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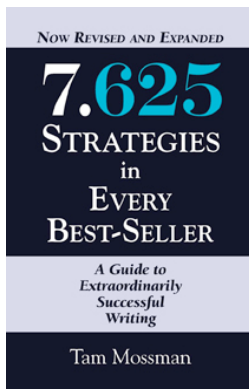
in

EVERY

BEST-SELLER

*A Guide to
Extraordinarily
Successful
Writing*

Tam Mossman



As a Trade editor for more than 30 years, Tam Mossman contracted several best-sellers and rejected thousands of failed manuscripts. Here, he pinpoints the "essential vitamins" that help some books enjoy huge successes - and why most, lacking these must-haves, soon go out of print. A bonus Strategy (#7.625) explains how editors decide which submissions to sign, while Amazon.com's reader reviews and handheld devices like Kindle let buyers - not publishers - choose what they want to read.

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STRATEGIES
IN
EVERY
BEST-SELLER

*Wholly
Revised
and
Expanded*

Tam Mossman

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INTRODUCTION
How Books Go Far with No P.R.

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 NON-FICTION BEST-SELLER is one of the few ways you can become a millionaire, quickly and legally. Nor is there any glass ceiling: On any best-seller list, more than half the novels are written by women.

If you hope for a sale to a major Hollywood studio, six-figure paperback floor bid, plus translations into foreign languages, chances are surprisingly good that your first time at bat will score a home run.

Among the many examples: 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 best-seller was the author's very first book.

In 1997, this trend became hard to ignore when *Cold Mountain* (the year before, #1 on the *New York Times*'s fiction best-seller list) won the National Book Award and *Angela's Ashes* (1999, fresh from the *Times*'s #1 non-fiction slot) took home the Pulitzer Prize. Neither author had published a book before! And in 2002, the Pulitzer went to *Three Junes*, yet another first novel of that same year. [2]

What is a Best-Seller, Anyway?

Whenever a book surfaces on some local list compiled by a newspaper like the *Philadelphia Inquirer* or the *Miami Herald*, its publisher can rightly claim it's a best-seller. But before that title can attract the interest of book clubs, mass-market reprinters, foreign publishers, and Hollywood, it must show up on a coast-to-coast radar screen—preferably the one compiled each week by the *New York Times Book Review* (or as editors call it for short, the *TBR*).

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). Other books (like those "Instant" paperbacks that Bantam used to publish) spike onto national 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 buzz over 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 were selling copies of *I Want to Tell You* (originally published at \$17.95) on remainder—for 99 cents each.

To call that book a best-seller is like saying that a home run is a bird, simply because it flies through the air. Baseballs fall to earth; birds stay aloft. To qualify for my definition of best-seller, a book must soar onto the *TBR*'s list and stay there, month after month, under its own steam.

With no assist from print or radio ads. With no endorsements or introduction by any big cheese. Without the author appearing on talk shows, or having to sign copies in bookstores during a publicity tour.

Sooner or later, even these #1 best-sellers will slide off the list. But in the long run, the Royalty Race is not to the swiftest. A handful of popular tomes remain in print, selling several thousand copies a year—earning their authors ongoing royalties, endlessly and effortlessly. Dependable backlist titles like *Gone with the Wind* (never out of print since 1936), *Atlas Shrugged* (since 1957) and *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (since 1961) give their publishers found money to gamble on new, unproven manuscripts—like yours!

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 ticket sales in any given weekend. But just like *Star Wars* before it in 1977, *ID4* drew repeat audiences who paid to see it again and again. Over those same months, it earned far more than any other #1 hit.

In Hollywood lingo, such a picture “has legs.” All enduring best-sellers have legs too—plus other features that give them distinct advantages over their competition.

Their unique anatomy rewards a closer look.

The Dizzy Heights, the Lower Depths

Compare the literary landscape to a mountain range. High on Parnassus’s heady summit sit a few sharp authors who offer dazzling views and peak experiences. From there, it’s downhill all the way. The lowlands are thick with amateurs. The products of their labors—unripe, wordy, unfocused—constitute the slush pile, that endless trickle of unsolicited (or “over the transom”) submissions that every publisher gets.

