into the past in the character's mind. This also presents two opportunities: First, to show how the character's mindset has changed over time; and second, to provide a pause in the action.

Does this seem complicated? It's really not. It all comes naturally the more fiction you write. Like riding a bicycle or driving a car, once learned, it becomes second nature. But that shouldn't stop old hands from reflecting on what was just written. Even old hands can improve their prose! (And, like riding a bicycle or driving a car, paying attention can avoid problems!)

There are some things to watch out for, of course. Just like in drama, what occurs in a scene needs to be meaningful. For example, a gratuitous sex scene might be an effective hook at the beginning of a story, no matter the genre, but it must mean something farther into a story.

Another example that's a bit difficult to pull off is the scene where a character dies. An editor of *Son of Thunder*, for example, reacted strongly when I killed off a character whom she liked. Perhaps I should have built up to that scene in a better way? The same thing happened in *Aristocrats and Assassins* when a reviewer reacted strongly after I killed off a character. In the first case, I might have built up the character too much; in the second, I thought my character description was a bit more ambivalent, so there'd be no problem. (Of course, both negative reactions are anecdotal and don't represent a valid statistical sample.)

But to be honest, both scenes could be justified by their shock value. Twists in fiction scenes, especially mysteries, thrillers, and sci-fi, can please or entertain readers like surprises from a pinata. That has value too.

Settings are often confused with scenes. The latter are a more general concept because scenes have their own plot, characters and their POVs, dialogue, and settings—they're miniature, self-contained stories for the most part.

Authors can put drama into their stories with scenes, so the better they are, the better the drama.

The Irish Rover

I've been lucky enough in my life to see a bit of the world. Some settings from those travels find their way into my stories, of course. For example, our last major trip was a riverboat cruise down the Danube. My novel *Death on the Danube*, the third book in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series, was based on that trip (*sans* murders!). The novella "Fascist Tango," found in the third volume of *Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape* (another free PDF download), features places I visited during much earlier travel around South America; and what Vladimir Kalinin, my multi-series arch-villain, saw flying into Bogotá in *Soldiers of God* was seen by me several times returning from the US to Colombia where I lived for many years.

My knowledge of the EU is second only to the US and South America. I've never lived in Europe, although I've spent a lot of time there as a conference participant, guest scientist, or tourist. The EU includes the Irish Republic, and we enjoyed a lengthy land tour there (basically the reverse of Esther Brookstone and Bastiann van Coevorden's at the beginning of the novel *Intolerance*). On that tour, I met my collaborator A. B. Carolan at Blarney Castle [wink, wink]; he lives in Donegal and has a cameo in *Intolerance*, Book Seven in the "Esther Brookstone" series.

With Google, Google Earth, along with various travel websites, real travel doesn't matter that much anymore. Authors can stay in the comfort of their homes and travel around the world with their laptops to make their storytelling seem more real. While real travel might help with some settings, virtual travel can provide just as much local color for readers who want to travel along.

Whether from real travels or virtual ones on a laptop, authors have to be careful. For example, suppose the principal character checks into hotel X in city Y. The author must remain neutral about X or, even better, compliment the hotel and its service to protect the author legally as well as not upset those readers who have visited X and thought it was a damn good hotel!

With *Death on the Danube*, I was very careful to have Esther and Bastiann praise their honeymoon cruise on the riverboat, even though Bastiann has to run a murder investigation aboard the ship (don't expect that on your riverboat tour!). In fact, I could imagine the cruise ship company, Amawaterways, using the novel in some way for advertising the services they offer to tourists (they probably don't, though). That cruise for us was truly entertaining, educational, and interesting, and I hope that I conveyed that well in the novel.

Some travelers diss tours. Both our Danube and Irish tours provided me with a lot of information I can still use in future stories. To refresh my memory or to visit places virtually, I can sit in front of my laptop and tour those places again...and the rest of the world too. Modern authors never had it so good. Of course, whether real or virtual, your settings have to seem real. That's true of all fiction.

Recycling Characters

In books about writing fiction (often much wordier but saying less than this little course), I've never seen this topic mentioned. "Whoa!" you might say. "That's not creating new fiction if you reuse characters."

Wrong. Fiction writers recycle characters all the time. That's what series do. While creating believable and interesting characters is important, more fresh material is and should be always found in the plots and doesn't have to exist in the characterization, except for the development of characters in time.

And why stop with series? Consider my arch-villain, Vladimir Kalinin. Books in four different series, "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco," "Esther Brookstone Art Detective," "Inspector Steve Morgan," and "Clones and Mutants Trilogy," along with two bridge books between them, needed an evil villain (although he has some redeeming qualities in *No Amber Waves of Grain*, the third book in the last trilogy). Ergo, he's present, creating problems for multiple protagonists.

Because these books move along an extended timeline, you could argue that they represent one huge series, but a series generally recycles the good guys, not villains—that's how we define series! (The same observation might make you wonder how old Vladimir lives for so long. That question begins to be answered in *Full Medical*, my very first novel and first book in the "Clones and Mutants Trilogy.")

But outside a series, should the good guys be recycled? Why not? Esther Brookstone and Bastiann van Coevorden, protagonists in the "Eshter Brookstone Art Detective" series, play important roles in the "Chen and Castilblanco" detective series. (I often call them cameos, but they're really more than that. Cameos are what I give myself!) Turn-about's fair play, so sometimes Chen and Castilblanco appear in the "Esther Brookstone" series, most notably Chen in *Palettes, Patriots, and Prats*. (They're all together in *Defanging the Red Dragon*.)

All of this has to make sense, of course. I've worked hard to make that happen and like the results. You might have fun trying it as well.

The Flow of Prose

It might be hard to believe, but I'm more of a reader than a writer; and, as I read, I often admire other authors' prose, especially when it flows like a strong current in the ocean or in a river that can't be denied. Sometimes I imagine that some great voice is reading it to me—a James Earl Jones, say—with inflections and pauses interlaced with those words from a great story. (I suppose that's a justification for audiobooks, but my imagination is sufficient.)

"Flow" is the key word here. Some authors have trouble with dialogue, for example, because it interrupts the flow of the narrative. Yet dialogue must flow too, weaving in and out of the narrative, or vice versa, creating storytelling that carries the reader forward.

I love it when I read it. Writing it doesn't require a Nobel prize winner, although Garcia Marquez was a master at it; or a Pulitzer prize winner like my old UCSB English professor, N. Scott Momaday. I've seen it in works by writers you've never heard of, and in genres where you'd maybe not expect it—comedy, crime, fantasy, science fiction...you name it.

I strive to maintain an inevitable flow in my own prose. Sometimes modern prose style gets in the way. Novels today tend to have short sections and short chapters, especially in

thrillers, and the breaks between them are sometimes like atollas or reefs in the literary ocean, or a boulder in the river, where waves and rapids crash. But that sometimes is effective too. My father, a painter of landscapes, knew that waves crashing are just part of the flow.

Part of maintaining the flow is choosing the right words. As I get older, this becomes more difficult. As I write a novel, I know there's a *mot juste*—it's on the tip of my tongue, because storytelling is a vocal tradition—but I often have to leave an X and move on. But that same flow will often tell me what X is, or it provides something even better. (I often come up with X in my content editing, so this isn't writer's block.)

Most writers probably struggle in this way to maintain the desired flow. It's an important part of content editing, and we shouldn't minimize its importance. And readers will be happier when a writer doesn't, i.e., his or her prose flows. Every reader wants to be carried away in their reading. If they're not, they might just look for another book!

The End Game

If you're a reader, do you peruse what's at the end of a book? Many authors, if they include anything, only include a short bio, but they really should include a bit more. What can authors add to that for you, the reader, especially authors of indie books and those writing for indie publishers (small presses)? Consider it a bit of dessert after that full meal corresponding to the novel you just read.

I'll go through the back material I'd like to see in a novel as a reader:

Questions or topics for book clubs and discussion groups. This is optional and depends on how "deep" your book might dive. For example, let's say your book's themes are about human trafficking, drugs, global warming, mental health issues—anything that's a current (or even past) topic of discussion. Your fiction might then generate a lot of discussion in a group.

[Note: I don't include this end material in this course, although I suppose writing groups might find such a section interesting. In a sense, though, the whole course can create discussion, if only because my opinions on writing, publishing, and marketing are a bit unconventional, to say the least!]

A thank you to the reader. Here's an example: "Thank you for reading *The Vienna Gig*. There are so many good authors and good books, so I'm honored you chose mine." The advantage of such a message is that it's the perfect place to continue to ask for a review (to be posted anywhere other readers and the author might see it): "If you have the time, please write a short review—other readers and I would find such a review beneficial." If readers have finished the book and arrived at this message, they probably liked the book, so it's also likely the review will be positive. This message is also a good lead-in to...

A list of your similar books. You could start this list with something like "If you enjoyed this book, you might also enjoy:" If the book is in genre X and you also write in genre Y, I'd just list the genre-X books, but that's up to you. Some authors put the list of other books in the front material. I'd do one or the other, but not both, and something like "Other books by John Q. Author:" sounds a wee bit cold at the start of the book.

