

Chapter 1

Fiction Writing Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Setting your sights on publication
- ▶ Getting your head ready to write
- ▶ Writing great fiction and editing your story

So you want to write a novel? Great! But is that all you want to do? After all, anybody can type a bunch of words and call it a novel. The trick is writing one that's good enough to get published. This book is for fiction writers who want to write an excellent novel and get it published. That's a tough, demanding goal, but it's entirely doable if you tackle it intelligently.

If you're going to write a novel, you need to get your head fully into the game. That means making a game plan that's a proven winner and then executing your game plan. After you have a plan, you need writing (and rewriting) skills — lots of them. Writing fiction means developing a raft of technical skills, both strategic and tactical. None of these steps are hard, but they're a lot easier to pick up when you have some guidance.

After you've written a great novel, whether you choose to get an agent or make the deal yourself, selling a strong story is about making the right connections with the right people at the right time.

Our goal in this book is to take you from being a *writer* to being an *author*. We have every confidence that you can do it, and this chapter explains how. It can happen — and it will happen — if you have the talent and persistence to do what you need to do.

Five urban legends that can hurt you

As soon as you admit to your family and friends that you're working on a novel, they'll start feeding you all kinds of urban legends about writing. These are things that "everybody knows," and yet they're dead wrong. Wrong or not, they can kill your career before it gets rolling. Here are some of the urban legends we've heard, along with answers you should have ready:

- ✓ **Legend 1: You're not smart enough to write a novel.** How smart do you have to be to write a novel? How do you know? What does IQ have to do with writing fiction? The fact is that the main thing any novelist needs is the ability to tap into her own emotional wellsprings and create a story that can move her readers. We know plenty of novelists, and they run the gamut on intelligence from average to ultra-high. But every one of them is a person we'd be happy to be stranded with on a desert island for long periods of time. Fiction writers are exceptionally honest people who don't balk at telling their own inner truths. If you can do that, you can write fiction.
- ✓ **Legend 2: You're not talented enough to write a novel.** What is talent? Does anybody know how to measure talent? What if talent is something you grow, not something you inherit? The fact is that writing fiction requires quite a few skills. We've never met anyone who had all those skills when they started writing. Every single published novelist we know spent long hours learning the craft of fiction. They all had one thing in common: persistence. We have no idea what talent may be, but we do know persistence when we see it. If you have persistence, you have as good of a chance of getting published as anyone else.
- ✓ **Legend 3: You have nothing to write about.** Is there only one kind of novel that you can write? Do all novelists have to come from New York City? Do they all have to be trendy and cool? Why? If you've lived long enough to be able to type, you have something to write about. If you've ever known fear, joy, rejection, love, rage, pleasure, pain, feast, or famine, then you have *plenty* to write about. If you've survived a miserable childhood or a wretched middle school or a toxic relationship — if you've been to hell and back — then you have enough material to write about for your whole career. If your life has been one long happy stream of nicey nirvana from beginning to end, then you'll need to work a little harder, but you should still be able to scrape a story out of that.
- ✓ **Legend 4: You have to know people to get a novel published.** Who knew Stephen King before he got published? Who knew Tom Clancy? Who knew J. K. Rowling? If you have great writing in your pocket, you'll get to know people quick enough. All you have to do is show around what you have, and the right people will find you. Yes, really. Great writing trumps great connections every time.
- ✓ **Legend 5: You'll forget your friends when you're famous.** Which famous writers ever forgot their real friends when they hit the limelight? Why would they do that? If you become famous, you'll be besieged with people posing as friends who are looking for a piece of your fame. Soon enough, you'll find out that the friends who knew-you-when are the *only* friends that you know for sure love you for yourself. You won't forget your real friends — you'll value them more than ever.

Setting Your Ultimate Goal As a Writer

If you're writing a novel, don't be modest about your goals. First of all, you want to write a really good novel, right? You aren't in this game to write a piece of schlock. You have some talent, and you have a story, and you want to write it well.

Second, you want to get the darned thing published. Don't hang your head and say, "I'll be happy just to get it written." Write to get published. Humility is a fine thing, but false humility can keep you from doing the one thing you really want to do.



Do this right now:

1. Take a piece of paper and write down these words:

"I'm going to write a novel and get it published. I'm going to do it because writing a novel is worthwhile and because I have the talent to do it. I'm going to do it because I have something important to say to the world. I refuse to let anything get in my way."

