Advice on Novel Writing by Crawford Kilian

1. Foreword by the Author

A little later tonight (Thursday, Nov 5 [1992]), I'm going to start sending in a series of items about writing fiction for the mass market. Some of these I posted a few days ago, provoking a remarkable amount of e-mail asking for copies of this or that posting. So I decided I'd start from the top and go through the whole batch in a couple of stages. Altogether I'll be sending 17 separate ``handouts'' from my commercial fiction course. They range from good work habits to the reading of contracts. Please--don't read them as divine revelation. They come out of my experience, which may not be anything like yours or that of other writers. But if they save you some time, energy and grief, I'll be glad.

The files total about 180K--enough for a short book. I'll number each one as Fiction Advice plus a number and keyword. If you miss some of them, I'll *try* to post them directly, but sometimes people's addresses don't make sense to my computer...

Why am I doing this? Well, a year or so ago someone e-mailed me with that very question. I thought for a minute and then replied to this effect: When you're young, and you think you have the talent, you wonder how you can make the talent serve you. When you're older, you wonder how you can serve the talent. This is some small part of my service. God bless, work hard, write honestly, take pride in your craft!

Crawford Kilian
Communications Department
Capilano College
2055 Purcell Way
North Vancouver, BC Canada V7G 1H7
Usenet: Crawford_Kilian@mindlink.bc.ca

2. Developing Efficient Work Habits

Different writers face different advantages and drawbacks in forming good writing habits. The circumstances of your personal life may make it easy or hard to find writing time, but time itself is not the real issue--it's habit. Writing must be something you do regularly, like brushing your teeth. The writer who waits for inspiration will wait even longer for a complete, published novel.

Writing habits flourish best in routine, but the efficient writer also exploits opportunity. Routine: Set aside some time every day when you can work undisturbed for an hour or two--first thing in the morning, during lunch, after dinner, whenever you can set aside other demands. Ideally, it's the same time of day. Your family and friends will soon build their routines around yours. With luck, they will resent your unscheduled appearances during your writing time, and will send you packing back to your desk.

Keep your writing equipment (paper, pens, software manuals, etc.) in your writing place, close at hand. Minimize distractions like interesting new magazines and books. Try to find a writing time when few people phone or visit. If a cup of coffee and some background music make you feel less lonely, by all means enjoy them.

Use household chores as thinking time: a chance to review what you've done so far and to consider where your writing should go next. Walking the dog or vacuuming the carpet can provide more ideas than you expect. This is really just ``controlled daydreaming,'' letting your mind freewheel in a particular direction: What the heroine should do in the

next chapter, how the hero would respond to escaping a car bomb, how the villain developed his evil character. But the process doesn't seem to work if you just sit and stare at the wall. You need to be up and moving in some automatic pattern.

Don't lean on others for editorial advice and encouragement--least of all people you're emotionally involved with. Spouses, friends and roommates rarely have both editorial perceptiveness and the tact to express it without infuriating you or breaking your heart. Empty praise will get you nowhere; unconstructive criticism can destroy your novel in an instant.

Instead, be your own editor: set aside regular times to write yourself letters discussing your own work, articulating what's good and less good in it. In the process you'll easily solve problems that could otherwise grow into full-blown writer's block. On a computer, the letters can form a continuous journal, recording your reactions to the evolving work. Checking back to the first journal entries can help keep you on track--or dramatically show how far you've moved from your original concept.

Writing a letter to yourself is especially helpful if you're beginning to have anxieties about the story. Sometimes we try to suppress those anxieties, which only makes them worse. Anxiety turns to frustration and despair, and finally we abandon the whole project. If you can actually write down what bothers you about your heroine, or your plot, or whatever, the answer to the problem often suggests itself. The act of turning our chaotic thoughts into orderly sentences seems to lead to much quicker and more satisfying solutions.

In addition to these self-addressed letters, keep a daily log of your progress. Word processors with word-count functions are powerful encouragers. The log can give you a sense of accomplishment, especially on big projects, and can enable you to set realistic completion deadlines. For example, if you know you can write 500 words in an hour, and you write three hours a week, you can have a completed novel manuscript of 75,000 words in 50 weeks. If you write ten hours a week, the ms. will be complete in 15 weeks.

Compile a ``project bible.'' This is a list of facts, names, and so on that you expect to be using for constant reference. If you have some important research findings you plan to use, put them in the bible along with their sources. Include lists of characters' names (with descriptions, so their eyes don't change color), unusual words or spellings, etc. The best format for this bible may be a looseleaf binder you can carry with you. (A word of caution: If your bible gets too big to carry easily, you're defeating its purpose.)

Opportunity: If you decide you ``can't write'' unless you're seated at your Gigabyte II computer with Mozart on the stereo and no one else in the house, you're just making life harder for yourself. Your ordinary domestic routine will always contain ``dead time''--periods when you're away from home (or at least away from your workplace) with no other task at hand. You might be waiting in a doctor's office, on a bus, or trapped in a large, dull meeting. Use that dead time constructively by carrying your notebook bible in which you can record at least a few lines of a rough draft. Or you might jot down some background notes about your project, or a self-editing idea that's just occurred to you. You can then use these when you're back at your desk producing finished text.

These are general habits that will help you at all stages of the novel-writing process. But you may also find that you need to understand those stages and adapt your habits to each of them. You may not do yourself any good if you plunge into the writing phase before

you've worked out a decent outline. So let's take a look at the stages of the novel-writing process, and then consider some techniques to maximize your efficiency in each of them.

3. Elements Of A Successful Story

If your novel or short story is going to work, it's going to need all the right components. Used without imagination or sensitivity, those elements may produce only formula fiction. But, like a good cook with the right materials and a good recipe, you can also create some pleasant surprises.

Many writers, like many good cooks, don't need to think consciously about what they're throwing in the pot. But as an apprentice you should probably think about how your story matches up with the following suggestions. They all have to do, essentially, with bringing your characters and readers from a *state of ignorance* to a *state of awareness*: Can our heroine find happiness as a journalist? We don't know, but we'll find out. Can our hero found a family dynasty in the Nevada wilderness? We don't know, but we'll find out.

In the opening...

Show us your main characters, or at least foreshadow them: We might see your heroine's mother getting married, for example. Or we might see a crime committed which will bring in your hero to investigate.

Show one or more characters under some kind of appropriate stress. For example, if the hero must perform well under enemy fire in the climax, show him being shot at in Chapter One--and performing badly. If the heroine must resist temptation at the end, show her (or someone else) succumbing to temptation in the beginning.

Show us who's the ``good guy,'' who's the ``bad guy.'' That is, in whom should we make an emotional investment? Whose side are we on? Even if the hero is morally repugnant (a hired killer, for example), he should display some trait or attitude we can admire and identify with. The villain can be likable but set on a course we must disapprove.

Show what's at stake. Editors and readers want to know this right away. (That's why the blurb on the jacket usually tells us: ``Only one person can save the West/defend the Galactic Empire/defeat the vampires...'')What does the hero stand to gain or lose? What will follow if the villain wins?

Establish the setting--where and when the story takes place.

Establish the area of conflict . If the setting is the Nanaimo coal mines at the turn of the century, the area of conflict may be relations between miners and owners, or within a family of miners, or within a single miner's personality.

Foreshadow the ending. If the hero dies in a blizzard at the end, a few flakes of snow may fall in the first chapter.

Set the tone of the story: solemn or excited, humorous or tragic.

In the body of the story...

Tell your story in scenes, not in exposition. A scene contains a purpose, an obstacle or conflict, and a resolution that tells us something new about the characters and their circumstances.

Develop your characters through action and dialogue. Show us, don't tell us, what's going on and why (not He was loud and rude, but ``Get outa my way, you jerk!'' he bellowed.).

Include all the elements you need for your conclusion. If everything depends on killing the victim with a shotgun, show us the shotgun long before it goes off.

Give your characters adequate motivation for their actions and words. Drama is people doing amazing things for very good reasons. Melodrama is people doing amazing things for bad or nonexistent reasons.
Develop the plot as a series of increasingly serious problems. (The heroine escapes the villain in Chapter 5 by fleeing into the snowy mountains; now in Chapter 6 she risks death in an avalanche.) Establish suspense by making solution of the problems uncertain (How will the heroine escape the avalanche and avoid freezing to death in Chapter Seven?).
Make solutions of the problems appropriate to the characters (Good thing she took Outward Bound training in Chapter One).

In the conclusion...

Present a final, crucial conflict when everything gained so far is in danger and could be lost by a single word or deed: this is the climax, which reveals something to your readers (and perhaps to your characters) which has been implicit from the outset but not obvious or predictable.

Throughout the story...

Remember that nothing in a story happens at random . Why is the heroine's name Sophia? Why is she blind? Why is her dog a black Lab? The easy answer is that you're the God of your novel and that's the way you want things. But if you have a conscious reason for these elements, the story gains in interest because it carries more meaning: For example, ``Sophia'' means ``wisdom'' and the name can provide a cue to the reader.
Use image, metaphor and simile with a conscious purpose, not just because a phrase ``sounds good.''
Maintain consistent style, tone, and point of view.
Know the conventions of the form you're working in, and break them only when you have a good reason to. For example, if it's conventional for the private eye to be an aggressive, hard-drinking single man, you're going to shake up the reader if your private eye is a yogurt-loving, shy mother of three school-age children. You'll shake up the reader even more if she goes around pistol-whipping people; as a private eye, her behavior will still depend on her personality and limitations.