Your website. I'd end this first page of back material with "For more information, visit my website. <https://JohnQAuthor.com>."

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements. In this next section of back material, I suggest you include material about how you came to write the book, your sources if you sought back material for the book (sometimes erroneously called "research"), and reasons why you didn't do X when writing the story (create an ET language, have Y marry Z, and so forth).

You might not state any of that, but there are always people who helped you put the book together and you should acknowledge them—your agent, chief editor, copy editor, cover artist, and beta-readers. You might also want to acknowledge those who inspired you to write the book. And don't forget your significant other if you have one—that person has to live with a nerd who's always writing!

Author bio. Can't forget that! You don't want to write a memoir here, just a few paragraphs containing the essentials: Maybe where you were born, where you live now, what experiences you had that might relate to your writing, and so forth. Don't include your mailing address or telephone number, but do indicate your website (yes, again!), author page on Facebook or other social media, and your contact info if your website doesn't have a contact page (say it does if you do).

This isn't a place to be a name-dropper. Maybe you live next door to superstar author X or were a ghost writer for politician Y, but I'd leave them out—the reader might hate X and Y! For the same reason, don't say that your goal in your writing life is to write like Z.

Will your readers care about any of this? Maybe not, but none of it can hurt either. All authors need to learn to include interesting back material because some readers love this. I know I do. It's a fitting end for the journey I've made with the author reading their book.

Lack of Motivation or Writer's Block?

I've often mentioned that I've never had writer's block. I'm a full-time writer, so there's always something that I want to write! That's not writer's block. (Choosing what to write is another matter.)

I believe I've also mentioned that in the last few years, I've been having more problems remembering the precise word—I know it exists, and it often comes to me on my content-editing passes. That's not writer's block either.

But is lack of motivation writer's block? I suppose it is if an author can't write anything, but the lack of motivation hits me with respect to books I'd planned to write, usually the next book in a series. For example, you have two free PDFs for the sixth and seventh book in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series. (*Defanging the Red Dragon* and *Intolerance* are in the list found on the "Free Stuff & Contests" web page at my website [...where you found this course].) They exist because I was ambivalent about continuing the series. (I published #8, *The Klimt Connection*, March 18 with D2D—inspired in part by the two red ales I quaffed on St. Paddy's Day?) I was motivated to write all three of those novels, and I did so in four months! Motivation is important.

My problem with extending a series isn't completely due to the fact that the so-called "book marketing experts" don't want to promote, or don't even know how to promote, a series. That's but one way to kill my motivation.

You'll remember that I had problems with the second book in "The Last Humans" series, first with the publisher of the first book, Black Opal Books, and then with Amazon. (That was the final nail in Amazon's coffin for me. No recent books of mine appear on Amazon!) A. B. Carolan and I had plans to continue "The Denisovan Trilogy" (only the first book is out, and not on Amazon), but a luke-warm reception of the first novel, *Origins*, has dampened our enthusiasm a lot. I also had plans to turn *More than Human: The Mensa Contagion* into two separate novels (that would require some expansion, mostly in the part about the Mars colony) and then write a third, but again a luke-warm reception of that book dampened my enthusiasm.

Of course, motivation can be lacking for a specific project simply because I find other projects more appealing! I was clearly motivated to write the last four "Esther Brookstone" novels that can be considered a sub-trilogy of political thrillers (with relevance to current politics at that!). The free PDFs for #6 and #7 were easy to produce, and the D2D ebooks were too (more about that in the Draft2Digital article below), so most of my time was spent on finishing the manuscripts. (Maybe doing the latter was more obsession than motivation? Same difference, of course.)

[Another example: I introduced Inspector Steve Morgan in *The Klimt Connection*, #8 in the "Esther Brookstone" series, and that motivated me to give him his own series—so far it's only a trilogy.]

I recognize that I'm lucky. Nothing in what I've experienced and described above can be considered writer's block, but I believe that authors will have similar experiences as their careers progress. In a sense, it's not about sitting down and doing the writing, it's about satisfying a yen to get some specific thing written. My advice? It's the same I have for life in general: Don't keep waiting for inspiration to strike! It might just be temporarily on strike! Just roll with the punches and do the best you can with what you love to do.

An Example: "The Recruit"

While the following is just a short story, I include one of mine to illustrate some of the elements of storytelling. In a sense, a novel is just more of the same. This story was the second of four about the "Earl of Penrith." It's a British-style mystery. (You don't like British-style mysteries? Okay, just read it for the comments I make!)

I never know when I begin a tale whether it will become a short story, novella, or novel. This is determined as I go along in my writing journey. Above all, an author has to be flexible and self-critical. The plot and characters just might not be enough for a novella or novel. but they work fine in a short story.

And let me assure you I'm not being a narcissist here by using my own prose as an example. You can find many other examples simply by reading a lot (without annotations, of course). I just couldn't use someone else's prose because it would take a lot of time to secure the author and/or publisher's permission. I'd rather spend that time writing!

The Recruit

– Keep titles meaningful, curious, and short.

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– A simple copyright statement is all you need, even for D2D. In a collection, I have a general copyright statement on its page at the beginning and then separate ones for each story in the collection. Only the general one is needed for a collection, and a novel only has one as well.

DI Earl Wilson was already walking around the crime scene leaving DS Sally Hill to other chores. She'd be taking notes on her moby too, mostly about the obvious; he'd be looking for things that weren't so obvious. They were a good team.

He was a police veteran who had started out as a patrol constable in London, a "bobby" or "top" as they were called, the latter for the helmet—and then bounced around the country after being promoted from PC to DC and finally DI, finally ending up in the Lake District, where he suspected he would retire someday because he loved hiking and fishing. **– Here I introduce the main character and the general setting; I also include two British terms, "bobby" and "top," and explain their connection. The reader can connect patrol constable to PC. I probably should have defined DC, DS, and DI, but they're in my list of British terms ubiquitous in all my British-style mysteries.**

He was a big bear of a man, an oversized version of that American telly detective, Columbo, complete with old car and dirty raincoat, but he didn't smoke cigars and didn't drink much. In fact, for his age, he was in good shape. A criminal might outrun him, but they'd be hard-pressed to outfight him. He had once broken one's jaw, but he'd gone to the hospital later to apologize to the hand-cuffed scrote for doing that. **– Keep character descriptions short enough to allow the reader to form his own images.**

Sally was from the other coast, loved the Lake District as well, and loathed southern England. Her birthplace was Morpeth, a regional capital not far from Newcastle-on-Tyne, so she felt right at home in Penrith that might be considered a left-coast town in comparison to Morpeth, without any political meaning intended—the area along the border with Scotland was a conservative one. **– Keep the descriptions of settings short too. The reader doesn't need to know more about the Newcastle area—at least not in a short story.**

Twenty years younger than her Guv, she was coming into her own as Earl's partner in policing. She was fleet of foot and good enough at martial arts to compensate for her small size, as many a criminal had discovered. She also could turn on the charm, though, if she felt inclined or needed to do so in an interview or interrogation.

"Seven combatants dead, lass. Looks like Fallujah or some other killing fields in the Middle East, not here in our Lake District." **– The "hook" should be an attention-getter.**

"Um, I recognize this bloke, Guv," Sally said, bending over one of the bodies to study the face, its features distorted by the rictus of death. "Ed Chance, muscle for the Crystal Boys. Clean shot to the heart."

"Turf war between two gangs then? Who's invading whose patch?"

"Being as near to each other as they are, I'd think they joined forces and were pursuing someone."

"Going after some yob who betrayed both gangs? Isn't greed wonderful?" He'd already moved far away from the inglorious seven. Across a pretty lea and about a soccer field away, he halted. "Blood traces here. Whoever they were after stood his ground and blew them all away. Weird." Earl picked up one shell. "Automatic weapon. Maybe a Chinese copy of an Uzi? We see more of those than the Americans' AR-style rifles. None of them legal outside our ARUs or military units, of course. And I don't think our Rambo wasted much ammo. I count only ten shell casings. So maybe a semi-automatic?" His gaze became more distant as he surveyed the

abandoned farm. “If this place were drier and had a bit of sagebrush, I’d compare the bloke who did this to the Earps at OK Corral.” He spotted the pathologist and SOCOs’ vans moving up the track that led to the farm’s main buildings. He pointed. “We’ll let Harry and his science lads and Doc Simpson do their bit here. Let’s take a look down there.” He pointed to the main buildings nestled in a dale. “Our morning exercise, lass.” – **Again, SOCO is defined in my list of British terms, although I should have defined it here; it’s an acronym for Scene-of-Crime Officer, i.e., British for CSI.**

In the old farmhouse, they found some interesting evidence. An empty sitting room contained only one chair. Ropes that had been sliced through still hung from it. There were some blood traces on the old rug around the chair, new stains to add some color to the old ones.

“Someone was being held here.”

“And maybe tortured?” Sally said.

“But he managed to escape. Our lone shooter with the Uzi copy?”

