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**Seven Strategies in Every Best-Seller: A Guide to
Extraordinarily Successful Writing**

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INTRODUCTION

How Books Go Far, with No P.R.

*Or Why Certain Titles Stay in Print,
Year after Year,
with Absolutely no Promotion or Advertising*

“I had thought that you were going to be interested in literature and the value of the word, and not all this being so obsessed with money.”

—Harry Evans, as President of Random House ¹

Writing a hit novel or a non-fiction best-seller is one of the few ways you can become a millionaire, quickly and legally. Best of all, this path to fame and fortune is wide open to amateurs. Many have climbed to the pinnacle of success with nothing more exotic than a typewriter. (Nowadays, word-processing software and Internet access make the work so much easier.)

Nor do you need experience! If you're aiming for a six-figure paperback floor bid, sale to a major Hollywood studio, and translations into dozens of languages, chances are startlingly good that you'll score a home run during your first time at bat. Among the many examples I could list: Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1955), Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase* (1964), Lynn V. Andrews's *Medicine Woman* (1978), John Gray's *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (1992), John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994) and Nicholas Evans's *The Horse Whisperer* (1995). Each of these best-sellers was the author's very first book.

In 1997, this trend became impossible to ignore when *Cold Mountain* (which, one year before, had hit #1 on the *New York Times*'s fiction best-seller list) won the National Book Award; and *Angela's Ashes* (which had enjoyed the *Times*'s #1 non-fiction slot) took home the Pulitzer Prize. Neither author had published a book before!

What is a Best-Seller, Anyway?

Whenever a book surfaces on local best-seller lists, compiled by a newspaper like the *Philadelphia Inquirer* or the *Miami Herald*, its publisher can trumpet it as a best-seller. But before that title can attract the interest of book clubs, mass-market reprint offers, foreign publishers and Hollywood, it must show up on a nation-wide radar screen—preferably the one compiled each week by the *New York Times Book Review* (which editors and publishers call the *TBR*).

Some books (like those “Instant” paperbacks that Bantam used to publish) spike onto the national best-seller lists by exploiting a breaking news story. A year later, they’re typically out of print. For example, O. J. Simpson’s *I Want to Tell You* (1995) sold briskly, buoyed by the publicity of his upcoming murder trial. Then sales dwindled—fast. After a civil jury found O. J. guilty of “wrongful death” in the Brown/Goldman double murder, Los Angeles bookstores put copies of *I Want to Tell You* (originally published at \$17.95) on remainder—for 99 cents each.

To call O. J.’s book a best-seller is like saying that a softball is a bird, simply because it flies through the air. Baseballs fall to earth; birds remain aloft. To qualify for my definition of *best-seller*, a book must soar onto the *TBR*’s list and stay there, month after month—purely under its own steam. With no print or radio ads. With no cover blurb, endorsement, or introduction by a literary superstar. Without the author appearing on *Oprah*, or having to sign copies in bookstores coast to coast.

Every publisher hopes for a celebrity slam-dunk like Jerry Seinfeld’s *SeinLanguage* (1993) or Ellen DeGeneres’s *My Point . . . and I Do Have One* (1995). But long-term, the Royalty Race is not to the swiftest. A steady, dependable backlist title like *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (in print since 1961) or *Gone with the Wind* (since 1936) gives publishers found money that they can gamble on new, untried manuscripts—like yours!

Sooner or later, even a #1 best-seller slips off the list. But typically, it remains in print, selling at least 3,000 copies a year—earning its lucky author endless, effortless, generous royalties!

Back in 1996, *Independence Day* played in movie theaters for more than four months. During that summer, other films took turns at being #1 at the box office and managed to gross more box office in any given weekend. But *ID4* drew repeat audiences who paid to see it again and again—so that over those same months, it earned far more than any other #1 hit film.

In Hollywood lingo, such a picture “has legs.” All enduring best-sellers have legs too—and thus, are worth our close examination.