4. Style: Checklist For Fiction Writers

As you begin to develop your outline, and then the actual text of your novel, you can save time and energy by making sure that your writing style requires virtually no copy editing. In the narrative:

- Do any sentences begin with the words ``There'' or ``It''? They can almost certainly benefit from revision. (Compare: There were three gunmen who had sworn to kill him. It was hard to believe. or: Three gunmen had sworn to kill him. He couldn't believe it.)
- Are you using passive voice instead of active voice? (Compare: Is passive voice being used?) Put it in active voice!
- Are you repeating what you've already told your readers? Are you telegraphing your punches?
- Are you using trite phrases, cliches, or deliberately unusual words? You'd better have a very good reason for doing so.

Are you terse? Or, alternatively, are you on the other hand expressing and communicating your thoughts and ideas with a perhaps excessive and abundant plethora of gratuitous and surplus verbiage, whose predictably foreseeable end results, needless to say, include as a component part a somewhat repetitious redundancy?

Are you grammatically correct? Are spelling and punctuation correct? (This is not mere detail work, but basic craft. Learn standard English or forget about writing novels.)

Is the prose fluent, varied in rhythm, and suitable in tone to the type of story you're telling?

Are you as narrator intruding on the story through witticisms, editorializing, or self-consciously, inappropriately ``fine'' writing?

In the dialogue:

Are you punctuating dialogue correctly, so that you neither confuse nor distract your readers?

Are your characters speaking naturally, as they would in reality, but more coherently?

Does every speech advance the story, revealing something new about the plot or the characters? If not, what is its justification?

Are your characters so distinct in their speech--in diction, rhythm, and mannerism--that you rarely need to add ``he said'' or ``she said''?

5. Manuscript Format

Once your book appears in print, your publisher will return your manuscript as ``dead matter.'' At that point it's of interest only to future Ph.D. candidates. But when it first arrives in the publisher's office, it ought to look as inviting, clean and professional as you can make it. You want to make sure it's as readable (and correctable) as possible; don't give the editor an excuse to reject you because you make her eyes hurt, and she can't even find room to insert proper spelling.

Ideally, you'll submit your manuscript in laser-printed form. If you can't afford that, then use an inkjet printer (used with good bond paper, it's almost as good as laser), a good dot-matrix printer, or an electric typewriter. If your dot-matrix printer has a pale ribbon and you can't replace it, make a darker photocopy of the original printout.

Consider your choice of font. A sans serif font is legible but not readable--that is, you can recognize a word or phrase quickly, but reading page after page would be exhausting. A boldface font is even worse. A serif font is more readable, so by all means choose one for the body of your manuscript text. Point size is also important. For the Mac, 12-point Times isn't bad, and it lets you put a lot of text on one page. But 14-point Times is more readable.

(This issue, by the way, recently kicked up a big fuss in this newsgroup; some people argued that only a monospace font was acceptable. I finally phoned Del Rey Books to see if they preferred a monospace font like Courier, or a more flexible font. The editor I talked to obviously thought I was bonkers; they don't much care as long as they can read the manuscript.)

Paper should be standard 8.5x11, 20 lb. white bond. If you use fanfold paper in a dot-matrix printer, make sure it's reasonably heavy. (You will *of course* separate each page

and remove the strips on the sides.) Give yourself a margin of at least an inch top and bottom, and an inch or an inch and a half on the sides. Double-space your text. Do not put an extra double-space between paragraphs, unless you want a similar gap on the printed page to indicate a change of scene or passage of time. Indent each paragraph about half an inch. If you are using a font with letters that take up variable amounts of space, a single space after a period is enough. If you are using a typewriter or a monospace font, two spaces are better. Either way, a single space should follow every comma, semicolon, and colon. If you can, use an ``em dash'' with no spaces between the dash and the surrounding words. Two hyphens -- are an acceptable substitute. Underline text only if you cannot italicize it.

Do not use a right-justified margin! It may look tidy, but it creates gaps between words that make reading hard. Avoid hyphenations. Also avoid ``widows and orphans''--that is, a paragraph that begins on the last line of a page, or a paragraph that ends on the first line the following page. Most word processors can kick such paragraphs onto the next page. This may create huge lower margins, but it's better than breaking a paragraph.

Be sure that each page displays a plain Arabic numeral in the upper right-hand corner. Otherwise, don't bother with a header. They're not going to scatter your ms. or lose the title page. And when you send it in, don't bind it in a cute cover. Send it loose, in a typing-paper box. Make sure you have at least two copies on disk (in separate locations) or a photocopy. In 1979 I sent half a manuscript (240 pages, a year's work) to my editor in New York; he sent it back a couple of months later, but I'm still waiting for it. Fortunately I had a carbon copy.

The publisher may want you to send along a disk with the manuscript on it, as well as the hard copy. When I did that recently, I found that the editor just poured my files into a new font and layout and sent me the page proofs for correction. That meant all the mistakes I found were my own; I couldn't blame some clumsy typesetter. This is the downside of the computer revolution, folks.

6. Storyboarding

``Storyboarding'' usually means arranging a sequence of images for a film or commercial. But you can storyboard a novel also, and it can be a helpful way to organize the plot. That's because we don't normally *think* plot. We have an idea for a story (immigrant boy founds family dynasty in Nevada wilderness) and a random assortment of mental images (encounter with a grizzly bear, wild ride to rescue son from kidnappers, gorgeous blonde swimming nude in icy stream, showdown with eastern gangsters wanting land for casino). How do we get from these fragments to a coherent plot?

Writing a letter to yourself may help, but first try this: Take a stack of 3x5 cards and jot down an image or scene on each one, just in the order the ideas occur to you. It might look something like this:

> Jesse rides into town, confronts Caleb Black about his fraudulent mining-shares deal. Caleb denies everything, threatens to shoot Jesse if he talks about it.

When you have five or ten or twenty such cards, lay them out in the sequence you envisage for the story. You certainly don't have a card for each scene in the novel, but you have the scenes that your subconscious seems to want to deal with.

You also have numerous gaps. How do you get Jesse from his silver mine in Nevada to the deck of the Titanic? How does Caleb get in touch with the three hired killers from San Francisco? How does Jesse's grandson respond to the first offer from the gangster syndicate that wants to build a casino on the site of the old mine?

Now you turn your thoughts to just those gaps, and new ideas occur to you. That means more cards. Maybe some of the new ideas are better than the original ones, so some of the old cards go in the trash. New characters emerge to fulfill functions in the story. Your research into Nevada history suggests still more scenes which might go into this or that part of the novel; still more cards go into your growing deck.

The story may eventually end up as a series of flashbacks, but for now stick to straight chronological order. Maybe the whole story occurs during a three-hour siege of a secluded mansion; maybe it stretches across a century and a continent. Whatever the ``real time'' of your story, you may see that the cards clump naturally around certain periods of the plot and you see no need for events to fill in the gaps. That's fine; maybe you've found the natural divisions between chapters or sections of the story.

Keep asking yourself *why*. Why Nevada, why mining, why a gorgeous naked blonde? Don't keep a scene in your storyboard unless you can justify it as a way to dramatize a character's personality, to move the story ahead, to lend verisimilitude. If you absolutely must have a scene in which Jesse's true love Sophia goes skinnydipping in an icy creek and then nearly drowns, what good will the scene do for the story?

Once you have at least the main sequence of events clearly mapped out on your cards, you can begin to transfer them to a more manageable synopsis or outline. More about that in a later posting.

7. Ten Points on Plotting

Nothing should happen at random. Every element in a story should have significance, whether for verisimilitude, symbolism, or the intended climax. Names, places, actions and events should all be purposeful. To test the significance of an element, ask: Why this place and not another? Why this name and not another? Why this action, this speech, and not others--or none at all? The answers should be: To persuade the reader of the story's plausibility; to convey a message about the theme of the story; to prepare the reader for the climax so that it seems both plausible and in keeping with the theme.

Plot stems from character under adversity. A mild-mannered person cannot achieve his goals by an out-of-character action like a violent assault, unless we have prepared the reader for it by revealing a glimpse of some suppressed aspect of his personality that can be plausibly released by stress. And the stress itself must also be plausible, given the circumstances of the story.

Each character has an urgent personal agenda. Too much is at stake to abandon that agenda without good reason. We may not share the character's urgency, but we should be able to see why he cares so much about what he's doing. A character who acts without real motivation is by definition melodramatic, doing outrageous things for the sake of the thrill it gives the reader--not because it makes sense for the character to do so.

The plot of a story is the synthesis of the plots of its individual characters. Each character has a personal agenda, modified by conflict or concordance with the agendas of others. The villain doesn't get everything his way, any more than the hero does; each keeps thwarting the other, who must then improvise under pressure. If the hero is moving northwest, and the villain is moving northeast, the plot carries them both more or less due north--at least until one or the other gains some advantage.

The plot ``begins'' long before the story. The story itself should begin at the latest possible moment before the climax, at a point when events take a decisive and irreversible turn. We may learn later, through flashbacks, exposition, or inference, about events occurring before the beginning of the story.

Foreshadow all important elements. The first part of a story is a kind of prophecy; the second part fulfills the prophecy. Any important character, location, object should be foreshadowed early in the story. The deus ex machina is unacceptable; you can't pull a rabbit out of your hat to rescue your hero. But you can't telegraph your punch either--your readers don't want to see what's coming, especially if your characters seem too dumb to see it. The trick is to put the plot element into your story without making the reader excessively aware of its importance. Chance and coincidence, in particular, require careful preparation if they are going to influence the plot.