She walked around the rest of the sitting room and visited the outside hall while he went into the kitchen that featured a relic from the past, a handsome wood stove. In the back corner by the door, he found something more interesting than the stove.

“Lass, back here,” he called out. When she appeared, he pointed to the corpse. “Might be who had the task of guarding the prisoner?” A penknife was sticking in the man’s neck, its damage leaving the man’s head resting in a large pool of blood. Using his many years of experience, Earl put all the data together to make a tentative theory. “Crystal Boys and/or the other gang holds the bloke for whatever reason, he escapes his one guard while they’re off somewhere else, kills the guard, and does a runner, taking the guard’s weapon along as a memento. The gang members return and chase him, he stops and turns, and blows them away.”

“Good enough theory for now. But how did the other gang come to be here?”

Earl shrugged. “They were both after the yob. Maybe he was a snout working against both of them? They were either in business together or temporarily joined forces to take him down, but everyone forgot he had the guard’s weapon.”

“Harry and his SOCOs might be able to refine your theory.”

“Or show it’s completely wrong. In any case, seven gang members, no, eight, counting this yobbie here, are dead. That’s a miracle. Eight against one. And don’t forget the bloke was able to cut through those ropes binding him. He’s good.” – **The MC is having doubts, showing he’s human.**

“Admiring him, are you?”

Earl shrugged again. “Enjoying it, I dare say. Eight gang members we no longer have to worry about in our patch, I dare say. And maybe a message to scrotes elsewhere? Is Ed Chance from Manchester?”

“One of their local reps, if memory serves.”

Earl nodded and pulled out his mobile. He told Harry Simpson, the lead SOCO, that his team would need to go over the farm buildings after finishing their work at the shooting site.

“Now the question becomes: Why were all these lovely maggots who live in England’s underbelly here at this old farm?”

They were outside now. She pointed. “There’s a newer building up on the hill, Earl.” He squinted. The lead SOCO was still on the line. That building was nearer the SOCOs, so Earl suggested to Harry that they hit that building first.

“Katie thinks it has surveillance cameras,” the SOCO said, referring to one of his team members.

“It might be why all these thugs were here,” Earl said. “I’m willing to bet the gangs were using the abandoned farm for a manufacturing plant. Fine-tooth comb and all that, lad, and some surveillance video would be much appreciated.”

Note that I use * to separate sections in novels as well. You can use whatever you like, but they shouldn’t distract from the text.**

Hours later, Sally and Earl were examining their third surveillance video. The newer building had been a lab to make illegal or controlled pills, and a lot of product was still there, hence the videocams. Number three was wide-angle and provided a panoramic view of the shootout in the vale below.

It was like watching an action film on the telly. A young man came running out of the old farmhouse. Gang members from that same farmhouse poured out in pursuit. Earl thought the young bloke might be between twenty- and thirty-years-old. The seven gained on him because he was limping slightly. Why didn’t they shoot? Suddenly their quarry turned and sprayed them all with bullets. He then disappeared behind the same hill where the drugs lab sat on top, going out of the range of all the cameras. – **This is nearly a flashback...and shows a way to make it not so obvious.**

“Wow!” said Earl.

“I agree!”

They’d been so engrossed in the action that they hadn’t realized that a tall stranger now filled Earl’s office doorframe.

He stood. “Who the hell are you? How’d you get into our CID? And how long have you been watching?”

The stranger smiled. “Rick Barnes, MI5 agent, at your service.” He offered a handshake to Earl, who ignored the offer as if the hand belonged to a zombie-like Putin. The stranger then showed his credentials. “Duty sergeant waved me through and no one else tried to stop me. And I saw most of what you saw. It has increased my appreciation for that lad’s skill.” – **It’s always good to add some surprises and twists.**

“Okay. Just what do you want? Why is MI5 interested in this case?”

Rick sat in the other guest chair without being invited and pointed at Sally’s laptop. “I’d like to watch that video with you again.” Sally looked at Earl; he nodded. At one point just as the lad turned to face his pursuers, the agent said, “Stop there.” The video now showed a still image, a good shot of the lad’s face after Sally blowed it up. “Meet Simon Edgewood. That’s not his real name, though. It’s a new one given to him because he’s in witness protection. Or was. I can’t say he was a willing participant, but we had our reasons for doing it, and I can say we failed to protect him as we should have.”

The coppers were told he had testified against some gang leaders in Northumberland, Newcastle-on-Tyne area. Sally nodded knowingly; she probably recognized the names of some of the particulars. In the courtroom, they’d vowed to get even and put a price on Simon’s head from jail. The authorities had given him a new life in the Lake District, but somehow the local gangs in Earl’s patch had learned who he was.

“Was he back in the business?”

“I doubt it. He’s been here almost ten years. He testified in Newcastle when he was only fifteen. Nice lad who went astray early. Same old story. Tippler father, druggie mum. Poor, no future, no education, although he’s intelligent enough and self-taught. And I’m here for more

reasons than trying to protect one of the Crown's star witnesses. NCA's as well as MI5's, to be precise. We want to recruit him."

"What?" Earl glanced at Sally. She shrugged, so Earl returned his attention to the smiling agent. "He's obviously a killer! Why would MI5 want a job like that working for them?"

"He's intelligent, resourceful, and skilled, all good qualities for a field agent. He's also been clean since those Newcastle trials. He would have stayed clean except for that bounty. The two gangs here probably thought it could win them some favors with the syndicate in Newcastle, I suppose. NCA tells me they're trying to link up with the east-coast fellows."

"I'd guess he's a dead man walking now," Earl said, somewhat mollified. Had he jumped to conclusions? "Damaged goods, I dare say."

"So, you would just toss him to the wolves, Earl?" Sally asked him.

He glanced at his sergeant. She called him Earl only when she was unhappy with his behavior. "Obviously not my call. And maybe not our case?" The question was directed at the agent.

"Your case is basically closed, but I would like to ask for your help in finding Simon. He won't do our program any good if he's dead."

"Your program?"

"I don't get it," Sally said, adding to Earl's question with a comment. "Does MI5 or NCA make a habit of recruiting troubled young people? How could they be reliable agents?"

"That's exactly what we do. I head the program." – **I don't know whether such programs exist, but a Brit might not either. Consider this a bit of creative literary license. Personally, I think such programs should exist in both the UK and the US.**

"Is it successful?" Earl said.

"Better than I hoped for. So far we have about a thirty percent success rate. As you guessed, Sergeant, it's a combined program with NCA. After three years intensive training, the young recruits choose the agency they prefer to work for."

"Isn't something lost by their not coming up through the ranks?" Earl said. He had a low opinion of those police officers who used a similar program that took university graduates and started them out as detective constables; they lacked the street and community experience that uniformed PCs acquired.

"They're on probation for another three years as well, working with a seasoned agent."

"No disastrous failures?"

"Less than five percent recidivism. The others just prefer to live ordinary lives, which we're okay with."

"What about mental and physical screenings?" Sally said.

"They're periodic throughout the training and probationary periods."

"Are MI5 and NCA that desperate for personnel?" Earl said.

"Yes. We had a lot more than normal attrition because of Covid. Also, seasoned agents are retiring early because, as you two probably know well, policing is a thankless task that few in the public appreciate or understand, and the politicians are always looking to cut our budgets. Our funding as a special program is more secure, and will continue to be as long as our success rate continues." He stretched his legs and crossed them. Earl now expected yet another sales pitch. "Moreover, the UK is becoming a lot more diverse, and our police and other authorities should reflect that changing diversity. My program offers a chance to disadvantaged groups to go into law enforcement, which is a steady job with benefits. You must know how blacks and

Asians have had a tough time getting a good-paying job and owning a house in ye olde merry England. There was that banking scandal about mortgages not that long ago.” – **The funding problems are probably a good guess, on the other hand.**

“This Simon is white,” Sally said, pointing at the screen.

“He’s a poor Geordie boy who had no chance early in life. He matured in the witness program and became a model citizen until those two gangs discovered his identity and went after the bounty. That was more to win points with the Newcastle syndicate, of course.” – **“Geordie” describes someone from the Newcastle area as well as their dialect. I should have explained this to American readers. My bad.**

“So, did he go over to the dark side now?” Earl said. “He left eight bodies behind at that farm. That’s a fact.”

“I don’t know, but from the video, we could consider that self-defense. There’s no way to tell if that shooting exhibition was that of a cold-blooded killer or a young lad just trying to survive.”

“I don’t know either,” Earl echoed. “So, I guess we should talk to him and find out.”

“Without giving the rest of the gangs’ members a clue to his whereabouts.”

The police officers’ investigation, with MI5’s Rick Barnes as observer, now became a manhunt for Simon Edgewood. It would be a strange investigation because on face value the person they were looking for had done nothing wrong beyond defending himself, if the MI5 agent was to be believed.

Of course, Rick’s program resisted any investigation into Simon’s personal life in the Lake District. Earl wanted to ignore that constraint.

“How can we find him if we know anything about his stay here in the area?” he said to Rick. “My God, man, we already know he was in the witness program. He’s been exposed!”

“We have to protect those who are involved in his new life here.”