The Heights of Publishing

Think of the literary landscape as a mountain range. Up high, on the intoxicating summit of Parnassus, sit a few sharp authors who provide us with dazzling views and peak experiences. But from there, it’s downhill all the way.

The slopes and foothills are thronged with amateurs. The fruits of their labors—unripe, verbose unfocused—constitute the slush pile, an endless flood of unsolicited, un-agented submissions.

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In James Michener's *The Novel* (1991), a young editorial trainee is warned that "only one manuscript in nine hundred that come in over the transom ever becomes a book." ² That figure's insanely generous! Over 18 years, as an editor at three different publishing houses, I thought myself lucky if I found one publishable submission out of two or three thousand.

Dig into a typical week's slush pile, and what do you find? About 40% is fiction, much of it experimental. Many novels, like *In the Middle Distance*, are every bit as bland as they sound.

On the 60% non-fiction side, the title often warns that the project is impossible to market, as were *A Field Guide to Dog Turds* (humor) and *How to Spot a Drug Addict* (dead serious).

Lots of home-brewed theology. How do we know that God frowns on nuclear war? Because the word *abomination* begins with "A-bom[b]." Many private journals, scribbled at the prompts of inner demons. One woman, who took her Random House rejection a bit too seriously, used Day-Glo markers to fill a loose-leaf notebook with murderous fantasies about Bennett Cerf—unaware that the man had been dead for years.

No writer's too young to dream: One 13-year-old girl sent in a "complete selection" of her poetry, bravely titled *Samantha Trent: The Early Works*. Another kid offered us his 300-page historical novel about the Roman legions. In his version, all Gaul was divided into two parts, like summer camp. Typical dialogue: "I come not to give you advice, but my plan."

One feminist argued that cheating boyfriends should have molten lead funneled into their skulls. I returned her manuscript with a pre-printed rejection slip that seemed oddly appropriate: "Your proposal doesn't seem right for us at this time"

Lesson from the Slush Pile, #1: When Sex Doesn't Sell

Lester was a crusty old editor who always wore a three-piece suit. One morning, parked on his desk, he found a hand-delivered manuscript—authored by Stanley, the fast-talking leader of a Lower East Side commune where private romances were forbidden: Every man had to sleep with every woman, and vice versa.

Stanley's manuscript was a collective diary, of sorts. He'd assembled first-person testimonials from at least two dozen commune members, most of them women who ooh'd and ahh'd over Stanley's prowess.

Long before the morning coffee wagon arrived, Lester had tucked the manuscript back in its box and routed it back up to the mailroom.

As soon as Stanley read the bad news, he telephoned Lester in hostile amazement. "Obviously, you don't like sex!" he bellowed.

"Oh, but I do," Lester replied.

"Then how can you say my book is boring?"

"I never said that your book was boring," Lester said evenly. "I said *I* was bored." ³

Despite their astounding variety of subject matter, most slush-pile submissions gaze inward, not outward. Their creators do not touch—much less aim for—any widespread passion or universal instinct. And so, back these manuscripts go, along with a pre-printed message like: *We regret that this doesn't seem right for our list. Another publisher may well feel differently. We wish you luck in placing it elsewhere.*

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Why are rejection letters so unspecific, so inscrutably vague? Because editors don't want to ignite an ongoing debate—as I once did, not knowing any better.

As an Assistant Editor, still wet behind the ears, I opened a thick Manila envelope from an author I'll call Roger. "My novel, *Leather Chaps*, is a book you can publish with no risk!" insisted his cover letter.

He'd enclosed three sample chapters, so I gave them a quick scan: Thunder over the mesa, skittish horses, cowpoke named Luke, dingy saloon, moody bartender, terse dialogue with Mark, who seemed like the villain . . .

"This isn't a project we could handle successfully," my rejection letter stated. "We do very little fiction and have no experience publishing Westerns."