An editorial trainee in James Michener’s *The Novel* (1991) is warned that “only one manuscript in the nine hundred

that come in over the transom ever becomes a book.” [3] That statistic is wildly generous! Over 18 years as an editor at three different publishing houses, I was lucky to find even one publishable submission out of two or three thousand.

One of the houses I worked for received at least 20 unsolicited submissions a *day*, not counting the glop from second-tier literary agents. Digging into a typical week’s slush pile, what would I find?

Roughly 40% of it was fiction, much of it experimental. Many novels were as blah as their titles suggested (actual example: *In the Middle Distance*).

In the 60% portion of non-fiction, titles often alerted me that these projects would be impossible to market. More real-life examples: *A Field Guide to Dog Turds* (humor) and *How to Spot a Drug Addict* (dead serious).

Lots of home-brewed theology. How can we deduce that God frowns on nuclear war? Because the word *abomination* begins with “A-bom[b].”

Always a few aimless private journals, scribbled at the dictation of inner demons. One woman took her previous rejection a little too personally. Using Day-Glo markers, she filled a notebook with murderous fantasies about Bennett Cerf—unaware that the man had been dead for years.

She enclosed several chapters from the manuscript that Random House had returned to her, but forgot to remove the color photo of herself wearing only a feather boa, with a personal inscription: “For you, Mr. Cerf.”

No writer’s too young to dream: One 13-year-old girl sent in a “complete selection” of her poetry, assertively titled *Samantha Trent: The Early Works*. Another kid offered us a 300-page novel about an ancient Roman legion. Typical dialogue: “I come not to give you advice, but my plan.”

As actor/rapper Ice Cube says, growing older means becoming “a little wiser about how the world works.” [4] Yet too many adult authors get turned down because they haven’t bothered to learn much about their chosen topics.

Back when postage was cheaper, we mailed unsolicited authors a laundry list of various reasons for our refusal. The one checked most often was, “Your topic requires professional credentials.” (Our office satirist offered up other excuses like “We couldn’t penetrate the layers of Bubble Wrap enclosing your manuscript,” and “Never claim to have cured a disease you still can’t spell.”)

One woman argued that cheating boyfriends should have molten lead funneled into their skulls. By this time, we were using a pre-printed rejection slip that stated, “Your proposal doesn’t seem right for us at this time. Another editor may well feel differently.”

Slush Pile Lesson #1: By Itself, Sex Doesn’t Sell

Lester always came to work wearing a three-piece suit. One morning, parked on his desk was a manuscript hand-delivered to our front desk. The author was Stanley Fisher, the fast-talking leader of the Middle of Silence Gallery, a Lower East Side commune where private romances were forbidden: Every man had to sleep with every woman who asked him, and vice versa. Stanley’s screed was an anthology of first-person testimonials from some two dozen commune members, most of them women who ooh’d and ahh’d over Stanley’s prowess.

Long before the morning coffee wagon came by, Lester had stuffed the manuscript back in its box and routed it back to the mailroom.

As soon as Stanley read the rejection letter, he phoned Lester in hostile amazement: “Obviously, you don’t like sex!”

“Oh, but I do,” Lester replied.

“Then how can you say my book is boring?”

“I never said your book was boring,” Lester replied evenly. “I’m saying *I* was bored.” [5]

Slush-pile authors tend to gaze inward, not outward at the world with all its fascinations. Unlike Stanley, these beginners seldom touch on any widespread goal or universal passion. So back went their manuscripts, along with some pre-printed message like “Other houses have different policies. We wish you the best of luck in placing your work elsewhere.”

Even today, rejection letters are inscrutably vague—deliberately, so as not to ignite any ongoing debate. As an Assistant Editor, still new to the profession, I opened a fat Manila envelope from an author I’ll call Roger. “My novel, *Leather Chaps*, is a book you can publish with no risk!” his cover letter insisted.

