How to Create a Page-Turning Novel

3-Hour Writing Lab

My favorite writer's quote is by NY Times bestselling author Elmore Leonard, who said:

"*In your writing, try to leave out the parts readers skip*."

- Have you ever done that? Skip over large sections of a novel when it gets bla-bla-bla, and start reading where the real story picks up again?

- If it happens too much with a book, I put it down for good (and I certainly won't buy another book by that author).

- My goal when I write, and especially when I edit my work, is to get rid of all those "skipping" parts before I turn my manuscript in.

The Uphill Climb for all who want to be published

- Typically, there's no fast track to getting published with a traditional publishing house.

- Having said that, I believe one of the **greatest obstacles to getting published is NOT the writing part**. It's what happens *after*, as we try to get our book ready for the market.

- The Self-Editing part:

  - Herein lies the problem…a serious one. We don't possess the ability to see ourselves, or our work accurately (the flawed lens).

    - "There is a way that **seems right** to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Prov 14:12, NIV)

    - "All a man's ways **seem right** to him, but the LORD weighs the heart." (Prov 21:2)

    - Some have used the word "Blindspot" to describe this human condition. A Blindspot is something that is true about us that we either cannot see at all or don't see very clearly.

  - If we will do 2 Things regularly, we can overcome this self-deception in our writing.

- - - Accept that this is true—that it's a fact—and work harder at trying to discover what your blindspots are.

      - Recognize that others see our blindspots, often very effectively, and seek out their input in a humble way.

  - The Reality of "Blindspots" are why we need Editors involved in our writing.

    - WORD OF CAUTION to those who are considering Self-publishing as a viable alternative traditional publishing…DON'T skip the step of hiring a qualified, reputable editor before "going public."

    - You need help, not for what you see, but for all the things you don't see. Those are the things that will sink your book.

  - If your aim is the TRADITIONAL Publishing model, realized this…you must become an editor before you will get an editor (actually, before you even get a good agent).

  - They don't have the time to work with a "diamond in the rough." It's not enough that you're a "pretty good writer with even greater potential."

- The plight of agents and editors today is this: So many manuscripts, so little time.

  - They get up to 150 submissions A MONTH and don't get paid a dime for reading them. If they spent just 30 minutes reviewing each one, it would take them 25 hours a week.

  - So they don't. They skim through these submissions, looking for the 5-6 that really stand out, and probably will only offer to represent 1-2 of them. The rest get rejection letters.

More on "the part readers tend to skip."

- Agents and Editors are readers, too.

  - What do you suppose they do if your first chapter has "skipping parts?"

  - What if the first chapter doesn't, but they start showing up as they read on?

- On the flipside (the positive side)…what do you think they do when a book has no skipping parts?

- They keep reading…and reading…then ask for more (that's what you want).

- They are looking for a book that will cause them to have the same reaction they know readers everywhere want to have…*a book they can't put down*!

- This is why it's *critical* for us to learn how to Self-Edit, especially how to recognize the Parts Readers Skip.

- Here's a little Research Tip (especially for you who write historical) – Most of your research is for you, not them.

  - For readers, 90% of it is bla-bla-bla.

  - In fiction, research is a spice, not a main ingredient.

Recognizing Where and When to Snip (and a little about Why)

- "Descriptions? We don't need no stinking descriptions."

  - Well, we need some, just not too much. As I've already said, today's reader watches way more than they read (an impatient bunch). So don't describe things everyone already sees in their head.

  - Regarding the Setting…think movie scenes. A setup paragraph (or two) at the most, then dive in.

  - Release more details in tiny doses as the scene moves forward, or in dialogue from things the characters say (but be careful it doesn't sound artificial).

  - Regarding the Characters themselves:

    - Old way – every time you introduce a new character, take a paragraph or two to tell us what they look like.

    - New way – don't do that, anymore (a definite skipping part).

    - A sentence or two, here and there at most, as part of a character's thoughts, or work it in small doses during dialog.

