



# ***ON WRITING***

*By*

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## INTRODUCTION

Everything you see in this little publication was previously published on my blog, <http://www.journalscape.com/markterry/>. There is plenty more on that site, but I selected these essays as being most relevant to the actual craft and—dare I say it?—art of writing. Not just writing, but writing for publication--writing, being published and getting paid for the privilege. There actually is a difference, and it's not always obvious to those people struggling to reach that point what that difference is. It certainly wasn't for me.

If you would like, download this publication, print it out, give it to your friends, pass it out to your writing group, that's fine. Don't charge anybody for it. I'm not. It's free. But it's automatically copyrighted and it remains my intellectual property. In the American system of patents and copyrights, a certain degree of trust and honesty is involved.

I hope you enjoy these essays. I hope they're helpful. There are several things about writing that I believe very strongly.

1. The best way to learn to write is to write. Daily, if possible.
2. The equally important way to learn to write is to read. Fill a Jacuzzi with books and soak in them. Fill your head with millions of words by other people.
3. No writer is as good as they think they are. It's nearly impossible to objectively evaluate your own work. Even the greatest award-winning, bestselling writers are not as good as they think they are, because their imagination and intellect fills in the holes. Therefore, there is always room for improvement. There is no point where you achieve perfection in writing.
4. The great thing about free advice is you can always ignore it. Take what works for you and discard the rest. Advice, I believe, is worth about just as much as the fortune cookie it comes in. And like fortune cookie fortunes, tells you much more about the person giving advice than the person receiving it.

Best,  
Mark Terry

## **Chapter 1: Point of View**

### **Part I.**

I think this is too big a topic for me to spend just one day on, so I'll split it up for the rest of the week. Here are some examples to discuss:

#### **Example 1:**

The device gave off a caustic stench. Kneeling over it, Joe and Frank studied the bomb--the grease-encrusted housing, the multiple many-colored wires, the digital clock counting down: 1:01; 1:00; :0:59...

"We don't have time to think," Joe said. "We have to make a decision."

"Red," said Frank. He moved his wire cutter toward the red wire. "We'll cut the red wire."

#### **Example 2:**

Frank thought the device gave off a caustic stench. He and his partner Joe were kneeling over the bomb. The housing was covered in grease and there were dozens of many-colored wires jutting out around the digital clock that was counting down: 1:01; 1:00; 0:59...

Joe said, "We don't have to think. We have to make a decision."

You mean I have to make a decision, thought Frank. I wouldn't trust your decisions in a situation like this. "Red," he said, and brought the blades of his wire cutter toward the red wire. "We'll cut the red wire."

#### **Example 3:**

The bomb stank. Bombardier had covered the device's casing in grease. Conscious of Frank next to me, no doubt jumping to conclusions, I studied the bomb. Dozens of multi-colored wires framed a digital clock like a Rasta man's do. The freakin' clock, counting off the time to our death. "1:01; 1:00; 0:59..."

"We don't have time to think," I said. "We have to make a decision."

And Frank, who doesn't look before he leaps, jammed the blades of his wirecutters against the red wire. "Red," he said. "We'll cut the red wire."

#### **Example 4:**

The bomb stank, thought Frank. Joe, squatting next to him, wondered about the grease covering the device's housing. Why had Bombardier done that? Was it part of the device? Frank was focused more on the wires, multi-colored and sprouting from a dozen small holes in the device, framing the digital readout. Joe couldn't take his eyes off the readout, thinking, we're running out of time. "1:01; 1:00; 0:59..."

"We don't have time to think," said Joe. "We have to make a decision." Let's either do something or get the hell out of here.

"Red," said Frank, jamming the blades of his wirecutters against the red wire. "We'll cut the red wire." No guts, no glory. You only die once, he thought.

Okay. Summary:

Example 1: Omniscient, limited 3rd person, distant. Very much an objective reporter's point of view.

Example 2: Third person, from Frank's point of view.

Example 3: First person, from Joe's point of view.

Example 4: Third person omniscient, from both characters' points of view.

## **Part II.**

### **Point of View--Part 2: Third Person**

Yesterday I gave 4 examples, 3 being in the third person. Here's #1--

#### **Example 1:**

The device gave off a caustic stench. Kneeling over it, Joe and Frank studied the bomb--the grease-encrusted housing, the multiple many-colored wires, the digital clock counting down: 1:01; 1:00; :0:59...

"We don't have time to think," Joe said. "We have to make a decision."

"Red," said Frank. He moved his wire cutter toward the red wire. "We'll cut the red wire."

Okay. Very journalistic. It's omniscient. We're not in either Frank or Joe's heads. We're not, really, looking at things from either Frank or Joe's points of view. There's nothing wrong with this, except it doesn't really exploit the writing. TV and movie scripts give you what's said and seen and except for some sort of voiceover, which sometimes works but often doesn't in TV or movies, the only way the viewer knows what's going on in the character's head is by the skills of the actor. Novels and short stories can do better by letting us know what the character is thinking and feeling, what they're seeing. Which is part of the problem of the omniscient limited 3rd person pov--the narrator is like a camera lens just showing the reader what's happening. It's Just The Facts, Ma'am Fiction, and it has its places, certainly. But ultimately, not only do I think writing that way for an entire story or novel would be very difficult to do, but I think it would ultimately be rather unsatisfying for the reader. But some of the time, that's exactly what you're going to do.

Another problem here is the distance between the reader and the writer. The easy thing about first person narratives is how intimate they are. You're in the narrator's head. You're also limited by what the narrator experiences. The advantage to 3rd person is the ability to expose readers to more than what the pov character experiences. One of the disadvantages--at least some of the time--of 3rd person is that there may be too much distance. Example #1 is like that. It's a little

cold. Sometimes that's what you want, a certain kind of detachment. There's a touch of intimacy because the characters are named Frank and Joe. If their names were Frank Holloway and Joe Smithback, and if I called them strictly by their last names, the distance becomes even greater.

Take Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch novels. Except for at least one of them, they're written in the third person. Connelly's a terrific writer, but there's a formality to his writing style that is reinforced by how far he keeps the reader from Harry. The narrator always refers to Harry as Bosch. Most other characters do, too, though some call him Harry. It's undoubtedly intentional. Whatever the reason--and I suspect it's that Connelly wants to be more of an observer of Harry and crime and Los Angeles--it's as if there is a glass wall between the reader and the character. We know Harry rather well--again, Connelly's a terrific reader--we know his thoughts, his feelings; but it doesn't feel like we're wearing Harry's skin or sharing his experiences so much as watching his experiences.

This is taking longer than I thought, so I want to add one more comment about the omniscient third person. It has to do with the classic "show don't tell," aspect of writing. If all we did was "Show," our novels would all run 1000 pages, so sometimes we have to tell as well. If we don't get into our characters' heads, though, we really need to show things in order to display emotion. Here's #1 re-written to show emotion, but we still don't have their thoughts or have an individual character's pov:

The device gave off a caustic stench. Kneeling over it, Joe and Frank studied the bomb--the grease-encrusted housing, the multiple many-colored wires, the digital clock counting down: 1:01; 1:00; :0:59...

"We don't have time to think," Joe said. "We have to make a decision." Sweat dripped off his brow and splattered onto the hard concrete floor. He arched it off his forehead with the sleeve of his Michael Jordan jersey, which was torn and stained from his struggle with the Bombardier.

"Red," said Frank. He moved his wire cutter toward the red wire. "We'll cut the red wire." His hands didn't shake. His jaw was set, eyes wide open. He shifted his position on the floor, looked at Joe, and winked. "Trust me."

See? All show. Not bad. Brings the reader in. We have some idea of what they're thinking and feeling without "telling" what they're thinking and feeling. Is this a good way to go in your writing? If you want it to be. But it's tricky to stay omniscient and if you don't create a scene from a character's pov, you're building a house without using all the tools at your disposal. Still, there may be good reasons to do it--or not so good reasons, but for some reason that's how you want to tell your story.

### **Part III.**

Who's your main character? In each scene--and yes, I'll break it down into scenes, not chapters--who's your main character? More specifically, in each scene, who is your point of view character?

That final question, ultimately, is what needs to be decided by the writer. Yesterday we talked

about limited 3rd person omniscient, and I don't think I've ever read a novel written entirely that way, although I suppose it's possible I have. None come to mind. It's not uncommon, however, to read an entire novel written in the third person from a single character's point of view. And in thrillers in particular, it's not uncommon to have multiple points of view, each pov being part of a scene/chapter--often, as in the case of my four upcoming Derek Stillwater novels, the chapters are short, basically single scenes, each from a single character's pov. The trick there is to make sure the readers know who your main character is, even if you show the story from 20 different povs. Today's audience is very sophisticated. They watch--literally--thousands of 30 minute, 60 minute, 90 minute and 120 minute plays usually written in the third person with multiple povs every year, and moreover, have grown up doing so from about the age of one day. It's been said that earlier generations had problems with multiple points of view. Well, folks, TV and film have taken care of that problem. But ultimately, commercial fiction is about heroes of some sort or another--our main character or characters--and no matter how many characters in the story, it's a good idea if the reader knows who to root for and identify with.

If you want, pop on over to author Paul Levine's new website, [www.paul-levine.com](http://www.paul-levine.com) and read an excerpt of his upcoming novel *Solomon v. Lord*. I've been a fan of Paul's work for years and wasn't thrilled when he quit writing novels to write for TV ("Jag" and "First Monday") but I'm pleased he'll be back writing novels and look forward to his new one. Anyway, if you do visit, note that he's giving us a chapter broken up into scenes alternating between the two main characters, Solomon and Lord. They are in jail for contempt of court and each character's pov is clearly broken up.

Now, let's look at my two examples, #2 and #4.

Example 2:

Frank thought the device gave off a caustic stench. He and his partner Joe were kneeling over the bomb. The housing was covered in grease and there were dozens of many-colored wires jutting out around the digital clock that was counting down: 1:01; 1:00; 0:59...

Joe said, "We don't have to think. We have to make a decision."

You mean I have to make a decision, thought Frank. I wouldn't trust your decisions in a situation like this. "Red," he said, and brought the blades of his wirecutter toward the red wire. "We'll cut the red wire."

Example 4:

The bomb stank, thought Frank. Joe, squatting next to him, wondered about the grease covering the device's housing. Why had Bombardier done that? Was it part of the device? Frank was focused more on the wires, multi-colored and sprouting from a dozen small holes in the device, framing the digital readout. Joe couldn't take his eyes off the readout, thinking, we're running out of time. "1:01; 1:00; 0:59..."

"We don't have time to think," said Joe. "We have to make a decision." Let's either do something or get the hell out of here.

"Red," said Frank, jamming the blades of his wirecutters against the red wire. "We'll cut the red wire." No guts, no glory. You only die once, he thought.

First, let's look at #4. We're inside both Frank and Joe's heads simultaneously. It very much has the feel of watching a pro ping-pong match from the vantage of the net. In short, it sucks. It's confusing. It's weird. DON'T DO THIS. And, in my opinion, don't do it even a little. I read a lot of novels in the third person where the author does this. Even though we've got a main pov character, they're just dying to have the reader know what some other character is thinking or feeling, so they slip in something from their pov. It's awkward. It's amateurish, and it's ineffective.

Disagree with me? Fine. Disagree. Sometimes it works. Sometimes people win the Lotto. Sometimes people get hit by lightning. It doesn't mean buying Lotto tickets is a sound investment strategy or that it's wise to stand on your roof during an electrical storm. By the same token, it's not a good writing strategy to be inside the heads of multiple characters in a single scene. You want to do that, give them a separate scene and show it from that character's pov. It'll cause structural headaches and there are a lot of decisions and choices to make about how and when to do that (different subject for a different day), but most importantly, it doesn't confuse the reader. Remember: THERE REALLY ARE NO LAWS GOVERNING GOOD WRITING. BUT THERE ARE GUIDELINES DEVELOPED LOOSELY BASED ON WHAT WORKS FOR READERS. AND IT'S 2006 AND READERS CAN BE HARD TO COME BY AND THEY ARE EASILY DISTRACTED BY TV AND MOVIES AND THE INTERNET AND THEIR CHILDREN AND THEIR SPOUSES AND DINNER PLANS AND THEIR GOLF GAME AND SEX AND FLOWERS AND RAINBOWS AND FAMINE IN AFRICA AND TSUNAMIS IN ASIA AND TOM CRUISE'S WEIRD BEHAVIOR AND JENNIFER GARNER'S PREGNANCY AND...

--DON'T GIVE THE READER A REASON TO PUT YOUR BOOK ASIDE FOR SOMETHING ELSE (THEY DON'T NEED YOU TO GIVE THEM A REASON, THEY HAVE PLENTY OF THEIR OWN).

One of the advantages of limited third person, of course, is you have control over the distance between the reader and the narrator. It's possible without freaking out your readers to go to a limited omniscient and provide the reader with information that a pov character may not be privy to, depending on how you structure your story. You can be as intimate as your technical skills allow you to be (for an example, read Harlan Coben's Myron Bolitar novels, which are written in the limited third person, by and large, but have the intimate feel of first person. Harlan once described it as "cheating third person.") or as far out as you care to go (again, see yesterday's comments about Michael Connelly), depending on what you're trying to accomplish and the overall feel you want your book to have. PJ Parrish, a pair of sisters who write excellent thrillers starring Louis Kincaid, have an in-between feel. It works and it's questionable if they purposefully chose that distance, but it felt right for them and for their character and books. Or, perhaps, it came about from the collaborative process they (Kristy and Kelly Montee) use. Whatever, it works.

Tomorrow, first person and I'll try to wrap this up this weekend or Monday by talking about some of those naughty folk who have successfully and unsuccessfully mixed and matched within the same work, and a few other options that you can make and why I kinda, sorta wish you wouldn't.

#### **Part IV.**

Okay, I lied. After I finished the last entry, I went upstairs, ate my Lucky Charms and took Frodo for a long walk, during which I considered 3rd person pov a bit more. And the more I thought, the more I began to suspect that one of the advantages of a limited third person pov is exactly what I was talking about earlier--the distance you create. And the more I thought about that, the more I began to see the distance between the reader and the narrator (and hence the character) as being oftentimes a function of character. Here's some "for-instances:"

Mary Reed & Eric Mayer write a series of historical mysteries about John "The Eunuch," Grand Chancellor for Emperor Justinian in, oh, off the top of my head, 5th century Constantinople. (Or is it 6th?). Besides being a Eunuch, John is an educated, shrewd, intelligent guy. He's the chief advisor to the emperor, a man who if he gets his toga in a bunch, is more than willing to have you executed without much more than a wave of his hand. In addition, the Empress is a rather fickle, emotional, manipulative shrew who likes to play with people to see if she can get them in trouble, including John. Besides having a pair of bosses as volatile and dangerous as them, there are court politics that make Washington D.C. look like a Cub Scout Pack--everybody manipulating each other, stabbing you in the back (often literally), and everybody from the senators to the Emperor's boy-toys would be willing to bring John down in order to gain more access to the Emperor. In short, John plays his cards close to his cloak, keeping his thoughts and emotions very much under wraps. It's not only part of his personality, but it's a survival strategy. As a result, Mary and Eric seem to have a pretty distant relationship to John. Intentional? Well, only they know, but it makes sense, given the character. Compare John to Harlan Coben's Myron Bolitar, and we've got Myron as an outgoing, emotional, sometimes sophomoric, smartass guy--bringing the reader in under those circumstances makes sense and isn't all that hard to do. In fact, I suspect if you kept too much distance from a guy like Myron he'd look a bit like a jerk (sort of like watching an Adam Sandler movie while sober).

I'm currently reading Lincoln Child and Douglas Preston's "Dance of Death," and it's got multiple viewpoints and easily 5 or 6 main characters (some of whom are getting murdered). But essentially there are 2 or 3 main, MAIN characters, Vincent D'Agostino, an Italian-American New York cop; Aloysius Pendergast, FBI agent; etc. Pendergast is a severe... oh, hell, he's a modern day version of John the Eunuch in some ways, the authors' updating of a quirky Sherlock Holmes. And I'll tell you what... we don't get in Pendergast's head much. I'm not sure if we do at all. It seems to me that Pendergast is more likely to be viewed by one of the other characters, or when he is a pov character, it's limited omniscient. We see what Pendergast does, but not why or what's going on in his head. He's a mysterious, complex character, repressed probably, and knowing too much about what's going on in his head would probably just ruin the mystique. Vincent, on the other hand, is cynical, gruff, emotional, insecure, and we're in his head in a big way.

Take away message, if there is one? When using 3rd person limited pov, how close you bring the

readers and how often and in what way you get into their heads and emotions (showing or telling) not only depends on the author's intentions, but very much as a function of effective characterization.

Okay. Tomorrow, first person.

### **Part V.**

I'm not even going to copy my example of first person here. Everybody knows what it is.

For the record, I love first person. I love reading it and I love writing it. It's worth being noted, just as a curious aside, that the Derek Stillwater novels are not first-person and I feel they're my best books to date.

Pros of first person. Intimacy, first and foremost. Not only does it feel like the character is talking directly to you, there's a certain amount of transference--through the alchemy of reading, the reader often feels like they ARE the main character. Pretty much by definition, in the first person the reader is privy to the thoughts and emotions of the main character, unless the writer is using the narrator as a "Watson," as Doyle did in his Sherlock Holmes stories. In other words, Sherlock is the main character, but Watson is the first person narrator. It worked well for him because it made Sherlock bigger than life and mysterious, but you don't see that too much these days. And even though Watson is the narrator, it's Holmes we remember.

More pros. First person works well for mysteries because in theory the reader doesn't know anything more than the main character does. We get to find the clues at the same time and be presented with clues in the same way, so even if we miss them, hopefully they're there and the character did catch them.

So intimacy, immediacy, etc. What's wrong with first person? Some are obvious. It's limiting. Sometimes you want to show things the main character doesn't see. This can be handled in different ways. For instance, in my second Meg Malloy novel that my agent is shopping around, after some adventures together, Meg and Jack Bear go off in separate ways, her to deal with a client being cyber-stalked, him to Chicago to retrieve Meg's car that was stolen by a 14-year-old runaway. When they get back together, Meg asks Jack about his trip and he tells her about retrieving the girl, his encounter with her "pimp" that ended up with Jack breaking the guy's arm. There are probably 3 ways to handle this.

1. Jack could just tell her. It lacks immediacy and "talking heads" can get boring if you're not careful.
2. Cut the scene and have a third-person break. More about that later, but I didn't choose to do it that way.
3. Have Meg tell Jack's story as a story. That's more or less what I did and here's what I wrote:

He had left Lake Orion around six at night and hit Chicago around ten. Figuring Sally and her pimp, Tom, were territorial, he headed over to Wrigley Field, Racine and the Coldwater Bar &

Grill. After that, he merely drove in ever-widening blocks until he spotted the car, two streets over from the bar.

"I found a parking spot--something of a miracle in that part of town, believe me--close enough to keep an eye on the car, and settled in to wait. I didn't have to wait long. Sally came out of one of the brownstones with Tom and headed for the car. It was around midnight or so."

*Jack angled out of his rented Mustang and plotted an intercept course. He met them just as they hit the Z4. Sally's eyes grew big and she grabbed Tom's arm. "It's that guy! Jack Bear! It's him."*

*Tom sneered. "You're a persistent bastard, aren't you?"*

*"Persistent," Jack agreed.*

*"She's staying with me and I'm keeping the car," Tom said.*

*Jack shook his head. "No."*

*Tom pulled a butterfly knife from his pocket, spinning it so the blades clicked into place. He lunged at Jack.*

Our waitress brought the sizzling platter of meat and tortillas just as Jack got to this point in his story. I had finished my margarita. Jack was only halfway through his beer. The waitress, Kathy, wearing denim shorts and a black Sagebrush Cantina T-shirt, brushed her shoulder-length brown hair away from her face and said, "Everything okay?"

"Yes," I hissed.

\*\*\*

Then Meg nags Jack into telling her the rest of the story.

