

The Secrets

A Service Sheet for Writers

Volume One, Issue Zero

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Why *The Secrets*?

The Secrets is a service sheet inspired by two things I spend a lot of time at conventions and elsewhere talking writing with a lot of writers. We all have tricks of the trade that could help a lot of folks refine their writing and improve it enough to move them into the realm of being publishable or being able to sustain a career.

The second inspiration was an earlier service sheet for magicians called **The Jinx**. . It was published in the 1930s and 40s by a magician named Ted Annemann. In each issue **The Jinx** provided the readers with news, opinion and, most importantly, tricks they could use to go out and earn a living. The wisdom dispensed in that magazine is useful today, and many of the tricks described therein are still classics in the realm of magic.

The Secrets will be a service sheet that brings you all the things **The Jinx** brought its readers: tricks of the trade, news, ideas, challenges for exercises, lists of recommended books, samples and criticism of books (not being critical per se, but pointing out things to be learned) and anything else that can help writers work. For the most part attention will be paid to items that will not become dated fast, but will serve for a long time to come. It will also be material that will build a foundation for a long career that will be as much fun as it will be fulfilling and rewarding, mentally and, with any luck, financially.

What follows in this sample issue are examples of the kind of content you'll see in **The Secrets**. What you'll find here won't make you a writer if you don't write, but will make you much better if you do



Writer's Block

There are a lot of folks who are scared spitless by the words *writer's block*. It conjures up images of the worst kind: of someone straining to get something moving through a bout of intellectual constipation. Not a pretty picture, and decidedly less fun when you're the one straining away.

The simple fact of the matter is that writer's block really need not happen at all. Back in 1980 when I was working at COLECO Industries, I was writing short stories at night and bringing them into the office to share with my coworkers. At one point I was blocking on a story, and I complained about it. Tom Helmer, our leader, told me that there was no such thing as writer's block, and that there was a simple path around it.

Instead of working on the story, he suggested, I should just start thinking about what the characters do in their spare time. He asked me to think about what kind of games they played for fun, and said I should even think about designing such a game. I took his advice, calmed down, and let my creativity get flowing on something else. All juiced up because of that, I turned back to the tale I'd been working on. Lo and behold, there was no block, and things went forward without a hitch.

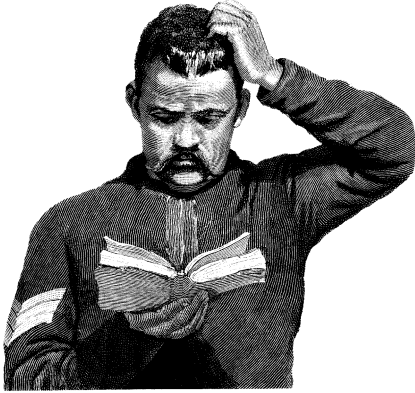
Tom's advice stood me in good stead down for the years. I started to think about what his exercise really had me doing. Once I'd analyzed it, it became obvious: I was getting to know my characters better. Because I knew more about them, they became more fully formed in my head. It became easier to

imagine what they would do in any given situation. Their reactions became natural and normal, which made writing them easier and far more smooth.

The most common complaint I hear from writers is this: I get 20 pages into a story and it just stops. They don't necessarily identify their problem as writer's block, but that's what they're thinking. My recommendation, expanding Tom's idea, is simple. I suggest they grab the last 3 issues of something like **People** magazine and cull out every insipid question asked in every celebrity interview and then pretend they are a reporter interviewing the characters in their novel. They can interview them for background, or on the events of the book so far, but the key is to get answers to all the questions.

It might seem silly to want to know what a character's favorite color is, for example, and you certainly would never state it as such in the text, but when ever you wonder what color shirt he's wearing, or the color of the car she wants to buy, you have that information. Those choices will be reflected in the book, letting the reader know without being told what the favorite color is. This rounds out the characters and world.

So, there it is, the solution to writer's block: get to know your characters better. As they become more fully formed in your head, making little decisions about them will become simple, and that will ease the larger ones. Your characters will live and breathe, and that's when writing is absolutely at its best.



I'm not sure...

One of the things that puzzles me on a regular basis is the number of folks who spend a lot of money on "how to write" books. (Okay, yes, this is a curious comment by someone who is putting out a "how to write" service sheet.) What I find curious is not that these books sell, but that people buy them without having any idea who the writers are. It has always struck me as being rather odd that folks would seek advice about writing from folks who are, for all intents and purposes, complete strangers.

Moreover, "how to write" books should not be the first books that writers amass when preparing for a career. This is not to say that there are not many fine books on the subject of writing. There are, and two will be recommended below. The simple fact is, however, that other books come first.

