**Daily Kick – David Farland Part 4**

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Keeping the Suspense Alive

Have you ever noticed how a television or movie series can grab you at the beginning but feel tired and “old” after a few episodes?

I loved Harry Potter when it came out, but for me at least, it has become quite stale. I quit reading the series at book six, I believe, deciding that I’d rather see the movies, but even the movies don’t really interest me much anymore. I’ve seen the pattern repeated dozens of times, though. I liked the television series “House” for a year, and was fond of “Lie to Me” for a few episodes.

Even some of the great comedy series like Seinfeld and MASH lost their luster.

There are two reasons for this, I’m convinced. The first one is that when we first see a great movie, such as the Matrix, or when we read a great book, like THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATOO, we go into the story with a lot of questions. A good writer will look for dozens of ways to keep you wondering. But eventually, the questions all have to get answered. Sure, you might be able to string the audience along for awhile, the way that the writers did with the television series “Lost,” but eventually you have to answer the question “What’s going on?” or the audience will walk out on you. Once you answer that question, you enter a dangerous part of your story. You see, very often, as an author we use suspense and mystery as our draws, the emotions that drag a reader into a story.

But once the reader knows what’s going on, we enter the second phase of a story, in which the reader is silently asking the question, “Do I care?”

Readers will only care about a story so long as the protagonist is likeable and is going through some conflicts that are interesting to the reader. Such questions as “Will the hero and heroine fall in love?” “Will the cop catch the killer?” “Will he ever overcome his drinking problem?” and so on all need to be answered. Once they’re answered, the story is done—forever.

For example, when you read a romance, you’re waiting for the heroine and hero to fall in love. That’s it, period. As a writer, you can’t decide, “Oh, George and Hilda were such a great couple, I think I’ll have them fall in love again in my next book.” Seriously, don’t ever try that. You’ve seen it done before, of course, in Hollywood. We’ll see a story where two people fall in love, and then it does so well that some witty producer decides to make a sequel. Of course, in order to do that, you have to start out with the couple having gotten a divorce, and then discovering that their ex-spouses really were their one true love. The problem with that is that you’ve got to destroy the first movie in order to make the second one work. So with romances, you really should never try to write a sequel.

With mysteries, you’ve got a little more leeway. You could have a detective solve a crime, catch a criminal, have that criminal get released from prison or escape somehow, and then have your detective track him down again. But you can’t do it endlessly. If your killer escapes justice once, shame on him. If he does it twice, shame on your detective. At least in American fiction, the criminal would need to die after a couple of movies. That’s why I won’t keep watching sequels to Silence of the Lambs.

My point here is this: eventually, the suspense in the story must come to an end, and the conflicts need to be resolved. Once those two things happen, your series is done. Period.

Too many times, writers don’t realize this. They have a success and keep wanting to ride the gravy train. Many times, it’s the publisher who is pushing for this, too. How many Tarzan novels can you write? How many Conan’s?

So your job as a writer is threefold: 1) Keep the suspense and the sense of mystery in your series alive for as long as possible. 2) Create interesting, likeable characters and work through their most meaningful conflicts. 3) Stop when finished, even if your fans, publishers, and spouse all want you to keep going.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Following the Market Trends

I’ve been seeing a lot of new authors who are writing for the young adult market, hoping to cash in on the current trends. I know of others who are saying, “Hey, write what you want beautifully, and readers will find you.” I even know authors who say, “I want to write young adult fantasy, but I don’t want to look like I’m just another follower.”

So which should you do?

There are many kinds of writers. Some are so prolific that they can write several books a year. If you’re a working writer, then writing a book from time to time that takes advantage of current trends is fine. It’s no different from a newspaper columnist who writes for a living. Writers write.

Other stories are so personal, so deeply compelling, that you might feel that you have to write them in order to fill some deep-rooted need. I have several stories that are like that. I haven’t written them because I’m worried that they are so off-beat, they won’t be big money makers. They might even drag down my sales record. So if I write them, I’ll probably use a pseudonym. I intend to work on a couple such neglected properties this year. Who knows, maybe they’ll even take off and start a trend.

But then I have some borderline stories—ones that I know will make money and that I’m interested in writing. Those are no brainers: of course I’ll write them. I have too many good reasons to do so.

Don’t ever shy away from writing a story that grabs you simply because you’ll feel like a follower. The truth is that when someone writes a great pirate story, for example, and everyone reads it, readers begin looking for something new in that genre. Very often, no other great writers come along, and so we get a bunch of cloned pirate stories. That’s what happened in the 1890s. The novel TREASURE ISLAND was a huge hit, and hundreds of knockoffs were written. The genre died until the 1930s, when film spawned a little comeback. Then they went away again, until Disney’s movie Pirates of the Caribbean sparked a little new revival.

But sometimes, a little subgenre will bud off and grow into new shapes. When Stephenie Meyer wrote TWILIGHT, it wasn’t as if the vampire novels were dead. Anne Rice was still doing just fine. Buffy the Vampire Slayer had just gone off the air on television. New vampire movies were scheduled to be summer hits. In short, no one could have said, “Oh, the vampire novels have been dead for forty years, and maybe it’s time for a comeback.” Instead, Stephenie wrote a novel that played perfectly to a teen female audience, and her book became a bestseller despite the fact that there was plenty of competition in the genre.

I have a novel like that. Ten years ago I wrote a YA book called “The Young Olympians.” It was a good book, but I wrote it while working with some folks at a video game company, and the rights got tied up in a little corporate battle. So I set it aside. Meanwhile, PERCY JACKSON AND THE YOUNG OLYMPIANS came out, and it has sold millions of copies. A year ago, I got the rights to my own novel back and thought, Hmmm. If I sent this in to a publisher now, it would look like I was trying to ride the coattails of some other author. I decided to lay it aside and forget about it, but I keep having dreams set in the novel, and I want to go back and do a rewrite. Something in the book speaks to me, and I can’t ignore those promptings. So a couple of weeks ago, Scholastic listed the “God novels” as a hot new trend in YA literature, and I’ve decided to work on this novel in a few weeks and then send it out. Maybe I can break out of the little “God novel” subgenre.

So write what you want, but consider your reasons carefully. Are you writing for a paycheck? Are you writing to fulfill a primal need? Are you writing to win awards or fame? Figure out what you’re trying to accomplish, and then look at how you can best reach that goal.

No matter why you’re writing, keep writing!

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Getting to Write

Yesterday I learned that my good friend, mentor, and fellow writer Orson Scott Card had a stroke and would be canceling all appearances for the near future. For several most of the day I was completely bummed out about this. I sent him a note, wishing him a complete and speedy recovery, but basically couldn’t shake my sadness.

Fortunately, it was a minor stroke. It affected the fine motor control in his left hand, which will make it hard to write for a few months, since he can’t type quickly, but in the long run, it won’t affect his ability to tell stories. That’s good news. I’ve known writers who have lost so much in a stroke that they can’t write at all. One writer whose monumental works had won world acclaim suddenly found that her efforts were no longer publishable. She struggled to write, but soon fell into a deep depression that last until her death years later.

After a busy and meagerly productive day, I began thinking of how great it is to be able to write. Many people are crippled by various factors. Some are crippled by negative attitudes about writing—the feeling that their work is inferior to that of others, or that their work will never sell.

I had to battle that with one of my recent novels, IN THE COMPANY OF ANGELS. (If you’ve been on this list for more than six months, forgive me for telling this story. Many of the folks on this list haven’t heard it.) I began writing it without a publisher, and after submitting it to a couple of places, I grimly continued with my rewriting. I wondered if it just wasn’t as good as I felt it was, or if I was wasting my time with it. I thought, “You know, if just one person understands this book and appreciates it, then perhaps it will have been worth the trouble, even though I’ll never make a dime on it.” I sent the first draft to my mother to read, and she began calling every day, usually in tears, to ask, “What have you done to publish that book today?” The answer was “Nothing. I write ‘em. I don’t publish ‘em.” She felt that it was the best book that she’d ever read, but I had to wonder, “What does she know?” Mothers often like their children’s novels disproportionately. Yet when my mother died, my wife convinced me to publish the book, which went on to win the Whitney Award for Best Novel of the Year, beating out some 365 other novels. All of my copies soon sold, and in fact I’m supposed to get my last check from the distributor this week. The cover, also won an award as one of the best covers of the year, which was cool, given that it was the first time that I’ve ever created my own book cover. (Coincidentally, I’ve only ever designed four book covers, yet three of them have won awards.) In terms of “dollars earned per hour,” the book was a flop. In terms of the number of fan letters I’ve received, it has been a monstrously big hit, and that is gratifying.

