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Randy Ingermanson

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Writing Fiction
FOR
DUMMIES®

**by Randy Ingermanson
and
Peter Economy**



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Dedication

To my loyal blog readers on the Advanced Fiction Writing Blog. You've taught me more in your questions than I could possibly teach you in my answers.

— Randy Ingermanson

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Introduction

So, you want to write a novel? Great! Writing a novel is a worthwhile goal. It'll challenge you, stretch you, and change you. Getting it published will gain you respect from your family and friends, and it may even earn you a bit of fame and money.

But respect, fame, and money aren't the only reasons for writing a novel. The only reason you need to give for writing a novel is that you want to write a novel. Don't let anyone bully you by demanding some better reason; there isn't one.

Whatever your reason, *Writing Fiction For Dummies* can help you make the leap from writer to author. You can write a powerful novel. You can get it published. And you can be the author you've always wanted to be.

About This Book

Writers like to think of themselves as artists, and rightly so; writing fiction is an art form. But artistic talent is not enough. Writing fiction is also a *craft* — a set of practical skills you can learn. This book is about teaching you the craft of writing fiction so that your art can shine through. So if you're a budding novelist, then we wrote this book specifically for you. This book teaches you the craft you need, shows you how to edit yourself, and takes you through the process of getting published.

If you're more advanced than a beginning writer, that's great! You'll find some parts of this book obvious. We hope to surprise you with some fresh insights, though, so stay alert. We've found that even published novelists are sometimes weak in certain areas. Our aim is to give you a solid foundation in every aspect of writing fiction.

We focus on novel-writing, but if you're a screenwriter or you want to write short stories, you'll find virtually all the material here useful to you; however, we don't try to cover the specialized things you need to know to write screenplays or short stories. Again, our goal is to give you the foundation that every fiction writer must have in order to write strong stories.

As you build your craft, remember that *every* rule we mention in this book can be broken. Every rule. If we sometimes sound horribly dogmatic on some of the rules, it's because they're almost always true. When we sound less certain with a rule, it's because it's true more often than not. The one unbreakable rule of fiction writing is that no rule is unbreakable — you should use whatever works.

Conventions Used In This Book

We use the following conventions throughout the text to make everything consistent and easy-to-understand:

- ✓ All Web addresses appear in `monoFont`.
- ✓ New terms appear in *italics* and are closely followed by an easy-to-understand definition.
- ✓ **Bold** text indicates keywords in bulleted lists or highlights the action parts of numbered steps.

The English-speaking world is still trying to sort out how to deal with generic pronouns. In the bad old days, *he* was understood to refer to both men and women, which never made sense, but it was the standard. Now there is no standard. Replacing *he* with *they* is awkward, so in most cases, we try to use *he* and *she* in roughly equal numbers.

Because more fiction readers are women than men, we often tilt toward using *she* when referring to the reader. Because a great many editors are women, we often use *she* for editors and *he* for agents, but we're not consistent. We try to mix up the *he* and *she* usage when referring to characters. Forgive us if we don't get our pronouns quite even. We tried, and anyway we know you're smart enough not to be confused.

What You're Not to Read

We've written this book so you can easily find information and readily understand what you find. We also simplify the presentation so you can identify "skippable" material. *Sidebars* are the shaded boxes that appear here and there. They share useful facts, but they aren't essential for you to read.

Foolish Assumptions

Every author writes with an ideal reader in mind. Here are some things we assume about you:

- ✔ **You want to get published.** You're a creative person, but you intend to act like a professional right from the start. You're willing to do unglamorous tasks, like researching your category and target audience, because you know that fiction writing is a business, not just an art.
- ✔ **You want to write a novel.** This book focuses on writing novels, which typically run 60,000 words or more. If you prefer to write short fiction, the information on craft applies, but you'll create a simpler plot and use fewer characters. If you want to write a screenplay, you'll find all the information on story world, characters, structure, plot, and theme valuable, but we don't discuss the formatting you need to know for screenwriting, and we don't tell you how to sell your screenplay (you can find that kind of info in *Screenwriting For Dummies*, by Laura Schellhardt [Wiley]).
- ✔ **You recognize that fiction is a big tent with many different opinions on what's good and what isn't.** In this book, we give you broad guidelines that apply to most kinds of fiction, but there are no rules that apply everywhere and always for all writers. You'll strongly disagree with us sometimes, but you're smart enough to take the advice that works for you and ignore the rest. You know that many other writers will find the advice you reject useful.
- ✔ **You want to figure out how to tell a great story rather than how to fix grammar and punctuation.** You already have a good handle on grammar, or you know where to find the help you need (perhaps you plan to enlist your grammar-guru friends, consult Geraldine Woods's *English Grammar For Dummies* [Wiley], or hire a freelance proofreader). When you do break grammar rules, you claim artistic license and do it on purpose.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into five parts. Dive in wherever you like. This section describes what's in this book and where we put it.