- Showing vs Telling

  - Again, think movie scenes. In movies, you don't have some narrator off to the side interrupting the action with clever observations.

  - RUE – Resist the Urge to Explain (imagine intelligent people are buying your books, who don't need everything explained to them).

- "You gotta get good at Dialog," he said.

  - Make your characters sound like real people saying real things people might really say. Not like proper British nobility or bad actors in B-movies.

  - I've stopped reading books early on, just because of unrealistic dialog (and so will agents and editors).

  - Read your dialog out loud (or let someone else read it back to you out loud).

  - He said/she said….works for me.

    - Don't use "creative" speaker attributions; this is not the place for creative writing. ("Don't go," he fumed. "I love you," she gushed)

    - 95% of the time "said" is all you need. If only 2 characters in the scene, can usually do away with these, too.

    - Use "beats" as often as possible. Ex: Jim opened the door. "Anyone in here?"

Some great books to recommend on this Topic:

- Self-Editing for Fiction Writers – Renni Browne and Dave King

- Write Tight – William Brohaugh

- Revision and Self-Editing – James Scott Bell

Instructions for Test Readers or Critique Partners

- Our worst enemy once we think our manuscript is done is not our critics; it's us, and our craving for compliments.

- What I did:

  - Picked a handful of trusted people who chain-read fiction.

  - Asked them to use both a pen and a yellow marker (or the electronic equivalent).

  - Pleaded with them to write or mark the following:

    - Any place you either skipped or were tempted to skip.

    - Anything that slowed the story down or bored you.

    - Any place you had to read more than once to understand.

    - Any dialog that sounded phony or artificial (like bad actors talking).

- ▪ Any ways the ending left you feeling frustrated.
  - o They will see things as they read, and they will have constructive/negative things to say. It's up to you to convince them you *really* want and need to hear it.

In our Remaining Time (Hours 2-3), Plan to Share 3 More Things to Make the Pages Turn (Actually drawn from a Survey – "3 Things that Matter Most to Fiction Readers")

Basically, there are 7 Main Parts of Any Fiction Novel

- o The Beginning - A Beginning that Grabs the Reader
- o The Characters - Characters the Reader will Care About
- o Dialogue – Relevant and Realistic
- o The Setting – Location, Time Period
- o The Story Itself – Main plot, sub-plots
- o The Pace – Creating a slow fuse or a page-turner
- o The Ending – Must be Satisfying

- Who Can Guess what the Top 3 are?

  - o The Importance of a Great Beginning

  - o Creating Characters People Really Care About

  - o Finishing with a Satisfying Ending

- We'll Start with the #1 Thing That Matters – Creating Characters People Really Care About (spend out Last hour on Beginnings and Endings).

  - o Most #1 Votes (in Everyone's Top 3).

- You know that old saying that there are 3 things that matter most in real estate: Location, Location and Location.

  - o Apparently in fiction writing, it's: Characters, Characters and Characters.

- Many of the multi-published authors I've talked to were surprised by this (most thought Plot or Story would have been #1).

  o Most of the teaching/craft books I've read don't begin with the Importance of the Characters.

  o Some don't even talk about Characters until the middle.

- I would agree with readers, here's one reason why…

  o I've read novels with great beginnings and ones that even seemed to have a great story but found myself setting it aside halfway through because I just didn't care about the characters.

Since Readers care about the characters, writers must care about them, too.

- Most of us read fiction novels for recreation. It's supposed to be enjoyable.

  o How long does it take you to read an average sized book?

  o Do any of us want to spend that much time hanging with people we don't enjoy being with? People who are irritating or annoying?

  o If the main characters in a book annoy us, we're not going to be want to read about them hour after hour.

- I'm not saying our characters have to be flawless, wonderful people (they'd be annoying in a different way).

  o Characters need to have flaws to make them interesting and realistic.

  o In fact, watching our characters change and grow throughout the story is an important aspect of writing a novel. People want to see that.

  o But if our characters are too flawed, people will get turned off and set the book aside.