Another crippling attitude that people have is “I don’t have time to write.” That’s a frequent complaint, and if you’re a busy person, finding large blocks of time might be difficult. Yet you’d be surprised at what you can do in a few stolen minutes here and there. If you write for just twenty minutes per day and manage to get a page or two typed, you’ll write a novel in a year. Last year, I took a little writing retreat. At the end of it, I felt exhausted and decided not to write for the day, but I decided, “Maybe I can get a page or two written at the airport.” I rushed through security, found a wall plug, and sat down and began to write, typing as fast as I could. I only had forty minutes, but I got five pages done. But when I looked up, I found that my plane had been delayed. My forty minutes turned into four more hours, and then I realized, “Hey, I still get to write on the plane!” I hate writing on planes.

So I kept writing on the plane, and then dashed off a few more pages when I got home. As a result, I wrote more than thirty pages that day, and it turned out to be the most productive day of my retreat. Yet I’d been tempted to keep my laptop packed up.

Every day, every hour, every moment is a precious opportunity to write. Feel grateful if you’ve got your health and the time in which to do it.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Deepening Your Art

As artists, we all have blind spots. By that I mean, there are areas of artistry that we just don’t interest us, to the point that we may not even recognize someone else’s genius.

A few years ago I was speaking with a painter who is a good friend, a realist who admires Rembrandt above all others. I said something about the marvelous use of color by Chagall, and my friend became furious—ranting against Chagall, Picasso, and a long litany of fine painters whose work falls outside his interest.

To some degree, we all do that. I was reading a novel last night in which the author spends a great deal of time examining human relationships, showing the love and brutality in the affairs between a protagonist and the rest of the cast of characters. She examines relationships in far more depth than I typically do, and I realized that I needed to learn from her.

I felt much as I do when I look at the writings of a world-class wordsmith. But there are literally hundreds of areas where an artist might invest his interest. For example, in the novel DUNE, Frank Herbert created a masterpiece through his examination of an imaginary setting, just as Tolkien’s work really was a masterpiece in resonance. Some authors excel in creating labyrinthine mysteries, or plots that astonish, or, like Rowling, are geniuses in audience analysis.

I believe that one key to deepening your art as a writer is to learn to see the strengths in others’ works. Sometimes, the beauty in another artist’s work isn’t apparent, or maybe it’s something that just doesn’t interest you. No matter. Study it and try to learn from it anyway.

Let’s face it: not every novel is worthy of deep study, but every year, there are a few that come out that should be studied. How do you find them? Any novel that garners a huge audience might be worthy of study. You’ll often find that the author connects to an audience because he or she understands that audience in ways that others don’t. You’ll also find that “best of” lists frequently contain novels that are deeply affecting for one reason or another.

Of course, as you look at books, you’ll find that too often, “pretty good” books are marketed as great literature. Sadly, publishers have to sell something while they’re waiting for the really astonishing novels to come along.

Sometimes the bestseller lists really look more like “the critic’s best friends” lists.

So you’ll get burned out in your attempts to study. When that happens to me, I go back to the classics. Still, even as I keep one eye on the past, I try to keep one on the future.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Muscling through a Story

There are many reasons why people give up on stories. Sometimes they encounter unexpected difficulties in writing. That’s very common with new writers who discover that it’s a lot harder to write well than the author imagined. Sometimes health issues get in the way, or the writer gets delayed by emergencies at work.

Too often the writer just feels that he or she has “run out of steam.” A novel that felt exciting, that felt like a good idea at first, somehow fails to excite in the long run.

That’s because we as authors get used to ideas. On the novel I’m currently working on, I got a mind-blowing idea for an ending a couple of years ago. It seemed like a great idea at the time. I’ve never seen anything like it. But after two years, I’m just not that excited anymore. Yes, it’s still a great ending, but I don’t feel totally compelled to write it.

Some authors have that trouble with almost every book that they write. As they consider the story, revise it, and agonize over it, they lose interest. I heard of one author who loved to tell people about his novels in great detail, regaling them at bars. But after telling people about it a few times, he would grow tired of his ideas—no matter how great they were—and he found that he was unable to write it. The only way that he could complete a novel is if he sat down and wrote it out in one sitting, over the period of a few days or weeks. As a result, he very rarely completed a novel.

Other authors, once they’ve lost interest in their own story, often feel that there is something “wrong” with the story. I felt that way about the second book in my GOLDEN QUEEN series. I lost my interest in it near the end and had a nagging feeling that the book had a problem. But fans kept writing me and telling me how great it was. So a few months ago, after it had nearly fifteen years to cool, I was asked to go through and edit a reprint of it. The book was far better than I remembered it being. In fact, there was nothing wrong with it at all.

Which brings me to a point: sometimes you’re not the best judge of your own work. Many times the book that an author thinks is his finest work might strike me as a reader as rather tepid. Meanwhile, a book that the author feels is weak might have a powerful effect upon the audience.

So keep writing. If you’ve got a story that you left unfinished because it feels cold to you, write it anyway. If you’re going to make it as a professional, you’ve got to muscle through your stories sometimes and just keep producing.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Why Diversify?

I’ve long believed that authors should diversify their work. In other words, authors should write for more than one publisher, and write to more than one audience, in most cases.

If you write only one kind of book, for only one publisher, you may be left to the whims of editors or the market. For example, if you’re only writing fantasy, and a publisher feels overbought on fantasy, they may delay buying your next book, or turn it down altogether. Suddenly you might find yourself in serious financial trouble.

If you have only one revenue stream and you are trying to negotiate for a better contract, your publisher may feel free to delay negotiations in order to bring you to your knees. But if you’ve got a multiple-income stream, it puts you into a better position to negotiate contracts. This may sound cynical, but I’ve seen authors nearly get destroyed by publishers who simply refuse to come to the table.

So if you like more than one kind of fiction—if you’re a fan of both mysteries and romances, let’s say—then try writing in both fields. You’ll want to write at least one book of each kind every year in order to create a following in each field.

But there are other ways to handle this. You can write in multiple mediums, for example. You might write novels AND screenplays, or novels and videogame scripts.

I was looking at my own revenue stream for the year, and it looks as if I’ve got monies coming in from more than a dozen sources, from screenplays to novels, from self-published books and from teaching, from short stories and foreign right’s sales.

For most writers, this equates to a healthy income stream. Even if you’re only beginning to write, there is nothing wrong with thinking seriously about what kinds of writing you might want to do in the future and then testing your skills in that genre or medium.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Fostering Multiple Revenue Streams

You probably know that I’ve trained a lot of successful authors over the years. I was listening to some of them teaching at a writing seminar last week, and it struck me that those authors who have succeeded best in this field are those who learned one of my first lessons best: Foster Multiple Revenue Streams.

What does this mean? Well, many authors, the ones who fail, typically publish a novel and sell the North American rights to it, then try to write another novel and do the same, again and again and again. Eventually something happens and their revenue stream gets blocked—either they can’t deliver a manuscript on time, or a publisher squeezes them in harsh negotiations, and the author suddenly runs out of money and has to go back to work in another field.

But successful authors look for ways to create several revenue streams. Very often, this means that the author might write in two different fields. For example, I write adult fantasy and middle grade books. If one revenue stream gets blocked, I’ve always got another.