The point here is that first person offers certain technical challenges. Some authors handle them imaginatively and creatively, working hard to blend in ways of providing a variety of information that doesn't seem like an "information dump."

Some authors don't. Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth--when I was in high school in the late '70s, early '80s--I was a good high school saxophonist. I took some private lessons from my band director, who in turn had studied sax with the godfather of saxophone education (whose name I forget) at the University of Michigan. I was given that instructor's book on saxophone and in the intro it said something along the lines of, "The saxophone is one of the easiest musical instruments to play--poorly."

I think that's exactly the problem with first person. It's easy. It's natural. But there's a tendency for even the best writers to slip into too much "tell" and not nearly enough "show." It's entirely too easy to slip into a pov that isn't actually the character's, but is the authors. An awful lot of authors--especially mystery authors, I'm afraid--choose first person not because they're good at it

(although they probably think they are) or because it meets the demands of the particular story they're writing, but because they feel that mystery stories should be written in the first person.

Another problem is suspense. For the thriller, third person works better, especially if you can create suspense from an alternate pov by having things going on that are going to be dangerous that your main character doesn't know is happening. That way the reader can go, "Oh God, Frank and Joe are trying to defuse the bomb, but they don't know that the Bombadier's partner, Go-Boom, is just on the other side of the door with a radio transmitter..."

On the other hand, there are a number of exceedingly talented and successful writers who have used the first person for so-called suspense novels--Barry Eisler for his John Rain books; Lee Child for his Reacher books; Jonathan Kellerman for his Alex Delaware novels. I would argue that Kellerman's books rarely seem that suspenseful, but are fascinating, and I've often wondered why Barry chose the first person for a half-American/half-Japanese assassin. First-person pov for an assassin as a main character wouldn't have been my first pov choice for all of the reasons above, but Barry pulls it off.

Let me wrap this up with a comment on shifting povs. I blame this on Robert Crais, the amazing author of the amazing Elvis Cole P.I. series. (As well as Demolition Angel and Hostage, both terrific stand-alones). Crais went along his first 5 or 6 books or so and wrote the books in traditional first-person. Then he wrote "L.A. Requiem." Not only does Cole narrate in first person, but there are plenty of alternating chapters and scenes written in the third person. It works great. It's a terrific, suspense book. It was a bestseller.

Unfortunately, it encouraged an awful lot of bestselling authors to use that technique. It must have seemed like a license to steal. "Well, the assumption has always been that this doesn't work, but Crais did a great job and it was successful, so I'll do it..." Harlan Coben does it in his thrillers. And honestly, despite his successes, I'm not sure it always works in his books. I'll be reading along, caught up in the story, there'll be a change from first person to third person and I'll be totally freaking confused about who's narrating, where we are, who we're writing about. Harlan could have done better. And this failure, I think, has more to do with not being as concerned about those transitions rather than concerned about first versus third person pov. A little more care should have been taken at the beginning of those scene changes to establish who was the pov character. Kellerman has also done this, and although I rather like seeing scenes from Milo's pov, I'm not really sure they worked from a technical pov.

David Morrell in his book on writing lectured at length on NEVER USING THE FIRST PERSON. Then goes on to use it in his book "Long Lost." (Not very well, I thought. Perhaps he should have followed his own advice). Although I don't agree with Morrell entirely on this issue, I think part of the takeaway message today is to not automatically just leap into first person because it's easy for you. It may not serve the story well that you're writing.

Now I could go on to write about first or third person present (try to avoid either one, but there have been notable exceptions) or 2nd person (gag me), but I won't. Let me just bring up one more point about first person and we'll wrap up this little mini-series lecture.

I think a lot of writers, especially of mysteries, choose first person because the person they're writing about--the film editor who finds a dead body, the caterer who solves crimes, the housewife who is an amateur sleuth, etc--is an awful lot like them. In fact, their character is essentially a thinly disguised version of themselves, so, hey, why not write it in the first person?

Okay. Sure. My character, Theo MacGreggor, who appeared in the two novellas in "Catfish Guru" and in a short story "Just As Dead" published by Orchard Press Mysteries, [and in "Blood Secrets," which was picked up by two publishers who went out of business before publication (otherwise known as Small Press Hell)], is essentially me. Me with a PhD, a divorce, a young child, etc. But we drove the same car, lived in the same house, had the same point of view.

So when an editor or agent or reader says, "I really don't like the character..." be prepared to have your feelings hurt. Not to mention your ego slammed a bit. We can kind of understand Sally Fields saying, "You like me! You really like me!" Because the rest of the time we're thinking, "They hate me! They really hate me!"

## Chapter 2: Physical Description

I was posting on Eric Mayer's blog when it occurred to me that what I had to say would work fine on my own, so I promptly copied it here. Eric was posting on Mr. Potato Head (Or is it potatoe? Oh, never mind). Anyway, he was talking about using Mr. Potato Head as an initiator for character descriptions, and I had this to say:

Physical descriptions are an oddity, I think. I suspect too much description is pretty much wasted, and quickly forgotten or skimmed over anyway. I also suspect that the, "He had brown curly hair, angular features, wore a yellow golf shirt and worn blue jeans," to be descriptive but useless. I've always thought Ross Thomas put a spin on physical descriptions that was worth copying. This is from "Out On The Rim." It wasn't the description I was looking for, but it's one of hundreds that just pop, so here it is:

**Tomguy had a square and too honest pink face and not very much gray-blond hair whose sparseness he wisely made no attempt to conceal. From behind rimless bifocals, a pair of wet brown eyes, slightly popped, stared out at the world's perfidy, as if in chronic amazement. Still, it was a face to inspire confidence, what with its stairstep chin, purselike mouth and an aggressive Roman nose that was altogether reassuring. A perfect banker's face, Stallings thought, if only it could dissemble successfully, which it seemed incapable of doing.**

Ah, well, there were reasons Thomas was so good, and that's one of them. He's not really giving us a physical description, is he? He's giving us a character description. I'm more inclined to keep it to a shorthand. Like: "She was tall and blond and as dangerous as broken glass." Or in the piece I'm working on, I have a primary character who is an Hispanic woman working for a caterer, and the main character gives her a lift in. I find I described her several different times over two chapters, but here's how it starts, with her calling out, "Hey, *amante*. *Que pasa?*"

Michael turned with a smile. "*Amante?* What's that mean?"

The speaker was a woman, Maria Sanchez. She worked for the food service at the Resort's International Center. Working in the International Center and all over the Resort for the last six months Michael had gotten to know Maria, pretty much whether he wanted to or not. Maria Sanchez was in her twenties, with large liquid eyes, black curly hair and a vivacious smile. She was a flirt and Michael Gabriel knew exactly what *amante* meant in Spanish.

She wore her uniform for the day--a black skirt that stopped an inch or so above her knees, a white blouse, hose and heels. "You make that uniform look illegal, *querido*," he said.

Anyway, the point is, we can do a bit more with physical description than describe the furniture.

p.s. It occurs to me as well that in the larger view of pacing, character description has to bow to pace. If you're trying to slow things down or lead up to a surprise, detailed description might be a good thing. If you're in the midst of things trying to keep the pace moving, you'd want to keep your descriptions sparse. The difference between these two bits:

1. She had long curly blond hair, a shade lighter than pure gold, that framed high cheek bones that had made Sofia Loren famous around the world, a neck as graceful as a swan's, perfect round breasts, a wasp waist, swelling lush hips and legs that were every man's fantasy. Then she jammed the stiletto between his ribs and none of it mattered any more.

2. Bullets flew past her. Sprinting around the corner, she caught just a brief eyeful of her curly blond hair in the mirror before a hail of gunfire shattered her image into a million shards of broken glass.

### Chapter 3: Verbs

The bullet hit the barn door loudly, sending splinters of wood flying near Dave's head. Turning quickly, Dave dropped to the ground, rolled and came up running fast, Sig 9mm hot and ready in his hand.

All right. Two sentences, nothing particularly bad about them. 35 words. But by choosing our verbs more carefully, can we make it better?

The bullet thwacked the barn door. Wood splintered around Dave's head. Spinning, Dave dove to the ground, rolled and came up sprinting, Sig 9mm hot and ready in his hand.

30 words. Thwacked instead of hit the barn door loudly. Thwacked being a pretty much made-up word that still gives you a sense of sound and movement. Instead of sending splinters of wood flying, the wood splintered. Instead of turning quickly, he spun. Instead of dropping to the ground, he dove. Instead of running fast, he sprinted.

Not only is it shorter, but it's more vivid, gives a sense of movement and excitement. The all-important element in good writing--tension. It can become second nature, but it takes practice. Choose your verbs carefully. Verbs do the most work in your writing, whether fiction or nonfiction. Words such as "fast," "loudly," "quickly" are adverbs, and adverbs are lazy. A good, well-chosen verb is better than modifying a verb with an adverb any day. Check it out yourself. Your writing will improve.

## Chapter 4: Tension

One of the things I have above my desk is a sheet of paper that says:

### TENSION--SUSPENSE

1. Find tense words.
2. Arrange sentences with tension in mind.
3. Milk the tension.
4. Surface tension (line-by-line tension)  
--keep tension in mind as you tend to all the other aspects of your writing!
5. Pull the tension cord  
--the reader should always be a little bit worried!

I'm reasonably certain I got those from Gary Provost's "Make Your Words Work," by far the best book on the nuts-and-bolts of writing that I've ever read. I think it's out of print, but if you can find a copy, do. It's excellent.

I want to expand on these five rules a bit and point out that by tension and suspense, we don't just mean the main character's lover is in a house with a serial killer and the hero is six blocks away caught in traffic trying to rescue her.

Tense words: "He inhaled sharply" versus "He gulped air" or "Air ripped in and out of his lungs."

Arrangement of tension is a little tricky. It more or less means: don't give away the store in the first sentence. Perhaps:

The killer was in the house. She knew it. As soon as she stepped through the door, she could feel that there was someone there.

Better: She pushed open the door and stepped into the abandoned house. Except, it didn't feel abandoned. It had that odd feel, like there was a presence, like someone was there before her, someone malevolent, dangerous. She heard a sound. Or less than a sound, an echo of a sound, a soundless vibration, as if someone was slowly taking a deep breath. And then she saw it. Clearly, in the dust on the gritty floor, the outline of The Saw's size 12 boot, the one with the slash mark across the heel.

Milk the tension. See above.

Surface tension. Tough concept. Really not a 101 concept at all. Really, to get this you need to write a few million words and read a few million more. But a sentence has tension, balance. It's what is created in the mind and emotions of the reader. It's an accumulation of word choices and word order. It's style and using active verbs and making sure that the words you use convey what you want the reader to feel.

"John was a nice man with a charming smile" is pretty flat no matter how you look at it. "John's smile had charmed many a girl out of her panties," is better and "John's smile lit up the room like

a thousand watt bulb," is all right, too.

Pull the tension cord. More milking. See the description of the woman walking into the abandoned house and you see what we mean. There's something going on, but the reader isn't necessarily sure what. It's usually a mistake to give the reader too much information up front, and a way to keep the reader interested is to parcel it out, bit by bit, which keeps the tension up. Think of a story or an article as a trail of bread crumbs. Don't put all of them--or even a meal of them--at the front of the story, but spread them out, spaced out in such a way that the reader is intrigued enough to follow them to whatever the treasure is at the end.

## Chapter 5: Active Description

How's this?

Jerome was wearing a crisp white dress shirt open at the neck, faded blue jeans and Dingo cowboy boots. Curly brown hair worn to the shoulder peeked out from beneath his stained Stetson. He had blue eyes, a pug nose and thin lips above a square jaw.

There's nothing wrong here in particular. Nothing particularly right, either. The use of the passive voice in description isn't so much like a weed in commercial fiction these days as a cold virus--it's everywhere. At the very least we can improve this by saying "Jerome wore a crisp white dress shirt..." instead of "was wearing." But part of the problem here is that it's just a physical description. Although it might hint at something about Jerome, it really doesn't tell us much, and in many ways it's eminently forgettable. It's a bit like describing a passive snapshot. How about this?

Jerome looked like a cross between a Fortune 500 Executive and a cowboy. He wore a crisp white dress shirt open at the neck, faded blue jeans and Dingo cowboy boots. His curly brown hair peeking from beneath his stained Stetson was too long for conventional businesses, but for his business it was fine if that's what he wanted. He had squinty blue eyes, as if from hours of staring into the sun, or perhaps at a computer spreadsheet, but the sunburned pug nose, thin lips and square jaw were all Home On The Range.

I like this better, though it's longer, but we're getting a different sense of Jerome that makes his description useful, not just descriptive. It's telling us something about the man. Now, instead of a passive description dump, it would be even better if we make this description active. How about this?

Jerome looked like a cross between a Fortune 500 Executive and a cowboy. He brushed grime off his crisp white dress shirt, dusted his hands off on his faded jeans and scraped the cow dung off his Dingo cowboy boots. Peeling off his faded and grimed Stetson, he shook out the long curly hair he took so much flack about from his bosses back at the office. Squinting blue eyes more accustomed to computer spreadsheets than staring into a Texas sun, he scratched his square jaw with his manicured nails, compressed his tight lips and said, "Mr. Farrelly, the numbers aren't adding up. The bank's looking at your loan application for the ranch, but I'm afraid there's some problems with your assets. There are too many discrepancies with your..."

Well, before we get involved in rancher Farrelly's financial problems, I just want to point out that any of the descriptions used here are probably fine, depending on what you're trying to accomplish. But the biggest problem with the first set is it's easy for the reader to skip it and forget it. I actually like the second one, but the third one isn't just description, it's story. Even in nonfiction, we're telling a story, and making our descriptions active rather than passive is a good thing.

Now, before I start fussing with the third one, dropping the first sentence and wondering exactly about Jerome's cowboy background and how he ended up in the auditing department of a bank

counting ranch assets, I'm going to go back to work.

## Chapter 6: 10 Steps to Writing Success

1. Neatness counts. That includes typos and grammar errors. No, it's not your editor's job to fix them. If you have too many, you will remain unpublished. Besides, you can often count on some editors to add typos and grammar errors to your work. Always a treat.
2. Clarity is important. Not style. Not being hip. Not voice. I don't care if you're writing fiction or nonfiction or advertising copy. Clarity is important.
3. Value effective writing. Related to #2. Style may be effective. Or it may confuse or muddy things. Effective writing is efficient writing. It gets to the point. It carries the thoughts, whether information or painting a picture, in an efficient, effective manner. It may or may not be poetic. It gets the job done in the best way you are capable of getting it done.
4. Publishing is a business. If you intend to write to be published and hence make money, then it is a business. Treat it like one. Keep records. Communicate in a professional, businesslike manner with editors, agents and professionals.
5. If you haven't heard this before, you're out of the loop. Persistence is important. In writing and in any area of the arts. Hell, in any endeavor, whether it be developing a new drug to cure cancer, negotiating peace in the Middle East (and you thought it was hard getting published!) or finding an agent, to losing 25 pounds, persistence may be your most valuable asset. Yes, I'm a stubborn son of a bitch. And some of you are calling me bad names.
6. Money is important. Don't like that one? You're one hundred percent happy writing your stories and giving them away to whatever relative wants to read them? Fine. Go away. There's nothing here for you. I'm trading my words for cash, thank you very much, and with that cash I do things like pay the mortgage, groceries and take vacations. When you give your work away, publishers devalue the work in general and don't think it's important to pay writers a living wage. This is evil. It is insidious. It may even be theft. Think about it.
7. Get a grip. There's more to life than writing.
8. Adverbs are not your friends. "Go read PJ Parrish's blog," he said encouragingly. "Do you have a speech impediment?" he asked pithily. Use a good verb, not a bad adverb. Don't run quickly. Rush or race or sprint. Get it?
9. Submit. Get your mind out of the gutter, you sniveling weasel. You don't get published by leaving your work on your hard drive or in your desk. You have to submit it. Rejection is the coin of the realm, your ticket to ride, your initiation ritual, etc, etc. Can't live with it? Find a different area of endeavor. Publishing's not for wimps.
10. Quit. Go ahead. I dare you. I've been saying I was going to quit writing fiction since

about 1988. Hasn't happened yet. I'm saying it now. If my agent can't sell the next novel I'm writing on spec... if things go to hell with Midnight Ink... if...

Believe me? My wife doesn't. So go ahead. Quit. If you can. If you can, well bully for you, you're well on your way to having a sane, sensible life with a 9 to 5 job, good retirement, and health insurance.

And if you can't? Well, you've either got an obsessive-compulsive disorder requiring medication...

Or you're a writer.

## Chapter 7: 7 Thoughts on Beginning Writers

Over the last couple months I've had the opportunity to read the first 50 pages of manuscripts by beginning novelists. I don't mean to be patronizing by using "beginning," but I believe they were first novels.

Their problems were so similar, and if I were crazy enough to go back and read my first manuscript, I'd probably find all the same problems, so I figured they were worth mentioning here.

1. They TELL rather than SHOW. Fiction should be like painting a movie or painting a picture. Both these writers needed to show things rather than tell the reader about them.
2. Passive voice. I think all writers battle with this. I do. "He had bought sixteen rakes at the local hardware store. The owner had said, 'Bill, you're losing your mind.'" Better: "He bought sixteen rakes at the local hardware store. The owner said, 'Bill, you're losing your mind.'"
 

3. Too much backstory. Stay in the now. Your story has forward momentum, don't slow that momentum down with long flashbacks, dream sequences or explanations of how they met their wife, what their dates were like, etc. Those may very well be important, but in this case, you've got to fit them in without jerking the reader out of the story.
4. Bad beginnings. The technical term is "*in media res*," which translates loosely to "in the middle of things," which is generally a good place to start your book. I was quite pleased to read Eric Mayer and Mary Reed's latest novel and find that it began with the main character literally running away from the law enforcement authorities who believed he had murdered a senator. Talk about in the middle of things! You don't have much time to get the attention of a reader, editor or agent. Get started fast. John Sandford told me when I interviewed him that the best writing advice he ever got was from Lawrence Sanders, which was, start your novel with your second chapter.
5. Conflict. By the same token, when I interviewed Michael Connelly for a profile (yep, I'm dropping names today), he commented that the best advice he ever got was that on every single page your character needs to want something, even if it's only a glass of water. This may or may not be in conflict--he could be in the desert, he could be in a grungy bar, he could be interviewing a witness, whatever. This is a case of: you need some sort of conflict, large or small, ALL THE TIME.
6. Focus. Both of these new writers' works felt unfocused to me. They sprawled. They meandered. They went off on distracting tangents. The timeline jumped (see #7). It was a little bit like they weren't sure what their story was.
7. Timeline. There are wonderful novels that cover huge amounts of time. Days, weeks, months, years, centuries. But they're tricky. Whenever you jump in time, you threaten to lose your reader. The transitions are brutally difficult this way and, like #6, it suggests that your story isn't focused. If you're writing about a battle that lasted two days, we may not need to

know about what led up to it. What first comes to mind for me is the movie "Saving Private Ryan." Starts with D-Day and moves on to a very specific period in time. The war lasted 4 years, but the movie didn't cover that. It focused on getting them in, onto their mission and how it ended. Yes, it was bookended with the present and there was a scene of the mother receiving the bad news, but the timeframe was tight. Think TV's "24." Nice clear timeframes.

There are other issues, but these seem to be the really big ones. Story issues concerning structure and plotting and the type of story chosen are more sophisticated--and there were problems in these cases, too.

Both these writers showed promise. They had, for want of a better word, talent. They were able to string words together, create pictures in our heads, describe characters who were, at least somewhat, interesting characters we might want to spend time with. What they lacked, mostly, were experience and proficient technique. It can be learned. But it takes some teaching, a lot of study and a whole lot more practice, practice, practice.

## Chapter 8: Characterization

How do you create interesting characters? To be honest, I'm not sure. I assume if they're interesting to me, they'll be interesting to other people. There are a few rules I follow now that took some time for me to learn, and there are undoubtedly exceptions, but I'll throw them out here.