I scanned his three sample chapters: Thunder over the mesa, skittish horses. Lonesome cowpoke named Luke in a dingy saloon. Mark, a tall dark stranger dressed all in leather, introduces himself: “Ah’m no rustler, just a hustler.”

“Not a project we could handle successfully,” I wrote back. “We do very little fiction and have no experience publishing Westerns.”

A week later, in came an even thicker Manila envelope with more *Leather Chaps* chapters. “I fear you’ve misjudged the market for my story,” Roger wrote. “This isn’t another Louis Lamour potboiler. Read on. I’m sure you’ll agree.”

I sure did! Mark knocked back a few more whiskies in that dingy saloon, then confessed he had a yen for Luke. Rather than punch Mark’s teeth out, Luke tied him to a hitching post behind the saloon, and performed some fancy tricks he must

have learned back in the big city. I mailed back *Leather Chaps*, repeating my original objections.

Back came Roger's reply, via Express Mail: "Because I believe so strongly in my novel, I've saved enough to pay for its typesetting and printing. I can also provide pen-and-ink illustrations—at no expense—to eliminate any risk to you."

Actually, it would have. The president of our company had bragged to a reporter what a shame it was that years before, he was never offered *Valley of the Dolls* (1966). He'd have been proud to turn it down as pornographic trash!

"Not right for our list. . ." derives its power from being seamless, impenetrable, leaving nothing for insistent writers to dispute. Since I'd yet to learn that all-purpose mumble, my reply to Roger was needlessly helpful:

"We're not a vanity publisher and don't accept subsidies from our authors. Nor can I estimate how many copies *Leather Chaps* would sell to justify a first printing."

But Roger thought he could. "I can send autographed copies to all the members of my class at the Theological Seminary . . ."

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

Nowadays, editors won't even glance at any material they haven't asked to see. Even if you include a self-addressed stamped envelope, they usually ignore it and toss it out along with your query. More than just hopes and dreams are dashed. Hapless writers have often squandered months, even years they might have spent more gainfully.

Yet many published authors have the same problem! Again and again, you'll see best-selling authors enjoy a first-time success only to slide sadly, steadily downhill.

Editors must keep their standards sharp. After I'd slogged through half-baked prose all day long, too much of it looked downright promising! So to boost 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—and durable delights like John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), written early in their authors' careers.

Then I watched, baffled, as these same authors coughed up puny, disappointing books that soon appeared on tables labeled PUBLISHERS' OVERSTOCK.

F. Scott Fitzgerald mourned that there are no second acts in American fiction. Ensuing decades have proved him right.

When Françoise Sagan was only a teenager, her first book, *Bonjour Tristesse* ("Hello, Sadness," 1955) became an international best-seller. None of her later, world-weary novels enjoyed equal sales. After Grace Metalious' first book, *Peyton Place* (1956), she wrote *The Tight, White Collar* (1960)—soon out of print. After Louis Gould's *Such Good Friends* (1970) became a movie, her novels steadily dwindled in sales. [6]

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 had briskly 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* startled us all by erupting into a national best-seller. In 1977, I hit the lottery again with *The Amityville Horror*. Our first clue

of its appeal came when secretaries began photocopying the manuscript to read at home.

Both books had features in common. Both were co-authored; both were true stories. I was able to contract each for a token advance of only \$5,000. Both received generous offers from paperback reprint houses, and each was adapted into a film starring Rod Steiger.

Encouraged by these two successes (but with no clear idea of why they'd sold so well), I signed up other projects that looked like sure winners. When they failed—badly!—I was forced to wonder: Why do unknown writers keep bobbing to the top of the *TBR*'s best-seller list? Why can't more of them coax loyal readers back for second helpings?

And above all, the bottom-line questions that keep publishers' accountants awake at night: Why do so many titles fail to sell? And why do a very few stay in print for years, long after their authors are dead, with no promotion or advertising?

These questions were asked years ago, but never answered. In *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), Dale Carnegie wrote 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 confessed to me that his company, after 75 years of experience, still lost money on seven out of every eight books it published." [7]

Over the past century, haven't computers and market research improved those odds? Not by much.