Keep in mind the kind of story you're telling. Any story is about the relationship of an individual to society. A *comic* story describes an isolated individual achieving social integration either by being accepted into an existing society or by forming his own. This integration is often symbolized by a wedding or feast. A *tragic* story describes an integrated individual who becomes isolated; death is simply a symbol of this isolation. The plot should keep us in some degree of suspense about what kind of story we're reading. Even if we know it's a comedy, the precise nature of the comic climax should come as a surprise. If we know the hero is doomed, his downfall should stem from a factor we know about but have not given sufficient weight to.

Ironic plots subvert their surface meanings. Here, an ordinarily desirable goal appears very unattractive to us: the hero marries, but chooses the wrong girl and turns his story into a tragedy. Or the hero may die, but gains some improvement in social acceptance as a result--by becoming a martyr or social savior, for example.

The hero must eventually take charge of events. In any plot the hero is passive for a time, reacting to events. At some point he must try to take charge. This is the *counterthrust*, when the story goes into high gear. In some cases we may have a series of thrusts and counterthrusts; in the opening stages of the plot, the counterthrust helps define the hero's character and puts him in position for more serious conflicts (and counterthrusts) later in the story. You could even say that every scene presents the hero with a problem; his response is his counterthrust. In the larger structure of the plot, the counterthrust often comes after the hero's original plan of action has failed; he has learned some hard lessons and now he will apply them as he approaches the climax of the story.

Plot dramatizes character. If all literature is the story of the quest for identity, then plot is the roadmap of that quest. Every event, every response, should reveal (to

us if not to them) some aspect of the characters' identities. Plot elements dramatize characters' identities by providing opportunities to be brave or cowardly, stupid or brilliant, generous or mean. These opportunities come in the form of severe stress, appropriate to the kind of story you're telling. A plot element used for its own sake--a fistfight, a sexual encounter, an ominous warning--is a needless burden to the story if it does not illuminate the characters involved. Conversely, the reader will not believe any character trait that you have not dramatized through a plot device.

8. The Story Synopsis

The story synopsis or outline can take many forms; it has no rigid format. But the synopsis, like the manuscript, should be double-spaced and highly legible, with frequent paragraphing.

Some synopses cover the whole story, while others supplement a portion of completed manuscript and presuppose the reader's familiarity with that portion. If you have broken your novel into chapters, that's a useful way to divide your synopsis also. You may find, however, that what you thought would fit into one chapter will expand into two or three.

The major element of the synopsis, and sometimes the only element, is the narrative.

- Usually in present tense:
  On a fine spring day in 1923, Lucy Williams applies for a job working for a mysterious millionaire.
- Names and describes major characters:
  Lucy's new boss is Donald Matthews, a handsome young businessman scarcely older than Lucy, but with an unsavory reputation as a rumored bootlegger.
- Summarizes major events in the story:
  Hurrying home through the storm, Lucy bumps into Kenneth Holwood, Donald's former partner. Holwood seems deranged, and hints at some terrible secret in Donald's past.
- Indicates the story's point of view:
  Lucy mails the package despite her qualms; she wonders what it might contain. Meanwhile, in a shabby hotel room across town, Holwood meticulously plans the death of Donald Matthews. (This shows us that the story's point of view is third-person omniscient; we will skip from one viewpoint to another as events require.)
- Contains virtually no dialogue:
  Donald invites Lucy to dinner at a notorious speakeasy, saying she'll enjoy herself more than she thinks she will.

A list of major characters' names (with brief descriptions) can sometimes be helpful in keeping the story straight; if used, such a list usually goes at the beginning of the synopsis.

A background section sometimes precedes the synopsis itself, especially if the story's context requires some explanation. (This seems especially true of science fiction, fantasy, and historical novels, where the plot may hinge on unfamiliar story elements.) Otherwise, such explanation simply crops up where required in the synopsis.

How long should a synopsis be? I've sold some novels with just two or three pages. Other writers may write forty or fifty pages of outline. If your purpose is to interest an editor

before the novel is completed, and you expect the total ms. to run to 90,000 to 120,000 words, a synopsis of four to ten doublespaced pages should be adequate. After all, you're trying to tempt the editor by showing her a *brief* sample, giving her grounds for a decision without a long investment in reading time.

Should you stick to your synopsis? Not necessarily. It's there to help you and your editor, not to dictate the whole story. Like the itinerary of a foreign tour, it should give you a sense of direction and purpose while leaving you free to explore interesting byways; it should also give you a quick return to the main road if the byway turns into a dead end.

9. Understanding Genre: Notes on the Thriller

``Genre" simply means a kind of literature (usually fiction) dealing with a particular topic, setting, or issue. Even so-called ``mainstream" fiction has its genres: the coming-of-age story, for example. In the last few decades, genre in North America has come to mean types of fiction that are commercially successful because they are predictable treatments of familiar material: the Regency romance, the hard-boiled detective novel, the space opera. Some readers, writers and critics dismiss such fiction precisely because of its predictability, and they're often right to do so. But even the humblest hackwork requires a certain level of craft, and that means you must understand your genre's conventions if you are going to succeed--and especially if you are going to convey your message by tinkering with those conventions. For our purposes, a ``convention" is an understanding between writer and reader about certain details of the story. For example, we don't need to know the history of the Mexican-American War to understand why a youth from Ohio is punching cattle in Texas in 1871. We don't need to understand the post-Einstein physics that permits faster-than-light travel and the establishment of interstellar empires. And we agree that the heroine of a Regency romance should be heterosexual, unmarried, and unlikely to solve her problems through learning karate.

As a novice writer, you should understand your genre's conventions consciously, not just as things you take for granted that help make a good yarn. In this, you're like an apprentice cook who can't just uncritically love the taste of tomato soup; you have to know what ingredients make it taste that way, and use them with some calculation.

So it might be useful for you, in one of your letters to yourself about your novel, to write out *your own understanding and appreciation* of the form you're working in. I found this was especially helpful with a couple of my early books, which fell into the genre of the natural-disaster thriller. Your genre analysis doesn't have to be in essay form; it just has to identify the key elements of the genre as you understand them, and that in turn should lead to ideas about how to tinker with the genre's conventions. And *that*, in turn, should make your story more interesting than a slavish imitation of your favorite author.

As an example, here are my Own views about the thriller:

- The thriller portrays persons confronting problems they can't solve by recourse to established institutions and agencies; calling 911, or a psychiatrist, won't help matters in the slightest.
- The problems not only threaten the characters' physical and mental safety, they threaten to bring down the society they live in: their families, their communities, their nations. This is what is at stake in the story, and should appear as soon as possible.

The solution to the characters' problems usually involves some degree of violence, illegality, technical expertise, and dramatic action, but not more than we can plausibly expect from people of the kind we have chosen to portray.

The *political thriller* portrays characters who must go outside their society if they are to save it, and the characters therefore acquire a certain ironic quality. They must be at least as skilled and ruthless as their adversaries, yet motivated by values we can understand and admire even if we don't share them.

The *disaster thriller* portrays characters who are either isolated from their society or who risk such isolation if they fail. That is, either they will die or their society will fall (or both) if they do not accomplish their goals. In the novel of *natural disaster,* the disaster comes early and the issue is who will survive and how. In the novel of *man-made disaster,* the issue is how (or whether) the characters will prevent the disaster.

The characters must be highly plausible and complex; where they seem grotesque or two-dimensional, we must give some valid reason for these qualities. They must have adequate motives for the extreme and risky actions they take, and they must respond to events with plausible human reactions. Those reactions should spring from what we know of the characters' personalities, and should throw new light on those personalities.

The protagonist's goal is to save or restore a threatened society; it is rarely to create a whole new society. In this sense, the thriller is usually politically conservative, though irony may subvert that conservatism.

At the outset the protagonist only reacts to events; at some point, however, he or she embarks on the counterthrust, an attempt to take charge and overcome circumstances.

The progress of the protagonist is from ignorance to knowledge, accomplished through a series of increasingly intense and important conflicts. These lead to a climactic conflict and the resolution of the story.

With the climax the protagonist attains self-knowledge as well as understanding of his or her circumstances (or at least *we* attain such knowledge). This knowledge may well create a whole new perspective on the story's events and the characters' values: A murder may turn out to have been futile, or loyalty may have been betrayed. We should prepare for these insights early in the novel, so that the protagonist's change and development are logical and believable.

10. Symbolism and all that

Maybe you never got anything out of your literature courses except a strong dislike for ``analyzing a story to death.'' Sometimes the symbolic interpretation of a story or poem can seem pretty far-fetched.

Nevertheless, as soon as you start writing, you start writing on some kind of symbolic level. Maybe you're not conscious of it, but it's there: in your characters, their actions, the setting, and the images. (Some writers are very powerful symbolists, but don't realize it; that's why authors are often poor critics of their own work.)

You may argue that your writing simply comes out of your own life and experience, and has nothing to do with ``literary'' writing. Well, no doubt you'll include elements of your

own life, but whether you like it or not you'll find yourself treating that experience like gingerbread dough: You'll shape it into a mold to create a gingerbread man, or you'll have a shapeless mess on your hands.

What you write is really a kind of commentary on everything you've read so far in your life. If you get a kick out of romance novels, and you write one based on your own torrid love life which is quite different from most romances, your novel is still a comment on what you've read.

This is not the place for a long discussion of the theory of fiction. You should learn at least the basics of that theory, however, and no better source exists than Anatomy of Criticism, by Northrop Frye. You may find parts of it heavy going, but it will repay your efforts by letting you look at your own work more perceptively, and by enabling you to develop structure and symbol more consciously.