1. Main characters should be proactive. Readers aren't all that interested in reactive characters who are blown before events.
2. Corollary to rule #1, main characters should be fighters. I don't mean physically, necessarily, but either as a rule or by changing throughout the course of the story, a character must fight for what they are trying to achieve, whether love, the solution to a crime, revenge, a job or whatever. A friend of mine read my novella "Name Your Poison," part of CATFISH GURU, and objected to the fact that at the end of the story Mac takes another job rather than making demands on his bosses, to fight for what he wanted where he was. There were a lot of reasons I did that, primarily because Poison was written as a prequel to BLOOD SECRETS, in which Mac starts his first day on a job, but her point was well-taken, I think.
3. Quirky is as quirky does, but there's not a lot of reason to have a vanilla, bland, boring character who doesn't do or think interesting things.
4. Icebergs. That is to say, 9/10s are below the surface. You should know more about your character than you reveal, because it will show and guide your character's behavior. Show those quirks, don't tell the reader about them. Don't say, he drinks stingers for breakfast. Have him fixing a stinger before breakfast. And, if possible, figure out why he does.

Joe Konrath offered up a checklist/questionnaire with the following categories for characters:

UNIQUE  
GOALS  
FLAWS  
QUIRKS  
PERSPECTIVE  
SUPPORT  
ENEMY

They're all quit reasonable, but I'm not that systematic about my character development. Take Derek Stillwater, for instance. I knew he was an expert in biological and chemical terrorism. I knew he was some sort of Special Forces guy, but at first I wasn't sure what kind, then decided on Army, because of his involvement in the first Gulf War. I knew he was outspoken, a loner, and not necessarily a team player, which would make him a bad fit for the military, so I had him retired from the Army.

I knew he was fit, but I wanted it to be different from the usual, so I had him a hardcore ocean kayaker. It fit his personality. He lives on a boat--not a houseboat--in a marina off Baltimore, keeping him relatively close to Washington, D.C. Again, it has that sense of

independence and perhaps rootlessness to it. I wondered what somebody with his background would do after quitting the Army post-Desert Storm, and realized the UN would probably have wanted him as a weapons inspector. The CIA might very well have had an interest in him, but again, he probably has too much of a stubborn, independent streak to work long-term for the CIA.

I wanted him to be not necessarily a typical action hero, though very capable physically. So I made him have a love-hate, totally neurotic relationship to the subject he's an expert in. He FEARS these things--biological and chemical weapons--partly because he's seen their effects. And he reacts to this fear very often with panic attacks prior to entering a project. He's always trying to quit, but can't seem to, having a tiger by the tail. He's more afraid of what might happen if he does quit. His job's affected his relationships. He still loves his ex-wife, but their marriage never survived his career or hers. He can be charming, but he's also short-tempered, grouchy and single-minded when working. He's also got this obsession about using religious music to clear his head and think about problems. I don't really know where that came from, just that in my household if either my wife or I put "Chant" on the CD, it generally means we're stressed out and need something that will give us some calm in the middle of the storm, and I thought that would be a strange but important aspect of Derek's personality, one that, in the middle of the crisis, is going to freak out people if he pops on earphones and an iPod and starts listening to Bach's B Minor Mass for 15 minutes.

Sometimes in characterization the tail wags the dog. In other words, you need something done and you give your character the ability to do it. It's integrating those traits and giving reasons why that are a problem. For instance, I needed my character, Joanna Dancing, in my current novel, to be comfortable with motorcycles. I found myself having her steal a dirt bike to escape. Later on, I found that she owns a motorcycle. It wasn't intentional, but it became part of her personality, the independence, the "speed" fetish, etc.

You can get ridiculous about it. But the more real the character is to you, hopefully the more real it is to your readers.

## Chapter 9: Where's the Drama?

I'm not going to slam so-called "literary" fiction or "mainstream" fiction. But I'm going to give a couple of examples of sometimes why "literary" fiction doesn't seem terribly commercial. It has to do with drama and these particular authors' decisions to not exploit the drama.

### **Wolf: A False Memoir by Jim Harrison.**

Harrison's a pretty fantastic writer, a magnificent stylist, a poet. In this novel, he plays himself, narrating a story of going to northern Michigan to interview a famed engineer about his life. There's a certain irony, in that the engineer definitely has a life worth writing about--SO WHY DIDN'T HARRISON WRITE ABOUT IT? Instead, we're stuck with the narrator's self-absorbed, boozy musings.

Okay. Backstory, and the gist of my point. The engineer is recovering from an accident that crippled him. What accident? He's a builder of major projects like dams in 3rd world countries. He's also an epileptic, but he hates his medication. One of the things he does when building dams is to rappel down the side of the dams to inspect them prior to getting them going. Only he's been in Central or South America for months, hasn't been taking his epilepsy medicine, instead trying native medicines, and while rappelling down the side of the dam has a seizure and falls, scrabbling for purchase down the side of the dam and breaks his back.

My point--Harrison was going after something else. A lot of what he was going after was the poetry of his own thoughts, and how the narrator made choices, as did the subject of the interview, getting on with his life and/or death. But I as a reader thought--I want to know more about the engineer. In fact, I don't want to be told after the fact about that story of the dam, I want to BE THERE when it happened. I want to be inside this guy's head, I want to feel his panic, his fear, the DRAMA of what led him to do this. I wanted the GRAND ADVENTURE!

### **The Crown of Columbus by Michael Dorris & Louise Erdrich.**

A lovely, stylized novel about a historical hunt for the "crown of Columbus" that was hidden somewhere in the U.S. or Puerto Rico. This could have been a grand adventure on the lines of The Da Vinci Code, but Dorris and Erdrich were so in love with the family dynamics and their own writing style--and there's an epic poem written by one of the characters, a poet, that runs on for about 20 pages of the novel that I skipped over it was so boring--that they seem to have forgotten that there's this really amazing historical treasure hunt going on. The crown, by the way, was the Crown of Thorns that Jesus wore when crucified, still in existence, having been carried across the ocean by Columbus in a glass box. Talk about drama, but the writers chose to almost make it a throw-away aspect of the plot. God only knows why.

Well, that's two, and this was long enough. I was going to write about **Nathaniel Hawthorn's The House of Seven Gables**, and the family history of "choking on blood," which is mentioned in passing, but never dramatized or done in a way that seems more than a bit of quirky family trivia. Hawthorn had other priorities, but imagine the horror of a family

medical history of ruptured blood vessels in the throat, choking to death on your own blood...

The point being, in today's commercial fiction, readers want drama, they want action, they want to see and feel and hear amazing things, to be in the midst of these things. So-called literary writers sometimes don't seem interested in this, and that's perhaps because the commercial writer is primarily interested in STORY above all other things, whether it be style, theme, characterization, etc. STORY, on the other hand, is about drama and conflict.

## Chapter 10: The Power of the Thwart

What makes for a good story? Great characters? Yeah, hard to argue. Memorable characters are hard to find. What's the female main character in Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code?" Beats me, but the main character's name is Robert Langdon, right? What're the names of the main characters of any of Dan's other books? Beats me. I enjoyed the hell out of those books, but the characters aren't all that memorable. So that's important. You could probably argue that the main character in "The Da Vinci Code" is actually Jesus, or perhaps Leonardo da Vinci, but let's not go there today.

I've been thinking about plotting and the most valuable lesson I learned about plotting came from a conversation I had with my brother while standing waist-high in Brevort Lake in northern Michigan while we were keeping an eye on our kids. We were talking about "The Lord of the Rings," both the movies and the books, and Pete said something along the lines of, "I was reading the book to Dylan and I realized just how often the characters are thwarted."

And having watched the movies about 50 times and read the books a few times, upon really paying attention to how Tolkein plots, you can learn most of what you need to know about plotting, whether you're writing fantasy, thrillers, mysteries, romances, or so-called mainstream fiction, whatever that is.

Example. After leaving Rivendell, the Fellowship plans to head toward Mordor along some mountain pass, I don't remember which one. This plan is thwarted when they discover that Saruman is carefully watching that pass and has his "spies," the birds, looking for them. Gandalf then heads up and over the mountains. This time Saruman thwarts this attempt by causing a winter storm that nearly kills everybody on the mountainside. With great reluctance because he knows the dangers there, Gandalf leads them to the mines of Moria, where they will take tunnels and caverns and tunnels underneath the mountains. Only they are initially thwarted when they don't know how to get past the magic entrance. Having figured that out ("Speak friend and enter"), they really, REALLY want to get out, find the local pub and knock back a few before dropping the ring in a FedEx envelope and mailing it to Sauron, because the mines have been turned into a crypt, all the dwarves slaughtered by goblin orcs. They rush for the entrance only to have a tentacled monster attack them and destroy the entrance. Thwarted yet again. Further in the mines they get lost. Further still they arouse the interest of the orcs. They battle a cave troll (Great line: "They've got a cave troll!") and orcs and narrowly escape (and Frodo nearly dies) only to be cornered by goblins in a great amphitheater. Yikes, thwarted again. Only the orcs suddenly flee and they're faced with an even worse enemy, the Balrog, a demon of shadow and flame. Thwarted! Fleeing the Balrog, they nearly topple to their deaths on the bridge of Barad Dur--thwarted--but make the crossing only, horrors! Gandalf battles the Balrog and falls to his death.

The point here is to notice how often Tolkein does this during the entire series of the books, and how Peter Jackson exploits it in the films. If you have the director's cut versions of the films and you pay attention to the extra scenes, you'll notice that in general they were more cases of the heroes being thwarted--Aragorn's apparent failure to recruit the Army of the

Dead, the avalanche of skulls, escaping to realize they were too late to take on the Corsairs...

My earlier unpublished mysteries had a lot of flaws, but none of them were more serious than my taking it too easy on my hero. A crime was committed and they followed clues to solve the case. There weren't enough red herrings. My characters didn't get pinned into corners that apparently they couldn't get out from. In effect, they weren't thwarted enough. I've learned my lesson.

Just yesterday in the novel in progress I wrote a chapter in which the main character and the woman he's commandeered (or rescued) into helping him, are caught in the crawlspace between the main floor and the upper level on a catwalk. Below them are armed terrorists hunting for them. An explosion has seriously weakened the infrastructure they're on, the hero has been wounded, the space is filled with dust, and they discover that their planned route out has been booby-trapped with plastic explosives. And the clock is ticking before other hostages get killed.

Meaning, basically, that I'm trying to paint my characters into a corner. I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to get them out. Hopefully the reader won't be sure either. And hopefully I'll come up with something creative, unexpected and satisfying to get there.

It doesn't have to be this dramatic either. In a mainstream novel, the heroine can have a child with Down syndrome, a sleazy boss who wants sexual favors in exchange for career advancement, an ex-husband who keeps asking for money and showing up during her dinner dates with the man she thinks she loves...

Just don't make it too easy on your characters.

## Chapter 11: 3 Elements to Be a Successful Writer

Just a few thoughts on what it takes to be a successful writer. First, what is success?

### *Success.*

I don't know. Only you can define that. Eventual publication? Getting paid to publish? Making a living at it? Making \$100,000 a year? Six-figure advances and movie deals and being on Oprah? You decide. For simplicities' sake I'll very, very loosely define it as being paid for your writing in a manner that satisfies you and seeing your work in print.

How to get there?

### *Talent.*

Be talented. Huh. What's talent in terms of writing? Is Stephen King talented? Is Philip Roth talented? Is Joe Konrath talented? And what about Mark Terry, the dyslexic moron? Am I talented?

Yeah. We all are. And here's a working definition for this blog entry. Talent is defined by eventual success.

Don't like that? Tough. It's very workable. There are levels of talent. I don't write like Philip Roth (no shit). Neither does Stephen King, for that matter. Both are talented and both are, on the surface at least, successful. And keep in mind the earlier definition of success.

### *Persistence.*

My most valuable asset as a writer. I'm a regular pitbull when it comes to this. It's probably some "artistic" variety of an obsessive-compulsive disorder. I can't fucking let go. Even when I want to. I threw thousands of hours of my personal time that might have been better spent playing the guitar, working out, traveling, making love or playing tiddlywinks writing and submitting novels and magazine articles. I'm the freaking poster child of persistence. I've had two publishers go under before publication. I've had three literary agents. I had a thousand reasons to quit, but apparently 1001 to keep going. Despite my blog entry of two days ago, I believe persistence will win out in the long run. Only you can decide what the "long run" is.

### *Luck.*

Oh boy. Am I superstitious? Not particularly. Do I believe in luck. Bet your ass I believe in luck. Good and bad. Being in the right time at the right place with the right product comes down to luck. I've had some bad luck with writing. Hell, my 2nd novel manuscript almost got picked up by St. Martin's Press back in the late '80s. The editor wanted to pick it up but was talked out of it by one of the other editors. True story told me by the assistant. It took years for me to get that kind of interest again. Was that good luck or bad? I don't know. Sometimes I ask myself this question, just to put it in perspective.

Years and years ago, a gentleman named Bill Gates offered IBM his design for a computer operating system. They turned him down. Gee, that was unlucky, wasn't it? He was forced to start his own company.

These things happen. I like the movie "Bull Durham." One of the most significant bits in that movie comes toward the end, when Kevin Costner is playing pool with an old friend and cussing out Tim Robbins. He notes that his friend had a .330 average in the minor leagues and Robbins says, ".330 in the minors, big deal." Costner blasts into him, saying, "That's a career man." Then he goes on to tell him what the difference is between a so-so career and a great career in baseball--or, underlying it all, the difference between a great career in the minor leagues for practically minimum wage and a so-so career in the major leagues for hundreds of thousands of dollars--luck. A ball taking an odd bounce. A ball falling out of a fielder's mitt. A ball hopping left into fair territory instead of right into foul territory. A pitcher having a bad day or an umpire with a headache. He then says, "God reached down when you were a baby and gave you a lightning bolt for a pitching arm but you're pissing it away."

You can minimize luck's influences. You can hone your craft so your "talent" is obvious to anyone. You can show up so often that if good luck does swing around you can take advantage of it. You can study markets and learn the business so you're not trying to provide products nobody wants or that have been done to death. But don't discount luck.

So, you got those 3 elements? Do you have "talent?"

## Chapter 12: 6 Steps to Becoming a Professional Writer

Here it is, my 6 steps to becoming a professional writer. Follow these and the odds are very much with you.

1. Learn to write well. In fact, this may be the most important advice. Study. Read. Write. Write some more. Read some more. Write. Re-write. The only real way to learn to write well is to write a lot. Here is something I believe: nobody writes as well as they think they do. Me included. But the better you get and the more experienced you get, the more accurate your estimation of your own abilities. Learning what you do well and what you don't becomes part of writing well.

2. Send to the right markets. Don't send a romance story to Men's Health. Don't pitch a story on "How My Doctor Screwed Up and I Sued Him Successfully for \$25,000,000" to Medical Economics. Don't query an agent who only handles nonfiction about your novel. Don't query an editor who only handles chick-lit with your hard-boiled private eye novel. Seems obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people do this. In other words, learn the business. And it is a business.

3. Neatness counts. This made more sense when things were predominantly done on that dead tree stuff called paper, but we're mostly electronic now. Still, neatness counts--and that includes spelling and grammar, double-spacing fiction manuscripts, one-inch margins, 12-point font in Times New Roman or Arial or something similarly bland and easy-to-read. Nonfiction manuscripts are a bit different in terms of format, but the basic point is the same--neat and clean.

4. Get used to rejection. Life is full of rejection. You apply for jobs you don't get. You try to get laid and you don't. You buy a Lotto ticket and don't win a penny. Your kids don't think your jokes are funny and your spouse doesn't like the restaurant you picked out. Your writing life, no matter how successful you are, will be filled with rejection. Freelancers typically get 11 out of 12 queries rejected, or so I'm told. Even clients who work with you regularly won't like all your pitches. Your agent won't like all your novels and may not be able to sell all your work. Even accepted work may get canceled and rejected or editors will change jobs or publishers will go out of business. File REJECTION under the SHIT HAPPENS category and get used to it. If you can't handle it, consider a different line of work.

5. Stick to it. Persistence. Write every day. Send stuff out. Don't take rejection as an estimation of your self-worth. Most of the time it's not even an estimation of your work's value. Most of the time it means that on that particular day that particular editor didn't need, want or like that particular piece of work or story idea. If you can build the Great Wall of China a brick at a time or wear down rock a drop of water at a time, you can break into publishing one query or submission at a time.

6. Quit. Go ahead. Do it. There are too many writers as it is. It's very competitive. I'd like the competition to decrease. 195,000 books published each year, about 10,000 in the crime genre. The American Medical Writers Association has about 3000 members. So does

Mystery Writers of America. God knows how many members the Association of Health Care Journalists has. If a plague would wipe out half of them, I'd have a lot more work. So go ahead. Quit trying. Take up macrame or soap carving or guitar. Want to make money? Try Internet porn. There always seems to be a need for that.

But if you can't do it, if you return to writing no matter what... if you ignore the rejection letters, the disappointment, the snubs, the nasty comments, the fact your spouse wishes you'd work overtime or spend time with her, and your kids resent your being at the computer and your dog is frustrated with you and you've got papercuts and carpal tunnel syndrome and near-sightedness...

And you keep on writing...

Then you're a writer and may one day be successful at it.

Or you're delusional and in need of medication.

### Chapter 13: Authorial Distance

That title might suggest I'm asking whether I'm like my main character, but that's not what I'm going after at all.

Something interesting happened while I was writing yesterday. I'm working on a novel featuring the main character Joanna Dancing. For the first eight chapters, which are all written in the third person, single POV (hers), I've referred to her as Dancing. Other characters, and she's really only interacted with a couple, might call her Joanna or they might call her Dancing, but I as the narrator called her Dancing.

Then boom, I start chapter 9 and suddenly I start calling her Joanna. It wasn't completely intentional, and I struggled with it a bit.

You see, how close do I bring in the reader? How far out do I keep them? I like the intimacy of first-person, but for a number of reasons I don't want to use that for this book, mostly the nature of the book, which is very action and suspense oriented. Yet I want readers to know Joanna and like her and have sympathy, etc. At the same time, she's a woman who keeps her emotions very tightly wrapped, repressed is a good word, for a number of reasons.

This goes all the way back to college when I studied Hemingway's "For Whom The Bell Tolls" in 20th Century American Lit and this issue of why Hemingway only referred to the main character by his last name. It was a distancing technique.

So here's a question I need to ask myself. I kept the reader distant for a good 60 pages or so. Now I brought them in. Partly this may be in response that the first 60 pages or so are non-stop action, and I do mean non-stop. Joanna and the other character, Dan Webber, are on the run from what appears to be three separate groups of bad guys, all intent on either kidnapping or killing Webber, or perhaps even one of them wants to protect Webber and get him out of harm's way.

So should I, when I re-write, shift all the early "Dancings" to "Joannas?" Or does this shift reflect a shift to a more internal period in the book, where it's now less about moving the story along and more about breaking down the wall between Joanna and the reader--and not coincidentally, about breaking down the wall between Joanna and Dan Webber. He has to decide whether to trust her and vice versa, and not just a little bit, but all the way. He's reluctantly trusted her with his life up to this point, but if they're going to continue, he needs to trust her with everything else--why they're hunting him and possibly who they are. But in order for him to do that, he wants to know more about Joanna other than her obvious survival and defense skills.

It's a trick, actually, a balancing act, and what I can only really operate on is gut instincts. At the same time, I have some idea what I want to achieve, and it's likely that my subconscious has some notion how to achieve it without the more conscious assistance I can offer.

Or at least, I hope so.

## Chapter 14: Boring Drills

Thriller author David Morrell has commented in his book on writing and in other interviews that one of his mentors, John Barth, used to do "test borings" or "boring drills," approaching his novels from different points of view or styles before he got started, and David said, "Ah, like mining, running test borings," and Barth gave him a peculiar look and said, "No, I want to make sure they're not boring."

Hmmm.