A week later, I opened a thicker Manila envelope with more *Leather Chaps* chapters—lots more!

"I fear you've misjudged the market for my story," Roger wrote. "This isn't another Zane Grey clone or Louis Lamour potboiler. Read on, and I'm sure you'll discern it for what it is."

Did I ever! Luke knocked back a few whiskies in that dingy saloon, then confessed he had the hots for Mark. Did Mark punch Luke's teeth out? Nope, just took him out behind the saloon, hog-tied him to a hitching post, and performed some fancy tricks he must have learned in some big-city S&M bar.

I mailed *Leather Chaps* back, repeating the points of my first rejection letter.

Roger's reply arrived by Express Mail: "I am not wealthy but, because I believe so strongly in my novel, I've saved enough to pay for its typesetting and printing. This wholly eliminates any risk to your company, or you." Not really: Only a few months before, Prentice-Hall's president had told the press that *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) was pornographic trash. A pity that Jacqueline Susann never submitted the manuscript to him, because he'd have been proud to turn it down.

Not right for our list. . . derives its power from being seamless, impenetrable, offering no statement for a writer to dispute. But I hadn't yet learned that all-purpose mumble—and so, my reply was much too helpful and polite: "P-H is not a vanity publisher. We can't accept subsidies from our authors, and I can't estimate how many copies *Leather Chaps* would sell in its first year of publication . . ."

Roger was euphoric that he needn't foot the bill! And if I couldn't estimate his readership, he could do it for me: "I'll send autographed copies to all the members of my graduating class at the Theological Seminary . . . Did I fail to mention that I am a trained artist? I can provide you with full-page pen-and-ink illustrations, at no expense."

This time, I didn't write back, and our correspondence ground to a halt.

Of the three publishing houses I worked for, the largest one received upwards of 20 slush-pile submissions every *day*—not counting unpublishable garbage from literary agents who should have known better. More visible firms like Simon & Schuster attract even more. Nowadays, few publishers will even glance at material they haven't asked to see. And if the sender hasn't included a self-addressed stamped envelope, in the trash it goes.

More than just hopes and dreams are dashed. These hapless writers have squandered months, even years they could have spent training for a better job, planting a rock garden, mastering a second language, or just entertaining family and close friends.

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But if most amateurs write books that no one wants to read, many full-time writers have the same problem! Over and over, I've seen best-selling authors score one dazzling first-time success, only to slide sadly and steadily downhill.

To be a good editor, you have to keep your standards high. After I'd waded through half-baked submissions all day long, too many of them began to look downright promising! So, to maintain my literary immune system, I spent my evenings with certified best-sellers like Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1959), Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), Brett Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (1985), Tamara Janowitz's *Slaves of New York* (1986), and Michael Chabon's *Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988)—first books, every one. Meanwhile, I treated myself to top-of-the-line delights like John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), written earlier in their authors' careers.

And then I watched, baffled, as my favorite authors coughed up puny, disappointing books that quickly appeared on tables labeled PUBLISHER'S OVERSTOCK.

F. Scott Fitzgerald mourned that there are no second acts in American fiction. Decades of disappointments have proved him right. After the huge success of *Peyton Place* (1956), Grace Metalious' first book, she wrote *The Tight, White Collar* (1960)—now out of print. After Louis Gould's *Such Good Friends* (1970) became a movie, her novels steadily dwindled in sales.⁴

With *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), Jay McInerney became an instant celebrity. He went on to publish *Ransom* (1985), *Story of My Life* (1988), and *Brightness Falls* (1992). All three had wonderfully funny, memorable scenes.

All three were duds.

How come?

In 1970, I signed up a manuscript that 21 publishers (including my former boss!) had rejected. *W.C. Fields & Me* stunned us all by erupting into a national best-seller. In 1977, I won the lottery again, with *The Amityville Horror*. (My first hint that it might be a blockbuster came when secretaries started sneaking the manuscript over to the photocopier so they could read it at home.)