Earl handed his handcuffs to Rick and held out his arms. “Put them on me then. I can’t help you find him. You’ve made that an impossible mission.”

Rick handed them back. “Okay, I see your point. But how do we keep everything about who Simon really is quiet then?”

“Our police investigations are always made in secret except for the meddling media. Sometimes even people we interview blather to a reporter if only to see their name in print in the pages of Penrith’s local broadsheet. And if we tell them they could be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act, which MI5 and NCA might feel inclined to do, they’ll just stop talking, and our investigation will fizzle.”

Rick sighed. “We’ll have to take it case by case with those who know Simon. I don’t like threatening anyone, but I reserve the right to veto any interview. His new life here will mostly include people who know nothing about his previous one. Let’s keep it that way.”

Earl smiled at his small victory. “In that case, we’ll tell everyone he’s a missing person we’re worried about and looking for because we fear he’s in danger?”

Rick nodded but had a worrisome rejoinder. “Some VIPs in those gangs will know that’s not true.”

“But they won’t want his past to become public either. They want new business deals with that Newcastle syndicate.” Sally glanced from one man to the other, who she probably likened to farmyard roosters, one old bird and a challenging young one, facing off. “And maybe a bit of revenge as well as bounty?”

“Yes, let’s assume they’ll keep quiet,” Rick said. “Their losses have to be an embarrassment. Let’s just focus on finding him as stealthily as possible.”

Earl nodded. “How about getting us started? You must know something about Simon’s life here because you claimed he turned himself around.”

Rick perched on the corner of Earl’s desk, looking more relaxed now. “He works at an auto repair shop and leases a bedsit above it. He has a girlfriend, a nice young woman from a hardworking but poor family. That’s about all I know. The girlfriend or garage owner might know more.”

“Thanks,” Earl said. “Now, was that so painful?”

“Yes. I want to protect the young lad.”

“So do we,” Sally said, “The best way to do that is to find him. He might be running scared right now.”

“And hopefully still around, not gone to Ireland or some other place overseas,” Earl said.

“We’re watching Penrith, Liverpool, Bristol, and the southern ports. And foreign travel is difficult outside the UK now without proper documentation because of Brexit.”

“The lad can steal that. You’d better check airports too. And I’m not sure you need any documentatin to take a ferry to Ireland.”

Rick only nodded.

They kept the investigation focused. Normally for a major case, Earl would get help from other stations in the Penrith Police District. His DCI agreed with the MI5 agent, though, so Earl and Sally had to make do with three of their station’s DCs along with a SOCOs’ unit if needed.

That was why Sally showed up alone to talk with Kathy Kilborn, Simon’s girlfriend who worked at a gift shop in a nearby village. After the usual introductions, Kathy invited the DS to a storeroom in the shop’s rear to get away from the worried looks of the storeowner who’d already told Sally that she loved Kathy as if she were her own daughter. – **Material here and in what follows is almost background material. It’s designed to show how well Simon had turned over a new leaf and integrated into life in the Lake District.**

“She means well, sergeant, and she’s very nice to me, always saying that I should marry Simon.”

“When did you last see him?” Answer: The day before the shooting. Sally nodded. “The repair shop’s owner said Simon had decided to work late on some toff’s car.”

“Yes, I think the car’s owner promised him a nice bonus to finish the repairs ahead of schedule. Did the repair shop’s owner say anything else?”

Sally almost felt Kathy was running the interview. “He said Simon closed up things like he always does.”

Kathy nodded. “He often works late because he lives right above the shop. He says we can’t get married until we can manage a flat somewhere.”

“Did you try calling his mobile?”

“He doesn’t have one. He uses the phone in the repair shop, or my moby when he’s with me. My parents pay for mine as part of a family plan.”

Sally’s next question danced around the truth. She hadn’t provided the young girl with details about what had occurred at the farm. “Do you know if Simon has any enemies?”

“Heavens no! Even strangers like him, but, to be honest, he doesn’t have many friends. Me, my parents, his boss, my boss—that’s about it. He’s from down south. Cardiff area, I think. No family, though.”

“No violent pub barneys or drinking or drug problems? Other problems with the law?” Sally had already checked HOLMES. A negative shake of the head from Kathy confirmed the lack of a record on that police database, but the last question had also been a test to see if she knew about his past in Northumberland that had been erased when Simon went into witness protection.

“He’s a saint. I fell for him the day he came in here to buy his boss a pipe for his birthday.” She smiled. “My Pops smokes one, so I could make a few good recommendations. He didn’t want to go into Penrith because he doesn’t have a car.”

She’s quite smitten, thought Sally. “Has he met your parents?” The answer to that could indicate how serious the relationship really was.

“Two dinners. Pops was impressed, and Mum, who’s so protective of me and my little sister, told me he was a keeper.”

Would they still feel that way if they saw that video? “We might want to talk to your parents. Would that be possible?”

“I suppose. I don’t want them to think he’s in trouble with the law, though.”

“We’ll be clear about that and just say he’s missing, which he is, and we’re worried about him.”

“They will be too. So will my boss when I tell her why you’re here.”

“That’s all you can tell them for now. We’ll keep you informed.”

Sally didn’t want the worried young woman to know anything more. She was a complete innocent.

Earl had sent some SOCOs to the bedsit above the repair shop. After talking some more to Tim Dalton, Simon’s boss—he’d given the SOCOs a copy of the key—Earl climbed the stairs and stuck his head in the open door.

He saw that most of the SOCOs were still back at the farm. The newer building on the hill had been confirmed to be a drugs lab. Earl had informed the drugs unit but refrained from mentioning Simon’s history or the connection of the case to MI5 and NCA. That unit would be busy enough tracing that lab back to the two gangs because the ones on site hadn’t survived. Earl did want them all in jail, though.

Harry, the SOCOs’ leader, was in Simon’s bedsit, though, with one of his minions.

“Anything yet of note?” he said to the lead SOCO who waddled up to him looking like a NASA astronaut on a Mars mission. With the Yanks’ *Artemis* mission successes, one had to wonder when the first one might occur. Or would that jerk Elon Musk be successful with his own plans? Or the Chinese who still seemed to be chomping at the bit even though their economy was in a shambles now, something they caused themselves.

“Only that there seems to be a woman’s touch in play. Very neat and orderly. Two sets of fingerprints. Not much of anything else.”

“Easier to have a few trysts here with his girlfriend, I suppose, than at her parents’ house.”

“There’s a box of condoms. Is her name Kathy Kilborn?” Earl nodded. “That’s on several receipts we found in a bureau drawer. For the condoms and some takeaway, although there’s no rubbish corresponding to the latter. Clean place for a bachelor, I dare say.”

“A serious relationship then. Nothing wrong with that as long as the lad isn’t being abusive with the lass. No sign of drugs, weapons, or ammo?”

The SOCO waved a hand at the bedsit. "It seems there's not enough space here to hide even that penknife. But we'll keep looking, though."

At that moment, Earl received a message. He checked his mobile and read it. Sally was meeting him at the parents' house.

Kathy's father was a handyman who worked in the area with the parents' home as base; her mother was a seamstress who worked in the house. Sally could understand how Kathy had such a good disposition and seemed so nice because both parents were like that. She could see her Guv liked them too.

"Simon's a good bloke," Kevin Kilborn told them. "Fixed my truck for free, the lad did. Helped me load it for my next day's work too, when he was here for dinner. Treats Kathy right too, he does."

"Says we're the family he never had," Marsha Kilborn said with a smile.

"Marra, that lad has good son-in-law potential." The father said that to Earl but flashed a wink at Sally afterward.

"Did he ever talk about his family?" Earl said, wondering if Simon had divulged anything about his troubles in Northumberland.

"Seems like he'd been in the foster system in Wales," Kevin said. "Reading between the lines, as it were. That's always tough. Young ones always do better in a loving family, even if it's a poor one like ours." He thought a moment, but Earl had learned patience. The man shook his head. "Can't think of anything specific. Kept himself to himself a lot, so the missus and I think he'd just as soon forget about his early years."

No surprise, thought Sally. She glanced at Earl to see if he wanted her to jump in. He nodded. "Do you think he'd be able to support your daughter?"

"Handy with his hands, he is," Kevin said. "And he could help me a lot when he has time off at the repair shop, though I wouldn't be surprised if his boss gives him more duties as well. He already closes up a lot. He's a good worker, sergeant. So my answer is yes." Martha nodded.

"Do you have any idea where we might find him?" Sally said.

Kevin glanced at this wife; she shook her head. "We're worried. That repair shop's in a seedy area. We're afraid something has happened to that young man. He's never disappeared before."

"Couldn't he just have taken some time off? Maybe he felt trapped in his relationship with Kathy?"

"Heavens no! They were already engaged in a sense," Martha said. "But he couldn't yet afford a ring. That's why she invited him to dinner. He has plans, that young man. They revolved around Kathy, but he has ambition. Wants to open his own repair shop. Smart as a whip, he is. Not school smart, but practical."

"Always knew what to do," Kevin said. "Caught on to installing quarter-round right off, he did, just by watching me."