To paraphrase Frye very crudely, every story is about a search for identity. That identity depends largely on the protagonist's position (or lack of position) in society. A tragic story shows a person who moves from a socially integrated position (the Prince of Denmark, the King of Thebes) to a socially isolated one (a dead prince, a blind beggar). A comic story shows a person moving from social isolation (symbolized by poverty, lack of recognition, and single status) to social integration (wealth, status, and marriage to one's beloved).

Fiction in the western tradition draws on two major sources: ancient Greek literature, and the Judaeo-Christian Bible. Both sources are concerned with preservation or restoration of society, and with the individual hero as savior or social redeemer. Hamlet wants to redeem Denmark from his uncle's usurpation; Oedipus wants to save Thebes from the curse that he himself unintentionally placed on it.

In precisely the same way, the private eye redeems his society by identifying who is guilty (and therefore who is innocent); the frontier gunman risks his life to preserve the honest pioneers; the mutant telepath faces danger to search for fellow-mutants.

Now, you can play this straight or you can twist it. The private eye may find that everyone is guilty. The gunman may be in the pay of crooked land speculators. The mutant may find he is sterile, that his talents will die surface meaning. Winston Smith, in Nineteen Eighty-Four, is happily integrated at the end of the story, but we don't share his happiness.

How you use symbols can also undercut or change your apparent meaning. Let's take a look at some common symbols and patterns, and how they can comment on your story.

The Natural Cycle

Day to night, spring to winter, youth to old age. These suggest all kinds of imagery:

light=goodness, darkness=evil

spring=hope, winter=despair

girl=innocence, crone=evil knowledge, impending death

Northrop Frye argues that we associate images of spring with comedy; images of summer with romance; images of autumn with tragedy; images of winter with satire and irony. Note, however, that here ``comedy'' means a story of social unification; ``tragedy'' means a story of social isolation; and ``romance'' means a story in which the characters are larger than life and encounter wonders usually not seen in reality.

Bear in mind that images associated with these cycles are usually all you need: at the end of Nineteen Eighty-Four, a cold April wind kills the crocuses that ought to promise hope

and renewal. Similarly, autumn leaves can symbolize an aging person, a dying society, or the onset of evil.

The Natural Versus the Human World

Desert versus garden
Sinister forest versus park
Pastoral world versus city
In western literature, the journey from innocence to experience is often symbolized by the protagonist's journey from an idyllic world close to nature, to an urban world that has closed itself against nature. (In Biblical terms, this is the journey from Eden through the desert of the fallen world, to the Heavenly City.) Returns to the natural world are sometimes successful; sometimes the protagonist manages to bring the urban world into a new harmony with nature. In other cases, an urban hero finds meaning and value through some kind of contact with nature.

The Hero's Quest: Mysterious or unusual birth

Prophecy that he will overthrow the present order, restore a vanished order
Secluded childhood among humble people in a pastoral setting
Signs of the hero's unusual nature
Journey-quest -- a series of adventures and ordeals that test the hero, culminating in a climactic confrontation
Death -- real or symbolic
Rebirth
Recognition as savior-king; formation of new society around him

Symbolic Images

A symbol may be good or evil, depending on its context, and the author is quite free to develop the context to convey a particular symbolism. For example, the tree is usually a symbol of life--but not if you use it as the venue for a lynching, or you turn its wood into a crucifix or a gibbet. Here are some images and their most common symbolic meanings:

- *Garden:* nature ordered to serve human needs (*paradis* is a Persian word for garden)
- *Wilderness:* nature hostile to human needs
- *River:* life, often seen as ending in death as the river ends in the sea
- *Sea:* chaos, death, source of life
- *Flower:* youth, sexuality; red flowers symbolize death of young men
- *Pastoral animals:* Ordered human society
- *Predatory animals:* Evil; threats to human order
- *Fire:* light, life or hell and lust
- *Sky:* heaven, fate or necessity
- *Bridge:* Link between worlds, between life and death

Symbolic Characters

Different types of characters recur so often that they've acquired their own names. Here are some of the most common:

- *Eiron:* One who deprecates himself and appears less than he really is; includes most types of hero (Ulysses, Frodo, Huck Finn). The term ``irony'' derives from eiron.

- *Alazon:* An imposter, one who boasts and presents himself as more than he really is; subtypes include the braggart soldier (General Buck Turgidson in Dr. Strangelove) and obsessed philosopher-mad scientist (Saruman, Dr. Strangelove). In my novel Tsunami, I named my villain Allison; although he starts as a movie director, he ends up as a braggart soldier.
- *Tricky slave:* Hero's helper (Jim in Huckleberry Finn; Gollum in The Lord of the Rings).
- *Helpful giant:* Hero's helper; in tune with nature (Ents in TLOR; Chewbacca in Star Wars).
- *Wise old man:* Hero's helper; possessor of knowledge (Gandalf, Obi-Wan Kenobi).
- *Buffoon:* Creates a festive mood, relieves tension (Sam Gamgee, Mercutio).
- *Churl:* Straight man, killjoy or bumpkin (Uriah Heep).
- *Fair maiden:* Symbol of purity and redemption (Rowena) or of repressed sexuality (any number of Ice Maidens).
- *Dark woman:* Symbol of lust and temptation (or of natural sexuality).
- *Hero's double:* Represents the dark side of the hero's character (Ged's shadow in Wizard of Earthsea).

Since these images are much older than what is now politically correct, they can cause problems; readers may see them as affirmations of old, oppressive social values. However, many modern writers now use them ironically to criticize, not endorse, the values the images originally expressed. Nevertheless, be aware that if your heroines are always blonde virgins and your villainesses are always seductive brunettes, you may be sending a message you don't consciously intend.

Be aware also that you're perfectly free to develop your own symbolic system. Just as the ``Rosebud'' sled in Citizen Kane symbolizes Kane's lost childhood innocence, you can make a symbol out of a hat rack, a catcher's mitt, or an old bus schedule. You're also free to make your symbols understandable to your readers, or to keep them part of your private mythology. If you associate a catcher's mitt with your the death of your hero's father, the reader will understand--on some level--what you're trying to say. If the catcher's mitt seems important to your hero, but you don't tell us why, we can only guess at the symbolic meaning.

Don't try too self-consciously to be ``symbolic.'' But if certain images, objects or events seem to dominate your thinking about your novel, write yourself a letter about them. See whether they might indeed carry some symbolic level of meaning, and if that level is in harmony with your conscious intent.

11. Narrative Voice

Someone in your story has to tell us that Jeff pulled out his gun, that Samantha smiled at the tall stranger, that daylight was breaking over the valley. That someone is the narrator or ``author's persona.''

The author's persona of a fictional narrative can help or hinder the success of the story. Which persona you adopt depends on what kind of story you are trying to tell, and what kind of emotional atmosphere works best for the story.

The persona develops from the personality and attitude of the narrator, which are expressed by the narrator's choice of words and incidents. These in turn depend on the point of view of the story.

First-person point of view is usually subjective: we learn the narrator's thoughts, feelings, and reactions to events. In first-person objective, however, the narrator tells us only what people said and did, without comment.

Other first-person modes include:

- the observer-narrator, outside the main story (examples: Mr. Lockwood in Wuthering Heights, Nick Carraway in The Great Gatsby)
- detached autobiography (narrator looking back on long-past events)
- multiple narrators (first-person accounts by several characters)
- interior monologue (narrator recounts the story as a memory; stream of consciousness is an extreme form of this narrative)
- dramatic monologue (narrator tells story out loud without major interruption)
- letters or diary (narrator writes down events as they happen)

If the point of view is first-person, questions about the persona are simple: the character narrating the story has a particular personality and attitude, which is plausibly expressed by the way he or she describes events.

The second-person mode is rare: You knocked on the door. You went inside. Very few writers feel the need for it, and still fewer use it effectively.

If the point of view is third-person limited, persona again depends on the single character through whose eyes we witness the story. You may go inside the character's mind and tell us how that character thinks and feels, or you may describe outside events in terms the character would use. Readers like this point of view because they know whom to ``invest'' in or identify with.

In third-person objective, we have no entry to anyone's thoughts or feelings. The author simply describes, without emotion or editorializing, what the characters say and do. The author's persona here is almost non-existent. Readers may be unsure whose fate they should care about, but it can be very powerful precisely because it invites the reader to supply the emotion that the persona does not. This is the persona of Icelandic sagas, which inspired not only Ernest Hemingway but a whole generation of ``hard-boiled'' writers.

If the point of view is third-person omniscient, however, the author's persona can develop in any of several directions.

``Episodically limited.'' Whoever is the point of view for a particular scene determines the persona. An archbishop sees and describes events from his particular point of view, while a pickpocket does so quite differently. So the narrator, in a scene from the archbishop's point of view, has a persona quite different from that of the pickpocket: a different vocabulary, a different set of values, a different set of priorities. (As a general rule, point of view should not change during a scene. So if an archbishop is the point of view in a scene involving him and a pickpocket, we shouldn't suddenly switch to the pickpocket's point of view until we've resolved the scene and moved on to another scene.)

``Occasional interruptor.'' The author intervenes from time to time to supply necessary information, but otherwise stays in the background. The dialogue,

thoughts and behavior of the characters supply all other information the reader needs.