Oddly, both books had much in common. Both were co-authored with a professional writer. Both were true stories. I was able to contract each for an advance against royalties of only \$5,000. After generous offers from paperback reprint houses, both were adapted into movies starring Rod Steiger.

Encouraged by these two successes (but with no real clue as to why they'd sold so well), I signed up a half-dozen manuscripts that promised to be sure winners—only to watch them all fail . . . badly! And so, I was forced to wonder: Why do total unknowns keep on crashing the *TBR's* best-seller list? Why is it so hard for successful, established authors to coax loyal readers back to the well? And—above all, the bottom-line question that keeps editors awake at night!—why do most books fail to sell?

In *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), Dale Carnegie stated that since 1900, American publishing houses had printed more than 200,000 different titles: "Most . . . were deadly dull, and many were financial failures. The president of one of the largest publishing houses in the world confessed to me that his company, after 75 years of publishing experience, still lost money on seven out of every eight books it published."⁵

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Over the past 70 years, the situation has improved, but not by much. In any publisher's catalog, at least half of the new titles never earn back their advances. The average hardcover now bears a cover price of at least \$19.95, and even the well-heeled are balking. Recently a good friend of mine, based in Washington State, visited a local Barnes & Noble near Seattle. Down the aisle was a famous software mogul, buying the latest Harry Potter installment for his son. Even though his company's stock price was down, this man's net worth was well north of ten figures. But on seeing the book's \$25.95 cover price, he gasped: "Boy, this is expensive!"

More and more often, readers hold out for a low-priced paperback edition, or visit a local library where they can check out the book for nothing. Nation-wide chains like B. Dalton and Borders woo customers with discounts of up to 33% off list price—but still wind up returning thousands of unsold copies to publishers' warehouses, for full credit!

Desperate to improve these odds, publishers resort to one of two game plans: They either play it safe, or go hog wild.

Shooting Fish in a Barrel

There are hundreds of books you'll never hear of, because they aim at an exceedingly narrow—but proven, dependable—readership. In exchange for assured sales of or three or four thousand copies and a modest profit, the publisher abandons all hope of a widespread popular hit. Books following this straight and narrow path are the literary equivalent of a smart bomb. The better to reach their target audience, they bear no-nonsense titles like *The History of the Barometer*, or *Where to Watch Birds in Portugal and Spain*, or *Raising Milk Goats the Modern Way* (all published in 1997).

Shooting The Moon

When publishers feel that they have a real winner, they usually pull out all the stops. But there aren't too many stops to pull! Print advertising is expensive and not terribly effective—except with special-interest and self-help books, whose virtues can be summed up in two or three lines.

After Jane Roberts—prolific author and loyal friend—earned a wide following with *Seth Speaks* (1972), Prentice-Hall gave her books a full-page ad in the *TBR*. Her sales didn't improve one bit! Nowadays, sending an author on a cross-country book tour is horridly expensive. What if the bookstores don't draw a crowd, and the local media just says no?

This is why editors pay astronomical advances for name recognition and built-in publicity: a cool \$2.5 million to Dick Morris for *Beyond the Oval Office* (1996). \$4.2 million to Marcia Clark for *Without a Doubt* (1997). \$5 million to Marlon Brando for *Songs My Mother Taught Me* (1994). \$6.5 million to Colin Powell for *My American Journey* (1995).

Alas, high-profile authors rarely earn back their advances. Morris, Clark, and Brando were all costly disasters. Only Colin Powell sold well. But meanwhile, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994) by John Berendt—whose byline meant nothing outside the magazine world—rode the *Times* hardcover best-seller list for more than three full years, outselling all four of these celebrity books combined.

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For first-time authors, visibility is a major factor in whether you'll ever see a contract. One major publisher won't even look at your proposal unless you've established a niche on the lecture circuit. When you telephone a certain West Coast agent to pitch your manuscript, his first question isn't, "What's your topic?" but "How many books can you sell on your own?"