You can have all sorts of revenue streams. For example, selling foreign rights can be very lucrative. Many authors who don’t make a lot of money in the United States, for example, might be very popular in other countries—the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and so on. I’ve known authors who don’t even publish in the United States anymore, but who make a living on foreign sales.

Authors can make money in a host of other ways—through speaking fees, by teaching, by writing in different mediums (for example, if you’re writing a novel about an entomologist, you might do some research on ants, and write articles for magazines on the topic in order to gain some expertise in the field).

So each year, I keep track of my anticipated revenue sources. Here are my sources for the coming year:

1. Screenplay sale for Runelords. (I’ve been approached by a producer to write the screenplay and put the film into production.)

2. On-delivery money for Runelords #9—plan to deliver the manuscript within a couple of weeks.

3. On-publishing money for Runelords #9—should go on sale by the end of the year.

4. US Royalties on Runelords and Ravenspell books.

5. Foreign sales anticipated for Runelords in France, England, and other countries.

6. Audiobook sales for Runelords and other books—book 4 is now out on audiobook, so I expect to sell the rights to books 5 and 6 this year.

7. Teaching fees for writing workshops—I’ll be teaching a lot this spring, but probably won’t do much if anything for the fall, since I have to keep my book-touring season open.

8. Short story sales to magazines—I have a couple of short stories promised.

9. E-book royalties from my backlist. I don’t push my e-books much, but I’ve been getting them up for sale and promise to do a better job this year.

10. Book on Writing (I’ve got a publisher that wants me to write a book on writing. I’ll tell you more when I learn more.)

11. Possible income from sale of MEMORY MERCHANTS. I have the book out to a couple of agents, and we’ll see if and when they want to take it out.

12. Producer’s fees for Runelords and other movies. (I’ve done some work as an executive producer on some small films, and should see income from those, as well as a little income as I put together the Runelords movie—engaging a director, actors, distribution, investors, etc.)

13. Book sales from my websites.

14. Speaking fees from schools and libraries.

15. Income from new publishing company. (I have some partners and an investor interested in starting a new publishing company.)

16. Income from self-publishing of IN THE COMPANY OF ANGELS. I’m still waiting for my last check from my distributor.

17. Sale of ANGELS—I’ve sold IN THE COMPANY OF ANGELS to a small publisher, Cedar Fort, and will have it reissued in June.

Every year, of course, there are some surprises—foreign sales that you didn’t expect, movie rights that sell when you didn’t expect it, and so on. Some of these are only minor revenue streams—such as book sales from my web site, or short fiction sales—but every little bit helps. I have some new projects that I anticipate sales for—a thriller, a new fantasy series that I’ll be starting—but I don’t know when those will be finished, or when I might get an income from them.

Generally speaking, the larger the author is, and the longer the author has been in the industry, the more revenue streams that the author will develop.

So if you’re a new writer, if you’re launching yourself in this as a career, look for ways to make more money from your existing novels so that you can maximize your income.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Blowing a Deal

Recently I was working with a movie producer who wanted to buy the rights to some cartoon characters. The cartoonist in this case was no longer working and had only published on-line, so his works weren’t widely popular, but he wanted millions of dollars for his right. The producer had to pass.

In a similar instance, a novelist I know was offered a very high royalty rate on a book—but by paying a high rate, the publisher would have to raise the price of the book so high that he would begin meeting price resistance, which would hurt sales. I suspect that in the long run, what looked like a good deal might actually earn the author less than it otherwise could.

Right now, I have some interest from four different quarters on the movie rights to the Runelords, and I’m trying to consider which might be the best deal. The one that offers the most money? The one from the producer with the biggest name? It’s a little hard to tell.

But the important point here is that when you’re negotiating a sale on a book, whether it be for US rights, foreign rights, or movie rights, you have to educate yourself to become aware of the market. You need to know who your buyer is, what kind of capital they have to work with, and what they intend to do with your property.

If you have a publisher who wants to buy your novel and sees it as a midlist book, planning to print, say, thirty thousand copies, you can’t demand a million-dollar advance. At the same time, if you’ve got a publisher who sees your novel as the next big breakout run, and that publisher plans to print two million copies and spend an extra three million on advertising, you’d be a fool to settle for a $15,000 advance.

I’ve seen authors make both mistakes, and many that fall between. So the tip for the day is this: educate yourself in the markets, no matter which market you’re preparing to sell to. Find out what standard pay rates are, and how much those rates vary. Figure out why the distributor calculates things at those rates. Learn what kinds of resources your publisher has, and what they plan to invest in your product. Then get professional help from an agent or others who are educated in that field, so that you don’t make any outrageous blunders.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Velocity

When a new author comes out the gate, there are a lot of factors that publishers and booksellers look at in order to gauge success.

For example, INITIAL SALES. Some authors are in high demand by a few fans, so when their books come out, BANG! They soar to the top of the charts one week, and then fall off the next. That’s encouraging, but not real encouraging.

Other authors sell steadily, so that their books never hit high on the charts, but get picked up over months and months, and still sell well. So the publisher looks at the BOOK RETURN rate. I know that years ago I had some talks with Jim Baen, and he loved Elizabeth Moon in part because her books just kept selling and selling, so that he had virtually no returns.

I know that most publishers would recognize that that was a sign that Elizabeth had great word of mouth, and the publisher should therefore be printing more copies. But it’s true that often the publisher doesn’t know that they have had a hit until the returns come in.

The most important thing to look for, though, is a HIGH VELOCITY of sales. When an author gets tremendous growth over a long period of time, that’s high velocity. Simply put, what it means is that the author is getting a lot of advertising, usually from various sources. These might include great press coverage on television, boosts from potential movie sales, great word of mouth, excellent reviews in periodicals, and so on.

A case in point comes with Amanda Hocking, a name that you will be hearing a lot about this year. Amanda is a pretty, twenty-something girl who writes paranormal romance for teens—mainly vampire love stories. She tried to get published for several years and never got picked up by anyone.

Now, I’ve said before that the New York publishing system is broken. The publishers aren’t doing their jobs, the agents are swamped and aren’t doing theirs, so good authors are falling through the cracks. Thus, many of these authors are looking to circumvent the system by self-publishing in e-books as a way of obtaining an audience. Fair enough.

I also predicted last year that we would see our first genuine bestsellers rise out of the e-book market this year. Well, it didn’t take long for Amanda to pop out.

Amanda obtained a lot of sales velocity in a very traditional way: she released eight books in rapid succession, putting out all of her books at once. She put the first book of her series at a low price, and then had the rest at a regular paper-back rate. People began buying her books, bought another as soon as they finished the first, and the word-of-mouth spread rapidly.

It also helps that Amanda is writing in a sub-genre that is extremely popular. She is writing for the same readers who bought TWILIGHT books.

From about May to October Amanda’s sales numbers were high but not stellar, and then the news media began to take notice. In December, I read a couple of stories about her success in online magazines, and in that month she sold over 100,000 books. That increased her word of mouth, and in January she sold 450,000 copies. By my calculations, she made over two million dollars last month, and as the news spreads, you’ll probably see sales increase this month, too. People will get curious, read her books, and then tell friends about them.

So Amanda is getting tremendous high velocity on her works right now, and will become a self-made multimillionaire throughout this coming year. This will lead to hardcover deals and audiobook deals around the country, to major motion pictures, and of course to a rush for global rights in translations, which will simply continue to increase her velocity until her audience has been tapped out.

You should be considering how you might attain high sales velocity.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—How Ready Are You?

After yesterday’s kick on the warnings against self-publishing, I expect that I’ll get a deluge of people asking me to critique their works, hoping to find out if they’re “ready.”

In some cases, I can look at an author and know that they’re ready. Often I’ll see what they’re lacking, and so on. For example, when I first read a chapter by Brandon Sanderson, I went home and told my wife, “I found one” today. When I first read from Dan Wells, I told my wife, “This guy is going to succeed based upon his great ideas.” When Stephenie Meyer turned in her first assignments to me at BYU, I thought, “You know, if this young woman finds something that she passionately wants to write about, she’ll be dangerous.” I could go on with dozens of others, but I think you get my point. Some are obvious, but some authors will surprise you. There are authors whose works I absolutely hate, yet they have an audience.