``Editorial commentator.'' The author's persona has a distinct attitude toward the story's characters and events, and frequently comments on them. The editorial commentator may be a character in the story, often with a name, but is usually at some distance from the main events; in some cases, we may even have an editorial commentator reporting the narrative of someone else about events involving still other people. The editorial commentator is not always reliable; he or she may lie to us, or misunderstand the true significance of events.

Third-person omniscient gives you the most freedom to develop the story, and it works especially well in stories with complex plots or large settings where we must use multiple viewpoints to tell the story. It can, however, cause the reader to feel uncertain about whom to identify with in the story. If you are going to skip from one point of view to another, start doing so early in the story, before the reader has fully identified with the original point of view.

The author's persona can influence the reader's reaction by helping the reader to feel close to or distant from the characters. Three major hazards arise from careless use of the persona:

Sentimentality. The author's editorial rhetoric tries to evoke an emotional response that the story's events cannot evoke by themselves--something like a cheerleader trying to win applause for a team that doesn't deserve it. A particular problem for the ``editorial commentator.''

Mannerism. The author's persona seems more important than the story itself, and the author keeps reminding us of his or her presence through stylistic flamboyance, quirks of diction, or outright editorializing about the characters and events of the story. Also a problem for the editorial commentator. However, if the point of view is first person, and the narrator is a person given to stylistic flamboyance, quirks of diction, and so on, then the problem disappears; the persona is simply that of a rather egotistical individual who likes to show off.

Frigidity. The persona's excessive objectivity trivializes the events of the story, suggesting that the characters' problems need not be taken seriously: a particular hazard for ``hardboiled'' fiction in the objective mode, whether first person or third person.

Verb tense can also affect the narrative style of the story. Most stories use the past tense: *I knocked on the door. She pulled out her gun.* This is usually quite adequate although flashbacks can cause awkwardness: *I had knocked on the door. She had pulled out her gun.* A little of that goes a long way.

Be careful to stay consistently in one verb tense unless your narrator is a person who might switch tenses: *So I went to see my probation officer, and she tells me I can't hang out with my old buddies no more.*

Some writers achieve a kind of immediacy through use of the present tense: *I knock on the door. She pulls out her gun.* We don't feel anyone knows the outcome of events because they are occurring as we read, in ``real time.'' Some writers also enjoy the present tense because it seems ``arty'' or experimental. But most readers of genre fiction don't enjoy the present tense, so editors are often reluctant to let their authors use it. I learned that the hard way by using present tense in my first novel, The Empire of Time; it

was enough to keep the manuscript in editorial limbo for months, and the final offer to publish was contingent on changing to past tense. Guess how long I agonized over *that* artistic decision!

12. Constructing a Scene

The basic unit of fiction is not the sentence or the paragraph, but the scene. Every scene in a story has both a verbal and a nonverbal content. The verbal content may be a young man fervently courting a girl, or the President of the United States deciding whether to go ahead with a nuclear attack on a biological-warfare research center. The nonverbal content appears in the way you present the scene: You want your reader to think that the young man is touchingly awkward, or obnoxiously crude; that the president is a shallow twerp or a deeply sensitive man facing a terrible decision.

In effect, you are like an attorney presenting a case to the jury: You supply the evidence, and the jury supplies the verdict. If *you* tell us that the young man is touchingly awkward, we may well disbelieve you. But if you show us his awkward behavior, and *we* say, ``Aw, the poor lunk!"--then your scene has succeeded.

Every scene presents a problem of some kind for one or more characters, and shows us how the characters deal with that problem. That, in turn, shows us something about the characters and moves the story ahead.

Here's an exercise I've found useful with my fiction-writing students. I give them about 30 minutes to take the following elements to construct a scene that dramatizes the elements and leads to a decisive resolution:

- A taxi and public-transit strike that's completely tied up downtown traffic
- Donald Benson, a 35-year-old businessman: male chauvinist, aggressive personality, with business troubles
- Helene Williams, his 22-year-old secretary: insecure in her new job, able to make friends easily, knows the city well
- The need to get Donald to a hotel out at the airport to make a crucial presentation to a potential investor from Los Angeles; the investor will be flying out in four hours.

Give yourself half an hour to write such a scene, so that the reader will finish it knowing all this information. I predict you'll be amazed at how quickly you can produce the scene, and at how it leads logically to another scene. The key is *knowing what you want to show your reader about your characters and their problems.* Once you know that, everything else follows pretty easily. So consider what's going on in your own story. What do you want your reader to think about your heroine? That she's shy but determined? That she thinks no man could ever love her? That she's perceptive about other women but baffled by men? Whatever those traits may be, you should be able to think of logical, plausible events that could force her to show them to us.

In some cases, your plot will give you some automatic scenes. If your heroine is flying from New York to Frankfurt, maybe her seatmate is an attractive man who studiously ignores her; maybe the German customs people give her a hard time but she insists on her rights; maybe the heroine sees the attractive man greeted by a woman he seems to dote on even though the perceptive heroine can see the woman despises him. And so on.

How long should a scene be? Long enough to make its point. A scene may run to just a sentence or two, or it may take up 20 pages. When it ends, we should know more about the characters involved, and their problems should have increased. This doesn't mean endlessly increasing gloom, but it means that even a success only clears the way for a more stressful scene to come. The hero may disarm the terrorist bomb in the daycare center, but the resulting publicity will make him a marked man; now the terrorists will try to kill him or his loved ones.

How many characters should take part in a scene? As few as possible. Even a debate in Congress isn't going to involve every last representative. Here's a tip in this connection: If your plot demands a fairly large cast--for example, your protagonist is the commanding officer of an infantry platoon, or the headmistress of a girls' school--don't introduce a whole mob of characters at once. Bring in your protagonist first, in a scene that demonstrates the character's key traits (courage, leadership, self-hatred, whatever). Then bring in each of the supporting characters in a scene that lets him or her display key traits as well, while deepening our understanding of the protagonist and moving the plot along. This way we build up interest in the story by building up interest in the varied and complex characters. Tolkien does it in The Lord of the Rings; Kurosawa does it in Seven Samurai. Learn from the old masters!

13. Show And Tell: Which Is Better?

Novice writers (and some professionals) often fall into the trap of ``expositing'' information instead of presenting it dramatically. Sometimes exposition is inevitable, or even desirable. Lloyd Abbey, in his brilliant SF novel The Last Whales, gives us exactly one line of human dialogue; his characters, all being whales, can't speak to one another, so the narrator must tell us what they think and do. Gabriel Garca Marquez can also write superb exposition for page after page.

Most of us ordinary mortals, however, need to dramatize our characters and their feelings. Otherwise our readers will tire of our editorials.

Consider the following expository and dramatic passages. Which more adequately conveys what the author is trying to show to the reader?

> Vanessa was a tall woman of 34 with shoulder-length red hair and a pale complexion. She often lost her temper; when she did, her fair skin turned a deep pink, and she often swore. She was full of energy, and became impatient at even the slightest delay or impediment to her plans. Marshall, her chief assistant, was a balding, mild-mannered, nervous man of 54 who was often afraid of her. He was also annoyed with himself for letting her boss him around.
>
> ---
>
> Vanessa abruptly got up from her desk. A shaft of sunlight from the window behind her seemed to strike fire from her long red hair as she shook her head violently.
>
> ``No, Marshall! God damn it, this won't do! Didn't I make myself clear?"
>
> ``Yes, Vanessa, b-but--"
>
> ``And you understood what I told you, didn't you?" Her pale skin was flushing pink, and Marshall saw the signs of a classic outburst on the way. She took a step toward him, forcing him to look up to meet her gaze; she must be a good three

inches taller. He raised his hands in supplication, then caught himself and tried to make the gesture look like the smoothing of hair he no longer had. He felt sweat on his bald scalp.

``Vanessa, it was a--"

``It was another one of your screw-ups, Marshall! We're committed to a Thursday deadline. I'm going to make that damn deadline, whether or not you're here to help me. Now, am I going to get some cooperation from you, or not?"

Marshall nodded, cursing himself for his slavish obedience. Fifty-four years old, and taking orders from a bitch twenty years younger. Why didn't he just tell her to shove it?

``All the way, Vanessa. We'll get right on it."

``Damn well better." Her voice softened; the pink faded from her cheeks. ``Okay, let's get going."

Comment: A paragraph of exposition has turned into a scene: the portrayal of a conflict and its resolution. The scene has also prepared us for further scenes. Maybe Marshall's going to destroy himself for Vanessa, or poison her; maybe Vanessa's going to learn how to behave better. Most importantly, the authorial judgments in the exposition are now happening in the minds of the characters and the mind of the reader--who may well agree with Marshall, or side with Vanessa.

Here's another example:

Jerry was 19. Since leaving high school a year before, he had done almost nothing. He had held a series of part-time jobs, none of them lasting more than a few weeks. His girl friend Judy, meanwhile, was holding down two summer jobs to help pay for her second year of college. Jerry controlled her with a combination of extroverted charm and bullying sulkiness. Secretly he envied her ambition and feared that she would leave him if he ever relaxed his grip on her.

``Hey, good-lookin'," Jerry said as he ambled into the coffee shop and took his usual booth by the window.

``Hi," said Judy. She took out her order pad.

``Hey, I'm real sorry about what I said last night. I was way outa line."

``Would you like to order?"

``Hey, I said I was sorry, all right? Gimme a break."

``That's fine. But Murray says not to let my social life get in the way of my job. So you've got to order something for a change."

He snorted incredulously. ``Hey, I'm broke, babe."

She stared out the window at the traffic. ``You can't hang out here all day for the price of a cup of coffee, Jerry. Not any more. Murray says he'll have to let me go if you do."