In 1985, I resigned my book-publishing job at Philadelphia's Running Press and spent the next three years editing a quarterly magazine, editing articles and selecting chunks of yet-unpublished books. (First serializations, they're called.) Working in miniature this way, I saw more clearly why some narratives sizzle and others fizzle, and where even experienced authors often steer into the ditch.

Around the same time, I offered my services as a book doctor, fixing manuscripts hung up on lethal snags. Many hopeful authors asked me to line-edit their work, giving it that spit-'n'-polish that every "final" draft can use. I needed the money. But in all honesty, I had to turn down manuscripts that weren't just limping or sickly, but DOA!

Skilled wordsmiths can work wonders, but we can't bring manuscripts back from the dead or breathe life where there was none to begin with. If the car has four flat tires and a cracked engine block, why bother to wax it?

If amateurs have trouble getting published, so do best-selling authors! Over the years, I've spent long consultations with three different name-brand writers whose books had sold millions of copies. Paperback editions of their earlier hits were on sale in virtually every bookstore. But now, suddenly, their publishers had refused their latest efforts. Could I help them get their manuscripts back on the rails?

I knew these authors' work, and had devoured their original books with eager delight. But with these "problem" manuscripts, I had to flog myself to keep reading. *Get on with it!* Sentence after sentence, page after page, these manuscripts drifted aimlessly, practically daring me to lay them aside for good.

I wound up condensing chapters to half their original length, suggesting new scenes (and even whole new subplots) to liven things up, and even ghostwriting a new ending—in the author's own style, of course. After my extensive tinkering, all three publishers accepted the manuscripts, and quickly published them. Sad to say, none of them became a best-seller. When revisions have to be completed in only a few weeks, there's a limit to the improvements that even a gifted author can accomplish.⁷

Philosophically, what bothered me even more was that all three rejected manuscripts had boasted every basic element that a Creative Writing 101 instructor could ask for: drama, conflict, vivid characterizations, and colorful dialogue. But somehow, their authors had managed to leave out one vital ingredient: a motive to keep turning the pages!⁶

I decided that all writers—pros and amateurs alike—deserve a deeper inquiry into what makes prose enjoyable to read (as opposed to *worth* reading). Why do the books of John Grisham and J. K. Rowling quite literally sell themselves? Could these essentials be detected, isolated, defined?

Curious, I started re-reading memorable best-sellers—both novels and non-fiction—and caught up on other books that I'd missed when they first hit the charts.

In Search of that Certain Something

One of my first discoveries was that eloquence isn't a must: Authors can commit memorably lousy writing and still enjoy a best-seller. From *The Bitch* (1979), an early Jackie Collins novel:

They made love for hours. It seemed like hours. It probably was hours.⁸

(Book after book, Collins uses all seven Strategies with unusual clarity—and to great effect: Her books have been translated into more than 40 languages, with total sales of nearly 200 million copies.)

From Dean Koontz's *Intensity* (1995):

Dead girls lie as troubled in the dark as in the light.⁹

From the opening page of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971):

Like the brief doomed flare of exploding suns that register dimly on blind men's eyes . . .¹⁰

(When a star explodes—goes nova—it can sometimes shine for weeks, but seldom any brighter than the planet Venus. And the blind, by definition, can't perceive any light at all.)

To make sure I wasn't comparing books with completely different readerships, I matched major hits like James Michener's *Hawaii* (1959) and Tom Tryon's *The Other* (1971) against weak, flawed efforts by the same authors, like Michener's *Space* (1982) and Tryon's *Night of the Moonbow* (1989). Slowly, the fog began to lift. Certain ploys, elements, and techniques were obvious and ever-present in the top-sellers, but always missing from the flops. As I read on, more recognizable patterns clicked into focus—and began to arrange themselves under six or seven main headings.