    ▪ (So will Agents and Editors).

  o EXAMPLE of Finding the Balance: Rick Denton in *Remembering Christmas*

- This was my challenge in writing my 4th novel. It was, as the title suggests, a Christmas story. Something of a modern-day Scrooge tale.

- Most of you know, there's hardly a less likable character than Ebenezer Scrooge (at least right in the beginning). So Dickens wisely introduces poor Bob Cratchit very early on in the story.

- In my book, Rick Denton starts off as a selfish, self-centered, ambitious young executive who has no plans to come home for the holidays.

- To offset the Rick's "unlikability" factor, I gave him a sarcastic sense of humor and introduced 2 very sympathetic characters right off the bat (a homeless man and his mother, whose husband has just been rushed to the ER).

- And of course, as the story unfolds, the reader gets hints that Rick is going to experience a dramatic change before the story ends.

- *"Great fiction involves creating characters people really care about, then doing terrible things to them."*

  o I know this sounds awful but, if you think about it, it's really true.

  o Think of all of the best stories you've ever read, or the best movies you've ever seen. You'll find they have these two elements in common.

    - You care deeply about the characters (for some reason).

    - They are going through terrible things (adversity and conflict).

- My first book, *The Unfinished Gift*.

  o Why would readers care about Patrick?

    - Well, for starters, he is a child.

    - If we're just normal people, we instantly care about children.

- - And…right off the bat, we can tell he's experiencing some kind of trouble.

  - A little child in trouble, of course, we're going to care about him.

- One of the best and most popular ways to get people to care about your characters is to create sympathy for them in the reader's mind.

  - There's lots of different ways to do this.

  - One of those ways is to "do terrible things to them."

- What kind of "terrible things" is Patrick experiencing? Here's what we learn in Chapter 1:

  - His mother has just died in a car accident.

  - He's been driven to stay with the grandfather he's never met, and we get a hint this grandfather is mean.

  - His father is overseas fighting in the war and, for now, can't be with Patrick.

  - Patrick is all alone.

  - All of these things create sympathy for the character.

- Sympathy increases the character's likability factor and helps the reader to care more about them.

- In *Remembering Christmas*, I began to create sympathy for Rick by doing this early on in the story:

  - We learned that his real father abandoned him when he was eight years old.

  - Yes, Rick is selfish but when his mother calls, pleading for his help Rick cancels his expensive skiing trip to drive 3 states away to help her, even though he can't stand his stepfather.

- So that's our goal…to learn how to create flawed characters, who aren't too flawed, and create sympathy for them in the reader's mind.

- THEN—and this is important—must have the courage to put them through terrible situations that will cause the reader to keep reading to see how they overcome these obstacles.

  o Did you notice I used the phrase "have the courage" to put them through terrible situations?

  o I think that's one of the problems Christian writers often have…we're simply too nice.

  o We can't bring ourselves to put our characters in the kind of intense adversity and conflict that makes for a great story.

NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT WRITING GREAT BEGINNINGS

- We've all heard of the expression, "You only have one chance to make a good first impression."

  o That saying holds doubly true in the world of publishing.

  o Which is another reason why I recommend people not send in their manuscript to an agent until it's completely finished and very polished.

- Bestselling crime fiction author Mickey Spillane once said, "*Your first chapter sells your book. Your last chapter sells your next book*."

- Think about what readers go through before picking out a book by an author they've never heard of.

  o Certainly, the cover matters, right?

  o If they like that, they read the back cover blurb, maybe a few of the endorsements (if online, some of the reviews).

  o Maybe Click on the "Look Inside" button and read the first few pages, maybe the first chapter.

  o What happens if those first few pages don't grab them and suck them in?

- That's what happens if you're already published. For those hoping for a traditional publishing house, the readers we need to care most about at this stage are agents and editors who look at our submission.

  o Agents and editors will go right to those first few pages.

  o If they're not written incredibly well, nothing else matters.

- My editor at Revell, Andrea Doering, said this is exactly what she does when evaluating a manuscript.

  o She sets everything else aside and reads those first few pages. She can tell right there if this project warrants any more of her time and attention.