"Excuse me?" Sally saw Earl smile.

"That's tricky when going around corners," Earl said.

"Aye, you have to mitre it just right," Kevin said. He sighed. "My old knees aren't so good anymore, so he scooted along the floor and finished in a flash a task I had."

"I gather those plans included marrying your daughter and staying in the area?" Earl said.

"Told us that," Martha said. "We believed him. He wouldn't just do a runner, not that lad."

“Do you know about any pub brawls or other incidents? Did anyone have it in for him?”

Sally saw that Earl was dancing around the truth too.

“I don’t even think he drank all that much,” Kevin said. “We’d each do a pint, but that was about it. Not typical, I dare say—young lads these days like the drink too much—but I figured that maybe one or both of his birth parents could have been sots, and he hadn’t liked that. In any case, everyone he met seemed to like him. At least, that’s what Kathy has told us. She saw more of how he related to people, of course.” Kevin cleared his throat and Martha nodded. “He even had patience with toffs and their rich men’s cars at the repair shop. They can be...” He searched for the right words. “Rather demanding, let’s say. I see that in my own work as well. Bloke has to have patience when dealing with the rich snobs who think they’re better than common folk.”

The SOCOs found the gun. They’d spotted a loose ceiling tile above the bedsit’s counter and sink. Simon had expertly broken down the Chinese Uzi-copy.

Did that mean that Simon had done a runner despite what Kathy’s parents had said? Earl wouldn’t blame him if he had. Witness protection had failed to protect him. He was probably only alive because the two local gangs weren’t sure whether the Newcastle syndicate wanted him alive. But after Simon had killed eight gang members, they now probably wanted him dead no matter what that Newcastle gang wanted. – **There are always questions the MC considers in a mystery story. They are often indirect internal dialogue (what a person is thinking and might express vocally but doesn’t) as opposed to direct internal dialogue or spoken dialogue.**

“Someone must know where he is if he stayed in the area, Guv,” Sally said. “He can’t be that familiar with the Lake District. There are places I don’t even know about, and I’ve been here a while, but how could he find them?”

“Aye, there be plenty of places out among our wonderful natural treasures. A fishing cabin on some secluded lake, a cave in the mountains. Who knows?”

“But he wouldn’t know about any of those. He had no time for tourism. He was working 24/7, it seems.”

Earl nodded. “I see your point.” He thought a moment. “There are two blokes who seem to have earned Simon’s trust, Tim Dalton, his boss at the repair shop, and Kevin Kilborn, Kathy’s father. He’s worked with both of them. Working men can become close mates.”

“Over pints at the pub,” Sally said with a smile. “As far as we know, Simon didn’t frequent them.”

“Um, no money, no time. But he’s still close to those men. Let’s visit Dalton first and then Kilborn, if only for lack of better ideas. The spooks at MI5 are depending on us.”

Sally saw his grimace. Her Guv didn’t like either MI5 or NCA. She was more ambivalent and liked Rick Barnes.

They found Tim Dalton hard at work on a van. He took a break to have a mash with them. They got no joy from him about where Simon might be hiding, but the mash came with biscuits that were good.

“Missus baked them just last night,” the big man had said, patting his large belly.

They moved on to find Kilborn in a similar situation. He dusted spackling dust from his overalls, shook hands, and then sat on a rock wall to answer their questions. Sally perched on the step up to his truck parked next to the wall, and Earl stood on either side.

“Ave no idea where that lad might have gone, like I said before. ‘Tis very strange. Maybe the missus was a bit pushy ‘bout marriage. When we married, we lived in a bedsit smaller than Simon’s at first, poor as poor can be. Without the Council housing, we’d still be homeless. Them and the NHS, who saved Martha when she gave birth to Kathy, are services that will forever make me vote against the damned Tories. ‘Course the recent ones have carried on the Iron Lady’s policies without being half as smart as she were. We’d have lost World War Two if they’d been in charge instead of Winnie.”

Earl only half-listened to the workingman’s twisted version of English history that had a ring of truth to it. With only two dinners at the Kilborn house, could Kevin be that close to Simon? But factoring in the truck’s repair and that story about quarter-round, one had to consider that manly discussions might have occurred.

“Did you ever talk about the Lake District, Kevin? Things to do that don’t cost too much money?”

“Sure. I go fishing from time to time. We talked about that. Man talk. Women are generally bored with fishing.”

Bingo, thought Earl.

What was the Yanks’ adage about failures? thought Earl. *Something related to their version of cricket?* The answer came to him after they failed to find Simon at the first two fishing spots Kein had recommended to the lad. *Three strikes and you’re out!* Earl turned to face the handyman in the backseat of the station’s pool car. – **And here we have direct internal dialogue, Earl’s. I use italics to indicate a character’s direct thoughts so that I don’t have to always repeat so-and-so thought.**

“Those two spots were a bit questionable, to say the least.”

“Aye, but those twitchers’ blinds still make good spots to seek refuge when the cold winds come roaring down from the mountains. Beats being out on the lakes in a rowboat.”

“You couldn’t start a fire in them for a mash or fish fry. They’d catch fire with one spark. All dead, dry wood.”

“I always have a thermos and packs me catch in wet moss, Inspector. ‘Tis easier to clean the fish at home.”

Earl bet Martha liked that.

“Do you ever run into twitchers?” Sally said without taking her eyes off the narrow and muddy road they were now on that was worse than the first two.

“They’re more common than the birds themselves during summer months, but not where I fish. And those two are old. Next one’s a bit newer, but more distant. We’ll have more of a hike too, so you’ll need your wellies back on, sergeant.” – **Here the definition of “twitcher” is implied and might be a little bit late, but it’s also in my list. So is “wellies” for Wellingtons, i.e. galoshes. I have no idea why the Brits call birdwatchers twitchers, by the way. Maybe they’re really nervous types?**

Earl and Kevin still had theirs, but Sally had removed hers to drive.

Kevin told Sally to pull over when the road widened a bit. “‘Tis a walk from here.”

“And quite a walk from Simon’s bedsit,” Earl said.

“Member that wee café we passed?”

Earl nodded. “Looked cozy and inviting. I think I stopped there once.”

“Marra, ‘tis that. ‘Ave the best bacon roll you’ll ever taste. We can hit it on the way back to the village. Anyway, ‘tis a bus stop too. One can travel all the way to the North Sea if needs be.” – **Again my bad. “Marra” means mate. It’s also in my list.**

Northumberland, thought Earl. *Simon wouldn’t have gone there even if he had the money for a ticket.*

They followed Kevin to a smaller lake and then around it. Sally and Earl stopped when the handyman did. He cupped his hands around his mouth to create a megaphone as he’d done at the first two stops. – **Here tranquility will be mixed with action to make the latter stand out more.**

“Simon, me lad, are you somewhere about? It’s Kevin. Are you hidin’ here? Kathy’s worried, lad. We’re all worried.”

“Tell him Tim’s worried too,” Sally said in a whisper.

“Your boss is worried too, lad. What’s going on?”

They saw the young man rise from the reeds at the lake’s edge about fifty yards away.

“Who’s that with you, Kevin?”

Earl demurred, not knowing how Simon would react to Sally and his presence. Kevin solved the problem.

“They be two nice coppers. Martha and me called them for Kathy. They’ve been helping us.”

“Go away, sir. Go away, all of you. I’ll only put you all in danger.”

“Can’t stay here hiding forever, lad. What will you do when the snows come? Hereabouts isn’t like your warm Wales. Look, you don’t have to marry Kathy, if that be what’s worrin’ you.”

“I love Kathy, Mr. Kilborn, but I don’t want her to get killed. I don’t want anyone to get killed ‘cept me. I deserve it. None of you do.”

“I know what you’re scared of, Simon,” Earl said, mimicking Kevin’s megaphone. “We will keep everyone safe, don’t worry. I’m Detective Inspector Earl Wilson from Penrith District Police. No one will hurt you or those you love. I guarantee it.”

“I’m not convinced. Plods don’t even carry guns. You don’t know what you’re up against.”

“Yes we do. We saw all that went down at the farm on video. I’ll have an armed unit here shortly.”

Sally noted that Kevin was staring at Earl. “It’s okay, sir,” she whispered to him. “He’s still a good lad, but some bad people are after him.” The old man’s jaw dropped.

Earl continued the long-distance conversation. “Come back with us, Simon, back to our car. I’ll call for armed support now.”

“No way. Come here with Kevin and call them from here. But make sure you can trust who you call.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kevin said.

Earl shrugged. “Simon’s directing this play.”

He moved off, and Sally and Kevin followed.

Kevin and Simon hugged like they were father and son. “You have to tell me about your troubles, lad. Should have done that earlier.”

Simon eyed Sally and Earl. They'd already introduced themselves and shown him their credentials—he seemed to warm more to Sally than Earl—but Earl wasn't sure Simon trusted either one of them.

"I couldn't, Mr. Kilborn. I made a promise to the government. It's a long story. Did you make your call, Inspector?" Earl nodded. "Then we'll wait."