Even so, I had less than 20 years' experience in book publishing. Was my critical radar locking onto recent fads, tracking quirks peculiar to the late 20th century? To be on the safe side, I turned back to those enduringly popular yarns that have enthralled readers for centuries. Along with the adventures of James Bond and Sherlock Holmes, my test group of classic stories included the sagas of Robin Hood, Jason and the Argonauts, Theseus, and Ulysses; as well as Moses, King David, and other biblical figures.

To my surprise, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2,000 BCE) employed many of the "secret ingredients" that I'd detected in last summer's hit movies. At my local library, books that were wildly successful when first published—20, 50, and even 100 years ago—were often checked out or on reserve, forcing me to buy copies at a local bookstore. Long after the hoopla (and the authors) died, these works had remained in print, to enchant new generations of readers.

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In the next chapter, I'll reveal the first—and probably most important—of these Strategies and explain why it's so compelling and effective. But first, let me answer some of the questions (and objections) that writers pose most frequently.

Does every best-seller contain all seven of these Strategies?

Yes! In every riveting page-turner, these specific elements crop up repeatedly. Again, they are *not* the strengths touted in most creative writing courses. (I once read about an instructor in Maine charging \$200 for a three-day workshop on “Establishing a Sense of Place”—a *very* minor aspect of Strategy #2.)

Are these Strategies hard to spot?

Not if you know where to look. To demonstrate each Strategy in action, I'll be quoting from extremely successful authors like Jackie Collins, Dean Koontz, Tom Wolfe, Carlos Castaneda, Ian Fleming, Benjamin Spock, M.D., Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, and others whose books remain on sale, year after year.

Why hasn't anyone discovered these Strategies before?

Probably because we've taught to look in all the wrong places.

Typically, English Lit instructors assign Ben Johnson, John Dryden, Lawrence Sterne, Henry James, James Joyce and other authors whom most students would just as soon leave on the shelves of the campus bookstore. We read them to pass the course, but not for pleasure. Aspiring writers can get the fatal misconception that a “good” author is supposed to read like Franz Kafka, T.S. Eliot, or Samuel Beckett.

Worse, too many creative-writing classes teach that reader enjoyment is of marginal importance. Stephen King's *It* (1986) features a sardonic sequence wherein young Bill Denbrough takes a seminar at the University of Maine, taught by an instructor who has “published four books of poetry and his master's thesis, all with the University Press. He smokes pot and wears a peace medallion.” One of Denbrough's fellow students “wants to write novels about the grim lives of the poor in blank verse.” The class wastes an hour and ten minutes analyzing a “sallow young woman's vignette about a cow's examination of a discarded engine block in a deserted field,” which, she insists, “is a socio-political statement in the manner of the early Orwell.”

After the instructor slaps an *F* on Bill's latest story, Bill promptly sells it to a magazine for \$200. He flunks the seminar, but winds up with a contract from Viking Press, even before he graduates.¹¹ So there!

All too often, when we start looking in the right places—in crowd-pleasing books that people actually *want* to read—we're made to feel guilty for doing so. Back in 1800, William Wordsworth, England's future Poet Laureate, denounced the top-selling tomes of his day as “frantic,” “sickly,” “stupid,” “idle,” and “extravagant.”¹² More recently, publisher Henry Regnery was quoted as saying, “If you're making money, you're publishing the wrong kind of

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book.”¹³ This kind of insane snobbism is still alive and well at several of New York’s quality publishing houses.

Rather than be squeamish or elitist, I’ll be pointing out the Seven Strategies wherever they’re easiest to spot—in trashy potboilers, in top-grossing Hollywood movies, even in comic books.

Of course you can argue with success. But first, see what it can teach you.

Do you mean that when the Seven Strategies go in, quality goes down?

Not at all. You’ll find all seven of them front and center in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *Hamlet* (1603), *Paradise Lost* (1667), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *Das Rheingold* (1869), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1968), *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and dozens of other classic, critically acclaimed works.