So how do you know if you’re ready? There’s an easy test:

1) Write a book.

2) Print it off and pass it around to twenty people.

3) Wait for two weeks.

At the end of two weeks, if you have only a few people, say five or six, who have read your book, it’s not holding your audience. If you’ve got a book that has had fifteen or so people who’ve read it with excitement, you’re doing well.

But what you’re really looking for is “pass-along rate.” If at the end of two weeks you have people who are passing the manuscript to friends to read—to sons and daughters and neighbors—then you have a potential hit. If you’ve got thirty or forty readers at the end of two weeks, then you know that your book will have a life.

Hopefully, you’ll soon find an editor or agent who agrees with you, but if you don’t, that’s when you really begin looking at self-publishing.

Glowing comments from other writers in your writing group may not be a strong indication of success. After all, we’re all subconsciously predisposed to like the writings of people that we like personally. What really matters is what people think who’ve never met you, who don’t know you at all, and who don’t really care to know you. You want the opinions of people who just get clobbered by your book, who get taken by surprise, who like it even though they may never have read another book. If you’re getting copious attention from those people, you’re ready to publish!

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Changing Times

As I’ve been forecasting since last April, we’ve seen some huge changes in the publishing industry this year.

In the latest news, Borders has filed for bankruptcy here in the United States. Borders of course is the second largest bookstore chain in the United States, but they failed miserably at keeping touch with the changing times. The mistake? They didn’t respond to the online threat from [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), and they didn’t put together a program to sell electronic books.

As a result, in the fourth quarter of last year, the busiest season for bookstores, Borders group saw sales drop by a whopping 18 percent. So they’re filing for bankruptcy and will be selling about 200-250 stores. Since Borders stores are built, usually, near a Barnes and Noble, one must assume that customers will migrate to the competition.

Meanwhile, Borders doesn’t seem to have a viable plan to stay in business. Instead, some goofball decided to help wannabe authors self-publish their books electronically through a program called BookBrewer. Stay away from Borders’ stock, and stay away from their self-publishing model. Both are poison, in my opinion, and I’m not the only one to think that dealing with them is gonzo.

Borders has a plan to restructure which will pay only about 20 cents on the dollar to its debtors. This is going to hurt a lot of publishers and distributors—to the point that Ingrams, the nation’s largest book distribution company, has ceased providing them with books.

Meanwhile, we’re seeing similar news around the world. A day after Borders announced that it would go into bankruptcy, a major bookstore chain in Australia announced that they were going bankrupt, too. Last week in Canada, a bookstore chain tied to a major distribution company announced that both were filing for bankruptcy, while we see the same happening in England with one of their major chains on its way out.

In short, we’re seeing the dinosaurs all die off. Those businessmen who haven’t adjusted to the way that books are being sold will soon be gone. Whether they’re small private bookstores, major chains, book distribution companies, or publishers, those who don’t adjust will die.

Meanwhile, many publishers are actually showing higher profits right now. With electronic book sales up by 118% for the last year, publishers that take a chunk of electronic rights are actually seeing higher revenues with less in costs, thus increasing their profit margins. So the publishers are healthy. Barnes and Noble is feeling giddy over its sales of e-readers and the accompanying surge in electronic sales. Simon and Schuster, along with a number of other publishers, are seeing a big rise in profitability.

But this leads to a new problem for authors. Those same publishers are finding that the hardcover book market for bestsellers is shrinking. Many of the most active readers, the people who read ten or twenty novels per year, are now reading them on Kindles or iPads. As a result, some authors who were selling three hundred thousand copies in hardcover are finding that more than half of their sales are now made electronically—and that under current contracts, the publishers actually get to keep a larger percent of the author’s income. Thus, an author who might have made a million dollars on a novel last year is finding that he’s losing a couple hundred thousand dollars of that money to the publishers this year.

So now we’re coming to the next big battle. How much of the money on a new release should go to the author? I think that we’ll see some heavy contention—with agents and writers groups lining up to battle the publishers this coming year.

The real battle, perhaps, might re-shape the industry. The argument should be whether “electronic publishing” is really “publishing” at all. Under old-fashioned copyright law, when a publisher buys the right to publish a novel, he’s buying the right to make a physical copy and distribute it.

But with electronic publishing, there is no physical book being created and shipped. The book exists only as an electronic file, in the same way that music files are being downloaded and sold. So the question arises: is the selling of electronic copies in violation with the intent of the copyright law?

At least one judge has ruled that “electronic publishing” should be handled as “electronic licensing.” There is a huge distinction here as far as the author is concerned.

For example, a publisher in today’s world can publish your book, and then hold onto it indefinitely by claiming that he’s still publishing it electronically a hundred years from now, even though he has no other interest in it. The rights to the property would never revert, and the old contracts that are in the books in some cases give very little of the money from those sales to the authors. It creates a perpetual windfall for the publishers, and makes the writer wish that he’d never published the books in the first place.

So authors under the current system basically handle control of their work over to publishers for eternity. Savvy authors don’t want to do that, and if you understand that we see the emergence of a major new market over the next few years, where the control of electronic rights are all-important, it makes you as an author wonder if publishing a book right now is ultimately a mistake. In the long run, an author might make far more by self-publishing his works electronically.

A year ago I would have told you that you should stick with the traditional publishing route. Right now, as we move into a new age, I’m still going to tell you to stick with the traditional route. But here’s the thing: self-publishing electronically looks like a better alternative every day, even to someone like me who is a New York Times bestseller.

So when do you give up on the old system? So much depends upon you as an author. I’m an old guy in my fifties. For me, the old system still makes a lot of sense. But if I were eighteen or twenty, and I was looking at giving up thirty percent of my income on a book for life, just to have it published by some sloppy New York Publishing company that probably wouldn’t do anything to push my books anyway, I’d be giving New York the evil eye right about now.

Think about it: is an extra $20,000 in your pocket right now worth a loss of 30% in income on the sales of your book for the next fifty years? That’s the gamble you’re taking on publishing, and increasingly new authors are saying “No. I’m not getting enough of a push from existing publishers to make up for the long-term losses.” They may be right.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants—Planning to Succeed

Very often when I speak to writers who have just won a major contest like Writers of the Future, I find that they have something in common: an attitude. They’ll say, “I wrote stories regularly for years, and then I finally decided that I was going to win that contest.” They might place first or second or even third, but they usually have this in common: they decided that just writing wasn’t enough, and that they needed to give it their best shot.

As authors, that’s an attitude that we need to cultivate. Even if you win a major contest or an award, there is always another step to take, another goal to make, another mountain to conquer.

Deciding that you’re going to attain the goal is a little intimidating. We don’t want to be vain. We don’t want to look foolish for being over-confident. We don’t want to put our hearts on the line and have an epic fail in public.

But we have to do it anyway. We have to decide to succeed. Making a public commitment motivates us to greater success.

I recently read a little post about an interview that Terry Brooks gave. In it, he pointed out that with his writing, he always struggles to make his next book better than the last.

Some authors, he points out, write three hundred pages of a beautiful novel and then run out of time or energy and tack on a crummy ending. I’ve seen that a lot. Others, he adds, write two or three novels and then lose their passion and just start cranking out inferior work. That describes a lot of authors.

A real professional, Terry points out, recognizes that with each novel, he needs to be getting better. Terry Brooks is right.

I’ve pointed out before that authors need to create a sense of anticipation with their careers. Your first novel should be great. After all, you’re competing with the best authors who have ever lived. People who read your story might compare you to Ursula K. LeGuin, J.R.R. Tolkien, or Frank Herbert. Now, you might think of yourself as a little writer working on your first novel. You might not want to invite such comparisons. But the truth is that no matter what we want, we get our novels compared to the finest works by the greatest authors who have ever lived. So you’ve got to get used to it.