"The armed unit won't be one of ours," Earl said. "It will be an MI5 ARU." – **ARU is in the list. It's like SWAT in the US. My bad. Most Americans know what MI5 means, though. The MI5 and NCA together are like the American FBI.**

"Oh hell, more government types. Just what I need. They got me into this mess."

"Somehow someone recognized you, lad. Perhaps someone from Newcastle negotiating with those at the farm?"

Simon nodded. "The locals wanted a twofer. Told me themselves. Business ties with Newcastle to distribute their product and the bounty on my head." Simon noted Kevin's expression. "Sorry, Kevin. My past is a lot messier than just being an orphan and foster child from Wales. I might as well tell you, seeing as how it will probably all come out: I was in witness protection because I testified against a Newcastle syndicate. Somehow that protection was blown. To survive, I had to kill eight local gang members who were going to turn me over to that Newcastle syndicate, if not kill me outright."

"My Lord! I can't believe it! You're such a nice lad!"

"That he is, Kevin," Sally said. The handyman probably felt betrayed. "It's a complicated mess, but we have to end it now so you people can get on with your lives."

"Does Kathy know all this?"

"No. I never told her or you and your wife, figuring that if you didn't know, that would protect you. The last thing I wanted was for them to use you folks to get at me. That could get us all killed."

Earl put a finger to his lips. "We have visitors," he said in a whisper. "There's someone out there besides us, and it's too early for the ARU." – **The roller-coaster, having lowered the tension with relief, now climbs again toward danger.**

Earl had a déjà-vu moment peering between the tree trunks. The quartet had moved up the hill from the edge of the lake to the sparse forest, which reminded him of some of his Bosnian war experiences. – **This isn't really necessary, but it adds some color.**

He'd called Rick Barnes again and learned the ARU was still ten minutes out. He'd told Rick where they were now hiding just above Simon's original hideaway.

"They'll have to neutralize the scrotes first. Our drugs unit from Penrith has the goods on them, so they'll be in jail for a while."

"NCA's in on that action now," Rick said. "Stay down and wait for the ARU."

For what? A quick death? Rick wasn't on scene; neither was his ARU. Earl knew it was up to them. Gunfire interrupted his thoughts.

The gang—or gangs?—weren't taking chances—*fearing another encounter with Simon?* They'd just blasted the twitchers' blind with a barrage of bullets, probably thinking that he still had the Uzi copy at hand. – **I particularly like the alliteration here in "blasted the twitcher's blind with a barrage of bullets," but it might be overdone! Not minimalist writing, to be honest. I don't think I had it in the original post on my blog.**

Both Sally and Kevin looked desperately at Earl. He smiled at Simon.

“Got any ideas, double-oh-seven?” – **Now that’s a reference both Americans and Brits should understand!**

“What does that mean?” Simon whispered back. “You plods aren’t armed.”

Earl tapped his head. “But we’re smarter than these pillocks. You proved that back at the farm. Let’s spread out a bit and then follow my lead.”

Once sorted behind new trees each about fifteen yards apart, Earl used his hands to create his megaphone again. “We’ve got ‘em now!” he yelled. “They’ve told us where they are, the prats, shooting like that. They’re sitting ducks!” – **“Pillocks” and “prats” are both in my list, and they both mean fools. My bad.**

“Shoot first and ask questions later,” Simon called out, joining in the charade.

Smart lad! Your turn, Kevin!

“I’ve got their leader in my sights, Commander!” Kevin called out.

Commander? Earl liked the sound of that. “Make sure they’re all covered,” he yelled. – **Note that there are exceptions to my “just use ‘said’ in dialogue” rule. “Called out” and “yelled” both indicate “said in a very loud voice,” so it’s still minimalist writing to use them.**

By that time, all five scrotes were crouching and trying to determine where their adversaries were.

Coup de grace? thought Earl. “Twenty to five. They don’t have a chance. Fire on my count.”

With the perceived overwhelming force against them, the five bolted. Earl and the others waited a moment; then they heard gunfire followed by silence. Had the pillocks run into MI5’s ARU?

Kevin slapped Earl and Simon on their backs. “We’re quite the team! You too, sergeant.”

Earl dangled his cuffs in front of Simon. “I have to put these on you. Don’t worry. They won’t stay on for very long.”

Three weeks later, Sally and Earl had a visitor at the station. Rick Barnes entered Earl’s office once again and immediately sat down like he owned it, looking smug.

“You’re dying to tell us something,” Sally said. – **The denouement sums up what happened and what might happen in the future.**

“Three things. Because only MI5, NCA, and you two know about Simon’s past, he’ll be able to continue his life here.”

“What about the gangs?” Sally said.

“Those here are decimated and the leaders of that syndicate in Northumberland not already in jail will soon be. The evidence in the drugs lab and testimony of some of those captured at the lake will sink the locals. The attempted murder of Simon Edgewood at the farm and the negotiations to move product to Newcastle will finish the job. They’ll all be in King Charlie’s boarding houses for quite a while. MI5 and NCA have been busy.” He paused as if he expected applause. Sally and Earl were smiling but remained silent. “Next piece of news: Kathy and Simon have set a wedding date. A small ceremony, honeymoon financed with our signing bonus, and I’m sure you two will be invited. Third point: In a few months, Simon will start his training. In three years, either MI5 or NCA will have an excellent, new agent. Probationary, of course.”

Earl winked at Sally and then stared down Rick who needed to be deflated a bit. “I might work on him, Agent Barnes, to convince him he’d be a lot happier having a more normal life here, just doing what he was doing. Let’s see which route the lad chooses.”

“He has an obligation.”

Earl thought. “Is it met if he joins the police force?”

Rick frowned. “It usually goes the other way. Police to MI5 or NCA.”

“There’s always a first time.”

Earl’s plan was a bit different, though. He would work on the lad just like he said, but encourage him to have a new life in the Lake District with his new bride. He knew Simon didn’t have to return the signing bonus. MI5 and NCA would probably just be giving the couple a wedding present!

A final note: Can you see where I could have included a flashback and/or back story for Simon? Those might be included in a novella or novel, but I wanted to keep this short (especially as a part of a part of an appendix!), but those options, flashback and back story, show the advantage of content editing as you go: I could add them easily enough at any moment in my writing journey, especially if I wanted to create a novella or novel.

B. Publishing Your Novel

Colons, Commas, and All That

In these days of acronymic texting and tweets, good praxis for spelling and grammar seems nonexistent. If my old teachers could see what’s going on, they’d be aghast or bewildered and think it was all some kind of code. They knew the rules, and even those who weren’t directly involved in teaching their students how to write and speak English would knock off points on a term paper if you didn’t obey them.

Many authors rebelled against this straitjacket of arcane rules, bending them for “literary effect”...and perhaps a bit of revenge? That process still continues today. Punctuation has become one of the many victims on the literary crime scene, most of the time only criminal because arcane rules aren’t followed.

Before I do forensics on the punctuation crime scene, let me begin by stating upfront there never was just one set of rules. Chaos reigned because there are many “manuals of style,” so many that professors would often announce that the term paper for the class must follow X manual of style and students would groan. I can even imagine pedantic organizers of a new MFA program debating which one to use and how to enforce it.

Trying to control the evolution and use of language is like trying to juggle globs of oatmeal mixed with gelatin. Good luck! The French invented *l’Academie* to keep their language pure, for example, but I once knew a very educated Frenchman who insisted that “le weekend” was French and Americans had stolen the word. (The Spanish are more purist, using “el fin de semana,” which works in French too, of course, but is a wee bit longer—no wonder the French

use the American word.) Changes creep into languages all the time: “On the level” is ubiquitously used in English to mean something is correct, but it came into the language from the Freemasons, who weren’t just masons, of course (Mozart was a Freemason).

But I digress. Let’s return to punctuation. Here’s a puzzle I came across in my writing: I have a list of book titles—X, Y, and Z, for example—that were followed by some observation about the books. Title Z ended in a question mark, say “Where Is Sam?” Note that I didn’t add a period to that sentence. Looks wrong. In my pithy observation, I had: ..., “Where Is Sam?”, bla-bla-bla. Looks doubly wrong. My punctuation auto-checker agrees with the lack of a period but says the comma before bla-bla-bla is wrong. Because Bill Gates is probably the last expert on punctuation and grammar, you need to consult a better authority. (I’m still trying to teach MS Word the difference between it’s and its—Bill has it absolutely backward.) I looked elsewhere but could get nothing definitive. I arrive at my **First Rule: The rules don’t cover everything.**

Rules for commas, em dashes, and colons are confusing because they’re too often ambiguous. Colons can often be replaced by a comma, but not always, because the reverse is also true. And sometimes that colon adds emphasis that works just fine. Now consider: “He wrote a novel—an erotic *tour de force*—thinking he’d start a new series that would outsell the *Fifty Shades* series.” The inclusion of those em dashes also makes the statement stronger, but many people would just use commas (including those old English teachers who had no clue what an em dash is).