2. Put today's date at the top and your signature at the bottom.

Hang it where you can see it every day, and tell your family and friends about it.

As of this moment, you're a *writer*. Don't be ashamed to say so. On the happy day when you get your novel published, you'll be an *author*.



It's all too common for a writer to say (hanging head in shame), "I'm an unpublished writer." Banish that word *unpublished* from your vocabulary. You are a writer. Call yourself a writer, whether you've been published or not.



Randy's path to publication

Back in 1988, Randy decided that he was going to write a novel and get it published someday. Never mind why — just because. He started writing that novel, and about a year later, he'd

written enough that he felt ready to go to a writing conference. He met some other writers there, got some great training, and joined a critique group.

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Another year passed, and Randy's skills were developing. At a certain point, he realized that the novel he'd been working on for more than two years was fatally flawed. He put it in the drawer and never looked at it again, but he didn't abandon the vision. The goal was not to get *that* novel published; the goal was to get *some* novel published. Randy kept writing, worked hard, and after a couple of more years, he finished a novel.

He then began looking for an agent. Meanwhile, he began writing the next book. Within a year or so, he met an agent at a writing conference and within a few months signed an agreement for literary representation with him. The agent submitted the manuscript to a number of likely publishers. Randy kept writing.

One by one, every publisher on the list rejected Randy's manuscript. The agent submitted it to more publishers and resubmitted it to some publishers who'd rejected it but seemed interested. One of the publishing houses eventually rejected it three times. Randy kept writing.

The last publisher on the list saw some merit in Randy's work. The publishing committee looked at the manuscript for several months — and then rejected it. However, they took the time to point out three major problems that prevented them from buying the work. Randy's agent called him with the news that the novel was dead. He also explained to Randy the publisher's three concerns.

That day, Randy began working on a new novel, one that didn't have any of those problems. This time, he felt sure, he had a winner. This one

would be the novel that got published. His agent liked the idea and told him to pursue it. Randy kept writing.

Three months later, the agent died. Randy was devastated. He'd now been writing for eight years. He'd completed a novel, done his best to sell it, had it rejected everywhere, and then lost his champion. He kept writing.

Shortly thereafter, Randy went to a writing conference and made an appointment to talk with an editor he'd never met before. He stumbled through his pitch, making a perfect hash of it. Finally, the editor asked to see a writing sample. Randy pushed five pages across the table, and the editor skimmed over them. "You write pretty well," he said. "Here's my card. Send me a proposal and 100 pages."

A year and a half later, without an agent, Randy sold that novel to that editor's publishing house. The novel appeared in the spring of 2000, 12 years after he started writing. At last, he was an author. That novel, *Transgression*, went on to win a Christy Award, and Randy went on to write several more award-winning novels. He became well-known enough that conferences began asking him to teach.

Fast-forward another nine years. Randy has taught hundreds of writers. He's mentored a number of them to become authors. He's seen his students hit the bestseller list. And he's now seeing them as finalists for major awards. In this book, he's distilling what he's learned over the last 21 years on the art and craft of writing fiction.

Pinpointing Where You Are As a Writer

Now that you've set your goal — to write a novel good enough to get published — we can talk strategically about how to get there. It won't be easy, but it will be straightforward, so long as you do things in the right order.

We've identified four stages in the life of most writers on the road to publication. They're analogous to the four years of college, so we like to call these stages *freshman*, *sophomore*, *junior*, and *senior*.

Please note that these stages may take more or less than a year to work through. We've seen a writer go from sophomore to senior in less than a year. Randy is pretty sure he was stuck as a junior for about eight years. If he'd had a coach, he could've zipped through that painful junior stage in about a year. That's why he takes such joy in coaching writers.

This section looks at those four stages and explains how you can advance to the next level.

Freshmen: Concentrating on craft

Freshman writers are new to the game, and that's okay. Every Ph.D. was a freshman in college at one time, and every author was a freshman writer at one time. It's one step along the path. Typically, *freshman writers* have been reading fiction all their lives, and at last they've decided to start writing a novel. They write a few chapters and then discover an unpleasant truth: This fiction-writing game is harder than it looks.

Some freshmen give up at that point, but those who persist decide to get some training in the craft of writing fiction. They read books, take courses, join critique groups, and maybe go to a writing conference. Most importantly, they keep writing.