Do these Strategies operate in non-fiction as well?

Absolutely, because the two genres are far more similar than you might suppose.

Truman Capote claimed that with *In Cold Blood* (1965), he’d invented what he called the “non-fiction novel.” But fiction and non- have been cross-pollinating ever since Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722)—and presented both books as non-fiction memoirs.

“The characters in this book are real,” John Berendt assures us in his Author’s Note at the end of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, “but...I have used pseudonyms for a number of them to protect their privacy, and in a few cases I have gone a step further by altering their descriptions.” On top of that, he admits having “taken certain storytelling liberties, particularly . . . with the timing of events. Where the narrative strays from strict non-fiction, my intention has been to remain faithful to the characters and to the essential drift of events as they really happened.”¹⁴ In short, he’s tweaked and shuffled reality, just like a novelist!

Non-fiction best-sellers (yes, even how-to manuals and self-help titles) use novelistic ploys to win and hold readers. The presence—or absence—of the Seven Strategies helps explain why your average PTA cookbook sells only a few dozen copies, while *The Joy of Cooking* (1975) has sold millions.

I’ve even heard from a technical writer who claims that the Strategies help him compose manuals that are clearer and better organized!

Will using the Seven Strategies guarantee me a best-seller?

Unfortunately, there are no can’t-lose, foolproof ingredients for literary success. That’s why I use the term *Strategies*. Including all seven gives your work has a much better shot at healthy sales. But skimp on even one Strategy, and your book may not earn back its advance, if it ever gets a contract at all. To illustrate exactly what happens when a Strategy is lacking, I’ll be including a full two dozen “Lessons from the Slush Pile”—cautionary tales of actual submissions that crashed and burned in gruesome but instructive ways.

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Very simply, the Seven Strategies are what readers yearn for, in fiction and non-fiction alike. Readers, when rewarded and delighted, tend to recommend the book to their friends. This self-generating word of mouth—or “critical mass,” as executive editor John Kirk once called it—results in the kind of steady sales that keep a title in print.

Of course publicity, TV and radio appearances, and bookstore signings help sell copies. (Autographed copies can't be returned to the publisher, heh, heh!) But by itself, promotion can't force people to buy books they don't care to read; much less create the steady, healthy numbers required for long-term success.

Aren't these Strategies a recipe for a trite, predictable book?

Not at all! A best-seller fully satisfies certain *needs* that every reader brings to the printed page. Just as you can obtain your daily requirement of Vitamin C from orange juice, broccoli, or once-a-day supplements, so can any one Strategy be fulfilled in any number of ways.

Some techniques, of course, are more powerful than others. A very few are so effective that they've devolved into clichés. Yet paradoxically, their very familiarity only makes them *more* effective, as in the standard fairy-tale opening, “Once upon a time. . .,” or the traditional three knocks of a staff on the stage floor that announces the imminent rise of the curtain at the Comédie Française in Paris.¹⁵

A highly successful book needn't—indeed, *shouldn't*—follow any pat formulas. If you want to know what hackneyed and hidebound writing is like, read one of the countless paperback romances where characters' personality traits, conflicts, and reactions are all dictated by editorial fiat.¹⁶

Have you ever struggled over a manuscript or screenplay that wouldn't come to life? If so, I can guarantee that at least one crucial Strategy was lacking. Reviewing all seven will help pinpoint exactly what went wrong—and better yet, will help you avoid the wrongheaded ideas, false starts, and dead ends that can waste weeks of creative time.

As any experienced writer will tell you, a bad book is actually *harder* to write than a good one! Many best-selling authors like Richard Bach have claimed that their runaway hit “just wrote itself.” As long as you're spending all that effort and spending long chunks of time at the keyboard, employing these Strategies—and the many hints, tricks and shortcuts they suggest—will make your work easier, and certainly more fun.