A Good Dictionary is vital. I like one that is up to date, has etymological information so you know when a word came into use, and one that has plenty of words in it. Toward this end I favor books like Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and I snag a new one every 5-8 years. I prefer the book to using a CD-rom because browsing turns up great words you can find a use for later.

For a **thesaurus** I use **Roedale's The Synonym Finder**. I've used it my

entire career and have found nothing better. I do check the definitions of the synonyms just to make sure I'm getting exactly what I want. Again, browsing the book is great, so I prefer it to a CD.

As noted before, I think it is foolish to take writing advice from writers you don't know. I think it is vital to have read an author to see if he practices what he preaches, and to learn if what he says will work in *your* work actually works in *his* work for you. If not, figure out why not, or discard his advice.

I have for years highly touted Orson Scott Card's **Characters and Viewpoint**. It's a great book for examining how you want to tell a story and how you can set up the characters to tell it. Back before I ever had a novel published I participated in a workshop on character creation he ran at a convention. It was great and very helpful, as is that book. One look at a masterpiece like **Ender's Game** shows you that Card really knows his stuff.

Another book I'd recommend is Stephen King's **On Writing**. (His **Danse Macabre** is also great.) While critics may have blasted King over the years, the simple fact of the matter is that there is no better practitioner of what I would call "blitzkrieg characterization" on the planet. In a sentence he can flesh out a character, and with a paragraph he can have you projecting the whole of that character's life. The novels **It** and **The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon** are brilliant both in their characterization and the settings they evoke.

Need a book for names? Name the baby books are great, but also old Olympics guides are wonderful. Team sports provide mix and match opportunities for characters of a national group, for both men and women.



The Writer's Life

Rich as Croesus, creative and productive, all without breaking a sweat.

There is no writer who has not had someone say to him, "Someday, I'm going to sit down and write a book." It's said with respect, but also with a total lack of understanding of what writing takes. Herewith are the steps to becoming a writer.

Step One: Write. If you do not sit your butt down and write, you will never be a writer. Start slow, aim for a coherent paragraph or two, but write.

Step Two: Finish what you start before revising. If you do 24 drafts of one chapter, versus the first draft of 24 chapters, you'll learn roughly the same amount about writing, but in the latter case you'll have most of a novel in hand at the end of it.

Step Three: Submit your work for publication. There are two hard parts here:

Rejection: Yes, sometimes folks will say "No." I've got a bunch of New York Times bestselling novels to my name and I still get rejection slips. I collect them and save them. If hurt feelings will stop you from writing, your career will be short or painful, perhaps both.

Markets: Finding a place for a book is tough. Here's how to narrow your search. Have those who read the book complete this sentence, "In the tradition of [author1] and [author2]." Begin your search with the publishers who bring their books out.

Rinse, Lather, Repeat: Writing is one of those things you only get better at if you practice it. You also need to read lots, to see how others do it. Adopt things they do, avoid their mistakes, and you're on your way

Postscript to Issue Zero



What you've seen in the preceding pages is an example of the basic content you'll find in **The Secrets** every two weeks. The page count will vary, from a minimum of four pages to whatever we need to get the content in. At least initially I will be generating most of the content. I *am* well aware that I am not the sole fount of knowledge when it comes to writing. As I run into other ideas, or other authors have an idea they want to offer in these pages, I'll make space available to them.

I will point out books I think are good for writers. I will also embed links to websites of value, especially those of authors who contribute here. Obviously, if they've not got something valuable to say, they won't appear here, so their link will be useful to you.

I intend for each issue to have at least one solid piece of advice, akin to the method for working around writer's block in this issue. There have been whole books written about that subject, so getting the advice here for free, or for \$2 if you were buying this outside a subscription, is pretty economical.

There will subjects that are tackled in a series of articles over a span of issues. There just will be times when I want you to work with a concept for a while before

piling more information on. If you're actually not going to be using this stuff, it's a waste of your time and money.

I will be accepting questions to be answered, or suggestions of subjects to be touched upon. You can just send those to thesecrets@stormwolf.com and I'll pick and choose from them. The ones I'll pick will be substantive and apply to a bunch of people. Things like "Will you read my story?" or "Will you collaborate with me?" aren't going to make the cut.

I also intend to offer challenges for writers and, if possible, excerpt and comment on some of the results. I'm still working up a mechanism by which this can be done easily, and the technology will make that fun.

I will not be selling my subscription list to anyone, nor will I send out solicitations when I have a new book out or anything like that. **The Secrets** is meant to be useful: a vehicle for many writers, not *a* writer.

Writing *is*, without a doubt, the best job imaginable. For \$25 a year you'll get further faster than otherwise. If writing is what you want to do, **The Secrets** will show you how to attain that dream and have fun doing it.