I've been beating myself up over the novel in progress's point of views (or points of view, I suppose). It's written entirely in the third person single pov, the main character, Joanna Dancing. I'm about 160 pages in and I wouldn't say I'm stuck, but I'm getting snagged damn near every time I write. It's getting harder and harder to accomplish what I'm trying to accomplish. I keep thinking, "You need multiple povs," which means I'm going to have to go back to the beginning and stick them in there somewhere and decide who they are, etc.

The other voice says, "It's fine the way it is." I'm beginning to think that voice is the lazy voice and the impatient voice that just wants to get through the project, rather than the wiser voice that wants the project to be good.

So, somewhere between interviewing a guy from the Kohler company and lunch, I took a few minutes and started a scene about Colonel Seth Munro, head of "Special Operations" for the Department of Homeland Security.

Man, let me tell you. It felt like a breath of fresh air. It also gave me, in about two pages, a stronger sense of what's actually going on in the novel.

So I did a boring drill and I think it worked. Friday I had gotten frustrated, so I took the manuscript to date and wrote synopses of all the chapters, then I debated about what was going on in between with other characters and where I might stick them in, then I sat down and asked myself a bunch of questions on paper that kept cropping up during the story and decided, as best as I could, what the hell the answers are. Kind of like an outline, more or less.

Things like: who leaked the information about Webber's research to the Chinese?

Unfortunately, my answer in big capital letters was I DON'T KNOW, but by the time I got through answering all the other questions, I did know, as well as the why. And it did some interesting things to the story, like taking Seth Munro, who I viewed as a bad guy, and giving him much more complexity and color to his motivations for what he's doing and why. Which isn't to say he isn't a bad guy, but his motivations are far more three dimensional now.

If there's a lesson here, I think that instead of arguing with yourself, sometimes you just need to try different things and see for yourself how they work out. Yes, this can be time-

consuming, but it's worthwhile. And two, chances are there's a wise little voice in your head that REALLY knows what you should be doing. You just have to listen to it.

## Chapter 15: Care and Feeding of Editors

I decided I wouldn't really address fiction editors here because, well, I'm not entirely sure how to make them happy. Anybody really know, let me know.

But in terms of the nonfiction editors I work with regularly, I think I've got a few clues. They're pretty obvious, but like a lot of obvious things, not all writers are aware of this, so I'll lay it out for them.

1. Give 'em what they want. Editors are busy and they have deadlines that tend to be written in stone because of production schedules and advertising needs, which pay the bills. They also have bosses. So if you can give them story ideas that are what they need and want, you're making their life easier. This is hard. What seems to work well for me is if I'm off with a pitch that they turn down (at least if I've worked with them before), I e-mail back that I'll give it some more thought or more research and get back in a couple days. And then do.
2. Deadlines are sacred. I'm an editor. My CLIENT FROM HELL couldn't hit deadlines if their life depended on it. FUBAR, if you know what the acronym means. Drove me crazy. Drove the graphic artist even crazier, most likely. Cost everybody money because of the printing scheduling. Give your editor the materials on time, or even a little bit early. They'll appreciate it. Again, make your editor's life easier. If you can't hit the deadline, tell them so. [sidebar: be careful about getting things in too early. This causes two problems. One is that editors lose things, and two, if they have the time to work on your piece at their leisure, some (not all) editors will take that as a chance to tinker and tweak and make otherwise gratuitous changes just because they have time, which creates work for you.]
3. Go easy with re-writes. I've been essentially lucky in that my editors don't generally try to totally rewrite my pieces. Some consult me. Some don't. Usually I can see why the changes are made that are. Sometimes I don't. I usually just shrug and say, Whatever. I'm up to about invoice #122 so far this year, so I've written around 80 articles in 2005 and about 40 book reviews, plus a novel or two and edited 4 issues of one journal and one of another. Each one is not my baby, so I generally take changes and suggestions in stride. If they're way off base, I say so. If they're inaccurate (it's happened) or they've managed to incorporate some grammar or spelling errors in the process, I correct them--politely. If an editor turns out to be a monster in terms of corrections and changes, I tend not to pitch them anymore, figuring they really aren't looking for a writer, they think they can do it all themselves. Luckily, that rarely happens. Editors are too busy for it.
4. Keep it clean. Basic journalism, folks. Double-check your spelling and grammar. Double-check source names and make sure everybody's name is spelled right, including the companies, etc. Have I made mistakes with this? Of course. Not happily. Do your due diligence. Be professional. Sometimes shit happens, but at least you know you tried your best. Only god's perfect, but you can try to be.
5. Be polite. Be professional. It's a business relationship. You can expand personal boundaries a bit if you work with an editor regularly or you note that his or her personal style

goes in that direction, but carefully filter the information you hand out. "Need to know" is a good approach.

## Chapter 16: A Letter to Aspiring Writers

I won't call you pre-published. Although I respect your optimism, it borders on hubris. Nothing is guaranteed in life and the notion that if you keep plugging at it you WILL get published is not guaranteed. I think it's likely you will, but there is no guarantee.

This letter is to you. I assume you've written something. A novel. A TV or movie script. A poem. A short story. A magazine article. You quite likely have discovered that the world of publishing, TV or film is not impressed with your efforts. Even more likely, you have found that they aren't impressed with your efforts because you can't get anybody in those industries to even look at your efforts. You've been faced with rejection. Form rejection letters and no responses and all manner of rejection. Here are some thoughts. I don't want to sugarcoat anything.

*1. My life will be so much better if I can just get published.*

No. Well, maybe. But if you're unhappy, irritable, frustrated, and you feel it all has to do with a lack of success in your writing life, you're mostly wrong. The problem is with you. Pay attention to your life. There's more to it than writing. There are people suffering horribly all over the world--Iraq, Afghanistan ... everywhere. They have many more problems than you and yet they deal with it. Not all, but many. If you think your life would improve by getting published--and it's the only thing that would improve your life--then you need help. Talk to your doctor about antidepressants. Talk to your spouse. Take up an exercise program. Getting published won't solve all of your problems and may not solve any of your problems. And it may solve some and create others.

*2. That jerk's not as talented as I am, but he's got a 6-figure advance for that piece of dreck.*

Yeah. Fine. Go over to Joe Konrath's blog and read the argument raging on his "luck versus talent" entry. I don't agree with Joe entirely, that success in publishing is the result of luck, not talent. It's the result of both. But don't discount luck--in any area of human endeavor. Talent usually wins out in the long run, especially if tied to persistence, but anybody with a grown-up mentality realizes that sometimes talented, persistent people don't break through either. You're blaming someone else for your problems. Stop it.

*3. Those editors/agents/publishers are only buying things from people they know. It's who you know, not how good you are.*

I doubt it. Yeah, they may give breaks to people they know. Maybe. But they won't stay in business long if those things don't deliver, so don't overvalue connections. We'd all generally rather work with people we know, but the work has to stand on its own, too.

*4. I'm going to get my book published and make a ton of money.*

Maybe. I started out thinking that. Just ... probably not. Typical advances run between \$5000 and \$10,000 and you usually have to pay an agent 15% and the government between 25% and 35%, and even if you made \$100,000 advance, that money usually doesn't come in one big chunk. And even if it does, there's no guarantee your next book will be picked up exactly

12 months later ... or ever.

*5. I'll get foreign rights sales and a movie deal.*

Maybe. But even if you do, the money may not be all you think it is. And depending on your contract, that foreign rights money may go to your publisher to pay off your advance if your accounts are "basketed." And movie deals, which are cyclical, are typically done in the form of an "option," and it may be \$20,000 for a one-year option or less, and again, this time you've got multiple agents involved and the government and there won't be much money left.

*6. I'm an artist. I'm not going to worry about money. It means nothing to me.*

I've never been enamored with the starving artist in a garret scenario myself. The problem, of course, is that the people who buy magazine articles, TV and movie scripts, and novel manuscripts ARE in a business and they ARE worried about money and they DO have a bottom line to concern themselves about and if you don't somehow allow them to break even or make a profit, "artist" or not, you're going to be a one-shot wonder.

*7. What do you know? You haven't been published by any magazines I've heard of. You haven't been published by any big publishers. What makes you think you're an expert on the subject?*

Right. Because I'm making a living at it and I'm getting books published. And just because you haven't heard of the magazines I get published by doesn't mean they aren't high-paying publications with national readerships. My best magazine client pays \$1 per word. And they're not listed in The Writer' Market.

As for that book publishing thing, you're right. But I did sign contracts with a major independent publisher and was paid an advance and the check cleared.

You're not obligated to listen to a word I say here. Ever. But if you haven't been published, either poems, magazines, scripts or novels and you think you know more about the subject than I do, you're wrong. I study Sanchin-Ryu karate. I recently was promoted to 3rd degree brown belt. The insignia for Sanchin-Ryu has, among other things, a person practicing karate and he's missing the top of his head. It represents an open mind. Try it.

But if you want to instead say, "What does this guy know. What a jerk! I know more about the subject than he does," fine. Say it. Say it here if you want to, or just say it to yourself. Make you feel better? Okay, I guess one good thing came out of this blog entry. But if you somehow think that saying I know nothing about this and that your work isn't being picked up because of any of the above, or your life really is in the toilet right now but if you just get published it'll be better, and you feel that someone ELSE is to blame, well...

You're wrong.

## Chapter 17: So You Want to be a Writer

Because this blog is so much about writing, the assumption is that most of the readers are writers who find some value in my musings about writing. And presumably the reason my musings might have some value is because I'm making a living as a writer and I'm getting novels published, etc, etc.

So I have to ask the question. Do you really want to be a writer?

Writers write.

They can go to school for it, sure, but that doesn't guarantee much. There are undoubtedly plenty of MFAs out there teaching or working as clerks at Borders or holding flags on the expressway for construction companies. (Why not? Pays well, you get to dress casual, and you get a great tan. Hmmm...)

But professional writers, both fiction and nonfiction, do more than write.

They submit. And no, you know what I mean. This isn't some bondage-discipline thing. You send your shit in, folks.

So here's my challenge for 2006 to all aspiring writers out there.

Finish your novel manuscript and query 10 or 20 or 100 agents. Until you get one or find a reason to rewrite the manuscript.

Or,

Finish your novel manuscript, look for a list of small publishers that accept unagented manuscripts--Poisoned Pen Press, High Country Publishers, Five Star, Hilliard & Harris, etc., and submit via query letter or manuscript.

Write a short story and send it out over and over again.

Write a magazine article and submit it.

Write a query for a magazine article and submit it.

Go ahead. Collect your rejection slips. It's part of the job. But here's my advice regarding rejection slips learned from long experience. Take it to heart (or don't).

A rejection only means that an editor or agent does not see a need for your work at this particular time.

**DO NOT:**

Treat a rejection as an assessment of your writing skill.

Treat a rejection as an assessment of your worth as a human being.

Treat a rejection as an assessment of the value of your life.

Treat a rejection as a reason to believe you will never succeed as a writer.

**DO:**

Re-submit. Tell yourself you will submit either until it gets accepted or there are no more markets for that particular piece of work.

If you receive constructive or intelligent criticism, evaluate it. Do not treat it as gospel, but keep an open mind. If it seems reasonable, consider re-writing along those lines and resubmitting.

Keep writing other things. If you finish a novel, start on the next one while you're working on marketing the other.

**CONSIDER THIS:**

If you're not willing to do this, to spend a lot of your free time writing, to accepting rejection, to accepting that rejection is part of the business of writing and that persistence is more important than talent...

Then maybe you should re-evaluate how you spend your time.

Maybe you really don't want to be a professional writer. That's okay. There's an entire world of things you can do. You can take a cooking class. You can join a gym. Learn to play guitar. Take classes in Russian or Spanish or economics or constitutional law. You can volunteer at the local homeless shelter or become a foster parent or spend your free time watching TV or renting videos. You know what? I won't think worse of you and neither will anyone else.

But if you spend a lot of time writing and it makes you angry and makes you feel worthless and you think it's somebody else's fault, then really... really, for god sakes, it's your life. Think about how you want to spend it.

I wish everybody terrific holidays and a fantastic 2006 where you find whatever success it is you want.

## Chapter 18: Doing Your Own Thing

Early this morning I jumped on Eric Mayer's blog. He had a post he was responding to by someone else suggesting that because the big publishers are set in their ways and not looking for any thing outside the box, and because almost nobody can make a living writing fiction anyway, you should just do your own thing, there are plenty of small presses out there that will be interested in publishing your work.

I ranted a bit. Here it is:

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You know, this is significantly more complicated than just "do your own thing."

I have very, very commercial tastes, generally speaking, in my reading. My writing has ALWAYS reflected that. But I wrote many, many unpublished novel manuscripts, despite the fact they were recognizably commercial.

Why didn't they get published?

I'm not 100% sure, but here are some thoughts:

1. They weren't good enough. And by good enough, I think there are 2 issues:

A. The line-by-line writing wasn't good enough. There was probably too much passive tense, too much repetition, relatively poor word choice. I also think that after a while this became less of an issue, which leads me to:

B. Not good enough structure. This is a different ballgame and I think an awful lot of unpublished writers fall into this category. Sure, you tell a good story. Sure, your writing is acceptable. But *the way you're telling your story isn't effective enough*. There's too much backstory. There's too much padding. It's not tight enough. You're going off on tangents that negatively affect the forward thrust of the story. Your characters, though interesting and likable, are too pat, are cliched, are reminiscent of TV or movie characters. Your plot lacks coherence and logic, and goes from A to B to F to G, missing steps. It's unconvincing (this has happened to me, for sure). Even though certain types of stories have their own internal logic (ie., cozies), you couldn't convince the readers that the 30-something single mom was really a serial killer. The list goes on.

The point is, even small presses are looking for something that's effective and that they're able to sell. Yes, indies seem more open to variation (or perhaps, nobody wants to say this, it's really, they have lower standards, at least some of them), but that doesn't mean they want to lose money on you.

Big publishers don't want to lose money either, so they have some notion of what can reliably be sold.

You don't go to a car dealership and find too many purple and red 6-passenger, 3-wheeled vehicles. You might find some somewhere, but the big companies won't. Because they can't sell enough of them. Or to make it more sensible, you don't find a lot of 2-passenger cars out there. Some, but not that many. Limited market.

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Yes, well, let me expand just a bit. I think I was reacting, ultimately, to what felt to me a like a rationalization. You've all heard it, you've probably even felt it. It goes like this:

My work isn't getting published because:

1. It's a New York conspiracy.
2. The big publishers can't recognize originality when they see it.
3. I can't get an agent.
4. I don't have an agent.
5. I don't have the right agent.
6. I'm just as good as (fill in the blank).
7. I don't know anybody. They only publish works by people they know.
8. They only publish things they think will be bestsellers.
9. I'm an artist! What do I care?

The list can go on and on.

Okay, here's the deal. If all you want to do is write, if you don't care about being published by someone else, if the money doesn't matter AT ALL to you, if you have money to throw away, if you're in it ENTIRELY for the art, the actual DOING of writing, and even, by those standards, READERS aren't important...

Then by all means, write, print it out and tuck it away.

Or if you still want to see it in book form, but money and readers don't matter to you, then pay money to iUniverse or somebody similar and have books available print-on-demand, buy a dozen copies for family and friends and call it a day.

If that's what you want, REALLY, if you've got your desires and ambitions adjusted to just that narrow a frame of reference, I'M WRITING FOR MY ART AND MY ART ALONE AND COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER HUMAN BEINGS AND MAKING MONEY ARE NOT PART OF MY ART...

Oh for god sakes, why would you want to deal with the publishing industry and the laborious marketing aspects of the business? I mean, really, if that's REALLY where you're at, don't bitch about the New York publishing industry. They're a business. They're there to make money. If that's too crass and money-fixated for your art, they don't need you and you don't

need them and what are you bitchin' about?

Oh, and my comment about small presses. For the record, the quality of Poison Pen Press is very high. I've read many books by them and many of them could easily get published by the bigger houses. Really. Eric Mayer & Mary Reed, Larry Karp, Kit Erhman, the list goes on. I really do think so.

But I used to review mysteries for ForeWord Magazine, which focuses on independent and small presses, and folks, whether you want to admit it or not, some of this stuff just isn't up to snuff. It isn't. The quality's just not there. The writing isn't as good, the editing isn't as good, the storytelling just isn't that good. It doesn't mean they won't be if they work.

End of today's rant.

## Chapter 19: First Novels

I had a conversation with a writer friend a few months ago. He had self-published a couple novels and had asked another writer friend of mine to read one of them and asked for his opinion. The opinion he received was that he told a pretty good story, but he had some technical issues he should address.

I've read one of his books myself and there were also grammar and spelling issues and general clunky writing issues, but the issues that specifically came up were things like:

--shifting point of view

--passive voice

--shifting voice, as in sometimes using 3rd person, then having a different pov character in the 1st person

--too much tell, not enough show

All pretty much basic issues that professional writers need to work on, and beginning writers almost always use.

My friend, talking about using 3rd person sometimes and 1st person, mentioned that Harlan Coben used it in his last book.

Last several, I said, and sometimes ineffectively, but you really can't take a bestseller's technique and say, "See, it's being done by him! I can do it!"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because publishers will publish them anyway. They sell a million or more copies."

I don't think he agreed with me, but he's off running a new business and I doubt he'll get to writing another novel any time soon, although you never know.

I have two thoughts--okay, maybe more, maybe this is more like two schools of thought--on reading bestsellers and reading first novels.

Somewhere yesterday I read where Joe Konrath mentioned you should read first novels recently published to see what publishers are buying as first novels these days. I agree completely. I also think that prior to reviewing novels, I didn't read many first novels, and I often purposely grab a first novel when it comes along now to review, just so I can read it. Sometimes I wish I didn't, but there you go.

I also think it's worth your time to read bestsellers so you know what the majority of people are reading. Haven't read "The Da Vinci Code?" For better or for worse, Dan Brown struck a

chord.

Janet Evanovich? What's she doing that makes people line up for 10 hours to make it to her book signings? (That one might be easy, and the word is FUN.)

James Patterson? Hey, the way he's peddling his name and not writing his own books these days is grist for a dozen blog entries, but I read Patterson's early novels, and thought they were great, although "Pop Goes the Weasel" ended any continued reading of his books for me. What's Patterson doing--aside from marketing--that's so successful?

Stephen King? Patricia Cornwall (of the phoning-it-in school of novel publishing)?

There are a lot of bestsellers I really like. And many I don't. But the fact is, for some reason their books appeal to a very broad range of people, and if you can tap into that a little bit, it might (maybe) help you get published. Maybe.

At the very least it'll give you a sense of what's being published at all levels.

But I'd take a look at small presses and first novels, too.

## Chapter 20: The Freelancer's Mindset

Over on Eric Mayer's blog he posts about celebrating 12 years as a freelancer.

It reminded me, that although it's been only a year and a half for me freelancing fulltime, that the gulf between working for someone else and working for yourself is pretty huge. I know a lot of the readers here want to be novelists, and I think the required mindset is pretty much the same. So here are some thoughts.

1. Your work schedule is your responsibility. Work as little or as much as necessary. But in order to get a lot done, enough to make money at it, whether nonfiction or fiction, you're going to have to put in a lot of time.
2. Only a small percentage of your time will be spend actually writing. If it weren't for the novels, I would have days I didn't write because I would be sending out queries, setting up interviews, conducting interviews, doing miscellaneous paperwork, etc. In terms of the novels, you spend a lot of time on marketing issues and promotional issues--way too much time, but hey, that's the business.
3. Income goes up and down. If you're not comfortable with NOT knowing how much you're going to make in any given period, this is not the business for you.
4. The government is not your friend. You pay taxes quarterly. They double your social security bills, which we all call the self-employment tax, or SE Tax.
5. If you have chronic health problems or children, I hope your spouse has health insurance or you're making boodles of bucks, because health insurance can break you if you have to pay for it yourself. Thank God for my wife's health insurance.
6. Set up your own retirement fund. Pay yourself first, put a little bit away in mutual funds. Go to someplace like TIAA-CREF or whatever and make a point of this. You never know if health issues might force a retirement on you you're not prepared for.
7. You can do everything right and shit will still happen. Editors change jobs. Publications fold. Publications change their focus. Publications run into budget problems and cut back on freelancers. Roll with the punches and have faith something will turn up.
8. There are wonderful moments of serendipity, too. When somebody reads something you wrote and contacts you to do some work. When the longshot query you send out turns into your best, highest-paying client.
9. You may love what you're doing, but it's human nature to get bored and complacent. It's something you have to fight. You can't take the work for granted. You don't get paid just for showing up.
10. This can be the best damned job in the world if you're in the right frame of mind. No

boss. Constantly changing jobs. You're in control of your destiny, the pay can be pretty good, and if it's a beautiful day, you can go for a two-hour walk and make up the time later.