As the saying is, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. To earn a contract, you must hook your agent or editor from the very beginning—ideally, on the very first page. And one dependable way to start things humming is with Strategy #1.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Unless otherwise noted, all publishers are based in New York City.

(1) Quoted by Suzanna Andrews in “Random Anxiety,” *New York* magazine, July 7, 1997, pages 31 and 90.

(2) James Michener, *The Novel* [first published in 1991]. Random House, 1991, p. 123.

(3) “Good sex,” Lester told me later, “can’t be compulsory. Stanley’s manuscript described dozens of couplings, but not one of them was *sexy*—much less suspenseful. Why bother to flirt, if the outcome is pre-ordained?”

In reality, sex and romance often disguise what’s really fueling the story. *La Traviata* (1853), *My Fair Lady* (1957) and *Pretty Woman* (1990) all arise from a basic male rescue fantasy: Out of goodness and compassion, our hero yanks the heroine out of the gutter, sets her back upright—and discovers, to his surprise, that she’s ravishing!

Actually, his motive is not sexual, but redemptive. Catholic tradition identifies the woman “taken in adultery” (John 8: 3-4) as Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus drove seven devils and who was the first to witness his Resurrection. Henry Higgins never even kisses Eliza. In 1950s Westerns, the hero saves the schoolmarm, then gallops off as fast as he can.

(4) In Hollywood, you’re only as good as your last movie. This adage is now true in publishing as well: Editors are reluctant to sign you up if your last two or three books didn’t make money.

(5) Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* [1936]. Pocket Books, 1982, p. xiii.

(6) Publishers’ sales representatives refer to such motives as a book’s sales points. A successful title needs two or three *compelling* ones—which of course only its author can supply. Many manuscripts with weak sales points still get published. But if the sales reps doubt that a new book has what it takes, they will quietly skip over it when pitching their list to wholesalers. Few readers will ever see that blackballed title, because bookstores never ordered it in the first place.

(7) Very often, authors working on their second book will freeze up under the pressure of contractual deadlines—especially if their first one was written on spec, with no delivery date, affording them all the time in the world.

(8) Jackie Collins, *The Bitch* [1979]. Pocket, 1984, p. 56.

(9) Dean Koontz, *Intensity* [1996]. Knopf, 1996, p. 49.

(10) William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* [1971]. Bantam 1972, p. 11.

(11) Stephen King, *It* [1986]. Signet, 1990, pages 199-122.

(12) William Wordsworth, in his Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* [1800], available in several reprints and anthologies.

(13) Jane Mayer, “Solid-Gold Dish,” *The New Yorker*, May 26, 1997, p. 34.

(14) John Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story* [1994]. Random House, 1994, p. 389.

(15) Thanks to the Third Law of Reader Reaction (see Strategy #3), this venerable tradition has inspired many irreverent jokes, as in “That’s the director, knocking wood.” After the great classical actress Sarah Bernhardt had a leg amputated, she was fitted with a wooden prosthesis and made a brave return to the stage. That evening, on hearing the three knocks, one wag remarked, “Here she comes!”

(16) In the early 1980s, the editors at Silhouette Romances drew up hard-and-fast authors’ guidelines for the benefit of Barbara Cartland wannabes. For example:

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“The HEROINE is always young (19 to 27), basically an ingénue, usually petite and slight of build, and wears modest make-up and clothes. In spite of her fragile appearance, she is independent, high-spirited, and not too subservient. She should not be mousey [*sic*] or weepy. Almost always a virgin, she never truly believes that the Hero loves her until the final chapter.

“The HERO is self-assured, masterful, hot-tempered, capable of violence, passion and tenderness. Often mysteriously moody, always 8 to 12 years older than the Heroine. Usually in his early or late 30s, he is always tall, muscular (not muscle-bound) with craggy features. He is not necessarily handsome, but is, above all, virile. He is usually dark, although we have seen some great Nordic types and, recently, a gorgeous redhead.” And so forth.

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