Part I: Getting Ready to Write Fiction

A little planning can go a long way. We believe strongly in strategic thinking — setting goals, defining *story*, choosing a category, developing a creative style, researching your novel, and getting the right tools. If you need help in strategic planning for your next novel, check out this part and see whether you can find some ideas you've never seen anywhere else.

Part II: Creating Compelling Fiction

Writing fiction is about giving your reader a powerful emotional experience. To do this, you need to master several main aspects of fiction, including creating a great story world, constructing believable characters, building a well-structured plot, and overlaying it all with a theme. These are your core skills, and this part gives you step-by-step guides for developing them. After you've mastered this part, you'll have all the tools you need to write the first draft of your novel.

Part III: Editing and Polishing Your Story and Characters

After you have a first draft, you need to edit it to a high polish. Editing isn't hard, but you need a strategic and tactical plan to help you analyze your characters and your plot. This part shows you how to ask the right questions of your manuscript and how to use your answers to rework your story. We give you many practical tips for editing your manuscript from top to bottom.

Part IV: Getting Published

With an excellent manuscript in hand, you're ready to take it out to the world and knock 'em dead with your story. You'll want to get a second opinion, of course, but after you've been through that, you're ready to find out about editors and agents. Don't be terrified of these folks — they're looking for writers (like you) with great stories. If you have what they need, they'll become your instant lifelong friends.

This part shows you how to research and identify the agents or editors who are most interested in your kind of fiction. You discover how to pitch your work to agents and editors who are looking for exactly what you have.

Part V: The Part of Tens

This part contains some quick resources on two subjects of undying interest: Ten steps to designing your story and ten reasons people in the publishing business reject novels.

Icons Used in This Book



To make this book easier to read and simpler to use, we include some icons in the margins that can help you find and fathom key ideas and information.

Tips provide advice that's short and easy to remember that you can use right away.



This icon marks a writing exercise that you should do to move forward on your novel.



Remember icons flag advice you'll come back to again and again over the years.



This icon indicates a warning note about some special hazard that you should avoid.



The True Story icon marks anecdotes that illustrate what we're talking about.

Where to Go from Here

The great thing about this book is that you decide where to start and what to read. It's a reference you can jump into and out of at will. Just wander over to the table of contents or the index to find the information you want.

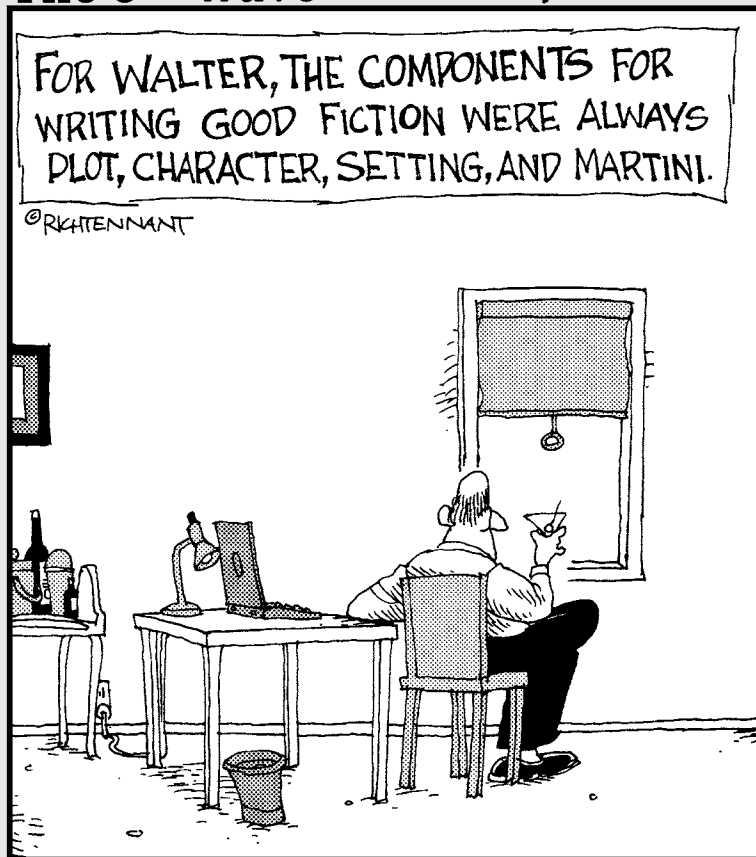
If you're new to writing fiction, you may want to start at the beginning of this book and read through to the end. If you're more experienced, then you can find a topic that interests you and turn right to it. If you're interested in character development, check out Chapter 7. If you've already written a story and want to analyze the plot, flip to Chapter 13. And if you want advice on finding an agent, try Chapter 17. Whatever the case, you'll find a wealth of information and practical advice. Ready? Set. Go!