In any publisher's catalog, at least half the new titles will never earn back their advances against royalties. Now that your typical hardcover bears a cover price of at least \$22.95, even well-heeled buyers are balking. Recently, a friend of mine visited a Barnes & Noble near Seattle. Down the aisle was a

software mogul, buying the one of the earlier Harry Potter books in hardcover for his son.

Though his company's stock price had been whipsawing at the time, this man's net worth was comfortably in the hundreds of millions. Yet upon checking the book's cover price, he gasped, "Boy, is this expensive!"

Increasingly, readers will wait for a lower-priced Trade paperback or mass-market edition, or visit a local library where they can check out books for nothing. Painfully aware of this trend, publishers—who used to wait at least a calendar year before issuing any paperback that would compete with cloth sales—now release the Trade paper edition only seven to eight months following the pub date of the cloth original.

Meanwhile, national bookstore chains and supermarkets 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!

That's one reason why publishers see hand-held reading devices like Kindle as a mixed blessing. Every digital copy downloaded is a copy sold, and not one is sitting idle in a warehouse, where it gets taxed as unsold inventory. (For more details, see the very last chapter.)

To improve the odds that any new title will sell enough copies to justify its author's advance and production costs, publishers traditionally resorted to one of two game plans: (1) Playing it safe, or (2) Going hog wild.

(1) Shooting Fish in Narrow Barrels

Romance novels issued as mass-market originals, art books in a split run (cloth for libraries, Trade paper for the budget-conscious), histories, and other special-interest titles can turn a dependable profit by aiming at a niche readership. But

it's a tradeoff. In exchange for near-guaranteed sales of maybe 10,000 copies, the publisher abandons all hopes for a widespread popular hit.

Books that follow this straight and narrow path are the literary equivalents of a smart bomb. The better to reach their target audience, they bear numbingly accurate titles like *The History of the Barometer*, and *Where to Watch Birds in Portugal and Spain*, and *Raising Milk Goats the Modern Way* (all actual titles, published back in 1997).

(2) *Shooting the Moon*

When they feel confident of an upcoming winner, publishers often pull out all the stops. But there aren't that many stops to pull! Print advertising is expensive and not very effective—except for special-interest and self-help books, whose sales points can be easily summarized in two or three lines of ad copy. Years after Jane Roberts had earned a broad readership with *Seth Speaks* (1972), Prentice-Hall gave her backlist titles a full-page ad in the *TBR*. But her sales didn't improve one bit!

Sending authors on book tours is a costly risk. Too often, local media give beginning authors no coverage, so unless they're celebrities with an established fan base, their bookstore signings draw only tiny crowds.

For any first-time author seeking for a contract, any *existing* visibility is a huge advantage. One major publisher won't even look at your proposal unless you've earned a niche on the lecture circuit. Ask a certain West Coast agent to represent you, and his first question will be, "How many books can you sell on your own?"

That's why editors pay huge advances to authors whose name recognition offers built-in publicity. In just one five-year

period: \$2.5 million to Dick Morris for *Beyond the Oval Office* (1996). \$4.2 million to O.J. prosecutor 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).

But few of these titles were ever bought at full list price! Morris's, Clark's, and Brando's memoirs were all costly disasters. Only Colin Powell's sold well. Meanwhile, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994) by John Berendt—whose name was unknown outside the magazine world—rode the *NYT*'s hardcover best-seller list for more than three years, outselling all those celebrity books combined.

After resigning my job as an acquisitions editor (under the gun to contract at least 12 profitable titles a year, or else), I spent some time editing selections from yet-unpublished books for first serialization in a magazine. Working in miniature this way, I saw more clearly why some narratives sizzle and others fizzle, and why even veteran authors can steer into the ditch.

Around the same time, I offered my services as a book doctor, helping to mold manuscripts into publishable shape. Many hopeful authors asked me to line-edit their manuscripts, giving them that professional polish that every “final” draft needs. Much as I needed the money, I felt honor-bound to turn down efforts that struck me as beyond help, plainly wrong-headed from the very first page.