Don’t think in small terms. Don’t say to yourself, “I just want to write a comfortable little story.” If you want to be comfortable, get a government job, or marry well. Don’t try to write for a living.

Your readers want your best effort. They want their hearts to pound and their heads to explode. They want fireworks with every novel. They want literature that changes their lives. That’s what they’re paying for. It’s part of the author’s unwritten contract with the reader, and we need to provide a great experience.

So start planning to succeed now. That planning might come in a lot of various stages. You might need to study your markets. You might need to take a class or absorb a book on writing to boost your skills. You might need to do an inventory of your skills and figure out what you need to do in order to do better.

Whatever your course of action, you need to bring your best effort to the table. Plan now to succeed.

# David Farland’s Daily Kick in the Pants – Editing Your Novel

Editing a novel isn’t simply a matter of eradicating errors, it’s an opportunity to add as many virtues to your work as possible. Does your novel suffer from weak descriptions? In your first pass, put them in. Would your work benefit by having stronger hooks at the opening to each chapter? Make a pass and put them in. Could your novel be better if your character had a more distinctive voice, or if we showed more internal dialog? You can make your novel better in the rewrite phase.

The truth is that there is so much to do to write a good novel, that many novelists find that it is better to focus on it in a couple of passes, in just the same way that a painter creates a masterpiece by laying down the paint in dozens of layers, letting each one dry before making another pass.

Sure, you might find some weaknesses when you’re editing, but you should be more concerned with adding virtues.

But in order to become a bestseller, you normally have to develop a number of skills. On a scale of one to ten, you might look at yourself and ask, where am I? Am I at a five when it comes to creating character voices? Am I only at a one when it comes to world creation? Does my work completely lack hooks or foreshadowing?

If you’re average in most ways but manage to excel in two or three, editors will find you to be publishable. In fact, if you’re excellent at three things, it creates a sense of a pattern of excellence, and you’ll probably become a bestseller. That’s all that it takes.

Given that, when I’m editing from now on, I’m going to try to work on developing new talents. For example, I might decide that I want to be at least a nine when it comes to creating hooks. Or maybe I’ll try to develop my themes to the point that I can honestly say, “I’ve never seen anyone handle this theme as well as I just did.”

I wish that I could say that there are great editors who can help you reach your loftiest goals. Maybe there are, but they probably don’t work in major publishing houses. Too often, editors for the houses don’t have much real training. Some went into the field with the goal of working as an editor, but I’ve worked with a number who came in from the secretarial pool. I recall one editor who didn’t like reading. Another had never read anything in the field when she started, and so asked me for a list of the classics.

An ideal editor, I think, would need to have a profound understanding of story. She would have studied with great writers, read widely in literature, and she’d prosper due to her ability to take good writers and help turn them into great ones.

Most of the editors that I’ve worked with aren’t writers. They have no experience with the craft, and I think that’s their weakness.

So what does a writer do? Just hoping that you’ll find a great editor isn’t quite enough. You’ll have to find your own editors and learn from them. For example, if you find a writer that you admire, you might look on his or her web site and see if the author has any articles that might enlighten you as to how to better your own work. You might even take a class, if the author is teaching at a local convention, and arrange to take that writer out to lunch in order to glean some private advice.

Similarly, there are plenty of great books on writing, and for a small investment, you get hours worth of thoughtful instruction on the topic of your choice from an expert in that field.

Beyond that, look for people with expertise and invite them to join your writer’s group or perhaps become a reader. If you look at Tolkien and Lewis, I have to wonder if either would have succeeded so well without the Inklings. Tolkien was a great world creator. Lewis was the pre-eminent master of theme. Each of them, I suspect, pushed the other to greater heights.

Look for people who can push you in the same way.

It is possible to hire editors, of course. Some professional fiction editors take on part-time work--after all, the field is notorious for its low pay. You can find people listed in the back of Writer’s Digest, or advertising online. You can also go to your local newspaper or to a magazine and find people.

Just as importantly, work on finding volunteer readers for your books. If you’re writing fantasy, see if you can find a few fans that would take a look at it and give an honest opinion. If you’re writing for children, check with an English teacher at a nearby school to see if you can find some volunteer readers. Don’t think that just because you haven’t published, people won’t be interested. The fact is, most people will be very enthusiastic in their response.

# The Future of Publishing

Last week I had my agent look over a movie contract, and in one clause that dealt with retained rights, my agent said, “We can’t sign this contract. It doesn’t allow us to sell enhanced books, and that is the entire future of publishing.”

I’d been talking to a prospective business partner about starting a company that will make enhanced books (books that may combine elements like film clips, music, video games, author interviews, and audio files, which are then sold electronically to be read on your iPad, phone, computer, and so on), so I thought that my agent’s comment was timely. But are “enhanced books” the future of publishing?

There is good reason to think so. But I don’t think that it’s the “entire future.”

Let me explain, and even prophesy, if I may. Now, I’ve been making my living as a writer for more than twenty years, and I watch the markets pretty closely. As most of you know, we’re going through some dramatic changes in the publishing world, with the new e-book revolution.

Here is what is happening. Right now, the e-book market is growing at over 10% per year. Meanwhile, the sale of paperbacks and hardcovers is dropping disproportionately. In fact, sales last month on hardcover books were down more than 40% from just the month before!

Now, there are reasons for this. Part of the problem has to do with the collapse of the Borders bookstore chain here in America. That might account for a drop of 25%. Another drop of 10% might be claimed because of the rise in sales of e-readers that people got for Christmas. But that means that there is still a substantial drop that doesn’t make sense—another 8%, more or less. What’s going on? I think that there may be people who are delaying hardback purchases in anticipation of buying e-readers. After all, why pay $25 for a hardcover when I plan to buy a Kindle and then get the electronic copy for $15 on Mother’s Day?

Whatever the problem, you have to realize that the entire publishing world is in trouble. As people switch to e-readers, then they quit buying at bookstores. As bookstore sales drop, their profit margins plunge into the red, and thus they can’t pay the distributors who sold them the books. As the distributors lose revenue (as happened with Anderson Distribution and others last year), they go out of business. When they don’t pay the publishers, what happens?

Well, publishers can do some things to save money. They can quit printing as many books. They can stop advertising. They can hold off on buying new manuscripts. They can use cheaper paper and binding. But there is a limit to how much they can cut their costs. Can they make up for the 50% losses that they’ve taken this year? No. There is only one thing that they can do, really. They have to get money from the authors.

Now, since authors don’t actually pay the publishers, there is only way to acquire money—from the author’s accounts. Money that is owed for past books sales just disappears. Or the publisher seeks to renegotiate the old contracts with worse terms, ones that let the publisher keep more money.

That kind of thing is happening a lot right now, if what I’m hearing is true. Publishers are publishing out-of-print books, or claiming that they hold the rights to OP books so that they can turn them into electronic books, and they’re basically stealing the author’s money. Or they are vastly under-reporting electronic sales, and perhaps even paper sales.

I’m sure that the publishers in most cases are hoping that they’ll figure a way out of this mess and pay the authors later. For example, most publishers are now demanding more and more from the authors in the way of electronic rights, movie rights, and income from foreign sales.

The publishers won’t make it. This change to electronic media is likely to take place over several years, and the publishers are in a downward spiral.

What I suspect will happen is this: most publishers will take money from the authors and be forced into court by writer’s groups. The judges will look at what is going on, there will be RICO investigations and allegations of mail fraud, and the publishers that are acting inappropriately will be reprimanded. They won’t go to prison. We never send white-collar criminals to prison. Instead, the authors will win their lawsuits, and will be awarded treble damages. This process will take several years to complete. When it is done, the publishers will declare bankruptcy, and the authors will never get anything in their settlement. In short, we’ll lose our shirts, if we keep on publishing with the big corporations.

Ten years from now, there will still be a business for paper books, but it won’t be an industry that makes $17 billion in US sales. It will be a much smaller business, maybe $4 billion in sales.

