Writing Genre Fiction
A Guide to the Craft

H. Thomas Milhorn, M.D., Ph.D.

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PREFACE

The title *Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the craft* is self-explanatory. It is a book about how to write genre fiction. After many years of writing nonfiction—three books, 12 chapters in books, and over a hundred articles—I decided to write a novel—a medical thriller in the mold of Robin Cook, Michael Crichton, and Michael Palmer. The problem was that, although I knew how to write and had received a number of awards for nonfiction works, I didn't know how to write genre fiction. So, before beginning the manuscript I did a thorough search of the literature, which included reading numerous books and hundreds of website articles. What I discovered was that there simply wasn't one good source from which to learn the craft of writing genre fiction.

Although there were numerous books on writing fiction, none were satisfactory for my purpose. Some were put together by editors, with each chapter being written by a different author. As with all edited books, some chapters were better than others and all the books were incomplete. Other books were written by single authors, but these varied greatly in terms of their actual usefulness for the purpose they were intended and none covered the subject adequately for my needs. For example, none came close to adequately covering the two important areas of emotions and body language—subjects I have devoted two entire chapters to. And none made use of the wealth of information about writing genre fiction that is available on the Internet.

The fact that none of the how-to books I reviewed were written by authors with experience writing nonfiction I believe to be of significance because a how-to book on writing fiction is a nonfiction book. To adequately write such a book logically requires nonfiction-writing skills.

My research resulted in the publishing of my first novel, *Caduceus Awry*, which was a finalist in the Eudora Welty Film and Fiction Festival novel competition.

Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the Craft is the book I was looking for when I set out on my quest to learn how to write genre fiction. It is an attempt to share what I learned from my research. It covers the six key elements of genre fiction; the various genres and subgenres; a large number of genre-fiction writing techniques; plot, subplots, and parallel plots; structure; scene and sequel; characterization; dialogue; emotions; and body language. It also covers additional information about copyrighting and plagiarism, where to get ideas, manuscript formatting and revising, and query letters and synopses. In addition, an appendix gives a large number of grammar tips.

Throughout the book, to prevent the frequently repeated use of "he or she," I have used "he" with the understanding that it refers to either sex. Also, to avoid confusion between quotation marks used to indicate that a character is speaking and quotation marks used to indicate a reference is being quoted, I have used quotation marks to indicate character speech and italics to indicate quotes from references.

Tom Milhorn
Meridian, Mississippi

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Chapter 1

Key Elements of Genre Fiction

Fiction is a literary work whose content is produced by imagination and is not necessarily based on fact. Writing fiction is generally conceded to be a combination of *craft* and *talent*. This is sometimes stated as:

Writing Fiction = Craft + Talent

The craft part of the equation is the part that can be taught or learned. The talent part is the part that cannot be taught or learned. You were either born with it or you weren't. It's like a lot of other things in life. For instance, all heart-transplant surgeons are taught the same craft, but some are much better at it than others. Why is that, you might ask? It's because they were born with a greater innate ability to do that kind of work, in part due to better eye-to-hand coordination, which is genetically determined.

The same goes for painting, doing mathematics, or playing basketball. You are either born with innate talent in one of these areas or you aren't. It's why Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein, and Michael Jordan stood out among others in their fields. However, despite being born with innate abilities, these individuals put forth the necessary effort to learn their respective crafts. Without that effort they never would have attained greatness. Until you learn

the craft of writing fiction and try your hand at it, you won't know whether you have talent to be a good writer or not. Read on.[1,2,3]

LITERARY FICTION VERSUS GENRE FICTION

Literary Fiction

Literary fiction is said to be the fiction of ideas. Its primary purpose is to evoke thought. The writer's goal is self-expression. Literary fiction is usually considered to be more concerned with style and solid writing, to stress character development and good descriptions, and to be paced more slowly than genre fiction. It is sometimes referred to as "serious fiction," compared to genre fiction, which is considered "commercial."[2,4-6]

Genre Fiction

Genre fiction is the fiction of emotions. Its primary purpose is to evoke feelings. The writer's goal is to entertain the reader. Any consideration of self-expression, if one exists, is usually secondary. Genre fiction is typically characterized by a great deal of dialogue, characters that readers can easily identify with, and plots that are fast paced. As a rule, publishers expect to make a substantial profit from selling a genre fiction book, which is not always true of a literary fiction work.

The most obvious function of genre is as a publishing category; that is, a marketing tool. Calling two different books "science fiction" lets a buyer know that they are similar in some way. If a person enjoyed one book classified as "science fiction," there's a greater chance he will enjoy another book classified the same way than he will one classified as "romance." As a result, genre allows booksellers to group novels in their bookstores in such a way that readers can more easily find the sort of book they want. Genre fiction is sometimes called *popular*, *category*, or *formula fiction*.[2,4-6]

FICTION LENGTH

Depending on length, works of fiction are classified as short stories, novelettes, novellas, and novels.