## Chapter 21: Getting the Basics Right

Joe Konrath has been judging a short story contest and mentioned that if it wasn't formatted correctly or had a typo or grammar error in the first page or so, he was likely to discard it. He has about three slots for winners and he's got over 2000 entries (I can't imagine reading that many short stories over the course of about 10 years, let alone a couple months). He compares it to what editors and agents go through.

There's been some controversy about this, but he's right, and I added this post to his response, which is more of a "yeah, you go Joe," than anything else. Here it is:

"A very important point here, and either people will learn it from trying or they won't learn it at all.

James Woods directed a film a few years ago and got Melanie Griffith to act in it and in an interview he was asked why and he said she was good and she fit the part and "she has whatever that 'oomph' it is that makes somebody a star."

In writing, we all need that 'oomph.' There's very little "good enough" in the arts. It's like being in school and doing "good enough" to get a B+ or even an A-, and saying that's "good enough." But in the world of getting your writing published and then noticed, you need to add that something else. You have to not just work on perfection in mechanics--spelling and grammar--but shine everything to a high gloss.

It's a mistake to think editors and/or agents will "fix" the spelling or grammar or other mechanical issues if the story is good enough (whatever the hell that is). They're busy and the industry has shifted toward editors largely acting as "acquisition agents" and their jobs as "shepherding" the manuscript to publication, more than shaping the work and editing the content. That isn't to say they don't edit and shape, but it's not their primary job.

Momma didn't teach you that "neatness counts?" It does. Get the spelling and grammar right and all the other mechanics of writing. Here's something I think editors and agents believe to be true--spelling and grammar is Writing 101. You're not going to get published until you graduate from Writing 401. If you're screwing up Writing 101, you're not ready.

## Chapter 22: I Hold These Truths...

I hold these truths to be, well, true. Not necessarily self-evident.

1. I don't recommend self-publishing fiction. The only nonfiction I would recommend publishing would have a niche market or you're in a position to sell the books as a secondary aspect of your primary business. In other words, say you spend much of your time giving talks about practice management to proctologists. "Business Management For Butt Doctors" will sell well at your talks, but most people probably aren't interested.

2. Should you POD? See answer to #1. But... what is your goal? Is it to make money? To make a living? To start off a professional writing career? If you answer yes, then do not use print-on-demand.

If your goal is to see your book published so you can have a copy on the shelf and sell a few copies to friends and family, sure, this is a reasonable option that is more affordable than self-publishing.

3. Unless you're extraordinarily successful and your book receives a huge advance, a giant push by your publisher, great buzz, fantastic reviews and copies fly off the shelves, publication can seem pretty damned anticlimactic. For most writers, publication is preceded and followed by marketing and promotion that is so grueling it makes the writing process seem like a day at the beach. Promotion and marketing is like trying to move Mt. Everest. Even with a backhoe there isn't going to be a noticeable difference. Mostly you'll feel like you're trying to move the mountain from Nepal to south Texas using a teaspoon.

4. Nobody--and I mean NOBODY--gives a damn about your book the way you do. Not your editor, not your publisher, not your agent, not your spouse, not your children, not your mom, dad, cat, dog, gold fish or the prostitute down the street with the heart of gold. Don't expect the world to view it the way you do.

5. If it was easy, everybody would do it. There would be so many damn books there wouldn't be any trees left on the planet. Contrary to popular opinion, everybody does NOT have a great book in them.

Best,  
Mark Terry

p.s. 6. A note on self-publishing. Writing is a business. Publishing is a business. They do not have to be mutually exclusive, but being both writer and publisher is a job. To be a publisher, first, you need money. You probably need more balls (and money) than brains. You need to learn about layout, production, copy editing (hopefully), cover art, budgets and, ta-da!--distribution, the single most important aspect of successful publication, the one most overlooked by writers and small presses. It is, presumably, a labor of love. Heavy on labor, light on love. I've had 500 copies of "Dirty Deeds" that I agreed to try and hand-sell for my small press publisher, High

Country Publishers, Ltd., on a consignment basis. In the 18 to 22 months or so since it's publication, I've managed to sell about 225 of them. I've done dozens of Rotary Club and Library Talks and book signings and book fairs. I've done mailings--thousands. I've sold copies to friends and family and a few neighbors. See above about moving Mt. Everest. And this is only 500 books! Imagine having a print run of 5000 in your garage?

Proceed with extreme caution!!!!

## Chapter 23: I Feel Fine

Bear with me....

Star Trek IV. We have Spock, having died in II, reborn, albeit younger and missing his, um, uh, soul/brain, whatever, having been regrown and re-integrated, in a cave at 3-D computer consoles playing a kind of Vulcan version of Trivia Pursuit. Then the computer says: How do you feel?

He's unable to answer this, totally confused by the question.

My point here? Readers want to feel. Something. Anything. Sadness. Happiness. Fear. Laughter. Grief. Terror. Exhilaration.

This is tough. Very, very tough. I tend to be analytical and rational. So do the characters in my fiction. Yet somehow I need to make my readers feel ... something.

This is also classic show-don't-tell. I prefer to have my characters act in ways that indicate their emotions, except when they're being smart-asses. A character's hands may shake, may feel chills up and down their spine, have sweat bead up on their forehead. It's much more effective than, "...a wave of fear crashed across my soul..." Yech.

How to have a character feel pleasure or joy or happiness is a much more complicated thing. A smile. A laugh. A lightheartedness shown ... how?

By the same token, I always, like many of us in real life, want my characters to be... perhaps this is hard to describe, but I think, inappropriately unresponsive. That is to say, somebody says something horrible to them or they realize something, and their first response isn't to slap their hands to their mouth and cry, "Oh my!" It's to stand frozen, eyes watering, staring blankly and struggling for an appropriate response. The pregnant pause, so to speak. Say your suburban housewife visits her neighbor, finds the door ajar, walks in and finds her neighbor's head lopped off, body eviscerated, blood everywhere. Screaming? Vomiting? Panic? Yes, possibly. But shock doesn't always react that way. People freeze up. They don't know what to do. They don't know what to FEEL.

I visited the medical examiner's office to take a tour, and I was deathly afraid that what I would encounter would be the one thing I probably couldn't deal with--a dead child being autopsied. I envisioned rotted corpses, bloated drowned corpses, and felt I could deal with those. What I got, actually, was an autopsy of an obese man who died in a house fire. First, he was naked, which is a shock in and of itself. Second, the skin was burnt. Not blackened or reddened, but it had the appearance of chicken that's been cooked too quickly on the grill. And thirdly, the top of his head was gone and they were sticking what looked like barbeque tongs into the skull.

Did I faint or vomit? No. I got ever-so-slightly lightheaded. I got tingly (weird sensation), and I focused all my concentration on Phil Predmore, the toxicologist who was giving me the tour. And I kept taking peeks. And I was glad to get out of there.

Derek Stillwater, in the upcoming "The Devil's Pitchfork," is a tough guy, former Special

Forces. During events he tends to be heroic and action-oriented. But just prior to entering a hot zone, he's a mess. Pale, shaking, sweating, nauseous. One character calls him on it and he says, "Stage fright," and finds a sink to vomit into. But in the hot zone, he's fine. Why? Partly it is stage fright. He knows what the potential is for him in a hot zone--death, whoever's there and his own. There's a certain courage, also, in being terrified, yet doing what you have to do. Also, and this goes unsaid, but I think it's there, there are control issues involved. Prior to entering, things aren't in his control. Once he's moving, he's in control.

In an interview David Morrell gave, he said his first works were very intellectual, which he was comfortable with. Then he realized that what readers wanted was romance, and by romance he didn't mean love and sex, but romance in the way knights and damsels in distress viewed romance--adventure and high emotions and the sweep and glamour of life being a drama.

So when you're writing, keep in mind that we're trying to transfer more than actions and thoughts, but emotions, as well.

Oh, and, like Spock, I feel fine.

## Chapter 24: How to Become a Fulltime Writer

Over the years I've acquired a lot of good writing advice and a fair amount of useless writing advice. Here's probably the best advice I ever read, culled from Michael Crichton, which to paraphrase was:

"Don't ask me. My route wasn't typical. You have to figure out how to break in. Everybody's route to publication is different."

Well, Michael wasn't particularly helpful there, but I understand what he meant.

Look, yesterday I wrote about how I had written about 10 or 12 unpublished novels before getting my first one published. But for all that, my first published and paid article came in 1993 and it was, by most of my memory, one of the first nonfiction pieces I ever wrote and sent anywhere. So in a very bizarre way, I wrote novels in order to learn how to write nonfiction for a living. Very strange and not recommended.

Some people go to college and get English degrees or pick up MFAs. I don't think they're a good route to succeeding as a fulltime writer, but it works for some people. Doug Stanton, a friend of mine, makes a great living as a NF writer and author, and I believe he received an MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop, although I'm not 100% certain.

I'm reading a novel for a review/profile right now and it's got some problems, but it's a bestseller and the guy self-published his first book and raised money for it by hitting up people for "venture capital," and flogged the book around to bookstores and now he's a bestseller. I think he tells a good story but his writing itself is so-so and he might have benefited from a few years of unpublished novels to learn his craft better (my opinion) but how do you argue with his kind of success?

Joe Konrath, if you check out his website, suggests what I think is a slightly too over-the-top way to get an agent and one to which I don't think I would respond to, were I an agent. But his did and it's worked for him.

It's a strange business, all aspects of it. There are things that make sense:

Write every day. (I don't any longer, but I used to).

Write what you know. (Well, I've always modified that to: Write about what you're interested in).

Learn to rewrite. (Yeah, but, try to make your first drafts good. Don't train your brain to produce crap the first time out).

Leverage who you know. (Yeah, but not all of us know anybody. I just found out that the woman who cuts my hair (okay, shaves my head) has a sister who works at Penguin in NY. Christ, I wish I knew that earlier. But she's in the business offices and facilities management. Is that

useful? I don't know. Probably not at the moment.)

Be persistent. (Okay. I'm locked into this one).

Get an agent. (Yes, good advice, but my first novel, *Dirty Deeds*, was published without one).

Write to please yourself. (I don't think this is the best advice in the world, but I hear it all the time. Yes, here's why you should write to please yourself if you're writing a novel. There's a huge chance you're going to spend a year on the project and not get it published. If you hated it, then you really, seriously wasted your time. At the same time, I think it's useful to consider the audience for what you write. And as a nonfiction writer I often write things I'd just as soon not write. It's how I make a living. Do you really think I want to spend hours researching urinalysis?)

Go to conferences. (Ah geeze. Let's not go there.)

Read. (Yeah. Without a doubt. But is it always good to read too in-depth in your own area? I'm not sure. We benefit from reading outside it. And novelists benefit from reading nonfiction, too).

Have a life. Yes, I'm fairly unequivocal about this one. There's more to life than writing. And having a life--eating good food, seeing movies, traveling, having relationships--will feed your writing. It's hard to have the depth of experience needed to entertain or inform a broad audience when you're 22. It happens, but really, folks, how many 50-somethings really think 20-somethings know that much about life? They do, of course, but personal growth is a good thing.

Get perspective. Goes with "Have a life." We're not curing cancer. The world doesn't "need" more literature. For god sakes, if the entire worldwide publishing biz came to a crashing halt I could read a book a day for the rest of my life without repeating myself or even cutting through the tip of the literary ice berg. Fiction is the entertainment business and has similar dynamics to the TV and movie business, theater, painting, the music industry and video games. You might tell yourself, "but this is what I'm meant to do," and that's always interesting, because I feel that way myself, but I doubt that some poor schlub rotting away from some hideous parasitic disease in a back alley in Calcutta says the same thing.

## Chapter 25: Chapter Length

I'm not sure I actually have anything insightful to say about this topic. More like a plea for feedback.

I like books with short chapters. The Spenser novels by Robert B. Parker are a good example. They're almost always just one scene. I know that Robert Walker argues that a scene is a scene, not a chapter, but I'm not going to get into a pissing contest with him on the subject. Short chapters to me are like potato chips--you can't eat just one. Still, they give a book a different feel.

The Derek Stillwater novels are generally written in very short chapters, which are typically short scenes. I realize there are exceptions to it, the first chapter of *The Devil's Pitchfork* being one. I wanted something cinematic. I have one of the characters at the scene of the crime, if you will, where the terrorists are going to attack and steal the bioweapon. I wanted to set the scene and show the character and the scene is very important because it's a Level 4 biohazard facility, which is quite unique in the world of laboratories, and I wanted to show how difficult it would be for people to get in and out of these places--card locks, multiple airlocks, alarms, etc., and that's just the internal facility. At the same time, the terrorists are making their assault in three white panel vans, and I wanted to simultaneously show them approaching and build up suspense, so I intercut the interior scenes with a paragraph or two from the pov of the vans, ending with something along the lines of, "They were ten minutes out... they were five minutes out..."

Also, these are multiple pov, and I have some concerns about taking the reader too far from the main character, Derek Stillwater. Derek is the pov character in just about every other scene/chapter--intentionally. But in order to tell the particular story I wanted to tell, I needed to go to other places with other people, but I wanted the readers to know that, yes, Derek is the hero, he's the main character.

I'm working on a thriller now, and I'm carefully and intentionally choosing it to be told entirely from the main character's point of view. It could be told from multiple povs like the Stillwater novels, but I'm intentionally trying to do something different and for specific reasons--that is to say, I want them to be exciting, but I don't really want the reader to know more than Joanna does. Joanne has a very specific job to do--protect her client. But she doesn't know exactly why she's protecting him or from who (or whom?), and part of the story is how she unravels those mysteries and how her client knows more than she does but doesn't trust her and it's how their relationship evolves that partly helps unravel the mysteries.

I want, particularly in the book, the reader to feel like they're in her shoes, so to speak, but without the baggage or restrictions of a first-person narrative. (I could go on at length about that choice, but not today). And for some reason that is not completely understood consciously, I'm writing longer chapters. Now by that, I mean 10 or 15 pages, not some 120 page Tom Clancy chapter--that's madness and I really don't like that kind of structure. It's more of a gut feeling kind of thing, a choice to structure them a bit different than the Derek Stillwater novels, to have cliffhangers that are internal parts of the chapters as well as at chapter endings.

Any thoughts?

## Chapter 26: Making a Living in the Arts

The publishing industry is a tough business. As far as I can tell, it probably always has been, at least once writers decided they wanted to make a living at it, rather than treat it as some weird hobby. (Really, if it's a hobby, maybe you should just self-publish and cut out the middleman).

There is gloom and doom everywhere. It's part of show business, so yes, it's a tough business.

A lot of people have this dream of being a writer (musician, artist, actor, etc.) and they think, "I'll get that book published (record contract, well-received show, movie deal) and I'll have it made, I'll be livin' on easy street, fame and fortune and everything that comes with it will be mine."

I don't think most of these people think: "The arts are like a job. You can make a living at it, but you have to work hard, put in your hours, accept that this is not a 9 to 5 gig with health benefits, paid vacation or sick days. There's a lot of competition and although there's a fair amount of need for the arts, it's a luxury, and people can afford to be very picky about how they spend their time and money on luxuries. So I'll have to really work my ass off and find a need and fill it and be in the right time at the right place with the right product--in other words, get lucky."

There are sacrifices, too, or if you don't like that word, perhaps the better word is tradeoffs.

Let's drift from writing for a moment over to musicians. If you're reasonably talented as a musician, you can undoubtedly make a living at it. Let's say you're a guitarist. You can teach guitar lessons. You can form a band or join a band--any kind--and play gigs on weekends at festivals and bars. If you've got the right kind of skill, you can play at weddings and hook up with a singer or for church services at a church large enough to offer some sort of fee.

The next level involves touring, regionally or broader. Burning your own CD and selling it along with whatever performances you give. Then on to wider tours, record contracts, international tours, big companies backing you.

Or breaking in as a studio musician, putting together soundtracks for TV shows, movies, video games, TV commercials.

Yes, that will require you to give up stability, work piecemeal, change where you live to where the work is, work, get your name out there, work, hone your skills, network, work, practice, be flexible and willing to go where the jobs are.

I sense--I was there once--that an awful lot of aspiring novelists believe they will write their novel, get the big contract, and they can make a living--not just a living, but a great living--as a novelist.

And maybe they will.

But I think that's not the way most people make a living in the arts. Yes, there are actors out

there like Harrison Ford or Angelina Jolie who are superstars and can work once a year or once every five years and live happily on the income. There are writers and singers, etc., that are in that same position.

But in any field there's also likely to be an actor who guests on dozen TV shows a year, gets hired to film a few TV pilots, does some TV commercials, acts as an extra a couple times a year on films, does some dinner theater, maybe gives acting lessons, and you know what? Sometimes these people make a decent living.

Writers, too. Lot of novelists out there who work other jobs, or like me, write nonfiction and edit newsletters and technical journals, and write book reviews, and in the case of other novelists, some may teach at their local college or put on seminars or even tend bar.

The point is, well, diversify.

Don't look at me, if you don't want to. Let's look at Lee Goldberg. He writes for TV shows, both on staff and as a freelancer. He writes novel tie-ins for TV shows. He writes novels under his own name. He's written a couple nonfiction books. Prior to breaking into TV he wrote magazine articles, and maybe still does.

I think, in the long run, it is possible to make a living as a writer. But branching out and considering--and be willing--to work outside one area of writing, will increase the odds.

## Chapter 27: No Easy Solutions

A very long time ago, mystery author Robert B. Parker, who pens the Spenser private investigator novels, wrote a novel about a teenage girl who, at least partly in response to her parents, ran away and became a prostitute. I'm not sure, but I think this was "God Save the Child." I do know that he came back to this character in "Taming a Seahorse." Spenser is hired to find and return the girl. He does. She promptly runs away again and proceeds to be a hooker. This happens repeatedly. By the end of the novel, among other things, Spenser's solution is to take the girl to a high-end brothel run by a woman in New York, who takes the girl under her wing. The solution, as it were, is, if you're going to be a hooker, you might as well be the best hooker you can be.

The made-for-TV version, starring Robert Urich as Spenser, had--not surprisingly--a different ending. The girl is taken to a halfway house for teen prostitutes, and the last time we see her she is dressed like a clean-cut cherub in jeans and a loose sweater, looking not remotely sexy. Not, certainly, like we saw her earlier dressed like a little girl in a very short skirt, pig-tails, sucking a lollypop for the "real" sickos she was involved with.

Which ending is better? I know the book's ending took some hits from people who found it to not be a solution at all. I thought when I read it that it was provocative and interesting--troubling, too. Parker often looks for unusual solutions to these types of problems, and as much as the Spenser novels exist in their own sometimes surreal version of SpenserWorld, there is often a conscious admission that easy solutions often only work in fiction and that human beings are complex and that sometimes a half-good solution is better than no solution. And certainly, although the TV version of this story satisfies everybody into believing they all live happily ever after and a teenager who is so troubled that she intentionally pursues increasingly worse versions of prostitution as a way of punishing both her parents and herself can easily and quickly be rehabilitated into a National Honors Society clean-cut teenage girl, at some level this rings horribly false. It's wish-fulfillment at its most dangerous.