If a car has no engine, the best wax job can't help it run. No editor can bring a manuscript back from the dead, or breathe life where there's none to begin with.

And if most amateurs have trouble getting manuscripts accepted, so do many pros! I've had long conversations with three different authors whose earlier books sold millions of copies. You can still find mass-market reprints of their earlier

hits in every chain bookstore. But now, editors had rejected their latest efforts. Could I help them figure out why?

I knew their track records. I'd raced through these authors' earlier books with eager delight. But these latest efforts practically dared me to lay them down for good.

The main symptoms were pointless details and descriptions, and no rooting interest to seize a reader's imagination. Line-editing, I often found myself condensing chapters to half their length, suggesting new subplots to liven things up, even adding new sentences—aping each author's own distinctive style.

In each case, the editors accepted my makeovers of these “problem” manuscripts and quickly published them. All three now offered the basics that any reader could want: vivid characterization, emotional conflicts, and colorful dialogue. But none of the three ever became a best-seller. They still lacked one element I couldn't provide: a strong premise to keep readers turning the pages [8]. Being faced with a deadline precludes any total overhaul or major rethinking, leaving only so many improvements that an editor can manage. [9]

Why, I wondered, did the later works of Danielle Steel, J.K. Rowling, and Janet Evanovich sell so dependably? What made their books so thoroughly enjoyable? Could these essentials be detected, isolated, defined?

Curious, I began catching up on best-sellers I'd missed when they first climbed to the top of the charts.

À la Recherche de Je Ne Sais Quoi

My first dismaying discovery was that eloquence counts for so little. Authors can perpetrate some truly wretched prose and still enjoy healthy sales.

From the first 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 goes nova, it sometimes shines for weeks. And the blind, by definition, can perceive no light at all.

In her novels, Jackie Collins uses all seven Strategies with unusual clarity and to solid effect. Her books have been translated into more than 40 languages, with total sales of nearly 200 million copies. But here’s an excerpt from an early effort of hers, *The Bitch* (1979): “They made love for hours. It seemed like hours. It probably was hours.” [11]

From Dean Koontz’s *Intensity* (1995): “Dead girls lie as troubled in the dark as in the light.” [12]

As a controlled experiment, I matched hits like James Michener’s *Hawaii* (1959) and Tom Tryon’s *The Other* (1971) against weak, flawed efforts by those same authors—Michener’s *Space* (1982) and Tryon’s *Night of the Moonbow* (1989). Certain features and techniques (as well as outright ploys!) were always present in their top sellers, *always* missing from their flops.

I did worry that my radar might be locking onto recent fads peculiar to the late 20th century. To be on the safe side, I turned to enduringly popular works—novels and non-fiction alike—that have stayed in print for centuries. My test group went *way* back, starting with the Greek myths of Jason and the Argonauts, Theseus, and Ulysses; as well as the biblical narratives of Moses, King David, and Jesus.

The Epic of Gilgamesh (circa 2,000 BCE) employs many of the “secret ingredients” in last summer’s blockbuster movies. And at my local library, books that enjoyed wild success when first published—centuries ago—were often checked out or on reserve, forcing me to buy copies on Amazon.com. Long after the original hoopla (and their authors) died, these classics enthrall new generations of readers.

In the next chapter, I'll explain the first of these seven Strategies—"Strats," I call them for short—and exactly why each one is compelling and effective. But first, let me tackle those questions and objections people I hear most often.

Does every best-seller feature all seven of these so-called Strats of yours?

Yep! These specific elements crop up repeatedly in every riveting page-turner. Unfortunately, they are *not* the guidelines touted in many creative writing courses. I once read about an instructor charging \$200 for a three-day workshop on "Establishing a Sense of Place"—a minor aspect of Strategy #2.

Are the Strats hard to spot?

Not if you know where to look. To demonstrate each one in action, I'll be quoting examples from writers like Carlos Castaneda, Jackie Collins, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Ian Fleming, Dean Koontz, William Shakespeare, Benjamin Spock, M.D., Mark Twain, Tom Wolfe, and other name-brand authors who remain on sale, year after year.