Short Story. A *short story* is a brief work of fiction, usually considered to be less than 7,500 words, although some extend the length to 10,000. It is more pointed and more economically detailed as to character, situation, and plot than longer works. Well-known writers of short stories include Anton Chekhov (*The Lottery Ticket, The Shoemaker and the Devil*) and O. Henry (*The Gift of Magi, The Blind Man's Holiday*). Ray Bradbury (*A Sound of Thunder, The Illustrated Man*) is a more recent writer of short stories.

A less well defined work of fiction is *flash fiction*—a genre of short story characterized by an even more limited word length, generally less than 2,000 words and tending to cluster in the 250 to 1,000 word range. Flash fiction has roots leading all the way back to Aesop's Fables. The Internet has brought new life to flash fiction with its demands for short, concise works. *Ezines*, periodic publications distributed by e-mails or posted on websites, are a ready market for flash fiction works. Many print magazines publish ezines as well.[2,7]

Novelette. A *novelette* is a work of fiction between short story and novella in length (7,500 and 17,499 words).[2] *Shop Girl* (2001) by Steve Martin is a recent novelette that was made into a movie in 2005.

Novella. A *novella* is a work of fiction shorter than a novel but longer than a novelette (17,500 and 39,999 words). However, some consider the upper limit of a novella to be anywhere from 49,999 to 59,999 words. Two well-known novellas are *Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by Robert Lewis Stevenson and *The Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad.[2,7]

Novel. A *novel* is a long work of fiction of 40,000 words or more, although some consider the lower limit of a novel to be anywhere from 50,000 to 60,000 words. A novel is usually much more complex than the shorter forms of fiction, having more characters, more situations, a more complicated plot, and even subplots and parallel plots.

Most modern-day novels go well beyond the 40,000-60,000 word mark. Dan Brown's highly successful novel *The Da Vinci*

Code (2003), for example, approaches 200,000 words.[2,7,8]

Although *Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the Craft* is addressed primarily to those who wish to write genre novels or improve their genre novel-writing skills, most of the techniques discussed apply equally well to the shorter forms of fiction.

KEY ELEMENTS

To create a fictional world that seems real to readers, writers use a minimum of six key elements: (1) Plot, story, and structure; (2) setting; (3) characters; (4) point of view; (5) prose; and (6) theme and subject.

Plot, Story, and Structure

Before beginning a novel it is important to understand the concepts of plot, story, and structure.

Plot

Plot is the sequence of events in a story as the author chooses to arrange them. It is a chain of events, each event the result of some prior events and the cause of some subsequent events. Its purpose is to get readers involved by creating tension so they feel a need to know what happens next. The hero and the villain each keep thwarting the other, forcing each to improvise under pressure. This continues until finally one gains the upper hand.

If the plot is organized around a single central problem, it usually ends when that problem is resolved. If the plot deals with a series of problems, it ends when the last problem is dealt with.[2,9-15] Plot is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Story

Story, unlike plot, is the sequence of events in a work of fiction in the order they actually occur. Story and plot may differ because writers use devices like flashbacks, recollections, introspections, and flash forwards so that the plot does not always

proceed in a chronological order. A story persists as long as there are problems to be resolved. [2,9-15]

Structure

Structure is the framework of a novel. It is the way the plot is arranged in both a logical and a dramatic manner to create maximum suspense. In all cases it consists of (1) a title, (2) a beginning, (3) a middle, and (4) an end. In addition, some novels have prologues, fewer have epilogues, and even fewer have both.

Title. You can choose almost anything you want as a *title* as long as it isn't overly long. It certainly can't be too short, since many titles consist only of a single word.[9,15-17]

Beginning. Every *beginning* makes a promise to readers. A romance novel promises to entertain and titillate them, a mystery novel makes a promise to intellectually challenge them, a thriller novel makes a promise to excite and keep them wondering what is going to happen next, and a horror novel promises to scare them. If you as a writer don't live up to our promise in subsequent pages, readers will be bitterly disappointed.

Usually readers are brought into the story at the moment the status quo is threatened. The closer the opening scene is to the precipitating event, the more force and emergency it will have. Ideally, readers should find characters in difficulty in the first chapter, the first page, or even better in the first paragraph. [9,15-17]

Middle. The *middle* increases conflict, further develops the main characters, and introduces other characters. It is composed of *complications* in which things progressively get worse for the hero and a *crisis* in which he must make a decision that can lead to either success or failure in achieving his ultimate goal. With complications, every attempt by the hero to solve a problem usually makes the problem worse or creates a new, more tenacious problem. Even if his situation improves, the forces arrayed against him grow comparably in magnitude. By the end of the middle, all the various forces that will collide at the story's climax should have been put in place.[15,18]

End. The story narrows down as the *end* approaches so the ending can take place clearly and decisively. Any subplots and side issues should have been disposed of. If the novel has parallel plots, they should have already converged into a single plot line.