At novel's end, we hope for some sort of closure, emotional, if not factual. In my novella, *Catfish Guru*, Theo MacGreggor finds himself investigating the murder of a biologist. The case involves blackmail and cover-ups and ultimately someone is killed by the supposed murderer. It all appears to be wrapped up nice and neat. There is tragedy, but Mac goes home. Then the cop involved in the case visits him and one of the questions he asks is, "Who really killed the scientist?" And Mac says he doesn't know. So the cop asks him the same question a little differently, which is, "Did the guy we arrested for the murder actually do it?" And Mac is more or less forced to say he doesn't think so. There is no evidence, either way, but Mac thinks that the person they arrested, and who did murder someone, did not actually kill the scientist. He thinks someone else did, someone close to him, someone he may have been in love with. The cop tells him there's no evidence. Mac, subtly, if not overtly, suggests that all the evidence he needs in this situation is in his heart.

So who killed the catfish guru? I left that up to the reader to decide. I was concerned when I wrote this that it wasn't decisive enough. And what's fascinated me is when readers read this--just as I had hoped--they all have different ideas on who did the killing. As my brother said, "I'm

comfortable with a certain level of ambiguity." And although the ending is ambiguous, it's a story that seemed to have been well-received by readers.

Sometimes your story needs a straightforward solution. Sometimes you should be creative. Sometimes you should look at all the complexities you created and say, "Maybe there is no straightforward solution." *And if there isn't, how can you bring the story to an end and still have it be satisfying?*

Sometimes--particularly in traditional mysteries--readers want all the loose ends tied up. But in real life they rarely are (which is probably why we want it in our fiction). I think some loose ends can remain loose ends, or, if not that, can turn out to be distractions unrelated to the main knot you're trying to untangle.

Ever hear of the Gordian knot? That big hairball of a knot that Alexander the Great was supposedly going to unravel? Stephen King commented once that in his novel *The Stand*, his solution was to have Alexander pick up his sword, yell, "Fuck it!" and chop the knot to shreds. In King's case, he meant wiping out most of the planet.

In thrillers and mysteries, sometimes it's easy to just kill off the villain. There's a kind of vigilante satisfaction in that. Sometimes that works rather too easily, though. The case your detective makes doesn't have to be strong enough to convince anyone "beyond the shadow of a doubt" that you've got the right perp. He snarls in your sleuth's face that "I got away with it and I'll get away with it next time, too, copper," and your character pulls out a gun and blows the villain away and says, "Not on my beat, you won't."

Sometimes it works. But it's been done to, uh, death. Sometimes you need to find other solutions. It's not easy. You need to satisfy the reader. Closure, the bad guy locked away, the bad guy dead, the bad guy confessing, the bad guy actually coming to a bookstore so the sleuth can say, "I know you're wondering why I brought you here today." It's the responsibility of the novelist to dig a little deeper and come up with a solution to a story that satisfies, is logical, but isn't trite or simplistic.

You didn't think it would be easy, did you?

## Chapter 28: Publishing Basics

I'm by no means an expert on publishing, but I thought I would list some opinions and observations here that might help unpublished writers get a grip on the lion's den they've decided they want to enter. I'm referring predominantly to book publishing, but much of these thoughts also apply to magazine publishing as well.

1. The definition of a publisher is someone with money who publishes. Period. There's no school, no credentials, no licensing. You have money, you publish, voila, you're a publisher. It's worth keeping in mind.
2. Corollary to #1. Even if a publisher publishes because they love books, thought publishing would be cool, etc., they have invested money in the process. What they expect from the author, then, is to make back their initial costs and create a profit for them. This is a long way to say, publishing is a business. But when you forget this, everything about publishing becomes confusing.
3. Editors do not become editors for the money. I read a survey of NY publishing house editors' salaries a few years ago and was stunned that anybody could work in New York City for \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year. I asked my then-agent about it and he commented that they got bonuses if their authors did well. **PAY ATTENTION TO THIS!** Do you understand what that means to you as an author? You're not a charity, and no matter how much your editor may like your work, if it doesn't perform, it hurts your editor's career, not just in terms of salary and bonus, but if they keep backing losing horses, they're pretty soon going to be delivery pizzas for a living.
4. Big publishing was once a so-called "gentleman's profession." There is a tension there still, in that it is stocked by people with Master's degrees in literature who are now running a business. (Which explains many things about publishing, I think). But increasingly, big publishing is owned and top-down managed by businessmen, all those MBAs. That's the tension. The movie industry is the same way. Money people at the top, creative people at the bottom, a mix inbetween. Who do you have to appeal to as a writer? **BOTH!!!**
5. Imagine this scenario. Your book is well reviewed and wins several awards. Your publisher gives you a \$20,000 advance and you only sell 50% of your printing. Will they publish you again? Possibly. But the next book had better get into a 70 or 80% sell-through.
6. Sell-through. Typically books--I'm told--don't sell 100% of their print runs. It would be better for everybody if they did. The publishing industry needs and wants (think requires) a 70% to 80% sell-through. For instance, if they print 10,000 books, they need you to sell 7,000 to 8,000 copies. I would have to do some math here, but I think the 70-80% sell-through is the amount that will put the publisher into the black after paying for production costs.
7. Ask yourself this: What does a publisher want? The next Dan Brown or J.K. Rowling? Or the next Harper Lee? Trick question, isn't it? And complicated. Sure they want the next Da Vinci Code or the next Harry Potter. But they wouldn't mind another "To Kill a Mockingbird" that becomes a classic and sells consistently for 50 years. **BUT...** Harper Lee only wrote one book.

And I guarantee you, publishers aren't interested in one-book authors unless that book should be "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," or "Tuesdays with Morrie" or "The Da Vinci Code."

8. I felt for years that the publishing industry had a moat around it with the drawbridge up. And that I was constantly banging my head against that drawbridge. Now, I seem to be knocking at the door and being occasionally invited in. What happened?

Here's the deal. In order to get the publishing industry to drop the drawbridge and let you in, there is a laundry list of requirements that the would-be writer has to meet. Yes, sometimes people bypass the drawbridge and the requirements and parachute or tunnel their way in, or they're such big freaking powerful writers that a single knock slams the door in. [Excuse the metaphors, please].

What are they?

1. Learn to write well. I'm not talking lyrical, etc. I'm talking effective, which is my definition of good writing. Your writing accomplishes what needs to be accomplished. It carries your story in the best possible way.

2. Be professional. That includes neat manuscripts with few if any spelling or grammar errors, formatted in the proper fashion--12 point font, preferably Ariel, Times New Roman or Courier, one-inch margins, on good clean white paper. It also means corresponding professionally, being patient and treating the entire endeavor as if it's a business, which it is.

3. Write something recognizable. Ouch. But this is why God invented genres. There may very well be a market for, say, a dinosaur who is a private investigator, but I'll tell you what. It's a TINY market. Part of this is also: be aware of what sells. It's tough to say, hey, that sold so I'll write something like it, because that book was bought a couple years ago, so 4 years or more might go by before yours is on the market. But be aware that, for instance, within the mystery genre, there are cozies and P.I. novels (hard and soft and in between), and thrillers and technothrillers and suspense and procedurals and espionage and woo-woo. The same goes for romance and SF and fantasy. You don't have to rigidly fall into one category, but you need to know what the hell you're doing and why if you try to blend things.

4. Be persistent. Joe Konrath regularly says a published writer is one who didn't give up. This is true. But, I would add, there's no guarantee. None whatsoever. You could spend 5 years or 10 years or 30 years and still not break in. Luck is involved, as well.

5. So to that I would add, if you eventually find that you're not enjoying this or don't think it's worth it, well, it probably isn't and you should quit. Life is short. It's not a dress rehearsal, and if this is a voluntary activity that's stressing you out and making your life miserable, for god sakes, find something else to do with your time. You can't get that time back, so if this isn't working for you either professionally or if you don't find it in some way satisfying, try to find something that does.

## Chapter 29: Re-Writing

Okay. Years and years ago, Writers Digest had an article about author and screenwriter Joe Gores. They put multiple copies of the first page of his novel manuscript in the article with his markings on it so readers could see what the process was like. It was the most valuable writing education I ever received, bar none.

I took up his process and in many ways I still use it. Here it is:

1. Write your chapter.
2. Print it out.
3. Take a felt-tipped pen of some vibrant color--red or blue or green or whatever.
4. Read the chapter out loud and make changes with felt-tipped pen.
5. Wait a few moments or hours or whatever.
6. Take a different colored felt-tipped pen and go over the manuscript again. Read it out loud or don't, at this point there's some value in seeing how your brain reacts to the words on the page versus your reading them aloud. Mark up manuscript.
7. Go to computer and make changes on manuscript--this is a third re-write, don't be afraid to make additional changes.
8. Print out.
9. Move on to next chapter.

And here's the caveat when it comes to novels. When you're done, try to put it away for a length of time. Then find yourself a nice comfy location like your sofa, your bed, your favorite armchair, poolside lounge chair, hammock, etc., that is similar to where you would be reading a novel for pleasure. Read your manuscript as if you were a reader. If you must have a pen in your hands at this point, resist rewriting. Maybe jot a few notes here and there about pace and flow or whether a character works or needs more or less or if something is boring you.

Then, go back to step 1 above and do it all over again.

Do I do this all the time? With variations, yes, and now my novels are getting published. It's not written in stone, but it'll definitely help aspiring writers to give it a shot.

### Chapter 30: The Fiction Paradigm

Business 101 says you need to find a need and fill it. For instance, if you notice that nobody is manufacturing widgets that help your car save 6 miles per gallon and you can design one, you've filled a need.

Notice, for example, that malls aren't placed everywhere, but wait for a specific volume of potential customers before the developers shell out the money.

Which begs the question, what is it about fiction writing that fills a need?

You can argue, I think, that with millions of novels already published and 195,000 books a year currently being published and readership supposedly decreasing all the time, that the writer of novels is a fool.

Of course, that's art. Art is rarely a necessary thing. It makes our life better, but we rarely will starve to death if we don't have a pretty picture on the wall. There is a problem, though, when art meets commerce. The business model is different, somewhat, than it is for widgets. At least a little bit.

So, if we, as writers, can't necessarily find a need and fill it, what can we do?

Fiction publishing works a little differently, partly because it's the entertainment business. The U.S. public--and probably humans in general--have an insatiable need for diversion and entertainment. Some argue that the more free time we have, the more time we spend on diversion, but I'm not convinced that people swamped with work aren't in serious need of diversion and seek it out, as well. But we as fiction writers definitely have a problem with a crowded entertainment field--TV, movies, videos, iPods, radio, the Internet, videogames, etc.

One solution is to try and find a need and fill it. You could, for instance, write something that's not ever been done before. Good luck. I have to say, though, that Eric Mayer and Mary Reed have probably done a good job by writing mysteries taking place in 4th or 5th Century Constantinople with a main character who is the chief advisor to the Emperor, and he's also, oh by the way, a eunuch. Nope, in all the genres (mystery) and subgenres (historicals), I would be reasonably confident in saying they are the only ones writing historical fiction about an Egyptian eunuch in Constantinople who solves mysteries.

Still, that seems like a pretty narrow niche. J.A. Konrath writes about a female homicide detective in Chicago. Nothing particularly unique about her from a global perspective. Joe's hook, if you will, is the humor, which I find often clashes with the grimness of the novels, and the fact her name is Jacquelyn "Jack" Daniels and the novels are named after cocktails. It at least gives the product a brand, in a similar way to Sue Grafton's alphabet mysteries. I note that Barry Eisler, who writes novels featuring half-Japanese, half-American John Rain, who is a hired assassin, and his novels all have "Rain" in the title. It's a nice hook.

Still, I'm not sure the hook is enough to draw all readers in and it's sure as hell not enough to

keep them coming back. I think the key here is to provide the reader with what they come to the product for--entertainment and some version of emotional resolution. If somebody's buying a book that's supposed to be funny, well, by god, they'd better laugh or at least be amused. If it's supposed to be an edge-of-your-seat suspense thriller, the reader doesn't have to be reading while sitting on the edge of their seat, but they sure as hell had better continue flipping pages when they should be doing chores, coming to the dinner table or turning off the lights. And if it's a novel about a Eunuch in Constantinople, you had better be damned certain there's cool stuff about Constantinople and the culture and era that isn't standard knowledge.

Ultimately, for a business, it's not very business-like. In fact, it's pretty weird.

### Chapter 31: The Price of Success

First we should define success, I suppose. Everybody's definition is different. Today I'm focusing entirely on fiction, specifically novel-writing, and I want to ask a question with the following parameters:

1. Novel writing
2. Making a living writing novels
3. Living means reasonably comfortable at the minimum, somewhere in the \$50,000 a year and up range

So my question: What is the price of getting to that point?

I don't know, because I haven't even come close.

I caught bits of an interview with Da Vinci Code author Dan Brown yesterday, and he commented that in his earlier books he spent a lot of time trying to sell books out of the trunk of his car and attending little-known writing conferences.

And if that doesn't resonate with authors, I don't know what will.

And for those of you who say, See! Dan Brown did this, too, and look how successful he turned out to be!, I just want you to sit down, take a deep breath, possibly put your head between your knees and have a reality check, okay? Some asshole climbs up on his roof during an electrical storm with an umbrella in his hand and doesn't get strike by lightning doesn't mean the same thing will happen to you.

What hit me about this was he named at least two things that I do that I really don't like to do. And frankly, if you're an author, the chances are you're going to have to do some of this stuff. (Eric, I know you don't do this stuff. Damned if I can figure out how you get away with it).

I've carried books around in my car and flogged them by hand (I've still got copies of Dirty Deeds available. Interested in a discounted, autographed copy? E-mail me.). I've gone to conferences. I've done Rotary Club talks. I've hired a publicist. Done book fairs, library talks, bookstore signings, TV & radio interviews, print interviews and even hawked books at a street fair in Lake Orion.

And I gotta tell you--this is no way to run a business.

You think door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesmen sell vacuums better than Wal-Mart or Kmart? Hey, when's the last time one showed up at your door?

I've done mailings--at my own expense--fliers and mail-order brochures. I've written articles for free for newsletters and websites that should increase my exposure and help sell books. I've got a website.

And it resembles trying to move Mt. Everest from Nepal to south Texas using a teaspoon.

It is the single most difficult endeavor I've ever tried to do. Book promotion is like a giant black hole that sucks up time and money and energy ... and energy ... and energy. It's unbelievable how much energy it takes away from other things. Drive an hour or an hour-and-a-half to a Rotary Club, be chatty with the folks through lunch and singing and the pledge of Allegiance and all their business-y things, then get up on your feet and do your 15-minute dog-and-pony show with as much energy and skill and charm as you can muster, sign 4 books, chat with somebody for 30 seconds, then pack it all up and drive home, knowing that you've spent 4 or 5 hours, \$4 in gas and made \$25 and probably exposed yourself to a number of people who in many cases haven't bought a book to read for pleasure in their entire life.

But that's much of what's involved in the marketing and promoting of novels these days, unless you're very lucky and your publisher does it for you--a big ad in the New York Times and US Today, a TV ad, booking you on Good Morning, America and sending you on a 30-city tour.

So you have to ask yourself--is it worth it?

And nobody can answer that but you.

## Chapter 32: The Tami Hoag Technique

I'm reading Tami Hoag's "Prior Bad Acts" to review. It's the first time I've read anything by this bestseller, although I may have listened to a couple of her books-on-tape. Something caught my interest. She does this repeatedly, but here's an excerpt:

**"I'm telling you the plain truth, Amber," Liska said without emotion. "I'm doing you a favor telling you. If you don't straighten up and at least pretend to be a good citizen, the parole board is not going to be all that anxious to kick you back out into the real world. That's how it is.**

**"You're pulling real time here. This isn't county jail, where they're happy to watch your ass walk out the door because they need the bed," Liska said. "Unlike a lot of other places, the State of Minnesota has plenty of prison cells to go around.**

**"Am I getting through to you here? I don't want to make things hard for you, Amber. I really don't. I don't even want to be here right now. I've got two kids of my own. I'd like to be spending time with them.**

**"I'm sure, as a mother, you can understand that. You remember what it was like. Your kids look up to you like you've got the key to the world. That love is like no other. That bond is stronger than anything."**

Now, just so you know, this is a homicide cop talking to the incarcerated junkie whose two children, who were placed in a foster home, has been murdered, and the cop is trying to work her into giving her any clue as to who might be stalking the judge in the murder case.

But the reason I bring this up is this is a long stretch of dialogue, one person speaking, and Hoag breaks it up into four separate paragraphs. She does this a lot, although this is the most dramatic example I've come across.

Pros: It's generally accepted that in commercial fiction, you should keep your paragraphs short. Lots of white space. All those long blocks of content can put off readers. Don't agree? Fine, don't agree, but I think the point has some merit. So I'm fairly positive that Hoag is doing this intentionally to keep the blocks short, which gives readers some mental reprieve, but also keeps the pace snappy. Joe Konrath noted that if you look at bestsellers and count the paragraphs per page, there tends to be more of them. That seems to be rather mechanistic and obsessive of Joe, but he's probably right.

Con: One of the reasons this has been so noticeable to me is that when I see a paragraph break in the middle of dialogue, I tend to interpret that as another person is speaking or narration is coming up. In this case, the quotation marks indicates it's dialogue, so my brain is saying, "Okay, another speaker." But it's not another speaker, and this is flinging me out of the story a little bit, which is a bad thing.

Note that Hoag uses a character tag in the first two paragraphs, ie., Liska said. In the third

paragraph she uses the name of the person who is being spoken to, Amber.

I'm not sure this is a recommended approach, although Hoag has been enormously successful. In this case my approach would have been to have Amber try to interrupt and Liska to talk over. I think that creates urgency, heightens tension, and frankly, that's how people talk in the real world, often on top of each other. Here's an example if I were to rewrite the above, with apologies to Ms. Hoag:

"I'm telling you the plain truth, Amber," Liska said without emotion. "I'm doing you a favor telling you. If you don't straighten up and at least pretend to be a good citizen, the parole board is not going to be all that anxious to kick you back out into the real world. That's how it--"

"Mind your own business, bi--"

"You're pulling real time here. This isn't county jail, where they're happy to watch your ass walk out the door because they need the bed," Liska said. "Unlike a lot of other places, the State of Minnesota has plenty of prison cells to go aro--"

"They can have mine, it's all theirs. I didn't do nothing. And I'm gonna sue--"

"Am I getting through to you here? I don't want to make things hard for you, Amber. I really don't. I don't even want to be here right now. I've got two kids of my own. I'd like to be spending time with them."

So you've got options. Hoag's are interesting.

### Chapter 33: The Terry Imperative

For a moment I want you to ask yourself a question. There is no correct answer. This is aimed primarily at aspiring writers, although pros might do well to ask themselves this as well. For today, at least, the answer to these questions shall be known as The Terry Imperative, and we'll assume, even if it is not remotely true, that the answers are important to your success as a writer. So here they are.

1. Do you like to write novels? Or do you want to be a novelist?
2. Do you want to write novels? Or do you want to be an author?
3. Are you a writer? Or are you a novelist? Or are you an author?
4. What matters more to you? Actually writing? Or being a writer?

My editor, Judy Geary, at High Country Publishers, Ltd made a comment to me once about how one of her writers really "enjoyed doing that author thing." She meant the promotion thing, where she went out among people and played "author."

I'll tell you a secret. For me, that's the least favorite aspect of the whole gig, one I'm sort of uncomfortable with. Partly because I get a sense that the audience wants something from me--and I'm not sure what it is--that I'm unable to give. The books aren't enough, apparently. They want something else.

I think a tremendous number of aspiring novelists actually want to be novelists or authors more than they want to write.

For me ... writing is what I want to do. The process of writing gives me great pleasure and satisfaction. Getting paid for the privilege does, as well. The trappings of author success, the promotion, interviews, book signings, conferences, well, they're just bizarre. But sometimes I think a lot of aspiring novelists focus entirely on that, the idea that they will be, quote, unquote, an "author," and do book signings and go to conferences and give talks and do interviews.