So if you’re a publisher, you need to look at scaling back now. You’ll need to move out of your fancy New York address, cut back on your print runs to something logical, and try to figure out how to ride out the storm. Latching onto author’s money is one way to do it. It has worked for decades.

As an author, I can’t afford to play this game. But there is an option: the e-book. With the rise in sales of e-books, an author can now go out and sell his own books. The market is expanding. Some authors are genuinely making millions in this new market.

By putting out a novel in e-book, I reach a much smaller market, but I might also cut out my publisher and my agent, with their high overhead, so that I make a much higher profit on a per-book basis. Sounds like a great idea, right?

But with the new market, there is going to come a lot of “white noise.” New authors, terrible writers, will be publishing, too, and readers are going to have to figure out how to decide what to read. Getting a reader’s attention will be terribly hard to do.

Well, how do you do that? One way may be to have critics giving reviews of books—not the author’s friends, but genuine impartial reviewers working for independent agencies. Another may be to have awards for each category of electronic book, so that we have something like the “Farland Award for best SF and fantasy novel next year.” Hell, consider this an announcement. I’ll set it up.

A third way to rise above the white noise may be to rely upon trusted “electronic publishers” to select books.

That’s where I’ve decided to step in. By creating an “enhanced book,” we’ll be investing a lot of money in a book’s future. We’ll take it from being an electronic Word file then and add background art, music, video, sound, and so on. We’ll have an author interview with the book, and it will become part book, part movie.

By investing that kind of money, we’ll not only enhance the reading experience for the audience, but we’ll also be putting our stamp of approval on a book. We’ll be saying, “We expect great things from this author. This one is really worth looking at.”

In short, I expect “enhanced books” to become the dominant art form for novels in the next few years, replacing and outselling simple e-books on the bestseller lists, and even outselling hardbacks and paperbacks within a couple of years.

As a person with a long history in publishing, videogames and film, this is sort of a natural step for me. My partner, Miles Romney, and I have agreed to start our company, in part because I believe in this new medium.

# Defining Yourself

It’s always good before you begin to write to really understand who your audience is and what they’re needs are, so that you can better meet those needs. But it’s also important to understand who you are as an author, and what it is that you want to achieve.

Yesterday I was helping an author write a query letter, and as I did, I was thinking, “Now what more can I say about his book? What sets this apart from other books in its genre?” Those are the same questions that I ask myself any time I’m looking at a query letter, but I don’t just ask them about the book. I ask them about the author.

A few years ago, an author I knew flew to New York to be interviewed by the legendary agent Al Zuckerman, the founder of Writers House Literary agency. As they spoke, Al suggested that the author “define his niche in the marketplace.” For example, you might say, “I’m the John Grisham of Middle Earth.” By that you might mean that you’re writing political/legal thrillers in a brilliantly devised fantasy setting. Is there a market for such books? Maybe. And if you think of a potential mixture that excites you, one that energizes any agent or editor that hears about it, you can instantly command a fortune in advances.

For example, years ago my former student Dan Wells mentioned that he wanted to be the “Stephen King of young adult fiction.” I thought that was an odd and interesting combination. Yet when his first novel, I AM NOT A SERIAL KILLER came out, it earned him huge advances overseas and led to the start of a brilliant career.

So you as an author, when you prepare to write a book, might consider whether you want to brand yourself.

J ust as importantly, you might want to look at your novel and brand it. What does that mean? It means that you set goals for your story—goals that have to do with understanding how it fits in the genre and what kind of qualities you want to achieve. When I began the Runelords series, one goal that I set was simple. I said, “I want this to start out like a traditional medieval fantasy, but by the time that a reader finishes the series, I want them to realize that there is nothing ‘traditional’ about this.” So I set out to work on biological world creation, magic systems, and so on in ways that I hadn’t seen before.

In a similar way, when I wrote my novel On My Way to Paradise I set a list of goals. At about spot number twelve I wrote, “I want to write the best battle scenes ever put into a science fiction novel.” Now, I had a lot of other goals, ones that were more important. But I was gratified when I got a gushing review from one young man who seemed not to notice all of the other cool literary things that I did: he just talked about the mind-blowing fights which he described as “the best battle scenes ever shown in science fiction.”

So ask yourself the questions: “What kind of writer am I? What do I want to achieve that is similar to some of the bestsellers of all time? How am I going to carve my own unique niche in the world? As I write this coming book, how will it help reach that goal, or does it take me off in the wrong direction? What kinds of goals do I want to reach with this novel?”

As I set my writing goals, I find that it’s best if I actually write them down, turn them into concrete, specific goals.

# What Makes a Million-dollar Bestseller?

Many times when a writer starts to write his or her first book or screenplay, it is because the seed of an idea takes root in his or her head and the author feels that it must come out. This is the author’s primary motivation to write.

That's not a bad way to write, but unfortunately in many cases the new author will pen something that feels terribly important and profound to him or her while the rest of the world might not respond at all. That's because so many new authors write as a type of therapy.

The new author, after two or three sales, will often find him or herself sliding back down on the sales charts, and only then will begin to wonder what it is that the rest of the world would like to see in a story.

The answer to that question of course changes from reader to reader. But if you're looking to sell big, you need to do some research into what audiences like.

This is something that writers need to do for almost every story. My research process requires me to look not just at book sales, but also at popular movies and television shows—to try to get a snapshot of our culture as a whole.

The reason for this is quite simple. If I write a book, there are a limited number of readers for it. For example, it has been estimated that in my own field, fantasy, there are only about two or three million regular readers out there. I can catch some of those people as they wander past my books, but if I want to go really big—say Harry Potter big—I need to do better than that. I need to create a sensation. I need to get enough publicity on morning television and radio shows so that it drives readers into the bookstore—the way that Rowling, Paolini, Meyer, and Suzanne Collins have recently have done.

In order to appeal to that wider audience, I look at several mediums and try to take some clues from them.

For example, let's take film. In order for a movie to gross $100 million at the box office, it has to draw a viewership of about 16 million people—which is much larger than the number of hardcover sales made by almost any novel.

So, what can I learn from movie tastes? A few years ago I read a book on screenwriting. In it, the instructor listed the top 50 bestselling movies of all time and asked that you look for similarities. When I reached the end of the list, the author announced that there were NO similarities. But I had found three things that they all had in common. The list changes each year, but my points will still hold true. In fact, I’ve even found a few more similarities.

Movies set in another time and or another place: 98%.

This tells us that movies that take us away from the real world and transport us into an alternate reality are far more popular than those set within a contemporary setting.

Movies with wide audience potential (Male/female): 100%.

Most of these movies have strong protagonists of both sexes and of various ages. Thus they draw in a much wider audience than, say, a teen chick flick. However, the main story focus is almost always on a relatively young male—anywhere from a child to a man in his early twenties. I hate that statistic, but I can’t ignore it.

Movies with high emotional Richter-scale values: 100%.

The movies here tend to tug on the heart strings. Very often they achieve this by placing an entire "world" in jeopardy. But sometimes, as in Home Alone or Forrest Gump, the movie focuses on one very likable protagonist—then puts him or her through hell.

Movies with heroic main plot: 98%.

Almost every movie on the list focuses on someone who is trying to save others.

Fantasy or SF: 94%.

Since I write fantasy I'd like to point out that fantasy movies have been topping the bestseller lists for decades. It's time that the studios take notice!

Alternate World: 80%.

Most of these movies that have done well have been set in an alternate world, not in our world.

So, as a writer, what can you learn from these points? Well, if you're trying to write a bestseller, this information might be something of a treasure map, pointing you in some likely directions.

Now, these figures hold true for the top 50 movies of all time, and they’re a good guide to how popular something might become, in general. But this is just a cursory glance at one medium of entertainment. A real analysis of bestsellers will need to take us much deeper—into not just noticing what works, but understanding why it works, and how the studios “make it work.”

Yet for today, it’s enough to simply notice a thing. We’ll be coming back to this in great depth over the next few days.