Nobody ever got good at writing by talking about it. Or hearing about it. Or reading about it. You get good at writing by doing it. Then you get your work critiqued, figure out what's not up to par, and try it again. And again. And again.

At first, freshmen writers feel like nothing is happening — those miserable critique partners never seem to be satisfied, and new flaws seem to pop up before they solve the old ones. But persistence pays off. Eventually, after months of hard work, freshmen writers wake up one day to a surprising truth: They've gotten better. They've gotten a whole lot better.



A freshman advances by writing and by getting it critiqued and by studying the craft of fiction and by writing some more.

Sophomores: Tackling the proposal

Sophomore writers have been writing for a good while, and they're no longer rank newbies. The other writers in their critique group are telling them, "That's pretty good. You've made a lot of progress."

A sophomore has generally taken at least one course on writing or has read several books on writing. A sophomore has almost always gone to at least one writing conference. He or she is starting to feel pretty confident. This writing game no longer seems hopeless. The craft of fiction is no longer a mystery.

But one thing is still an enigma: By now, a sophomore has heard how hard it is to break into publishing. There's a thing called a *book proposal* that needs to get written, but who knows what that's supposed to look like? And it requires a dreaded *synopsis*, and that sounds too ghastly for words. And how are these things related to a *query letter*? Typically, a sophomore feels a mix of confidence and terror: A growing confidence in craft, a rising terror of marketing. (If you're curious about query letters, synopses, and proposals, see Chapter 16.)

Retreating into defeatism here is easy, but that way lie dragons. The winning strategy is to keep writing — advancing in craft — but now to begin figuring out how to market yourself effectively. Writing marketing materials like a query, a synopsis, and a proposal is a skill that no novelist can afford to ignore.



If you're a sophomore, it's high time to go to a good writing conference armed with a proposal (and a finished chapter or two) and show it to somebody — maybe a writer. Maybe an agent. Maybe an editor. The proposal will likely need a lot of work. Go with that attitude and ask for a critique of your proposal. Make it clear that you're not pitching the project yet; you're just learning how to pitch. You'll get all the critique you can handle. (If you're uncertain about the difference between an agent, an editor, and a publisher, see Chapter 17.)

Can't wait! Practicing your proposal

Does a novel need a nice, long proposal to be sold to a publisher, or is a short synopsis good enough? Most writers Randy knows always prepare and submit full proposals, even to publishers that they've worked with frequently. The agents Randy knows all insist on receiving a proposal before agreeing to represent an author, and most of them use proposals in submitting potential novels to publishers. One editor says that she loves proposals because they help her get ready to take a project to her committee.

Randy insists that figuring out how to write a proposal is a highly valuable exercise for any writer. Many writers of commercial fiction need them, and this is becoming even more true as publishers find the economic screws

tightening — they need to know that the project has a good chance to sell well.

Please note that the fiction proposal is substantially different from the nonfiction proposal. A query letter is often part of the process (all of which we explain in Chapter 16). However, proposals are very important for a great many novelists, and it's unwise to remove them from the table. If you meet an agent and he's interested in your work after reading your query, he'll ask for more — either a manuscript or a proposal with sample chapters. It's far too late at that point to suddenly realize you have to learn to write a proposal. Even agents who don't want a proposal will be asking all the same questions that a proposal answers.

Go home and rework that proposal. And then do it again. And again. Sooner or later, you'll find that by some magic, you have a terrific proposal to go along with your excellent writing. You'll be a junior.



A sophomore advances by writing, by studying how to write a proposal, by writing that first practice proposal, and then by testing the proposal at writing conferences.

Juniors: Perfecting their pitches

Juniors are excellent writers. They've mastered most of the skills they need to get published. Their critique partners are saying, "Why aren't you published yet?"

A junior has typically taken a proposal or a sample chapter to a conference, showed it to an editor or an agent, and heard the magic words, "Send that to me." The junior has also heard back a few months later with the news, "Your work isn't right for me."

The junior year can be frustrating, humiliating, and depressing. It can be exhilarating beyond words at the same time. The junior period carries great highs and great lows, but you get through it if you persist.

If you're a junior, then you need to be writing, writing, writing — perfecting your craft. You also need to be polishing proposals and pitching them, preferably in person at writing conferences.