Sometimes I wish I could hire somebody to impersonate me to do the promotional stuff, somebody who likes it and brings unceasing energy to the process of being upbeat and positive and charming. I'll stay home and write, thanks.

That's not to say that process is all a chore. The more I do it the more I enjoy some of it, although I'm fairly stunned that there are people like Joe Konrath who can go to a conference and be "out there," from the minute it opens until way past the bar closes. I have to go hide in my room or in a corner from time to time. Kind of reminds me of the old "The Incredible Hulk" bit when Bill Bixby says, "Don't make me angry. You won't like me when I'm angry."

"Let me go back to my room and lay down for an hour or you won't like me. Trust me on this. When I get back, I'll be pleasant and charming, but until then, get the fuck out of my way!"

I love writing. I love being a writer. Being an "author," and a "novelist," though not without its charms, brings me pleasure in a way that is directly tied into the actual process of writing, not in everything that happens after publication. Except, of course, cashing the checks. I'm pretty fond of that.

## Chapter 34: Thoughts on Professional Writers

I've gotta run, but if you go to Paul Guyot's blog (see link above), he references Jim Warren's blog. I've got an excerpt here, and I'll get back to you later for a few more comments.

"Likewise, I find that experienced writers talk about technical things. I've never had another writer ask me where I got my ideas. The other writer wants to know how I thought of structuring a scene in a particular way, or what techniques are appropriate for a short piece but not for a novel, or whether using multiple POVs will make a story more interesting or not. In many ways, they are more interested in the choices we all make in telling the story than the story itself. They care less about what we write than how we write it."

Okay. I'm back now. What Jim's probably talking about is the difference between a good story and good storytelling. Because sometimes--not always--but sometimes, that's the difference between published and unpublished. A lot of unpublished writers have a good story. They just don't tell it well. A lot of how to do this comes from practice, from reading a lot (critically) and writing a lot and getting some sort of feedback and paying attention to it.

Caveat: not all unpublished writers have a good story. They have a good IDEA. This is worthy of a blog entry itself, probably. A good idea can be: Drunken man and family take job in isolated hotel for winter and it's haunted. How Stephen King wrote "The Shining," however, is both a good story and good storytelling. The good story part has to do with drama and conflict more than anything, which may or may not be separate from character. But conflict is what I'm after when it comes to a good story, because everything else falls into place.

I think when professional writers get together we have a tendency to talk less about technique and more about business-related issues like agents and contracts and marketing, dancing around any detail that might make us look unsuccessful, but I think Jim's right in that the professional, successful writer looks at technique differently than the unpublished.

Tim Drumheller, a friend of mine I worked with at Henry Ford Hospital, went on to get his PhD and now directs a laboratory somewhere--Colorado? I think. Anyway, like most degree programs at most levels, he had to take a lot of coursework that he suspected he'd never actually use. He asked his advisor about this and that gentleman said, "Do you have tools in your garage?" Tim says yes. "You have any tools in your garage you almost never ever use?" Of course, Tim says yes. "But you've got that tool just in case you need it."

Professional writers not only have more tools in their garage than the typical aspiring writer, but they know how and when to use them--usually. The when, in particular, is the art of writing, whereas the how and the specific tools you use--pov, word choice, pacing, what to leave in and what to take out, etc--is the craft. You can learn the craft. You can learn the art, too, but it's a much more subjective issue.

## Chapter 35: Thoughts on Research

Some of my earlier unpublished work suffered from insufficient research. (They also suffered from insufficient writing, but that's a different topic). This was, largely, pre-Internet.

Now, thanks mostly (but not exclusively) to the Internet, I do much more research for my novels, and it shows. Also, since turning full-time freelance nonfiction writer, a big part of what I do is call up experts and interview them. For instance, I spent thirty minutes talking to a forensic expert yesterday for a column I'm writing about jobs in forensic sciences.

Because I've largely moved from mysteries to thrillers, my books tend to be even more research-intensive than they were previously. I'm largely of the "hum a few bars and fake it" school, but sometimes I have to wonder. David Morrell, who writes amazing thrillers, does a ton of hands-on research, including attending wilderness survival schools and taking evasive driving courses. I recently interviewed Vince Flynn for a profile and he goes to the Middle East to research his espionage novels. In fact, I was given a photograph of Vince meeting with the King of Jordan, giving him a copy of his latest novel. He also told me that all his insider knowledge comes from a range of contacts he has with the CIA, FBI, DHS, DoD, etc., who are willing to talk to him and when they say he can't include something, he doesn't.

I'm not there. At least not yet. But in some ways I can see some aspect of that coming. Maybe. I have an idea for a Derek Stillwater novel that takes place largely in San Francisco. (Why? I'm not sure.) It will start in South Korea and move to San Francisco. From what I envision of this story, should I get to it, the South Korea part will mostly take place in the US military base there, so I don't think in-person research would be necessary, although it never seems to hurt. As for San Francisco, well, I've never been there and I think I would almost have to go there for this novel.

Some of it depends on the type of novel you're writing. I am routinely astonished by the depth of detail involved in Mary Reed and Eric Mayer's "John the Eunuch" novels that take place in-- correct me if I've got the dates wrong, Eric--5th Century Constantinople. I couldn't even begin to write about this era, such is the depth of my ignorance. In fact, historicals prior to about 1980 would be completely useless for me to attempt.

There's a lot you can do by hanging out on the Internet, reading books and talking to people. I've been to Washington, D.C., but in *The Devil's Pitchfork* I was looking for some sort of park to have an ambush in. I sent out an e-mail on DorothyL asking if anyone really familiar with D.C. could help me out. They did, made suggestions, which led me to maps and photographs and articles and even TV/video clips of Rock Creek Park.

There's a lot to be said about "write what you know," although I'm fonder of my variation, which is, "Write what you're interested in." Not to insult anybody, but cozies mysteries about amateur sleuths are a popular subgenre, but all too often they're written by people who don't want to research anything, so they use themselves as the main character and voila, they have a novel. Sometimes that works very well. Sometimes it just seems weak (to me).

Will you get things wrong? Uh, yeah. Undoubtedly. And readers can be pretty picky about that, too. At the beginning of *Dirty Deeds*, Meg Malloy is working at a computer in a small server room of an internet service provider. I actually visited one. A friend of mine runs one for GMAC Worldwide, and she showed it to me and explained what I was seeing. So that's pretty much what I wrote. A computer guy came back to me and said I got it all wrong. I said I doubted it since I was describing what I saw, but I appreciated the feedback. Something about the description didn't work for him, though he's the only one who's made the comment.

I did a signing with Loren Estleman and a couple other writers and we were talking about this and Loren started laughing and told a story about an editor who didn't like somebody's novel about Wyatt Earp. When asked why he said, you placed an oak tree on that hill and there's never been an oak tree on that hill.

Well, I guess that's why it's called fiction.

## Chapter 36: Time to Write

Although I'm a fulltime freelancer, that doesn't necessarily mean I have more time to work on fiction. It just sort of depends, though I almost always create an hour to two hours just for fiction.

When I first decided I wanted to write seriously, way, way back, I was in college getting a degree in microbiology and working a part-time job, so I knew time was going to be an issue. I took a page (so to speak) from my history as a piano and saxophone teacher and student and gave myself 30 minutes a day. That was my writing time. What it trained me to do was crank it out.

Over the years, I would work late at night after the kids and my wife went to bed. I know of some who work early in the morning before going to work. That would never work for me, but late at night did.

There were times when I got too busy to write, but I felt--and still do, actually--that it's important to try to write every day or almost every day, for it to become a habit. And it might be 10:30 at night and I'd rather be watching TV or reading a book or getting ready for bed, and I would say, "Just go down to your office and write one page. You can write one page in no time at all. One page a day for a year, 365 days, you'll have a novel manuscript. Just one page."

And it worked. And usually once I got through that page, I was in the flow and could do two or three or five, which is typically what I aim for--5. And if I wasn't, and I got one page done, or hell, even a paragraph or two, that was good. At least I did something. Like Woody Allen saying that 9/10 of success was just showing up.

Now I find my time eaten up by paying gigs, re-writes, deadlines, and to be honest--promotional things (and blogs)--but I still try to focus on the fact that at a minimum, one page, one page, one page...

## Chapter 37: What Do Editors Want?

What do editors want?

Besides a beach house in Maui, a better sex life and a 25-pound weight loss without diet or exercise?

--a neat, clean manuscript in a 12-point font with 1-inch margins on good stock paper

--a manuscript that is the appropriate length for the genre, probably somewhere in the range of 70,000 to 110,000 words, although between 70,000 and 100,000 is better in most cases

--something in a recognizable genre--a romance, a mystery, SF, fantasy, thriller, mainstream, etc.

--although they want something in a recognizable genre, they would also like to sit up and take notice and think, "Gee, this is fresh." That doesn't necessarily mean your romance novel is about flesh-eating werewolves.

--characters they give a damn about

--a professional level of craft; this means few if any typos, grammar errors, passive voice, etc., that the writing is economical, graceful and effective. Contrary to common perception, it is NOT the editor's job to "fix" the writing problems

--professionalism from the writer and his/her's representative

--realistic expectations. Nothing turns off an editor like someone coming in with a first novel and expecting a six-figure advance, movie deals and getting on Oprah. Might happen, but in most cases won't

--something that will make money, even a lot of money, so the editor can keep his or her job, get a performance bonus and afford to pay their mortgage on their beach house in Maui

--something the editor can fall in love with. Yes, despite being as crass and money-fixated as, say, the writers and agents, the editor would prefer to get a manuscript they love; this is how they make a living, and they want it to be fun, too

--no prima donnas allowed. They want someone who's easy to work with, open-minded and accommodating editorial comments and changes, flexible with scheduling, reliable about deadlines and cheerful and optimistic

I'm sure there's more, but those are the gimmes.

## Chapter 38: What to Write?

Stephen King, when asked why he writes horror, has famously replied, "What makes you think I have a choice?"

I've read some of King's nonfiction and some of his stories, like "Misery" and "Gerald's Game" that could probably more accurately be called suspense or a thriller than horror, and believe King does have a choice, but...

I accept his point. Some of it's inclination. We tend to write about what we like. My fiction has almost always been mystery or thrillers. I started out writing fiction, though, with sci-fi short stories. I also dabbled a bit in horror. As I've gotten older, my taste in both writing and reading has gotten narrower (not particularly healthy) and for the most part lies in the large echoing hallways of the crime/suspense genre. It makes sense then that that's what I write.

I started writing fiction and sort of fell into nonfiction. My first publication was actually a poem, but after that it was an essay about the genetics field, then technical book reviews. My first paid publication was an essay for *Traverse Magazine* called "Blue Heaven," and it's nonfiction, I suppose, about why the appeal of Traverse City is the color blue (blue sky, blue water, etc). But with a degree in microbiology & public health and 18 years working in clinical genetics, cancer research and infectious disease research, it's not completely surprising that I write quite a bit in that area. My plain-jane writing styles suits the technical material, and I have an ability to take very complicated subjects and turn them into relatively easy-to-understand materials. (It's a gift born of my inability to understand the complicated subjects as complicated subjects, so in order to grasp them I have to simplify them for myself). Either way, it's helped me in my career.

My friends Eric Mayer and Mary Reed write historical mysteries. I like theirs. I don't, as a rule, like historical novels much. As a result, I sure as hell can't write one. I correct that statement--I could if I had to, but it would be a chore and I would struggle with it. It would be technically proficient--I'm a pro, after all--but I'm not sure it would have the necessary "heart."

I recently interviewed Jay MacLarty, author of the upcoming "Live Wire" and his previous two novels, "The Courier" and "Bagman." The main character, Simon Leonidovitch (spelling is probably wrong) is a high level security courier. He travels all over the world. So, I might add, has Jay. Jay recently read and blurbed "The Devil's Pitchfork," and when we were talking, I asked him about his research, which to me would seem quite extensive. He said, no, not that much. Certainly not as much as I did for "Pitchfork." I told him he might be surprised. I read Richard Preston's "The Hot Zone" and "The Demon in the Freezer," but everything else was pretty much pulled off the Internet as needed and built on things I already knew from years in the biotech field.

Jay kind of laughed. Jay's run restaurants, several other types of businesses, owned a small software company, gambled professionally and is now a writer. He also likes to travel and if you check out his website, [www.jaymaclarty.com](http://www.jaymaclarty.com), you'll see photos of Jay in China and Italy and other exotic places. He told me that much of what he wrote tends to be primarily about things he's already familiar with, at least to some extent.

The point is, the novels I'm currently writing feel like I was meant to write them. Although I've never been in Special Forces like Derek Stillwater, I do have a degree in microbiology, worked in the field of infectious disease research, and have an interest in bioterrorism. I've written a number of articles on the subject, as well as about cutting-edge biotechnology and emerging technologies. [Writing nonfiction for a living has been something of an eye-opener, because not only do you have to force yourself to be interested in topics you might not otherwise be, you often surprise yourself by exactly what you ARE interested in].

The point is, sometimes we're well-suited for a certain type of writing. It chooses us, rather than us choosing it. That isn't to say you can't choose to write about something else because you're curious or think there's a market for it. One of the big literary agents, Evans, I believe, who also writes mystery novels (about a literary agent, go figure), has said writing about what you like is one thing, but a smarter thing to do is think a little bit more about what's marketable that happens to overlap with your own tastes and interests, then gear your work that way.

My suggestion for unpublished authors isn't very encouraging. It's, yes, think about if there's a market, but also, write the story you want to, because you're going to be with that story for a long time. And it's entirely possible it won't get published, so you'd better at least enjoy the process. But the truth is, publishing is a business, and there's not much point in building and marketing a widget that nobody wants or needs.

### Chapter 39: Where's the Story?

I started working on a new novel a few weeks ago. I'm writing it under a pseudonym (which is better than writing it under duress, I suppose), and although it's a thriller, it's rather different than anything else I've written and I hope (hope, hope, hope--is there an echo in here?) that it'll get published and turn into a successful series. I'm about 45 pages in.

Ahem. So?

I don't outline. The few times I've tried that it hasn't been successful. I'm much more of a, here's a title, here's a character, here's a premise, here are the things I think should happen, let's go. Driving across country in the dark, following my headlights, knowing I'm gonna hit Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, Dallas and hopefully get to my destination, say, San Diego. Preferably without going from St. Louis to Chicago and back to St. Louis, then back to Chicago, then over to St. Paul, then back to Chicago, Detroit, then to Indianapolis to Chicago...

I have no reason to doubt what I'm doing.

Except of course I do. Where's the damned story? I ask myself. Here's the main character. I'm getting to know her. Here's the secondary character. Getting to know him. Here's the plot. The setting. But ... where's the damned story?

It's there. In fact, I know it is. Here's the real trick. Stephen King said once that writing for him is like archaeology. He sees this neat thing sticking up out of the sand and it's his job to carefully dig it out without breaking it. He's not always sure what it is he's digging out of the sand. He's not always sure of its size. Maybe it's a short story. Maybe a novella. Maybe a novel. He has a pretty good idea what it is eventually, but not until he gets it all brushed off, out of the ground (unbroken), cleaned up and polished off is he completely sure what it is.

Bingo!

I've got a chunk of my story out of the ground. It seems strong, but you never know, they do break when you least expect it. It's an interesting story, what I see so far. I've got a lot of digging to do, though. Not just cleaning and polishing, but actual digging, to get this sucker out of the ground. And I feel like I'm writing blind.

This isn't entirely unusual for me. It's a rare novel--The Serpent's Kiss was one--where I knew pretty much what it was when I started it, and it lived up to my expectations.

Somehow I've worked my way back to a "leap of faith," that omnipresent theme of this blog, along with, "what is success?"

## Chapter 40: A Writer's Dirty Little Secret

Yesterday I mentioned that I was working on a new novel under a pseudonym, and that seemed to be the part that garnered interest from readers. As I was walking the dog this morning I thought, you commented on this, but you sort of danced around the real reason. And that made me think that it was time to talk about a dirty little secret that almost all writers of fiction and nonfiction aren't always honest about. It's money.

Okay? Yes, so far I'm quite pleased with the new publisher. They gave me a small advance. They seem to have distribution, marketing, etc. I may very well be with them--happily--for a very long time.

But if that book had been picked up by a major NY publisher, the advance would have bigger. Possibly just a little bigger. Probably a whole lot bigger. And yes, folks, I do give a damn about the money I make as a writer, and if you were honest with yourself, you probably do, too.

If my entire goal were to make a lot of money, writing--novels or nonfiction--would be a pretty stupid way to go about it. I can think of half a dozen careers right off the top of my head that I could pursue that make more money than writing--plumbers, electricians, accountants, teachers, medical technologists, union truck drivers. I can think of a half dozen businesses that would potentially be more lucrative than writing--restauranteur, UPS Store owner, lawncare... you get the idea.

Still, the novel I'm working on under a pseudonym has a commercial hook, is high concept, and I gave some thought to how to make it as commercial as possible when I sifted through story ideas, settling for the one I chose.

This is not always the way I work on fiction. A lot of times I just have an idea that interests me, and I go with it. This time, I sifted through ideas looking for the one that seemed most commercial, most likely to get a decent contract, that I could do well, that has a hook, a clearly defined audience, and that hopefully a publisher will take one look at it and say, "Yeah, we can make some money off this."

Will it work? Fuck if I know.

Does it make me crass and money-fixated? Hey, folks, as Stephen King said, "Some of you are calling me crass and money-fixated, and some of you are calling me bad names."

The fact is, I make a living as a writer. It's a decent living, roughly equivalent to what I was making working as a cytogenetics technologist at a major hospital. But there are no benefits, I have to take care of my retirement myself, and guess what? I have expenses. I have a mortgage, utility bills, a car payment... I like to take a decent vacation at least once a year, go out to eat, catch movies, and hope to help my kids with their college educations when we come to that.

Do I want to get rich? I don't even know what "rich" is anymore. Would I like to make more money than I am currently? Sure. I'll find a way to spend it. Or invest it. Or have a thicker

cushion for rough times. Or stay at a nicer resort next time we can afford to go to Disney World, or just have some peace of mind that I have enough money in the bank to weather the next slow-paying client. Or to be in a position to say, "No thanks," when a client turns out to be a jerk.

I think most writers--especially in fiction--have some sort of dream of riches, the bestsellers list, etc. I'd be happy if that happened, but upper midlist sounds good, too. I'll try not to adjust my lifestyle to spend it all.

Fairly recently bestselling author Tess Gerritsen took some heat for worrying on her blog that her latest paperback hadn't hit the NY Times Bestseller List where she had hoped it would. People got all over her about it, "oooooh, poor Tessy, making money none of the rest of us will ever see, but whining about her income dropping off..."

I chose to view her as a businesswoman concerned about the current market and her sales position. A lot rides on where she hit that list. She was expressing a concern a lot of writers have--and a lot of writers, if they ever were to hit her sales level, would have the same worries.

Let's be clear. If it were all about money, I wouldn't be doing this at all. I wouldn't write fiction at all, and I probably wouldn't be writing nonfiction either. If it were only money, I could get an MBA or a law degree and go work for someone else for money. Or buy a pizza franchise or whatever.

I've often thought that the biggest difference between aspiring novelists and people who buy lottery tickets, is that lottery ticket buyers don't really expect to win. But all novelists seem to think they're going to make a fortune, hit the bestsellers list, etc.

All? Well, most. I gave a talk lately and, as usual at Library talks, 3/4 of the audience was aspiring writers, and in this case, two of them had book contracts. One of them commented, "I'm just thrilled to see it in print. I'm not worried about sales or money."

Uh-huh. I didn't believe her, but I'm willing to say: That's nice. But, if you don't get worried about sales, which has a clear-cut mathematical connection to money, and you don't sell-through, it may be the only book you sell or get published.

If ever the law of supply and demand applied, it applies to writing. There are tons of decent manuscripts out there with a relatively finite number of slots for them to be published. If a publisher buys your manuscript, publishes it and it disappoints, they will probably give you another chance ... maybe. But if it continues to disappoint, well, they're probably receiving about 200 manuscripts a week and at least one of them could fill your slot.]