# Giving Up

Sometimes it seems that your life has a theme. In the past couple of weeks I’ve heard from several authors the words “I’m thinking about giving up.”

I worry about that. No one ever won a race by giving up.

At least when it comes to writing, I’ve never been good at giving up. My parents advised me against it. I didn’t listen. Sometimes my wife has even suggested that I go find another field—even in years when I was making fantastic money.

So I found an article about authors who didn’t give up, and would like to repost much of it. It was written by Janeen Elite, and much was taken from Jack Canfield. I can think of other authors with similar stories, but this will suffice:

While many writers lament that facing a blank page is the most difficult part of writing, others will disagree and state that it is getting "that" rejection letter that really makes writing torturous.

This is because "that" rejection letter can hit right where it hurts; the old ego. "That" rejection letter can make a writer doubt their own abilities, possibly may even make them rethink their dream career and even their life's purpose.

Well, take heart dear writers and don't give up. Just because a strange "someone" didn't like your piece does not mean it is not good.

The following is a list of writers who also received "that" letter. Many even received it more than once, but they didn't let that stop them and you shouldn't either.

Margaret Mitchell received "that" letter 38 times. The book? Gone With The Wind

This "poor" woman spent six years writing the first installment of a series of books she wanted to publish. You would think that after 9 rejections she might have thought she was wasting her time. Children all over the world are grateful that J.K. Rowling didn't feel that way. Her Harry Potter book series has sold over 400 million copies around the globe and even as far back as 2003 the BBC news announced that Rowland was already "richer than the Queen."

Talk about rejection! James Joyce's Dubliners was rejected 22 times! And even after it was published, only 379 copies were sold in its first year. To make matters worse, Mr. Joyce admitted that he purchased 120 of those copies himself.

This quote from author Judy Blume pretty much says it all. "I would go to sleep at night feeling that I'd never be published. But I'd wake up in the morning convinced I would be. Each time I sent a story or book off to a publisher, I would sit down and begin something new. I was learning more with each effort. I was determined. Determination and hard work are as important as talent." It took Ms. Blume 2 years before any of her work was accepted.

Ouch! That Hurts!

It's one thing to receive the standard rejection letter that states that a publisher is "not looking for this kind of book at this time" because then an author can at least console themselves in knowing that it is not personal and it is not their writing that is the problem.

Quite often an author can also convince themselves that maybe their book wasn't even read very carefully by a publisher to begin with. But how would you feel if you found out that not only was your book read, but a publisher actually took the time to tell you why it was so horrendous?

The following are actual excerpts famous authors have received in their rejection letters that turn out to be so laughable in hindsight.

"The girl doesn't, it seems to me, have a special perception or feeling which would lift that book above the 'curiosity' level." The book -- The Diary of Anne Frank.

"...too different from other juveniles on the market to warrant its selling" told to Dr. Seuss, about his book And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street.

"An endless nightmare. I do not believe it would "take"...I think the verdict would be 'Oh don't read that horrid book'." This was written about The War of The Worlds by H.G. Wells. Here is another wonderful critique Mr. Wells received about The Time Machine; "It is not interesting enough for the general reader and not thorough enough for the scientific reader."

"This will set publishing back 25 years," written about The Deer Park by Norman Mailer

"an absurd and uninteresting fantasy," regarding Lord of the Flies

And probably one of the all-time greatest ironic rejections is:

"You'd have a decent book if you'd get rid of that Gatsby Character." told to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

As you can tell from the quotes written above, some publishers just don't have a clue. So start saving those rejection letters. Who knows? Maybe one day you can show them off when your book hits the best seller list?

# The Submission Game

One question that I frequently get is “How do I make multiple submissions of my novel? I mean, the publishers all say that they won’t take them, but how would they even know if I did send copies of my manuscript to five publishers? I don’t want to wait years and years to get published.” In other words, no new author wants to spend ten years working their way through a list of publishers, and I don’t blame them.

The truth is, you shouldn’t make multiple submissions. Editors don’t want to spend twenty hard-won hours reading a manuscript, sometimes taking notes for rewrites, just to find out from the author that “Oh, sorry, I just sold it to your competitor.” So they make a rule that “We won’t even look at multiple submissions,” and woe to you if you violate that rule.

Editors do catch authors who break the rule. They do talk to one another. Years ago, my editors at Bantam would get together for lunch each Friday with science fiction editors from other publishers. They would talk about promising manuscripts that they got that week, recommend books to fill in one another’s slots, and so on.

So I’ve heard of a couple of aspiring authors who got caught sending multiple manuscripts out—and in each case, all of the editors in the field blacklisted that author.

Both of those instances were back in the 1990s. We’re entering a new age with self-publishing through e-books, and it may be that the rules will become more accommodating for authors in the future. But the truth is that if you want to jumpstart your career, getting a big sale with major publishers can be extremely valuable. So you as an author still need to know how to do that in the proper way.

Here is the rule: you as an author should never make multiple submissions to publishers unless the publisher’s guidelines specifically tell you that they allow it. However, if you find an agent who is willing to hold an auction for a large property, then publishers will knowingly look at a book that a dozen others also have under consideration.

Finding an agent who will hold an auction is hard, though. If an agent holds too many auctions—say a dozen a year—the publishers will tire of it. After all, the agent can’t be getting that many stellar properties. Publishers will only want to see the very finest, the cream of the crop, the novels that really might sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In order to maintain any credibility, an agent who is willing to hold an auction really should do it only on occasion. My own agent feels that once or twice a year is the limit. An agent who holds too many auctions is like “the boy who cried wolf” too many times. Such agents will soon discover that the publishers quit coming at to the auctions at all, and for that reason, most agents in New York, even ones who did it early in their career, never hold an auction. If they got lured into holding an auction one time too many, they may have lost their credibility.

So you as an author can only hold an auction if you and your agent agree that you’ve got a special book that’s worthy of an auction. And you should be aware that not all auctions are successful. Ideally, you want to get three or more bidders, but I’ve seen plenty of auctions where only one publisher came to the table, and very often, no one makes a bid at all.

So how do you find an agent who holds auctions? Go to www.publishersmarketplace.com and pay the $20 fee to join. Once you’re a member, you can go into the “Top Dealmakers” section of the site. There you can select “Agents,” then choose the genre that you’re writing in—young adult, romance, etc. You will then be shown nearly all of the agents who are working in your field, ranked in order, from the agent who has the most sales to the agent who has the fewest.

You should study each and every agent on your list. Sometimes an agent who has a lot of sales doesn’t do auctions—and so sells a lot of books, but none for big bucks. Other times, a promising new agent might only have three sales, but they were all in the past month, not over the course of the past ten years. So just because one agent has a lot of sales, and another has very few, it doesn’t mean that you should go with the most-established agent.

You should also study the books that each agent has sold. The site will tell you that and let you know roughly how much each book sold for. By studying the loglines of each novel that an agent represented, you can also get a great idea of what the agent is looking for. It also lets you know if the agent held a successful auction. The logline will tell you “sold at auction for . . .” If you’ve got an agent who has been working for five years, and that agent hasn’t had a successful auction, you can be fairly certain that the agent won’t try to auction your novel.

But don’t stop your shopping for agents at Publishers Marketplace. Once you know the agent’s name, you can easily go to the agent’s own website and get clearer ideas about books that they might be looking for in the future. By this I mean, you might find an agent who says, “I’ve been representing a lot of novels about girls who babysit, but I’d really like to see the next *Hunger Games*.” And if you happen to have the next *Hunger Games*, this just might be the perfect agent for you.

By using this method, you should be able to research all of the legitimate agents in your field in just a couple of hours. This is a great tool. When I shopped for my first agent twenty-five years ago, I spent weeks reading marketing reports, phoning other authors, and so on—and I never did get a clear idea of whom I wanted to have be my agent.