``Well, tell him to get stuffed."

``Jerry, be reasonable. I can't. I need this job."

``Christ, you already got the job at the movie theatre."

``That's nights, and it hardly pays anything. I've got my whole second year at college to pay for this summer. Jerry, maybe we can talk about this after I get off work, okay?"

``Yeah, right. See you Labor Day, then."

``Jerry, don't be a smartass. See you at four, okay?"

He got up, shrugging. ``Yeah, sure. Guess I'll go over to the bus station and read comic books until then." He glared at her. ``Don't be too nice to the guys who come in here. I find out you been fooling around with anybody, you know you're in trouble, right?"

``Right, Jerry. I'm really sorry. See you later."

Comment: Again we have a conflict that promises to lead to further conflicts and their resolution. We want to know if Judy will ditch Jerry, or Jerry will smarten up. Their relationship reveals itself through their dialogue, not through the author's editorializing.

Note that both these examples involve a power struggle. Someone is determined to be the boss, to get his or her way. Most scenes present such a struggle: someone decides on pizza or hamburgers for dinner, someone chooses the date for D-Day, someone comes up with the winning strategy to defeat the alien invaders or elect the first woman president. We as readers want to see the resources thrown into the struggle: raw masculinity, cynical intelligence, subtle sexual manipulation, political courage, suicidal desperation. Depending on which resources win, we endorse one myth or another about the way the world operates: that raw masculinity always triumphs, that political courage leads nowhere, and so on. Of course, if we are writing ironically, we are rejecting the very myths we seem to support. By using raw macho bullying mixed with a little self-pity, Jerry seems to win his power struggle with Judy. But few readers would admire him for the way he does it, or expect him to succeed in the long term with such tactics.

Think carefully about this as you develop your scenes. If your hero always wins arguments in a blaze of gunfire, he may become awfully tiresome awfully fast. If your heroine keeps bursting into tears, your readers may want to hand her a hankie (better yet, a towel) and tell her to get lost. Ideally, the power struggle in each scene should both tell us something new and surprising about the characters, and hint at something still hiding beneath the surface--like the insecurity that underlies Jerry's and Vanessa's bullying.

14. Character In Fiction

Plausible, complex characters are crucial to successful storytelling. You can develop them in several ways.

Concreteness. They have specific homes, possessions, medical histories, tastes in furniture, political opinions. Apart from creating verisimilitude, these concrete aspects of the characters should convey information about the story: does the hero smoke Marlboros because he's a rugged outdoorsman, or because that's the brand smoked by men of his social background, or just because you do?

Symbolic association. You can express a character's nature metaphorically through objects or settings (a rusty sword, an apple orchard in bloom, a violent thunderstorm). These may not be perfectly understandable to the reader at first (or to the writer!), but they seem subconsciously right. Symbolic associations can be consciously ``archetypal" (see Northrop Frye), linking the character to similar characters in literature. Or you may use symbols in some private system which the reader may or may not consciously grasp. Characters' names can form symbolic associations, though this practice has become less popular in modern fiction except in comic or ironic writing.

Speech. The character's speech (both content and manner) helps to evoke personality: shy and reticent, aggressive and frank, coy, humorous. Both content and manner of speech should accurately reflect the character's social and ethnic background without stereotyping. If a character ``speaks prose,'' his or her background should justify that rather artificial manner. If a character is inarticulate, that in itself should convey something.

Behavior. From table manners to performance in hand-to-hand combat, each new example of behavior should be consistent with what we already know of the character, yet it should reveal some new aspect of personality. Behavior under different forms of stress should be especially revealing.

Motivation. The characters should have good and sufficient reasons for their actions, and should carry those actions out with plausible skills. If we don't believe characters would do what the author tells us they do, the story fails.

Change. Characters should respond to their experiences by changing--or by working hard to *avoid* changing. As they seek to carry out their agendas, run into conflicts, fail or succeed, and confront new problems, they will not stay the same people. If a character seems the same at the end of a story as at the beginning, the reader at least should be changed and be aware of whatever factors kept the character from growing and developing.

The Character Resume

One useful way to learn more about your characters is to fill out a ``resume'' for them--at least for the more important ones. Such a resume might include the following information:

Name:
Address & Phone Number:
Date & Place of Birth:
Height/Weight/Physical Description:
Citizenship/Ethnic Origin:
Parents' Names & Occupations:
Other Family Members:
Spouse or Lover:
Friends' Names & Occupations:
Social Class:
Education:
Occupation/Employer:
Social Class:
Salary:
Community Status:
Job-Related Skills:
Political Beliefs/Affiliations:
Hobbies/Recreations:
Personal Qualities (imagination, taste, etc.):
Ambitions:
Fears/Anxieties/Hangups:
Intelligence:
Sense of Humor:

Most Painful Setback/Disappointment:
Most Instructive/Meaningful Experience:
Health/Physical Condition/Distinguishing Marks/Disabilities:
Sexual Orientation/Experience/Values:
Tastes in food, drink, art, music, literature, decor, clothing:
Attitude toward Life:
Attitude toward Death:
Philosophy of Life (in a phrase):
You may not use all this information, and you may want to add categories of your own, but a resume certainly helps make your character come alive in your own mind. The resume can also give you helpful ideas on everything from explaining the character's motivation to conceiving dramatic incidents that demonstrates the character's personal traits. The resume serves a useful purpose in your project bible, reminding you of the countless details you need to keep straight.

15. ``Let's Talk About Dialogue,'' He Pontificated

Dialogue has to sound like speech, but it can't be a mere transcript; most people don't speak precisely or concisely enough to serve the writer's needs. Good dialogue has several functions:

- To convey exposition: to tell us, through the conversations of the characters, what we need to know to make sense of the story.
- To convey character: to show us what kinds of people we're dealing with.
- To convey a sense of place and time: to evoke the speech patterns, vocabulary and rhythms of specific kinds of people.
- To develop conflict: to show how some people use language to dominate others, or fail to do so.

Each of these functions has its hazards. Expository dialogue can be dreadful:

> ``We'll be in Vancouver in thirty minutes,'' the flight attendant said. ``It's Canada's biggest west coast city, with a population of over a million in the metropolitan area."

Dialogue can convey character, but the writer may bog down in chatter that doesn't advance the story.

> ``When I was a kid,'' said Julie, ``I had a stuffed bear named Julius. He was a sweet old thing, and whenever I was upset I'd howl for him." (Unless Julie is going to howl for Julius when her husband leaves her, this kind of remark is pointless.)

Dialogue that conveys a specific place and time can become exaggerated and stereotyped:

> ``Pretty hot ootside, eh?" remarked Sergeant Renfrew of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. ``Good day to get oot of the hoose and oot on the saltchuck, eh? Catch us a couple of skookum salmon, eh?"

Dialogue that develops conflict has to do so while also conveying exposition, portraying character, and staying true to the time and place:

> ``Gadzooks,'' said Sergeant Renfrew as he dismounted from his motorcycle. ``Wouldst please present thy driver's licence and registration, madam?"

``Eat hot lead, copper!" snarled Sister Mary Agnes as she drew the .45 from within her habit.

Some Dialogue Hazards to Avoid:

- Too much faithfulness to speech: ``Um, uh, y'know, geez, well, like, well."
- Unusual spellings: ``Yeah," not ``Yeh" or ``Yea" or ``Ya."
- Too much use of ``he said," ``she said."
- Too much variation: ``he averred," ``she riposted"
- Dialect exaggeration: ``Lawsy, Miz Scahlut, us's wuhkin' jes' as fas' as us kin."
- Excessive direct address: ``Tell me, Marshall, your opinion of Vanessa." ``I hate her, Roger." ``Why is that, Marshall?" ``She bullies everyone, Roger."

Some Dialogue Conventions to Consider:

Each new speaker requires a new paragraph, properly indented and set off by quotation marks.

``Use double quotations," the novelist ordered, ``and remember to place commas and periods inside those quotation marks."

``If a speaker goes on for more than one paragraph," the count responded in his heavy Transylvanian accent, ``do not close off the quotation marks at the end of the first paragraph.

``Simply place quotation marks at the beginning of the next paragraph, and carry on to the end of the quotation."

Use ``he said" expressions only when you must, to avoid confusion about who's speaking. You can signal increasing tension by moving from ``he said" to ``he snapped," to ``he snarled," to ``he bellowed furiously." But the dialogue itself should convey that changing mood, and make such comments needless.

Action as well as speech is a part of dialogue. We expect to know when the speakers pause, where they're looking, what they're doing with their hands, how they respond to one another. The characters' speech becomes just one aspect of their interactions; sometimes their words are all we need, but sometimes we definitely need more. This is especially true when you're trying to convey a conflict between what your characters say and what they feel: their nonverbal messages are going to be far more reliable than their spoken words.

Speak your dialogue out loud; if it doesn't sound natural, or contains unexpected rhymes and rhythms, revise it.

Rely on rhythm and vocabulary, not phonetic spelling, to convey accent or dialect.

If you are giving us your characters' exact unspoken thoughts, use italics. If you are paraphrasing those thoughts, use regular Roman type):

Now what does she want? he asked himself. *Isn't she ever satisfied?* Marshall wondered what she wanted now. She was never satisfied.