All the subordinate characters should be "offstage," their work done, to leave the main characters alone in the "spotlight" to do the final battle.

The end consists of a climax and a resolution. The *climax*, also known as the *showdown*, is the decisive event that resolves the conflict. Although a genre novel has a number of high points of tension and action, the climax is the highest point. It is the logical coming together of the facts and events that took place earlier in the novel. It can be thought of as the ultimate surprise, revealing the answer to the central mystery. It is the moment that relieves all the tension that has built up through the beginning and middle of the story.

Once the climax is finished, the falling action leads quickly toward the story's *resolution,* which refers to the final outcome of a plot. It is the final explanation of events. Its function is to wrap up the story. Resolution is also known as the *denouement*, which literally means "unknotting."[14,17,19]

Structure is discussed further in Chapter 9.

Setting

The *setting* of a novel is the background on which the writer builds the plot and characters. It involves the entire environment: (1) time, (2) place, (3) experience, and (4) mood. Setting can be revealed through narration and dialogue and illustrated by the characters' actions, thoughts, and speech patterns.[2,20-22]

Time

Time is important to every story. Is it day or night? Is it just after the Civil War, during the great depression, or 50 years in the future? Does the story take place in New York City in 2006 or in New York City in 1880?

The year in which the story takes place is not the only temporal aspect of setting to consider. The time of year might change the physical setting—winter (snow, ice, leafless trees, and unbearable cold), fall (warm days, cool nights, and an array of color in the trees), spring (sun-shiny days, flowers in full bloom, and birds chirping). In general, the winter is a more gloomy time

than other seasons of the year, but not always. Children laughing and frolicking in the snow is certainly a happy scene.[2,20-22]

Place

Place includes the bigger picture (city, county, state, country) and the smaller picture (local businesses, places of residence and work, streets and avenues, and other local details). The place in which the story takes place may be real or fictitious.[2,20-22]

Experience

Setting is "seen" through a character's *experience*. Different characters may perceive the same surroundings in very different ways based on their familiarity with the setting. A man from a small town in the Mississippi Delta who is visiting Brooklyn for the first time might describe it differently than a man who has lived there all his life.[2,20-22]

Mood

The *mood* or *atmosphere* of a story is the impression it creates and the emotions it arouses in readers. Writers create appropriate moods through their choices of specific details, images, and chosen words and phrases. The character's five senses and the weather can be very helpful in establishing mood.

Filtering a scene through a character's feelings can profoundly influence what the reader experiences. For instance, the same setting may portray more than one mood depending on how the writer approaches it. A woman walking across a meadow may experience different feelings (happiness, sadness, anger, or fear) depending on the descriptive words the writer chooses to use.[2,20-22] Setting is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Characters

Characterization is the creation of imaginary people (*characters*) who appear to be real and believable to readers. In most stories, characters and their interactions drive the plot and

create the suspense and tension. Readers rely on the characters to draw them into the story.

Characters are usually human, but can be animals, aliens, robots, or anything you want them to be. Characters have names, physical appearances, and personalities. They often wear certain kinds of clothes, speak using slang or jargon, and sometimes have accents. They communicate with each other verbally and nonverbally.

Characters are classified as either major or minor, depending on the magnitudes of their roles in the story. Some characters may be either major or minor, also depending on their roles in the story.[2,10,23-25]

Major Characters

Also known as round characters, *major characters* are three dimensional figures. Their goals, ambitions, and values change as a result of what happens to them. Therefore, they are referred to in literature as *dynamic* characters. A dynamic character progresses to a higher level of understanding in the course of the story. Like real people, they have particular fears, aspirations, strengths and weaknesses, secrets, and sensitivities. They are not all good or all bad. The two major characters in fiction are the protagonist and the antagonist.

The *protagonist* (hero) is the character who dominates the story. He is a complex character who usually has three attributes: (1) A need or a want (prevent the murder, solve the crime, win the heart a loved one, escape from prison, get revenge for his wife's murder), (2) a strong point (courage, wisdom, persistence, kindness) that confers on him the potential for triumph, and (3) a flaw (alcoholism, prejudice, greed, fear of heights or crowds) that, unless overcome, may lead to his downfall.

The *main character* is the person the audience views the story through. Most of the time the main character is the protagonist; at other times the main character is a narrator, and at other times a secondary character. Each gives valuable insights into the protagonist from an outside prospective.