But what if you don’t have an agent? What if you still want to figure out how to make multiple submissions? That’s easy. You won’t send a full manuscript out, but you can make multiple submissions of query letters. You simply write a query letter and send it out to several top editors and agents at once and ask if they would like to see your novel. (You can find some great sites online that will talk at length about how to write a query letter.) Most of the agents and editors may ignore you, but those who are interested will write you a note, and if someone gets really excited, they may call you at midnight asking to read your book!

So there are ways to forge through the slush pile quickly, and every author should look for ways to do that. Don’t just send books off to publishers and let yourself become a prisoner of hope.

# Dealing with a Large Cast of Characters

A reader recently said, “I’ve taken a bunch of radio dramas that I wrote a few years ago, and I’m trying to combine them into one big story. However, I have a problem: how do I handle a large cast?”

There are real advantages to writing a book with a diverse cast. For one thing, you can attract a wide audience—male, female, old, and young—more easily with a large cast than you can if you’re writing to one target audience such as teenage girls. That’s why, though *Twilight* sold remarkably well, it still hasn’t ever overtaken *Harry Potter*. Rowling cast a wider net.

Most large fantasies do the same—things like *Game of Thrones* and *Wheel of Time*, but you’ll also see this happening with epic historical novels a lot, too, and even with thrillers.

But there are so many pitfalls and drawbacks to writing with a large cast. Will the readers remember who each character is? Will they connect with them? Will they enjoy the whole novel or will they read only one story line and skip the rest?

You want to take advantage of the strengths of having multiple protagonists while avoiding the pitfalls.

So here are some tips for writing stories with a large cast.

1) Narrow your focus to just a few characters. For a novel, you can really only focus on three or four characters. Each time that you add a new arc for a viewpoint character, the length of your story doubles. This is because each time that you add a new major protagonist, that person now has to have scenes and relationships with all of the others. Literally, the novel doubles the length of the story.

So make an intelligent decision as to who your viewpoint characters are going to be. To a large extent, the age and sex of your protagonists is the single largest factor that determines who your audience will be. If you’re going after teens and adults, for example, you want to make your protagonists are teens and adults, not children, and not great grandmothers.

Do you just want to pull in a female audience—write about a female protagonist. If you want a male audience, write about a male protagonist. Sure, there are readers who don’t care about the sex of the protagonist, but statistically there aren’t many.

If you’re trying to draw in both males and females, you’ll want to have a pretty equal number of protagonists of each sex.

So if you’re taking short stories and bringing them together to form one longer work, you may want to look at combining your protagonists from two or three stories into one. For example, let’s say that you have one middle-aged protagonist named Jonah Robb in one story, and you have another middle-aged protagonist named Conrad Hegel in another. You might look at the stories and ask yourself, could I rewrite this in such a way so that Jonah and Conrad become the same person?

2) Next, when writing large novels like this, look for ways to cut characters or deemphasize some of them. Consider each character’s story arc. Is the little boy in your story really so important that he needs a story line? Is he really that interesting? Or will your audience be far more interested in the teen girl’s arc? The truth is that when you choose to write in a mediocre plot line, you sap the strength of the story that is really driving the book. Don’t do it.

3) Next, let the readers know who is important in your story. As authors we tag a character as being important through a number of tactics. Here’s a list of them.

A) Viewpoint characters are important. If we bother to write a story from the point of view of a character in chapter one, the reader will expect to follow that character throughout the novel. (I know, I violated that rule in *The Runelords*. I was signaling to the reader that this isn’t your standard fantasy where everyone will live happily all the way through.)

B) Any character who is given a name is tagged as being important. Thus, if a doorman is given a name, we might expect him to take an important role in your story later on. Otherwise, he should remain just “the doorman.”

C) Any character who is powerful becomes important. By that I mean, any character who is powerful enough to change the outcome of a story is important to the reader. Thus a powerful villain is important, but so are resourceful protagonists, characters who act as guides to the protagonists, love interests, sidekicks, contagonists, and so on.

D) Any character who is put into extreme pain, particularly emotional pain, is probably important to the story, simply because he/she is someone that we will feel for.

E) Any character who is extremely likeable, anyone who is struggling to do the right thing, is important, for the same reason as above.

In other words, as you begin telling your story, you can use the above ideas to decide just how important a character will become and whether they are worthy of becoming viewpoint characters in your novel.

As you decide who your cast will be, remember that readers of different ages and different sexes are usually looking or different emotional payoffs. I’ve written about emotional draws before, but let me put it this way.

Statistically speaking, the strongest draw for a teenage girl is romance. More of them will be drawn to romance than, say, drama or mystery. So when creating that storyline, make sure that you target your readers by focusing on the kind of story that they want. A fifty-year-old woman reading the book may be attracted by mystery and drama, so you might want to have a viewpoint character for her who is involved in intrigue. A teenage boy will be attracted to adventure, so you make sure that his role focuses on that. A middle-grade reader will be interested in wonder, humor, and horror.

So when you’re looking at a potential viewpoint character, just ask yourself, “Is this character’s story a good fit for my needs?” If not, you either have to change the story or drop that viewpoint.

Of course, just because a character isn’t a good fit for a larger arc, that doesn’t mean that you need to drop them completely. A minor character who appears for a bit in one novel and then wanders off to live happily ever after can offer some great relief to the reader. It assures them that your series has an end, and that you can write satisfying conclusions.

Once you’ve decided who your cast will be, you as a writer need to make sure that the reader doesn’t forget who each character is. There are several ways to do that.

A) Make sure that we see the major characters often in your story. One way to do this is to keep your chapters short and have alternating viewpoints. If you go more than forty pages without visiting a character, you’ve probably ignored them for too long. So that means that if you’ve got four viewpoint characters and you’re alternating chapters, you may want to write short chapters—ten pages each.

You can also keep the characters visible by keeping them together physically. A lot of fantasy writers will have three people meet at an inn, then go off on different quests—only to meet at the end of the novel. This divides your characters, so that you lose focus. There are entire novels where this happens with Robert Jordan, for example. He may feel that he needs to spend book six in a series with two characters, then spend book seven with two others. So readers who are more interested in the book seven characters are tempted to just skip book six.

So try to keep your focus on a group of characters. Have them talk to each other, or maybe they can talk about or think about characters who aren’t on stage in a scene. Their conversation might be as simple as, “Have you heard anything from Alex lately?” just to remind us that we have an Alex storyline. The protagonist might respond, “Yeah, I saw him take a shotgun and head down Washington Street at sunset. Says he’s gonna’ bag himself a couple of zombies.” If you’re writing a contemporary piece, you can remind us of a character who falls out of the limelight by having your character text another, read about them on Facebook, and so on.

B) One way to make a character memorable is to tag each of your characters. By this I mean, you can give each person a distinguishing feature—such as a limp, a red trench coat, or an unusual accent—so that when you bring that person into the story, the reader can quickly identify him or her. When Alex comes limping back from his zombie hunt, a protagonist might have to listen closely to try to determine if that’s Alex’s limp, or just another cramped-up zombie.

C) Make sure that each of your protagonists has a gripping story—a complete arc, with his or her own problems and setbacks and grand designs. In order for your story to be memorable, it has to keep the reader intrigued, keep the reader hooked, so that the reader will be excited each time they come to a new segment. Remember that a gripping romance is much different from a gripping adventure or a fascinating mystery. You can have different types of stories woven together into one large tapestry.

D) Last of all, make sure that you start each scene and end each scene with powerful hooks. When your reader gets to the end of a scene and wonders, “Oh my gosh, how will Alex ever escape the zombies!” The threat needs to be strong enough so that the reader will look forward to it while he reads the following chapter about how Zina has fallen for the incredibly charming zombie lord, and you’ll want to keep them reading during the following chapter as Doctor Paulsen tries to determine just what kind of virus it is that has infected mankind and turned them all into zombies in the first place, even as her own daughter sinks further and further under the grip of the plague.

In short, there are some great reasons to write those big sprawling epic novels that weave together the stories of dozens of characters, but you as an author have to work hard to keep your cast manageable, to hook your readers with each of the tales, and to make your characters memorable.

A reader recently