If you plan to give us a long passage of inner monologue, however, consider the discomfort of having to read line after line of italic print. If you wish to emphasize a word in a line of italics, use Roman: *Isn't she* ever *satisfied?*

16. Writing A Query Letter About Your Novel

The query can be a quick way to tell whether your novel might be of interest to a particular publisher--without having to wait until some editor finds your manuscript deep

within her slush pile. The query should give the editor an idea of your story (and a sense of the way you're handling it) that's clear enough to help her decide if it's worth considering. If the idea sounds good, you know the complete manuscript (or sample chapters) will enjoy a prompt and careful reading. If the idea doesn't sound right for her, she may tell you why, and perhaps suggest either a new approach or another publisher. Some queries are very short, and others are long indeed--novel outlines masquerading as letters. Consider the following suggestions as guidelines, not ironclad laws:

- Supply a short, pungent description of what the book is about: a desperate attempt to escape a narcotics bust, an unexpected journey that leads to romance and danger in 1930s China, an aging gunfighter's attempt to prove himself again in the Mexican Revolution.
- If not obvious from your plot outline, identify the audience your book is aimed at: hardcore space-opera fans, teenage girls, Regency-romance readers.
- Be able to tell the editor what makes this novel different from others in the genre: a twist in the plot, a new angle on the hero, an unusual setting.
- Your credentials may be helpful, if only as a dedicated and knowledgeable reader in the genre, or as an observant resident of the city you've set your novel in. These are not trivial qualifications: If you don't know and love the genre you're writing in, it will show. And if you don't know the history and folklore of your setting, the story will lack depth.
- Display in your query some of the excitement and energy you want to bring to your story--show how and why this story matters to you, and it'll matter to your editor.

The Letter Itself

Ideally, your query letter ought to run to a page or a little more, organized something like this:

First paragraph: Tell us what kind of novel you've written, or are now writing. How long is it, when and where is it set? Describe the hero and heroine, and perhaps one or two other major characters. What's their predicament? How are they proposing to get out of it? And why should we care--that is, what's at stake?

Second paragraph: Describe what happens in the middle of the novel--how your characters interact, what conflicts arise among them.

Third paragraph: The resolution of the novel--the climax and its outcome, and tying up loose ends.

Fourth paragraph: Why this story interests you, what your qualifications are for writing it, and some questions for the editor: If this story interests you, would you like the whole ms., or an outline and sample chapters? Do you have any specific ms. requirements I should be aware of?

Obviously this pattern will vary depending on the nature of the query: If you've included an outline and sample chapters, the plot summary will be very brief or nonexistent, and the query will focus on your background and your questions for the editor. If the book is completed, the plot summary will be easier to supply than if you have only a rough idea of where the book is going.

The query letter is a blurb for your novel, and like any blurb it needs to pique the reader's interest and make the reader wonder: ``How is *that* going to turn out?'' The quality of writing in the query had better be first-rate, especially if you haven't included an

elegantly written chapter or two. If your query is clumsy or riddled with English errors, the editor will be less than eager to see more of your prose.
Because the query requires little time to read and respond to, it can help you quickly identify potential markets and definite non-markets. But it can't pre-sell your novel; at best, it can only create a cautiously welcoming attitude in an editor who knows how tough it is to sell a first novel during a recession.
Will your query reveal such a knockout story idea that the publisher will steal it--turn you down, pass on your idea to one of their hack writers, and publish it for their own profit? This may be the single most common anxiety of novices, but the sad truth is that your idea probably isn't *worth* stealing. In fact, the editor may wearily see it as the umpteenth standard variation on some ancient plot, one she's seen a dozen times just this week. This is not to say your idea should be positively weird; most story ideas in genre fiction are indeed variations on ancient plots. The trick is to make the variations appear to be fresh, surprising, and full of potential storytelling power. A query is a direct approach to an editor. But you may well be aware that many, many publishing houses no longer even consider queries or submissions that do not come through an agent. In my next posting I'll consider what that implies in the selling of your novel.

17. Researching Publishers and Agents

Too many people submit manuscripts to publishers.
Simply to read enough of those manuscripts to judge them unworthy would take the full-time services of several salaried editors. Most publishers simply can't afford to plow through the slush pile in hopes of someday finding a Great Novelist.
So they indicate in Writer's Market that they will consider only ``agented submissions''--work that a professional literary agent, who knows the market, thinks has some sales potential.
That simply draws fire onto the agents, who now find that they too have huge slush piles. And, like the publishers, the agents can't make money reading unsalable junk.
Where does that leave you?
In better shape than you think. If you've hammered out a credible but surprising plot about interesting people in a hell of a jam, and you're showing them in action instead of telling us what they're like, and your grammar, spelling and punctuation are first-rate--you're already ahead of 80 per cent of your competition.
Now the problem is finding the right market. Too many novice writers simply fire off their work to a publisher they've vaguely heard of, or one that's supposed to be prestigious, or even one that happens to be conveniently located right in town. (Those were precisely my three motives in submitting my first children's book to Parnassus Press. They bought it, which shows that sometimes even ignoramuses can get lucky. By rights I should have had to send the ms. to a couple of dozen houses before hitting the right one--if I ever did.)
Publishers tend to carve out special markets for themselves. A couple of sharp editors can dominate a genre; because they know how to reach a certain kind of reader, they attract a certain kind of writer. Or a publisher may be passionately devoted to supporting a certain kind of fiction, but is deeply uninterested in any other kind. A feminist publisher wouldn't have the faintest idea how to market a men's action-adventure novel, and wouldn't care to

learn. A children's publisher won't care how well-crafted your murder mystery is. And so on.

So step one is almost embarrassingly obvious: Notice which houses publish the kind of story you're working on. Look carefully at the story elements in the titles they publish; Del Rey fantasy novels, for example, require magic as a major component, not just frosting or a gimmick to get the hero somewhere interesting. Out of all the publishers in North America, only a few are potentially yours.

Then consult those potential publishers' entries in Writer's Market and see what they have to say about their own needs and who their editors are in specific genres. You may learn that your work in progress is too long, or too short, or needs some particular quality like a heroine aged over 35. You may also learn how long it takes them to respond to queries and submissions. Don't take those statements as legally binding promises; responses almost always take far longer, especially for unagented submissions.

Writer's Market also lists publishers by the genres they publish. This list can lead you to houses you're not familiar with, but don't just rush your ms. off to some publisher in Podunk. Check out the entries of these houses also, and also track down some of their recent titles in your genre. If they strike you as dreadful garbage, avoid them. Better to stay unpublished than to be trapped with a bad publisher.

Another useful source of research information is the publishing trade press. Quill and Quire in Canada, and Publisher's Weekly in the US, are much more up-to-date than any annual can be. So if the top horror editor in New York has just moved to a new publisher, or a publisher is starting a new line of romance novels aimed at Asian women, you may adjust your marketing strategy accordingly. Magazines like The Writer and Writer's Digest supply similar market news.

If every possible publisher warns you off with "No unagented submissions," you then have to go through a similar process with literary agents. You should be able to find an annually updated list of agents in your local library or the reference section of a good bookstore. Some agents, like Scott Meredith and Richard Curtis, have even written books themselves about the publishing business; these are worth reading.

As a general rule, you probably need an agent in the city where most of your publishers are. That, as a general rule, means New York City. You also need an agent who knows the market for your particular genre, so your work will go as promptly as possible to the most likely markets. (Some agents may submit a work in multiple copies to all potential publishers; this can really speed up the process.)

But also bear in mind that the phone and fax can put almost anyone in close touch with the New York market, so an agent in Chicago or Los Angeles or Miami may be quite as effective as somebody in Manhattan--and may also be familiar with regional publishers. Consider whether you want a big agent with scores or hundreds of clients, or a small outfit. The big agent may have clout but little stake in promoting you; the small agent may work hard for you, but lack entree to some editors. Talk to published writers, if possible, about their experiences with agents; sometimes a sympathetic author can suggest a good one.

No agent, however good, can sell your work to an editor who doesn't want to buy it. What the agent offers the editor is a reasonably trustworthy opinion about the marketability of a particular manuscript. It's in the agent's interest to deal only in work with serious sales potential, and to get it quickly into the hands of its most likely buyers.

You may therefore have to query a number of agents before you find one who's willing to take you on. And you may find that some highly reputable agents won't look at your stuff unless you pay them to.

This is not a racket. If you agree to the agent's terms, the reading may give you a very frank response. Sometimes you'll get a detailed critique that may devastate your ego but teach you just what you need to learn. In many cases the agent will waive the reading fee if he feels you're a commercial possibility and you're willing to sign on as one of his clients. That should be an encouraging offer indeed.

Sometimes an agent will take you on but strongly suggest certain kinds of revisions, or even that you tackle a completely different kind of story. Listen carefully; you're getting advice from someone who knows the market and wants to share in your prosperity. At least one of my novels greatly profited from the advice of an agent who thought my originally proposed ending was a disaster.

Your agreement with an agent may take the form of a detailed contract, or a simple agreement over the phone, or something in between. Be sure you understand and accept the terms your agent requires: Ten per cent of what he makes you, or 15? Deductions for photocopying, postage and phone bills? Control over all your writing, or just your fiction output?

Once you have an agent, don't be a pest. When he's got something to report, he'll let you know. If you've got something to report, like the completion of the manuscript or an idea for turning it into a series, let the agent know. Otherwise, stay off the phone and stick to your writing.

In some cases, of course, you may find you've sold a novel on your own hook and then decide to go looking for an agent. Under these happy circumstances you should find it fairly easy to get an agent's interest. If the publisher's already offered you a contract (and you haven't signed yet), the agent may be willing to take you on and then bargain a better deal for you. But you'll probably do all right even if you negotiate that first contract on your own. Most publishers are honorable and decent people; sometimes their integrity is positively intimidating. Even if they weren't honorable, your first book is likely to make so little money that it wouldn't be worth it to screw you out of spare change.