Some people fanatically debate punctuation issues, creating warring camps about them. One famous example is the Oxford comma: Does the last word in a series before “and” need to be followed by a comma? I break with the rules of American praxis on that one in general, and the *NY Times* style manual in particular, because I never want any confusion. Consider: “I would like to thank my parents, Mother Theresa and the Pope.” If you don’t think a comma is needed after “Theresa,” you have a problem. (The way it’s written one could think that Mother Theresa and the Pope are your parents!) This example was taken from a *NY Times* article, by the way!

So, I’ll end by stating Rules Two and Three. **Rule Two: Forget the rules but communicate clearly. Rule Three: Be consistent...at least in each story.**

By the way, these rules apply to editors too! Of course, all editors have a more important rule to follow: **Never, never change an author’s voice.** Any attempt to do so should get them fired. An editor can make suggestions and chat with you about that Oxford comma. They can plead for consistency. But they must let authors communicate as they will and not destroy their voices.

[And by the way, *The Chicago Manual of Style* is too damn expensive for any author to own, except maybe James Patterson or other stallions and mares in the Big Five’s stables! I can’t believe that traditional publishers require authors to follow it.]

Using D2D

Draft2Digital is the best way to self-publish. I’ve done multiple ebooks with them now. I learned a bit each time I use D2D, so I’d like to pass on some advice gleaned while doing this.

First, let me state that I have yet to see references to the D2D-Smashwords merger much beyond the initial announcement. I expected to see something, but the whole process has

continued to be the same, and it's easy. About Smashwords, nada, nil, rien, zilch. I suspect they're still in beta-testing mode. And D2D has been beta-testing a print option like forever (so don't use D2D if you want print!).

Below I will hold your hand a bit and guide you through the process of using D2D to turn your MS Word MS into a polished ebook. [By the way, I've reformatted these lessons in a form that could be published if you ignore the title page—use D2D's—and the “sample” watermark that's on all my free PDFs. Basically it comes down to leaving five spaces to start a new chapter!]

How smoothly the process goes depends a lot on how well you prepare your manuscript and what choices you make, though. So...let me offer some free advice:

Cover. Yeah, I know, it's the last thing authors usually think about. (I doubt that the Big Five publishing conglomerates think enough about covers; some of the worst covers I've seen recently are on their expensive books—a recent Paul Krugman book is an example—and aren't much more than PowerPoint slides.) I've found it's best to get into the writing a bit and take breathers once and a while to think about a cover. Even if you purchase a ready-made, inexpensive, but unique cover (bookcoverdesigner.com is a good source), getting a good cover takes some thought. That can be stimulated by sorting through samples. There are many prices to choose from, but don't assume a higher price implies a better cover, because many covers are overpriced. An ebook cover is just one .jpeg file created by a graphics artist hungry to make some extra bucks, after all. The artist will put your title, subtitle (if any), and author's name in suitable fonts and suitable colors for the background. Take the final result and store it in the same folder as your manuscript (MS).

Manuscript prep. Your MS must be tailored to D2D's formatting engine. This isn't hard to do, but your MS file won't look like anything you might release as a free PDF either. Don't use page breaks; use four or five carriage returns instead. Don't use tabs; set your overall indenting to automatic on the first line of a paragraph and kill that indenting only for chapter headings and so forth, centering the latter after the four or five page returns. You don't need a title page or copyright page (I include the latter, though)—the formatting software can do that for you—but you can also create your own. Same for front and end material. I pay special attention to the latter—mine's complicated, and I try to make all my ebooks look similar. (I only let D2D do the title page, if that. After all, the title's already on the cover of the ebook.)

Begin the formatting process. First, upload your cover, then upload your MS.

D2D formats your ebook. That begins with the previous uploads. You'll see a preview appear in the D2D preview window. Now you have some choices to make. I just use their standard ebook formatting. That's fine for me, and I suspect some of the fancy options can cause problems because you won't like the look. (A book is a book, so why all the genre-specific crap? Only D2D knows.) There are some options you might consider, though: Do you want a title page? Copyright page? Clickable table of contents? In my D2D ebooks, I ignored the title page, put in my own copyright page, and ignored the contents page (which they seem to make anyway, so why worry about it?).

Maybe the last choice needs some explaining. In an .epub reader, the contents appear on the left; in a .mobi reader, they take up several pages at the beginning of the book for a long novel with many chapters and ancillary material. In either case, they're annoying, and I don't see any need for adding extra baggage. My Kindle reads the .mobi file just fine. (It's annoying that Amazon makes you store any .mobi file without their DRM in the "Files" folder of your Kindle, but that's Bezos and his evil bots for you.) And now, just to the right of the arrow to close the file

is a drop-down menu with the table of contents. So, in both types of standard ebook files, .epub and .mobi, an additional table of contents just isn't needed. By the way, external links work fine if your ereader is connected to Wi-Fi. (I put in a link to the YouTube promo video for *Death on the Danube* in one ebook, and it worked just fine.)

Proofing. Always essential! This isn't looking for editing errors—you should have already done that to prepare your MS *ad nauseum*. (By the way, MS Word's new editor, for spelling and grammar, is damn good now, although it can still get confused.) Proofing is looking for formatting errors. Using the software's preview screen, first page through the main sections with the double arrows (you've indicated these with your four or five carriage returns, remember?); in other words, you can confirm that they've become page breaks as you intended, chapter headings are in larger font, etc. (You have to do that in the MS—in this file, I've made them 14-point compared to the text's 12-point). Again, I pay special attention to front and end material, making sure it appears just the way I want. After this first pass, then go page by page as if you were a speed reader, using the single arrows—remember, you're looking only for formatting errors.

Let's assume that there are some formatting errors and that you unintentionally caused them in your MS. Maybe you forgot those four or five carriage returns somewhere? I go back and fix the MS and start the whole process again because it's so easy. Maybe D2D offers onsite changes to be made, but why bother? Don't you want to keep a copy of what you fed into that software engine? Maybe for a second edition?

Get your ebooks. When you're satisfied with your proofing, download your free PDF, .epub, and .mobi ebook files. You might need them for PR and marketing. (Or—horrors!—if you want to retail your book with Amazon, which I cannot recommend anymore. Because D2D competes with Amazon's KDP, they throw up all kinds of roadblocks so it's hard to list your ebook on Amazon, Not worth the trouble!).

Continue. I can't remember the name, so let's call it clicking on an "all done" button. That takes you to the final two steps.

Choose where your ebook will be sold and/or borrowed. D2D has a cadre of affiliated ebook retailers and library and lending services (maybe more when the merger with Smashwords is finished?). I use them all except Amazon. Amazon adds a bunch of bureaucracy to this simple distribution process, making you fill out their special forms because—well, see above. I find their conditions onerous...and frankly I'm boycotting them. (I tried them with *Sleuthing, British-Style*, my first ebook published with D2D, and vowed to never distribute to Amazon again—another reason for my boycott!) Otherwise, why all except Amazon? Because the more places our ebooks are sold or borrowed, the better off we are. That's simple business sense!

Publish. This is the final step. D2D will email you as their affiliated retailers and library and lending services start offering your book, or you can check out that progress on their "My Books" web page. By the way, when you created your account with D2D, you chose how royalties are paid and other settings. Those settings cover all your ebooks published with D2D.

Note: D2D gloms the above steps altogether into just four—some of those four have multiple steps embedded in them, so I've tried to make your life easier.

This is a short lesson for using D2D. There are bells and whistles I avoid because these steps are good enough for me...and frankly about all I have patience for. You might be more motivated to try some of the bells and whistles, but one thing is certain: If I can do the above, you can too. Again, the prep is the key, and that includes having a wonderful, entertaining story people might want to read.

My only problem with D2D? It's so easy to use, authors will flock to it, especially after the D2D-Smashwords merger gets going full steam. You can bet the Big Five and their associated sycophants hate it, though. [chortle!]

What about Those Copyrights?

I laugh when I see PR and marketing gurus' blather and twaddle about the need for copyrights and registering them. I suppose one could argue that copyrights are the good face to the bad one of book piracy. Some authors register; I don't. The moment I slap a copyright statement on something I write, it's supposed to be protected. Bollocks! There's nothing like an unenforceable law to cause me mirth!

For example, on all my free PDF downloads (this little course is one), there's a copyright statement. A recent novel in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series, *Intolerance*, has a 2022 copyright. But knowing human beings like I do, I go ahead and state that the person who downloads one of those free PDFs can make copies and circulate it to family and friends as long as they "respect the copyright." What the hell does that mean?

First, it means that I can't do much if you don't, whatever it means. You could sell multiple copies of that free PDF and make some extra spending money. Or, you could use some software package to strip my name off the document and replace it with your own. (Good luck trying to convince someone you just write like me!) Or, you could take excerpts and claim they're your own stories. (My novels often have flashbacks or back stories that could lend themselves to that scam.)

The first thing is key, though. A copyright doesn't give any author any protection for their intellectual property! Stealing a book is like stealing a car: It's against the law, folks, but it doesn't guarantee that the victim can recover their car! Or, that authorities will catch the perp!