Why hasn't anyone detected these Strats before?

We've been taught to look in all the wrong places.

English majors are typically assigned works by Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Henry James, James Joyce, and Lawrence Sterne. No student reads them for enjoyment, only to pass the course. And so, they graduate under the misconception that any "serious" author must be a stoic pessimist like Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot, or Franz Kafka—a tradition carried on dutifully, doggedly by Jonathan Franzen in *Freedom* (2010).

Worse yet, creative-writing instructors often warn that currying reader enjoyment is a lowbrow ambition.

Stephen King's *It* (1986) plunks aspiring author Bill Denbrough into a seminar whose instructor 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 spends 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 even before he graduates, signs a contract with Viking Press, a house respected for its literary titles. [13] So there!

All too often, when writers start looking in all the *right* places—in books they've actually enjoyed—they're shamed into feeling guilty. In 1800, William Wordsworth, later to become England's Poet Laureate, denounced the top-selling tomes of his day as "frantic," "sickly," "stupid," "idle," and "extravagant." [14]

This snobbish distaste of pop culture persists at several New York publishing houses. Publisher Henry Regnery was once quoted as saying, "If you're making money, you're publishing the wrong kind of book." [15]

Sure you can argue with success! But first, why not listen to what it can teach you?

Then when the Strats go in, does quality go down?

No way! They're easy to spot in trashy potboilers, top-grossing Hollywood movies, even comic books. But they're equally obvious in Homer and Sophocles, Dante and Dickens. By being neither squeamish nor elitist, I can point out the Strats wherever they're most visible.

All seven are front and center in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *Hamlet* (1603), *Paradise Lost* (1667), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (in French, *Nôtre Dame de Paris*, 1831), *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Wagner's *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 plenty of other classic and critically acclaimed works.

Do the Strats energize non-fiction as well?

Absolutely! Actually, fiction and fact are more alike than anyone might suppose.

Truman Capote claimed that with *In Cold Blood* (1965), he'd invented what he called the "non-fiction novel." Actually, those two genres have been cross-pollinating ever since Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722)—and passed off both works of fiction as real-life memoirs.

"The characters in this book are real," John Berendt assures us the end of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, then adds, "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."

He also confesses to 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." [16]

In short, he's tweaked and shuffled facts for greater impact—exactly like any good novelist!

How-to manuals and self-help titles also use narrative "novelistic" tricks to grab readers. The presence (or absence) of the Strats helps explain why the 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 claimed that the Strats have helped him write user's manuals that are clearer and better organized!

Can using all your Strats guarantee a best-seller?

Unfortunately, there are no foolproof avenues to literary success. That's why I call them *Strategies*. Including all seven will offer you a far better shot at healthy sales. But skimp on even one, and your book may not earn back its advance—if it ever wins a contract in the first place. To dramatize exactly what happens when a Strat goes missing, I'll offer various "Slush Pile Lessons"—cautionary tales of submissions that failed in gruesome but instructive ways.

Very simply, the Strats are vitamins that keep a book alive and well, in fiction and non-fiction alike. Reward your readers, delight them, and likely they'll recommend your book to friends. This self-generating word of mouth—"critical mass," one executive editor called it—results in the ongoing sales that can keep your title in print.

With a recently published book, TV and radio appearances, newspaper coverage, and bookstore signings do boost sales. (Autographed copies can't be returned to the publisher, hee, hee!) But promotion and publicity alone can't create the steady re-orders required for long-term success. And as you'll learn in the final chapter, readers are growing increasingly skeptical of publishers' jacket copy and advertising hype. Before investing time or money, they'll investigate what a book is really like, warts and all, by checking the readers' reviews on Amazon.com.

Won't the Strats result in a trite, predictable book?

No! A successful book need not (indeed, shouldn't) follow any pat formula. It must simply satisfy those timeless essentials that even clay-tablet readers hungered for.

Just as you can obtain your Vitamin C from different daily sources, so you can supply any single Strat in various ways. Some are more “nourishing” than others. A few are so very effective that they've devolved into clichés. Yet their sheer familiarity makes them even more effective—as with the three backstage knocks that announce the imminent rise of the curtain in Paris [17], or in “Once upon a time . . .”