The *antagonist* (villain) is any character who opposes the efforts of the protagonist. He's the bad guy. There wouldn't be much conflict for your protagonist to overcome without the

antagonist to throw up roadblocks. Many stories have only a single antagonist, or one main one, while longer works, especially novels, may have more than one.

Like the protagonist, the antagonist is a three-dimensional character, and he must be a worthy opponent. He should be an intelligent, logical character who does what he does because his reasons make sense to him. No one sees himself as mean, evil, or insane; the antagonist doesn't either. To him, his actions and his logic are perfectly sound.[1,13,23-27]

Minor Characters

Also known as flat characters, *minor characters* are almost always one or two-dimensional characters; that is, they only have one or two striking qualities. Unlike major characters, they usually are all good or all bad and intentionally lack depth. Minor characters are sometimes referred to as *static* characters because they don't change in the course of the story. They can be bit players, stock characters, or sacrificial characters.

Bit players can be passing suspects in mysteries, incidental friends, coworkers, neighbors, waitresses, clerks, maintenance people, doormen, and so forth. The more important ones can be given some quirk or bit of color that lifts them somewhat above the masses (a maintenance man who spits snuff into a paper cup, a secretary who always wears black lipstick, a doorman who is always intoxicated).

A *stock character* is a stereotyped character, such as a mad scientist, an absent-minded professor, a spiteful mother-in-law, or a dumb blonde. In general, these characters should be avoided, unless you have a really good reason for using them.

Sacrificial characters (chauffeurs, double agents, crooked policemen, mistresses, and so forth) are killed in the course of the story for various reasons, including to keep them from revealing critical information to the protagonist. Also, the protagonist may kill one or more skilled opponents simply to demonstrate his prowess to the reader.[1,13,23-27]

Major or Minor Characters

Some characters can be either major or minor depending on

their roles in the story. These include foil characters, eccentrics, psychos, memorable characters, and phobics.

A foil is a piece of shiny metal put under gemstones to increase their brightness. *Foil characters* are closely associated with the character for whom they serve as a foil, usually a friend or lover whom he can confide in and thus disclose his innermost thoughts. They serve to bring out the brilliance of the character to whom they serve as a foil. Note that the foil can be a supporter of any of the characters, not just the protagonist. Some foil characters are included for comedy relief; others are included to reinforce the goal or the beliefs of the character they support. Still others are introduced to provide contrast. Foil characters also are known as *confidants, sidekicks,* or *faithful followers.*

Eccentrics follow their own rules of behavior. They know their code is right and everyone else's is wrong. An eccentric might be miserly despite being a multimillionaire, arrange bills by serial number in his wallet, avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk, believe the world is flat, or wear earmuffs in August.

The *psycho* character, on the surface, often appears normal, but the reader knows that he is not. In fact, the psycho may be normal in all aspects of his life but one, and that one is strange and bizarre, often hidden from the public. For instance, the psycho might appear to be a mild mannered accountant during the day, but wander through neighborhoods at night killing cats. Or worse, he brutally murders women who look like the old girlfriend who rejected him.

The *memorable character* may wear wildly colored clothes, have an extraordinary height or weight, be a priest who grows pot in the church's rectory, or be an idiot savant. To create a memorable character, writers select some unique aspect of body, mind, or personality. They exaggerate it and make it striking and colorful.

A *phobic character* is one with a persistent, abnormal, and irrational fear of a specific thing or situation that compels him to avoid the object of his phobia despite knowing that it is not dangerous. A character may be afraid of cats, bats, microbes, heights, closed spaces, or almost anything. [1,13,23-27]

Characterization is discussed further in Chapter 11.

Point of View

The *point of view* of a novel is the perspective from which the reader is allowed to view the action and the characters. As a writer, there are a number of points of view to choose from, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. Various authors have categorized them in different ways, but the system used in this book is the most common one. The points of view most often used in genre fiction are first person and third person.

First-person Point of View

With *first-person point of view,* a single character narrates the story from his point of view (*I* pulled the trigger). This point of view is used most often by writers of mystery novels and short stories.[2,28-31]

Third-person Point of View

Third-person point of view is the one most commonly used by writers of genre fiction (*He* pulled the trigger). One problem with this point of view is that the character cannot describe himself physically, unless he describes his image in a mirror, but this has been used so much that it's become a cliché and should be avoided.

A variant of third-person point of view used by most modern-day writers of genre fiction is to use the point of view of a single character, but let that character be different from scene to scene or chapter to chapter. For instance, in one scene the point of view might be that of the protagonist; in the next scene the point of view might be that of the antagonist; in a third scene it might be that of a foil character. A change in point of view in a published novel is usually indicated by skipped lines between scenes or by chapter breaks. In this way confusion is minimized.[2,28-31]

Second-person Point of View

Second-person point of view is rarely used because it is extremely difficult to pull off (*You* pulled the trigger). The reader