Some US authors register their work with the Library of Congress as well. I suppose there's something similar in other countries. For many self-published authors (I'm a mongrel with both self- and traditionally published works, remember), the fee for that costs more than the royalties they're likely to receive for a book (fact of life!). How do you send an ebook to the Library of Congress anyway? It's an archaic institution focused on print books! Most of my books have no print version.

For traditionally published authors, the publisher will sometimes perform that registration, but that's another upfront cost small presses are now often passing on to their authors in their desperation to survive as an endangered species in a world dominated by the huge, predatory publishing conglomerates known as the Big Five. I suppose the latter might pursue legal action if one of their old formulaic mares or stallions in their stables is pirated, but they won't spend the money for a lawyer to protect lesser-known authors (who often write better books!), especially newbies' books that aren't selling well. (It's all about that greedy bottom line, not art...and lawyers are expensive!)

No, that whole copyright thing is a joke in the publishing industry, just as it is for most intellectual property. Authors, publishers, and governments won't prosecute violations in general. So, you can find just about any book you want online for free. Those who do so are only punished by their guilty conscience, if they have one!

C. Marketing Your Novel

Promoting a Series

One thing I learned during the Covid-19 pandemic was how important book series are! Forget about streaming video and computer games! The only TV series I watched were on PBS's Masterpiece Theater, most recently *Around the World in Eighty Days* (highly recommended, by the way). I spent most of my time binge-reading book series and maintained my sanity in the process.

It's amazing how many good series there are. Most of them are "evergreen" in the sense that the novels in them are as good as when the author wrote them. I'm well into a new one (new for me), and I know I can find many others. You can find lists of many British-style mystery series, for example, in my own collections, *Sleuthing*, *British-Style* (I keep adding to that list with every collection).

Series exist in many genres (I hate that word "genre," but it's a bit useful here). Sometime in the future I'll binge-read all the Harry Potter books, one right after another. Um, that might be a bit masochistic because that series is a lesson in padding out a manuscript with a lot of superfluous verbosity. Maybe I'll just do that with A. B. Carolan's "ABC Sci-Fi Mysteries" instead, because A.B.'s young adult heroes are a lot more believable than Harry and his friends!

But that's the key for readers: The best series are well-established or finished because you can binge-read the novels, one right after another. But for authors, there's a problem with series: Most of the so-called "book marketing experts" out there either don't know how to promote a series, or won't, because they want to charge for each book's promotion! Is there a conspiracy going on? I suspect the real reason is the first, but they have no desire to remedy the problem because of the second.

So what can authors do to promote their series? The only thing I can suggest now is to make a personal appeal to readers. Although those book marketing experts don't often say it, I will: The best marketing tool is often word-of-mouth. So I'll make this plea to readers of this blog: Please binge-read series (I have several myself), and then tell your relatives and friends about those you like. Do this for as many as you can, please. As avid readers, you know other readers. Please help authors fight the book marketing experts who won't promote a series!

Note from Steve

You have just finished my little course on fiction writing. Thank you for your patience in reading it. It offers some writing and publishing tips you hopefully have found or will find useful in your own career as a fiction writer; it's also a (very limited!) history of my own publishing journey. I hope you have enjoyed it.

Because it's a free PDF, I'm not asking you to review it, but, if you like, use the contact page at my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>, to let me know what you think about it and whether it has helped you along your own writing journey.

Also, feel free to copy and pass this course around to your family and friends, especially to those who are just starting on their own writing journey as a fiction writer. (I would have loved to have a little course like this before I started publishing in 2006!)

And, whether you enjoyed reading this free PDF or not, please check out the list of other free PDF downloads available on the "Free Stuff & Contests" web page at my website above; in particular, there's a lot of free fiction, including two full novels. (I can't publish everything I write, even the good stuff—the bad stuff never sees the light of day, of course.)

And please check out the longer mystery, thriller, and sci-fi novels from my Irish colleague A. B. Carolan and me (for descriptions and review excerpts, see the website indicated above):

From Steven M. Moore...

The following novels are all on the same fictional timeline...

"Detectives Chen and Castilblanco"

The Midas Bomb
Angels Need Not Apply
Teeter-Totter between Lust and Murder
Aristocrats and Assassins
The Collector
Family Affairs
Gaia and the Goliaths
Defanging the Red Dragon*

"Esther Brookstone Art Detective"

Rembrandt's Angel
Son of Thunder
Death on the Danube
Palettes, Patriots, and Prats
Leonardo and the Quantum Code
Defanging the Red Dragon*
Intolerance**
The Klimt Connection
Celtic Chronicles

*Free PDF download available at my websute, #8 in the "Chen and Castilblanco" series, and #6 in the "Esther Brookstone" series—it's a crossover novel!

**Also a free PDF download

“Inspector Steve Morgan”

Legacy of Evil

Cult of Evil

Fear the Asian Evil

The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan***

“Clones and Mutants Trilogy”

Full Medical

Evil Agenda

No Amber Waves of Grain

Soldiers of God***

“Chaos Chronicles Trilogy”

Survivors of the Chaos

Sing a Zamba Galactica

Come Dance a Cumbia...with Stars in Your Hand!

(Note: This entire trilogy is now available as an ebook bundle titled *The Chaos Chronicles Trilogy Collection*)

Rogue Planet***

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***Bridge books between series, the last novel provides a bridge to the Dr. Carlos stories found in several collections (see below) and A. B. Carolan's third sci-fi mystery for young adults.

The following series are independent from other series...

“The Last Humans”

The Last Humans

The Last Humans: Book Two, A New Dawn

The Moscow Menace: The Last Humans, Book Three (to be published)

“Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries”

Muddlin' Through

Silicon Slummin'...and Just Gettin' By

Goin' the Extra Mile

Other novels...

More than Human: The Mensa Contagion

A Time-Traveler's Guide through the Multiverse

From A. B. Carolan...

“ABC Sci-Fi Mysteries”

The Secret Lab
The Secret of the Urns
Mind Games
Origins

Collections (short fiction from both authors)...

Pop Two Antacids and Have Some Java
Fantastic Encores!
Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape
Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape, Volume Two*
Pasodobles in a Quantum Sstringscape, Volume Three*
Sleuthing, British-Style
Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume Two*
Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume Three*
The Detectives*

*More free PDF downloads; all others are ebooks.

Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas!

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgments

It's not that easy to give credit where credit is due in a non-fiction work like this one (ignoring the short story given here as an example). When I started to consider making my stories public (circa 2003 or 2004), and even before (four or five years of serious writing efforts), many persons and online sites dealing with writing, publishing, and marketing influenced me. Some of those are mentioned on my website: <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

This course is *not a simple compilation* of my blog posts on writing (except for the examples of these found above in the appendix). It started out that way, but my opinions have somewhat changed since I received those early rejections from literary agents and acquisition editors. For example, although I still tend to lump the first group in that same class of pariahs as real estate agents, I believe there's nothing personal about their rejections—they're just not working for authors, for the most part, and are too fully embedded in the traditional publishing paradigm as sycophants of the Big Five's acquisitions editors.

I've also come around now to believe that there's a place for traditional publishers, especially independent publishers (small presses). They might even deserve a share in the royalties because they're investing pro bono by financing each book's production costs—these aren't egregious even for a less-than-100% DIY indie author for one or two books, but they become onerous after ten or so that don't sell well enough to finance the costs of the next book. It's just that traditional publishers' cut from an authors' royalties doesn't match the service they now provide their authors. And unfortunately, small presses struggle to compete against the Big Five too, and my experiences with two ended badly—yours might be different.

As for the old formulaic mares and stallions in the Big Five's stables who are ready for the glue factory, like Stephen King and so many others, those the Big Five conglomerates provide more support for because they're the horses they believe are "sure bets" in the races to bestseller books, they're *not* the struggling author's enemies either—they're just protecting their privileged status (so far) in the publishing world. The best thing we can do is stick to our writing and ignore the politics (that might be good advice for life in general, not just writing). If you're true to yourself and spin some good yarns, you've succeeded as a writer; if you can entertain at least one reader with each book, that book is a success.

Writing of any type is usually fun; writing fiction is probably the most fun. But don't ever forget that work is involved, and a lot of readers don't know how much, or care, or acknowledge it if they do know—there's even a lot of work just to arrive at a manuscript acceptable for public viewing. Above all, an author's stories should be new and fresh. Beyond that, good luck on your writing journey.

I thank all my readers who have read my books and encouraged me during my publishing journey. My many beta-readers first read my manuscripts, and I thank them all for their many contributions. Independent editors (i.e., those not associated with publishers) do copy editing before I even submit to a small press (that's now done and over with). Thanks are also due to the staff at Black Opal Books, Carrick Publishing, and Penmore Press for the TLC they showed me on the road to the final products, the books readers can read. You all know who you are, but I will not name names to respect your privacy.

Also, many thanks to my wife, my best friend and cheerleader. She has shown great love and patience in supporting me during my many treks down that lonesome road to book publication...with both of us suffering the slings and arrows of this crazy publishing business.

r/Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ, 2023

About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the US and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the US, for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> or follow him on Twitter, where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.