So that's my dirty little secret.

## Chapter 41: The Writer's Toolbox

I haven't seen any of the films nominated for Oscar this year, but I want to mention *The Lord of the Rings* as an example of what I'm getting at today.

Peter Jackson used a wide variety of techniques in making those films. Not just behind-the-scenes techniques like special effects and body doubles for long shots of the Hobbits and how he placed actors in the scene so it appeared that Gandalf was tall and Frodo was short--and if you don't know, watch some of the extra DVD materials.

But up-front things: aerial shots, tracking shots, close-ups, reaction shots, shots made close to the ground (watch the scene in *The Two Towers* when Aragorn thinks Pippin and Merry are dead and kicks the helmet in rage and frustration--by the way, Viggo broke a couple toes in that particular take. It looks like the camera's on the ground.)

My point is Jackson has a very big toolbox filled with a lot of tools and he used them.

We as writers have a toolbox and some of us fill them with tools and some of us don't, but in a long work of fiction, it's an excellent idea to use as many tools as possible.

For example, in dialogue, not just he said or she said, but: "Are you out of your mind?" She pressed her hands against her ears and closed her eyes. "I don't want to know!"

Versus, "Are you out of your mind?" she asked. "I don't want to know!"

Versus: "Are you out of your mind? I don't want to know!"

Versus:

Marci: "Are you out of your mind? I don't want to know!"

Variety is the spice of life, and that's true in writing as well. You can get a little too flashy, in my opinion, but it depends on the work. It needs to serve the work. But mixing it up helps, too.

I think you need to stay away from static description and lecturing and include these in action, but I would also say--most of the time. From time to time a bit of static description or lecturing may be appropriate, as long as it's done in an effective manner or it has some purpose--sometimes it's worthwhile to slow the story down a bit or bring attention to something. I remember when I read JK Rowling's "*The Order of the Phoenix*," I got rather annoyed early on with all of her detailed descriptions of Harry's first trip to the Ministry of Magic. It went on and on and on... well, there was a reason for it. The entire climax of the novel takes place there and she didn't want to have to slow that down with description, so she put it in earlier.

One serious caveat. Just because you've got a tool doesn't mean you have to use it. You can do quite nicely by having straightforward, solid, clear, effective writing. In fact, you should, most of

the time. That's your vehicle. The rest may be the chrome and the paint job or some nice scenery on your trip.

What's in your toolbox?

## Chapter 42: Business Essentials

All right class. My occasional columns, Writing 101, focus on writing nuts and bolts. I'm going to also write occasional columns I'll dub Writing 201 on the business of writing, focusing primarily on freelancing, not fiction.

One of the reasons for this is that I'm taking stock of where my career is. I have been getting articles published and paid for the privilege since 1993. In June of 2004 I went down to 2 10-hour workdays on my job so I could write fulltime the other 3 (or 5) days a week. It went so well that in October of 2004 I quit my day job to become a fulltime freelance writer. I love it. Still... I have a lot to learn about things, and there's a whole week's worth of possible topics involving tracking your income closely so you can pay quarterly taxes and the matter of scheduling your vacations around your tax-paying. But, ahem... enough of my mistakes for now.

I want to talk about the direction of your writing career, ie., what to focus your writing efforts on. Skipping my novel writing for the moment, the majority of my writing is for trade journals, typically in the medical, biotechnology areas, though I've broken into practice management (for physicians) and some small business and consumer subjects. It's good to specialize. My pay rates for magazines runs from about \$100 per article to my highest paying at 85 cents per word. I've recently picked up some in the 40 cents per word range, which is good. Still, you've got to write a lot and keep up the constant pressure to make a living at this. And I'm sure I'm obsessing because I have a large Visa bill and nobody has paid me in about 3 weeks, despite the fact that I'm owed about three or four thousand dollars for work completed.

The point being, as I'm coming up on one full year of writing fulltime, it seems like a good time to examine the direction of my career and decide if I want to continue with these types of markets, which I am very comfortable with, or shift direction a bit and try copywriting or technical writing. I have a science background and I've written extensively for two of the major trade journals in the pharmaceutical and biotech industry, so I'm thinking strongly of putting some efforts in trying to break into the pharmaceutical technical writing. I've done a tiny bit of it. One simple reason is this: money! [Do I sound crass and money-fixated? Tough! I've been called worse.] Consider that pharmaceutical technical writers can routinely charge anywhere from \$75 to \$175 per hour depending on their credentials and experience, why do you think I'm considering making the effort?

Okay. Take away message. Here's an important calculation to consider. How much money do you want to make? Decide on how much money you'd like to make a year. I'll throw out a round number--\$50,000. Divide that by 2080, which is the number of hours you would work on a "real job" at 9 to 5. That gives you a base "hourly" rate. In this case, approximately \$24 to \$25 dollars per hour. Then, because you're a freelancer and you have overhead, insurance, no paid time off, sick days or retirement, multiply it times 3. That comes out to \$75 an hour, which is a rate you should try to hit in order to make \$50,000. Keep in mind that you won't be working 2080 BILLABLE hours as a freelancer. 1000 to 1500 is more likely. (If you're lucky).

In my case, that \$75 per hour seems rather high, but anywhere from \$40 to \$75 would be reasonable, but there are too many factors involved for me to go into that, but one of the

important factors is: What will the market bear?

But by looking at this as a guideline rather than a rule, and giving some realistic thought to what your goals are, at least you have some direction. And it will make you look at those \$100 magazine articles you spend 5 or 6 or 7 hours working on in a very different light. I was recently contacted by a magazine that wanted me to write an article with less than a week's lagtime, about 800 words, and they paid a whopping \$50. I politely declined. I would have done it years back to get clips, but now my time is very valuable and time spent on that (less than \$10 an hour, probably) is time taken away from more important and better paying work. It's brutal out there and you have to treat your services as if they are valuable. Don't give them away.

## Chapter 43: Getting An Agent

I have been a little reluctant to touch on this topic, but I know a lot of writers are interested. I've called it Writing 301 because it's more advanced than other lessons, not because it's more difficult, but because I think writers should pay more attention to learning how to write and learning the business of writing before venturing out to working with an agent. That said, I've had three agents. The first was an amateur, though he sold some stuff for other people. The second was a New York agent with a well-established agency who represented me for 6 years and never sold anything. I broke off with them because I felt that they were getting to a point where every time I sent in a manuscript I could hear echoes all the way from the East Coast saying, "Oh Jesus, here he comes again." And their responses got slower and slower and slower. I'm not bitter about it. They must have seen something in my writing and overall I'm grateful for their support, but sometimes things just don't work out. And my recent agents, who are not in New York, have managed to get me signed up with a 2-book contract. So I do understand a bit about this. First, what does an agent do for you?

1. They represent your materials to editors. Presumably appropriate editors for the materials. They may do a bit of buzz building and selling before they send it. They presumably have some sort of relationship with various editors or at the very least know what types of materials editors like and are looking for.
2. They negotiate contracts. I've negotiated three book contracts (actually 4, now that I think about it) myself, and watched as my agent negotiated the 2-book contract with Midnight Ink/Llewellyn Worldwide. That 15% commission you pay your agent is worth every penny. Although I have some understanding of what the contracts are about, knowing what was fair was a complete mystery. My agent knew and asked for it. She could give me advice. Unlike me, she was willing to walk away if she thought the contract was too bad.
3. Advances and royalties are paid to the agent by the publisher. The agent then deducts their commission and cuts a check for you. If the publisher is a slow-pay or there are problems, your agent is your financial representative.
4. Market and sell subsidiary rights like foreign sales, audio sales, TV and movie sales. Assuming that the agent negotiated control of these things in your original contract.
5. That's about it. Those are the three basics. There are other things an agent may do. An agent may give you editorial advice. Two of mine have. They may give you career advice. They may give you marketing support and advice. Not all do. They may hold your hand and tell you how wonderful you are, etc., but that's more style than job requirement.

So how do you get an agent?

1. Write something. Finish it. I know you've heard of people getting their first novels picked up by agents (and publishers) on the basis of a few chapters and an outline. That's nonfiction. In fiction, it happens from time to time. From time to time people get struck by lightning and live. It's not advisable and it's not common and it's no reason to dance naked on your roof during an

electrical storm. Make the manuscript just as good and clean as you possibly can.

2. There are two very good sources for agents. The Association of Author Representatives website. I don't have it here, but you can google it. The AAR has a canon of ethics, membership requirements, and a list of members. Note. My current agents are not AAR members, but adhere to the canon of ethics. Another source, and for my money a little bit better one, is "Guide to Literary Agents," by Vater, published by Writer's Digest Books.

3. Write a query letter. Rewrite it. Rewrite it again. Make it really, really good. Make sure it fits on one sheet of paper. Agents get hundreds, even thousands of queries. Brevity in query letters is a virtue. Get to the friggin' point. Treat this as a major, vital writing assignment. Craft it. Structure? I suggest you start with, "I have written a thriller titled 'REALLY COOL TITLE HERE' that runs about 95,000 words." Follow it with a brief, interesting, concise, intriguing description of your story. Work on this. In that first sentence the word count isn't vital, but the type of book is. If your manuscript runs 250,000 words, stop writing the query letter, go back to your novel and edit until it's closer to 100,000 words. An agent will not likely be too interested in a first novel by an unpublished novelist that is that long, no matter how good it is. The kids who wrote Eragon had to cut 400 pages!

Paragraph 2 is who you are. If you have any kind of publication history, describe it here. If you have publication history that ties into the book--ie., you've published short stories, another novel, etc., mention it here. If you've foolishly self-published through iUniverse or any of those places, should you mention it? No. They don't give a shit. Unless, of course, your self-published opus went on to sell 50,000 copies. If it did, don't worry, agents and editors are probably looking for you. If you haven't published anything, but your career ties into something in the book, mention it. In other words, you're writing a novel about a forensic expert and you happen to be a forensic expert. Otherwise, keep it to a minimum.

Paragraph 3. Here's where I vary a bit. Tell them you've enclosed a brief (one-page synopsis) and the first 50-some pages of the manuscript (see next section) and a self-addressed stamped envelope.

4. You can just go with the query letter, synopsis and SASE. It's cheaper. It's also less effective. If they're interested, they'll ask to read 3 or 4 chapters or maybe the entire manuscript. Be confident. Send out a decent chunk. They'll probably at least take a peek. Then they'll throw it away if they don't want it. Oh, which reminds me. That SASE. Business envelope, one stamp. Don't send postage to have the manuscript returned. It's useless to you. They'll have spilled coffee on it, kicked it around the mailroom, whatever. It's not useful for sending out again. Have them discard it. Either tell them, "If this manuscript does not meet your needs, please discard and let me know with the enclosed SASE." Or assume they have at least half a brain and can discard it themselves because it won't fit into a business envelope. **DO NOT SEND THE ENTIRE MANUSCRIPT.** It's tempting, right? Hey, why just send 50 pages and not the entire ms? Well, because they won't read it and it might get returned to you and it's expensive to copy and ship an entire manuscript. Also, see the next section.

5. Some articles on getting an agent suggest you send these query letters out one at a time. Well,

how do I say this? Bullshit. Yes, that will do. This is a numbers game. Agents receive hundreds of unsolicited letters every week. Hundreds! Most are shit. Incorrect names, spelling, grammatical errors, hand-written, inappropriate or psychotic. Letters that read like: "My brother said my novel is great and should be a bestseller like John Grisham, and I think so to, so here it is, when do I get my check?" Or, "I know you'll love my book it's great. And if you don't, and you tell me, I'm going to kill myself, so don't tell me you hate it because I'm just sitting here with a bottle of pills waiting your rejection letter." Out of those hundreds, a few will look professional. Let's throw that word out here again. PROFESSIONAL. Out of those, the agent will take a peek at the query. The story might sound interesting. It might sound boring. It might sound marketable. It might not. It might sound just like a manuscript they've already got on their desk. They may have had 6 rejections recently for manuscripts that sound just like yours. They might not read it at all, overwhelmed by work, and have a flunky shovel form rejection letters into all of them just to clear space in their office.

It may also take a month or longer (or forever) for them to respond positively or negatively. I've had responses to queries comes back a year later saying, "Your manuscript sounds interesting, please send me..." So I suggest:

Photocopy the first 50-ish pages 10 times. Send them out. Wait a few days. Maybe a week. Do it again. Do it again. Do it again.

I did this around 100 times when I acquired my latest agent. She was in the 80s somewhere. I started at the beginning of the *Vater* book, in the *As*, sending to agents who are listed as being interested in my type of book and interested in taking on new clients. Not all listings in these books are accurate. I had two agents interested simultaneously, or close to it. The first one asked for limited exclusivity. I agreed. Two days later, Irene, my agent, e-mailed to ask to read *The Devil's Pitchfork*. I told her politely that another agent was reading it and I had agreed to 3 weeks exclusivity. If he declined, would she still be interested? She said yes. A week later the other agent declined. I e-mailed Irene back and asked if she was still interested. She was. I mailed it off to her. She also asked for a couple weeks exclusivity (this is a topic for another post) and I said yes. She got back to me in less than a week, phoned, saying she wanted to take me on as a client. I've been quite happy.

The real elements to getting an agent are:

1. A good product to sell
2. Professionalism
3. Persistence

I'm willing to cover questions on this, because this is rather long as it is.

Oh, one more comment. They say you can find out more about agents by reading the credits on books like yours, by going to conferences, etc. All true. Just never worked for me. I've yet to meet an agent at a conference, and I've tried the "my book is similar to one of your clients', so-and-so..." and that hasn't worked. I had a writer friend of mine give me an intro to his agent. Didn't work, though it got read. My writer friend's wife said not to take it too personally, nobody

they had passed on to him ever got picked up, even an author who later won the Booker Prize, the British version of the National Book Award.

Do you want a big, successful New York agent? Well, it wouldn't hurt. But what you mostly want is an agent who likes your work and is willing to be professional and persistent. An agent that believes in you and your work is the key, I think.

Oh, couple more points. Sorry.

Should you pay to have an agent read your manuscript? No. It's against the AAR canon of ethics. There are agents out there, some legit, some not, who charge and some who clearly make a living off the reading fees. My agents do charge for photocopying and postage. I pay it. Do I like to? No, but I'm willing, at least until my books start bringing in boodles of bucks, then we'll discuss it.

Does my agent have to be in New York? No. Doesn't hurt. Mine aren't. Mine are in Texas and Oregon. They travel to NY often. They also use those newfangled devices called telephones, fax machines and e-mail. Go figure.

Should you give an agent exclusivity? Limited seems reasonable. 3 or 4 weeks. An agent that says, "I want unlimited exclusivity while I'm reading your manuscript" is probably being unreasonable. Say yes, for four weeks. With any luck they'll get to it in that time. Be polite and professional. I think the exclusivity issue is annoying. They won't provide you exclusivity. They won't say, "I'm really excited about you and your work, so I'm going to put everything aside and give your my exclusive time and attention." But that's what they're asking you to do. And sometimes they ask for an open-ended exclusivity, while the manuscript sits on their desk for 6 or 8 weeks or longer. Do it, but be careful about it. You're trying to develop a professional business relationship with these people. No reason to jerk each other around before you even get started.

## Chapter 44: Books on Writing

My oldest son wants to be a writer. He's 12. This week he had a project due in school about careers, and he did a poster on writing, and he needed some clip art, so we went to Amazon.com and printed up book covers for several books on writing and Islands magazine, etc. We tripped across Stephen King's *On Writing* and Ian said, "He has a book on writing?" "Oh yeah," says me, "I've got that one. I've got a bunch of books on writing." So I thought that might make a good blog entry, so I just pulled all my how-to books on writing and realize I have many more than I thought I did. Here they are, with a comment or so.

*Make Your Words Work* by Gary Provost. By far the best book I've read about the nuts and bolts of writing--not selling or marketing, but writing--and I think it should be on every writer's shelf.

*Writers Market*. This is the 2005 edition and I've now gone totally to the online version.

*The Associated Press Stylebook*.

*The Well-Fed Writer* by Peter Bowerman. Recommended for his attitude, if nothing else, which is--you can do this and you deserve to be paid well for it.

*Jump Start Your Book Sales* by Ross. Okay.

*The Elements of Mystery Fiction* by William Tapply. Quite good.

*Secrets of a Freelance Writer* by Bob Bly. If you read the Bowerman, you don't need this book and vice versa. All about copywriting.

*How to become a Fulltime Freelance Writer* by Banks. Really, really excellent look at the freelancer's life and some serious considerations about the financial problems that may come along.

*Write the Perfect Book Proposal*. A bit repetitive, but if you have any thoughts of writing nonfiction books, this by Herman, a couple of agents, gives you an outline of what's in a book proposal followed by 10 successful book proposals they sold and what they thought worked and didn't in each.

*Telling Lies for Fun & Profit* by Lawrence Block. Also, *Spider, Spin Me a Web* by Lawrence Block. Essentially collections of his *Writers Digest* fiction columns. Decent on nuts and bolts, but wonderfully inspiring and entertaining about the thought processes and emotional and psychological obstacles a writer's likely to encounter.

*Speaking of Murder*. Interviews with Masters of Mystery and Suspense. Edited by Ed Gorman and Martin Greenberg. Seems to me these were great.

*The Elements of Screenwriting* by Irwin Blacker. A slim book that provides basics. I wouldn't recommend it as the only book you get if you're interested in screenwriting.

Strunk and White: The Elements of Styles. Of course.

Writers on Writing, edited by Winokur.

Stephen King: On Writing. Great memoir, so-so for nuts and bolts of writing, but very entertaining.

How to get Happily Published by Applebaum. More for self-publishing people, but a worthwhile read.

How to Write A Mystery by Larry Beinhart. I picked this up at the bookstore, sat down and got so engrossed in it I bought it. Highly recommended.

Intent to Sell by Jeffery Marks. Focuses on marketing and selling genre fiction. Jeff's a mystery author with an MBA in marketing and an education degree. This is a complicated book for me to recommend. There isn't a single untrue word, it's very useful, and I've read it twice. Both times the book pissed me off. Why? Because the focus is entirely on the book as product and nowhere is there thought or consideration to quality of writing. It's entirely about selling, which is fine, that's what it's about. Jeff's a friend and I recommend the book, but it does piss me of just sort of on principle.

Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing by David Morrell. Now, Morrell is one of my favorite thriller authors, and much of this book is wonderful. I think he's largely wrong with his opinions about first-person narratives, and other aspects of this book ticked me off when I read it, but I recently re-read what he had to say about viewpoint when I was struggling with it and thought he was spot-on. This is an excellent book.

Writing Mysteries, edited by Sue Grafton. Filled with all sorts of good stuff by well-known mystery and suspense authors.

Writing the Mystery by G. Miki Hayden.

The Freelance Success Book by Taylor. Good, if repetitive.

Six-Figure Freelancing by James-Enger. I liked it. I doubt I'll hit those numbers unless I get a big hit from one of my books, but I picked up some useful information regarding reprints and contracts and, like the Bowerman book, there's a lot to be said about putting a value on your work.

I've also got a number of reference books like A Dictionary of Genetics and a book on poisons, etc., but these are the primary books on writing decorating my shelf.

They're all reasonably useful but the best way to get better at writing is to write and pay attention to what you're doing right and what you're doing wrong and trying to figure out how to tell.

### About The Author

Mark Terry is the author of literally hundreds of magazine articles appearing in trade journals, newspapers, consumer publications and online publications. He is the long-time editor of The Journal of the Association of Genetic Technologists, and has reviewed books for several publications including Applied Cytogenetics, The Armchair Detective, ForeWord Magazine, Mystery Scene Magazine and The Oakland Press. In addition, he is the author of numerous short stories and novels including CATFISH GURU, DIRTY DEEDS and THE DEVIL'S PITCHFORK.

To learn more about Mark Terry or to purchase his books, visit his website at [www.mark-terry.com](http://www.mark-terry.com).