- This is the same thing Literary Agents do:

  o The better literary agents see an average of 150 manuscripts a month.

  o They don't get paid a dime to read these. They only get paid when they sell a client's books to a publisher.

- Top Literary agent Noah Luke, wrote a bestselling book for writers called, "The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide To Staying Out of the Rejection Pile."

  o Here's a Quote from a Review of the book:

    Surprise: Agents and editors don't read manuscripts for fun; they are looking for reasons to reject them. Lukeman has arranged his book 'in the order of what I look for when trying to dismiss a manuscript…"

  o Which is why Lukeman titled his book, "The First Five Pages…" These are the pages that matter most!

- **Beware** of **Overly Wordy Descriptions** (of People, Places or Things).

- Really, in general, we need to adopt a "less is more" outlook when we're *describing anything* in our book (settings, locations and people, etc.).

  o How many of you have read a book that is way too descriptive for you?

    ▪ What do you do when you come across this kind of thing?

- What do you think an agent or editor would do?

  o ILLUSTRATION - How many words are needed to describe this room and what's going on in here?

  - An old-school approach might take several paragraphs. It would catch everything but bore the reader to tears.

  - It's probably sufficient to say something like: *He peeked into the room. Looked like some kind of seminar was underway*.

- Give us a Great Hook in the first few lines (by the end of the first paragraph at the very least), and ALWAYS end the chapter with a hook (good idea to end ALL your chapters with a strong hook).

- A great quote by bestselling author James Scott Bell:

  "The opening pages of your book, starting with line one, are absolutely key. They are usually the first things an editor or agent reads (because if the writing isn't strong, they don't have to read the rest of your proposal). And readers browsing in a bookstore usually give attention to the first page or two to see if they want to buy. They are, in other words, giving you a chance to grab them. Do it. Don't waste a single paragraph getting warmed up."

Close with A Few Tips About "Creating Satisfying Endings."

- Endings was definitely in my Top 3 list of Things That Matter Most.

  o Here's my Equation: A Good Story + A Bad Ending = A Bad Story

  o It spoils the whole thing for me when a writer hasn't thought through how to create a satisfying ending.

  o I never, recommend a book or a movie that has a lousy ending.

- Life's too hard and too short to waste it on a movie or a book that leaves me depressed, confused or frustrated.

- o As writers, your goal (and mine) after someone closes the last page of our book should **NOT** be:

    - Them shaking their head in frustration.

    - Or saying, "What a lousy ending!"

- o Our goal SHOULD BE things like:

    - A contented sigh, followed by a smile.

    - Even better, reaching for the tissue box.

- o We want them to want to tell a friend, "*You have to get this book*!"

- o Or…They go right out and buy your other books!

- Another GREAT quote by Bestselling crime fiction author Mickey Spillane?

    "Nobody reads a novel to get to the middle. They read it to get to the end. If the ending's a let down, they won't buy anymore. Your first chapter sells your book. Your last chapter sells your next book."

    —Mickey Spillane

3 Common Ending Mistakes

- The Cliffhanger Ending –

    - o Most readers, agents and editors don't want to see the old-fashioned "cliffhanger" ending.

        - You know how you get to that place we feel the climax is building. You're wondering how this story can possibly wrap up properly with so few pages left.

        - Then you realize…it can't! The author leaves you hanging with a "… *To be continued*" paragraph.

    - o That might work in a comic book or even a TV show, but that's only because the next installment is already on the horizon.

- Most authors don't come out with a new book for 6 to 8 months (sometimes a year).

- That's a ridiculously long time to make someone wait to find out what happens to any of the main characters or plot points in a story.

- The Overly Predictable Ending –

  o Most people love surprises and twist endings in books and movies.

  o In some genres, a surprise or twist ending is almost expected. In others, not so much.

  o Take romance novels, for example.

    - We know the guy's gonna get the girl, or vice versa.

    - There's no surprise coming.

  o Take historical novels, based on actual history.