Part I

Getting Ready to Write Fiction

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



W ***In this part . . .***

We know you're excited to start writing, but before you begin, you need to do some strategic thinking. In this part, we consider exactly what makes a great story and how to find the fiction category that works best for you and your reading audience. Next, we take a look at four common methods writers use to write a novel. Finally, we delve deeply into the important subject of managing your time — and yourself.

Chapter 1

Fiction Writing Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Setting your sights on publication
 - ▶ Getting your head ready to write
 - ▶ Writing great fiction and editing your story
-

So you want to write a novel? Great! But is that all you want to do? After all, anybody can type a bunch of words and call it a novel. The trick is writing one that's good enough to get published. This book is for fiction writers who want to write an excellent novel and get it published. That's a tough, demanding goal, but it's entirely doable if you tackle it intelligently.

If you're going to write a novel, you need to get your head fully into the game. That means making a game plan that's a proven winner and then executing your game plan. After you have a plan, you need writing (and rewriting) skills — lots of them. Writing fiction means developing a raft of technical skills, both strategic and tactical. None of these steps are hard, but they're a lot easier to pick up when you have some guidance.

After you've written a great novel, whether you choose to get an agent or make the deal yourself, selling a strong story is about making the right connections with the right people at the right time.

Our goal in this book is to take you from being a *writer* to being an *author*. We have every confidence that you can do it, and this chapter explains how. It can happen — and it will happen — if you have the talent and persistence to do what you need to do.

Five urban legends that can hurt you

As soon as you admit to your family and friends that you're working on a novel, they'll start feeding you all kinds of urban legends about writing. These are things that "everybody knows," and yet they're dead wrong. Wrong or not, they can kill your career before it gets rolling. Here are some of the urban legends we've heard, along with answers you should have ready:

- ✔ **Legend 1: You're not smart enough to write a novel.** How smart do you have to be to write a novel? How do you know? What does IQ have to do with writing fiction? The fact is that the main thing any novelist needs is the ability to tap into her own emotional wellsprings and create a story that can move her readers. We know plenty of novelists, and they run the gamut on intelligence from average to ultra-high. But every one of them is a person we'd be happy to be stranded with on a desert island for long periods of time. Fiction writers are exceptionally honest people who don't balk at telling their own inner truths. If you can do that, you can write fiction.
- ✔ **Legend 2: You're not talented enough to write a novel.** What is talent? Does anybody know how to measure talent? What if talent is something you grow, not something you inherit? The fact is that writing fiction requires quite a few skills. We've never met anyone who had all those skills when they started writing. Every single published novelist we know spent long hours learning the craft of fiction. They all had one thing in common: persistence. We have no idea what talent may be, but we do know persistence when we see it. If you have persistence, you have as good of a chance of getting published as anyone else.
- ✔ **Legend 3: You have nothing to write about.** Is there only one kind of novel that you can write? Do all novelists have to come from New York City? Do they all have to be trendy and cool? Why? If you've lived long enough to be able to type, you have something to write about. If you've ever known fear, joy, rejection, love, rage, pleasure, pain, feast, or famine, then you have *plenty* to write about. If you've survived a miserable childhood or a wretched middle school or a toxic relationship — if you've been to hell and back — then you have enough material to write about for your whole career. If your life has been one long happy stream of nicey nirvana from beginning to end, then you'll need to work a little harder, but you should still be able to scrape a story out of that.
- ✔ **Legend 4: You have to know people to get a novel published.** Who knew Stephen King before he got published? Who knew Tom Clancy? Who knew J. K. Rowling? If you have great writing in your pocket, you'll get to know people quick enough. All you have to do is show around what you have, and the right people will find you. Yes, really. Great writing trumps great connections every time.
- ✔ **Legend 5: You'll forget your friends when you're famous.** Which famous writers ever forgot their real friends when they hit the limelight? Why would they do that? If you become famous, you'll be besieged with people posing as friends who are looking for a piece of your fame. Soon enough, you'll find out that the friends who knew-you-when are the *only* friends that you know for sure love you for yourself. You won't forget your real friends — you'll value them more than ever.