18. Reading a Contract

When you do finally receive a publisher's contract, you may feel your heart sink. It runs to several pages of single-spaced text, highly flavored with legalese and organized in a daunting sequence of numbered paragraphs and subparagraphs. Who knows what thorns lurk in such a thicket?

Actually, not too many. Most of your contract is standard ``boilerplate'' text that protects you as much as the publisher. It is often possible, even for a novice, to negotiate specific aspects of the contract.

Still, it helps to know what you're getting yourself into, so let us take a look at some of the key passages you're likely to find in your contract.

Delivery Of Satisfactory Copy

If you're selling your novel on the strength of sample chapters and an outline, the publisher wants assurance that you'll submit the full manuscript (often with a second copy), at an agreed-upon length, by an agreed-upon date. If your full ms. doesn't measure

up, or arrives too late, the publisher has the right to demand return of any money you've received.

In practice the publisher is usually much more flexible. He may bounce your ms. back to you with a reminder that you don't get the rest of your advance until the ms. is ``satisfactory." He (or more likely the editor) will tell you in exquisite detail what you still need to do to achieve ``satisfactory""status. A late ms. also means you won't collect the balance of your advance until it arrives, and it may also cause delays in final publication--as I learned to my sorrow with Greenmagic.

Permission for Copyrighted Material

If you want to include the lyrics of a pop song in your novel, or quote something as an epigraph, it's up to you to obtain the rights to such material, and to pay for them if necessary. If you leave it to the publisher, he'll charge you; if he can't get permission, and the novel doesn't work without such material, the deal is off and you have to repay any advance you've received. Obviously, this is an extreme case; normally you just drop the lines from the song or poem, and carry on.

Grant Of Rights

You are giving the publisher the right to make copies of what you've written. These copies may be in hardcover, softcover, audio cassette, filmstrip, comic book, or whatever. You are also specifying in which parts of the world the publisher may sell such copies. For example, a sale to a British publisher may specifically exclude North America, leaving you free to sell North American rights separately.

You may also be giving the publisher rights to sell foreign translations, to print excerpts in other books or periodicals as a form of advertising, or to sell copies to book clubs. Normally such sales require your informed, written consent.

Proofreading and Author's Corrections

You agree that you will proofread the galleys or page proofs of your novel and return the corrected pages promptly. If your corrections amount to actual revision of the original manuscript, and will require re-typesetting more than 10 per cent of the book, the publisher will charge you for such costs. This can very easily destroy any income you might have earned from the book.

Advances and Royalties

This spells out how much the publisher will pay you, and when. The most common agreement is payment of one-third of the advance on signing the contract; one-third on delivery of a satisfactory complete ms.; and one-third on publication date. You may be able to negotiate half on signing and half on delivery; otherwise, you are in effect lending the publisher some of your advance until a publication date that may be over a year away.

Royalties are generally a percentage of the list price of the book. For hardcover books, the usual royalties is ten per cent of list price. So a novel retailing for $24.95 will earn its author $2.50 per copy. For mass-market paperbacks, royalty rates can range from four per cent to eight per cent, usually with a proviso that the rate will go up after sale of some huge number of copies--150,000 seems to be a popular target. A paperback selling at $5.95, with an eight per cent royalty, will therefore earn you about 47 cents. A ``trade" paperback, intended for sale in regular bookstores rather than supermarkets and other mass outlets, will probably earn a comparable rate; the list price, however, will likely be higher and the number of copies sold will be lower.

Whatever the royalty rates, you're likely to get only half as much for sales to book clubs or overseas markets. (This is especially painful for Canadian authors with American publishers: sales in your own country, as ``foreign" sales, earn only half the U.S. royalty rate.)

You will also agree to split the take from certain kinds of licensing sales. For example, if your novel is a hardback and some other house wants to bring out a paperback edition, you can normally expect a 50 per cent share of what the paperback house pays. Sometimes a paperback house will license a hardback edition (in hopes of getting more critical attention for your book and hence selling more copies in paperback eventually); in such a case you should expect 75 per cent of the deal.

If you can possibly avoid it, do *not* agree to give your publisher a share of any sale to movies or TV. A film or TV show based on your novel will boost the publisher's sales quite nicely; he doesn't need a slice off the top of a deal that will surely pay you more than the publisher did. But if the book seems highly unlikely to interest Hollywood, you might offer a slice of film rights in exchange for a richer advance, with a proviso that an actual film or TV sale will also produce an additional chunk of money from the publisher.

The publisher will normally not charge for the production of versions of your novel in Braille or other formats for the handicapped. So you will get no money from this source.

The publisher should agree to supply you with two royalty statements a year. Each will cover a six-month reporting period, and each should arrive about 90 days after the close of that period. So a statement for January-June should reach you at the end of September. This will probably be a computer printout, and may be confusing. But it will indicate the number of copies shipped, the number returned unsold by booksellers, and the number presumably sold. The publisher will hold back on some of the royalty ``against further returns." Whatever remains is the actual number on which the publisher owes you money. Chances are that your advance will have consumed any potential royalties for the first reporting period, and perhaps for the second as well. Once you have ``earned out" your advance, however, you should expect a check with each royalty statement.

Do *not* sign a contract that does not explicitly promise you at least two royalty statements a year. Some publishers promise a statement only after the novel has earned out its advance. This means you may go for years--or forever--without knowing what your sales have been.

Author's Warranties and Indemnities

Here you are promising that this is indeed your work, that it isn't obscene, a breach of privacy, libelous, or otherwise illegal. If you do get into trouble, you agree to cooperate with the publisher's legal defense, and you agree to pay your share of the costs instead of asking the publisher, booksellers, or others to do so. If the publisher's lawyer thinks the manuscript poses legal problems, you agree to make the changes required to solve those problems--or to allow the publisher to do so.

You may find an insurance rider as part of your contract; this is intended to protect both you and the publisher from suffering total financial disaster if you get caught in a losing lawsuit.

Copies to Author

You will get a certain number of free copies, and will pay a reduced rate for more copies. That means you will still pay for those copies, and you should.

Option Clause

Pay attention to this one! This says you are giving the publisher right of first refusal on your next book (or at least your next book of this particular genre). The option clause means the publisher will give the next book a close, prompt reading. You should expect a response within 90 days, but some contracts specify 90 days after publication of your current book. That means you might have to wait for months, maybe over a year, until the publisher sees the initial reaction to your first book.

In practice, though, you probably will get a quicker response than that. If the publisher does make you an offer, you have the right to refuse it; you can then take your second book to any other publisher you like. However, you can't sell it to anyone else unless you get better terms for it than your original publisher offered.

You may well find yourself trapped as a result. If you need money in a hurry, you may feel you've got to accept a bad offer rather than spend months or years shopping your ms. around the market until you find a more generous publisher. And then, of course, your second contract will include an option clause for the *third* novel!

Your best hope in this case is that sales of the first book will warrant a heftier advance on the second or third book. And if the publisher still won't cooperate, you can then go to another publisher with at least some respectable sales figures that show you deserve a better deal.

Going Out of Print

Request for it to be reprinted; if he doesn't want to, you can then demand that all rights revert to you. You are then free to sell the book to another publisher. (I have done this a couple of times. You don't make as much money on the resale, but at least the book stays out on the market longer.) You may be able to acquire the plates or film from which copies of your novel were made, making it possible for a new publisher to bring your book out quite cheaply.

You will probably not make any money from ``remaindered'' copies that the publisher may sell to a book jobber at a deep discount. In some contracts, however, the author may indeed receive some percentage of such sales. It's also possible to buy copies of your book at a similar low price.

A Word of Advice

If at all possible, go over the contract with the editor or publisher, asking whatever questions arise. Then take your contract to an agent, lawyer, or professional writer. Chances are that it's perfectly okay. But even if you don't find something sneaky in the fine print, you'll have a clearer understanding of what you and your publisher have committed yourselves to. If something arises later on, like a problem over the option clause or the frequency of royalty statements, it won't come as a total shock.

Finally, bear in mind that if you have read this far, you are seriously interested in mastering an art and craft that rewards very few practitioners--novices or experts. Fiction in print is still relatively popular, but only relatively. For every reader you might attract, TV or films or recordings attract hundreds of consumers. You will work for months or years to create a product that is theoretically eternal, but in practice has a shelf-life of a few weeks. Most of your readers will, two months after reading your work, be unable to recall anything about the story (including your name)--maybe not even whether they

liked it or not. And you will reach more readers with a punchy, witty letter to the editor of a metropolitan daily than you're likely to reach with your novel.
Is it worth it? Only you can answer that question. My answer has been yes, and I don't regret it. Writing ten novels has been not only fun but an education; I can hardly wait to find out what the eleventh novel will teach me.

19. Afterword by the Author

Good heavens--17 files in 15 minutes! Ain't technology grand!
Slight correction: the files total about 100K; I miscounted.
Doubtless some postings have typos or noise... but I hope enough got through to do you some good and encourage you to take a shot at writing fiction--or another shot at that damn novel you've been chipping away at for the last few years.
I hope my comments draw some responses, criticism, rebuttals, anecdotal evidence, aspersions on my ancestry, and anything else that may come to mind. But unless you want to share painful intimacies via e-mail, why not put your comments in the newsgroup where everyone can benefit from them! Thanks for your interest and your patience.
Cheers, CK