    - The Nazis won World War II, we already know how the big story ends.

    - Civil War (North wins)…The Titanic (boat sinks)

  o So how can we avoid an overly predictable ending that bores the reader?

- In a romance novel, we can keep putting off that moment when the guy gets the girl, or make it seem as though it's not going to happen this time.

  o Keep the reader guessing till the end about how?

  o In a historical novel, typically, we create fictional characters.

    - Although we can't change history, there's nothing saying how our character is going to handle the situation.

    - We can keep the reader guessing (and worrying about it) until the end.

- The Rushed or Forced Ending –

    o This is an ending where the reader feels the author didn't take enough time to wrap things up.

        ▪ The Big Conflicts may be resolved, but many of the smaller or medium-sized things are left unanswered.

    o Or you force a bunch of things to happen artificially at the end that would never happen that way in real life.

    o Rush/Forced Endings can happen for a lot of reasons. Whatever the case, Don't do it! Don't rush the ending.

        ▪ You've taken the reader on this long journey spanning several hundred pages, don't abandon them there at the end.

    o We need to spend as much time unwinding the ending as we do building the suspense in the beginning.

The Dynamics of a Great Ending

- QUESTION: Can you name some movies you feel had great endings?

    o I'll go first: two of my all-time favorites are: *It's a Wonderful Life* and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

    o So, what are some of your favorite movie endings and What did you like about them?

    o Things like:

        ▪ Made you feel good? Inspired you?

        ▪ Gave you a sense of hope? Entertained you?

        ▪ Provided some escape from the harsh realities of life?

- Study examples of great endings

- When you watch a movie or read a book with a great ending, STOP and take some time to figure out why…what made the ending so good?
- Will help give us a vision and enable to set the goals we should be shooting for in our book.

- Good endings don't just happen by themselves; they're not something we just drift into. A great ending must be crafted by the author.

  - I recommend you think through your ending before you start writing your book. Don't just hope one will come to you down the road.

  - Make it part of the creative process as you craft or shape the story.

- Your ending should be the climax or resolution of your story.

  - It's when the guy gets the girl, the runner wins the race, the crime gets solved, the bad guy gets it, the world gets saved.

  - Which means…at the ending, we are resolving the major conflicts we have introduced as the plot of our story unfolded.

- Decide whether you're writing a Comedy or a Tragedy

  - How many of you have ever seen the Happy/Sad Masks of Comedy and Tragedy?

  - In Classical Theater, the question was typically asked, "Is this story a comedy or a tragedy? They were really asking about the Ending.

  - Will your main character achieve his/her goal? Solve their main problem? If a romance, get the girl?

    - If the answer was "Yes," then it was a Comedy (even if it wasn't funny).

    - If the answer was "No," then it was a Tragedy."

- In the classical sense then, I'm clearly an advocate for the Comedy. In my books, I always shoot for a Happy Ending (or at the very least, a Satisfying One)

- o Notice I said a Happy Ending (not a Sappy Ending).

- o By a Happy Ending, I'm not talking about everything being all unicorns and rainbows.

  - ▪ "And they lived Happily Ever After."

- o Having said that, I think a lot of what's out there today is WAY too Dark, and the Endings often leave us stuck there in the darkness.

  - ▪ In part, I can understand why. Life is hard, and for many people, it's been hard for a long time.

- o Some writers don't realize how cynical they've become. It's almost as if a happy or hopeful ending comes off as fake or forced, because we all know "life just turn out that way."

  - ▪ They look at these dark endings as just being "realistic" and "relevant."

- o I do think it's important that our stories depict honestly and accurately the difficulties and harsh realities of life—the dark days.

  - ▪ But I also think good fiction can lead people from there to a place of hope.

  - ▪ So in my books, I do show life as difficult and as hard as it really.

- o I just choose not to have my stories END AT THAT PLACE.

- o I keep writing until HOPE is born.

- Like the Bible says, "Weeping may endure through the night, but Joy comes in the morning."

  - o I just keep writing and End my stories "in the Morning."