To see hackneyed, hidebound prose in action, open any of the standard paperback romances where the personality traits of stock characters are prescribed by editorial fiat! [18]

Richard Bach claimed that his best-selling *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* “just wrote itself.” And as any veteran author will tell you, a bad book is much harder to write than a good one! If you've ever faced a project that wouldn't leap to life, it was probably missing at least two crucial Strats. That “vitamin deficiency” left you struggling with what you thought you *should* write, not what you really wanted to.

Using all 7.625 Strats will help you avoid all those wrongheaded assumptions, false starts, and dead ends that can spell weeks of wasted effort. Employing a few of the many tricks and shortcuts they suggest can make your work lots easier—and definitely more rewarding!

As the old cliché says, you have no second chance to make a first impression. And one definite, dependable way to start things humming is with Strategy #1.

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TAM MOSSMAN

Notes and References

Unless noted otherwise, 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] Accolades like this will alert readers who might otherwise never hear of a book. But by themselves, prizes and awards can’t create best-sellers. How often have you opened some committee-chosen “winner,” only to find it self-consciously artsy and disappointing?

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

[4] Quoted in “Renaissance Rapper Plays it Cool,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 22, 2002, p. P-5.

[5] As Lester told me, “Good sex isn’t compulsory. Stanley’s manuscript described dozens of hookups, but none were sexy—much less suspenseful. Why bother to flirt, if the outcome is pre-ordained?”

In popular narratives, lust disguises what really fuels the plot. Movies like *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *Pretty Woman* (1990) are founded on the age-old male rescue fantasy: Out of goodness and compassion, our hero hauls the heroine out of the gutter, sets her upright, dusts her off—and is surprised to see that she’s ravishing! Henry Higgins never even kisses Eliza because the goal here is redemption, not seduction.

Catholic tradition identifies the woman “taken in adultery” (John 8: 3-4) as Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus exorcises seven devils and who is the first to witness his Resurrection—when his first words to her are “Don’t touch me”! Similarly, in 1950s Westerns, the hero “redeems” the

schoolmarm from the bad guys, then gallops away as fast as his horse can carry him.

[6] In Hollywood, you're only as good as your last movie. This adage holds true in publishing, if your last book didn't earn back its advance against royalties.

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

[8] Authors working on their second manuscript often freeze up under the pressure of contract deadlines—especially if their first book was written “on spec,” with no delivery date, giving them plenty of time to ponder and revise.

[9] Editors refer to readers' motivations as a book's sales points. A successful title needs two or three compelling ones, which only its author can supply.

Many manuscripts with flabby sales points do see print. But if the sales reps doubt that a new title can earn enough sales, they'll consider it an also-ran and quietly skip it when pitching their seasonal catalog to wholesalers.

Few buyers can ever find that blackballed title—because few bookstores ever ordered it in the first place.

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

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

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

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

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

[15] Jane Mayer, “Solid-Gold Dish,” *The New Yorker*, May 26, 1997, p. 34.

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

[17] Thanks to the Third Law of Reader Reaction (see Strategy #3); this venerable tradition has inspired a few irreverent jokes. After the French stage actress Sarah Bernhardt had her leg amputated, she was fitted with a wooden prosthesis. Then came the night of her brave return to the stage.

When the three knocks sounded, one wag in the audience shouted, "Here she comes!"

[18] In the early 1980s, editors at Silhouette Romances drew up hard-and-fast authors' guidelines for the benefit of Barbara Cartland wannabes. For example:

"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 on.

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As a Trade editor for more than 30 years, Tam Mossman contracted several best-sellers and rejected thousands of failed manuscripts. Here, he pinpoints the "essential vitamins" that help some books enjoy huge successes - and why most, lacking these must-haves, soon go out of print. A bonus Strategy (#7.625) explains how editors decide which submissions to sign, while Amazon.com's reader reviews and handheld devices like Kindle let buyers - not publishers - choose what they want to read.

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