It's quite possible that you'll find an agent late in your junior year. Or you may hear from an editor that your book is under review by the publishing committee. Or a published author may read some of your work and tell you that you're almost there. If any of these things happen, you can be quite confident that you've become a senior.



A junior advances by striving for perfection in craft, by polishing proposals, and by pitching projects to live agents or editors.

Seniors: Preparing to become authors

Seniors are those chosen few who are destined to get published. This is clear to everyone — their critique buddies, their family, their friends, their agent. But it doesn't always feel that way to the senior.

Your senior period can be supreme agony. You are *that close* to getting published. You know in your gut that you write better than many published authors. In a just universe, you ought to be published. So why aren't you?

The answer is that you just haven't found the right publisher with the right project at the right time. Making that connection takes time: the time you spend as a senior. Any senior could be published at any time.

Your action plan as a senior is simply to follow the process. By this time, you must have a very polished complete manuscript and a strong proposal. Get your work out to editors (or better yet, have your agent get your work out). Keep getting it out, ignoring the rejections. It only takes one yes to get published. Keep looking for that yes.

And keep writing. You may one day wake up with a brilliant idea for a novel. You know instantly that this is *The One* — this novel will be your ticket. If this happens, follow your instinct. Write that novel in a white fury. You now have all the skills to write an excellent novel, and you'll find that you can write it far more easily than you can revise that old worn-out thing you started as a freshman writer.

Someday — this usually happens on a miserable day when the car's had a flat tire, or when the washing machine has leaked soapy water all over the floor, or your 3-year-old son has decided to iron the cat — on a day like that, the phone rings. It's your agent, calling to tell you that a publisher has made an offer on your novel. On that day, you suddenly forget all those years of striving, rejection, and heartache. On that day, you're an author.



A senior advances by ignoring rejections and continuing to submit a polished project until a publisher buys it.

Getting Yourself Organized

Most writers hate organization. We do, too. We probably hate it twice as much as you do, because there are two of us. However, we've found that we're a whale of a lot more productive when we do a bit of organization first. It isn't fun, but it makes the fun stuff easier.

It helps to know exactly what that fun stuff is, so in this book we begin (in Chapter 2) with a high-level look at why fiction is fun and why your reader wants to read your novel. What keeps your reader turning pages at 3 a.m. when the alarm is set for 6? We show you that secret and what you need to do to keep that reader up all night.

In Chapter 3, we discuss your niche and your genre. You can't appeal to every reader ever born. But the good news is this: Neither can any other author. Some readers walking this planet may find you the best author they've ever read. You need to figure out what those readers look like and how you can best meet their needs. When you know that, you're ready to write the perfect book for them.



You're unique. That means that you'll probably use methods different from your friends' for getting the first draft of your story down on the page. Some authors (Peter, for example) love outlines. Most authors hate them. Our job is not to tell you the one best process to write your novel. Our job is to show you (and we do so in Chapter 4) a variety of roads to completion and to let you choose one that works for you — or better yet, to find a unique road that fits you perfectly.

You have only a few resources that you can use to write your novel: time, energy, and money. Manage those effectively, and writing fiction will be a joy. Fail to manage them well, and writing will be a grind. In Chapter 5, we share some ideas we've found helpful.

Mastering Characterization, Plotting, and Other Skills

Novice writers have great ideas. Great writers have great ideas *and* great craft. Your first task is to understand the craft you need to turn your great ideas into great stories. Here's what you need:

- ✓ **Story world:** Your novel doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's set somewhere. That *somewhere* is usually called the *setting* or *milieu*, but we prefer the term *story world* because it's the world in which your story takes place.

In Chapter 6, we show you what goes into constructing a great story world. It's harder than it looks, but we give you a checklist of key concepts you need to nail down to have a fully defined story world. We also show you the most common backdrops that make a story world cry out for a story to fill it up with meaning.
- ✓ **Characters:** Your characters have a past, a present, and a future, and you need to know each of these. In Chapter 7, we show the ideas that go into building a believable backstory for each character. And we show why backstory is essential for knowing the possible futures of your characters. Finally, we show you how the past and the future intersect in the present — right now — to create a compelling story that moves (and moves your reader).
- ✓ **Plot:** The typical modern novel has a plot that contains six layers of structure, ranging from the 100,000-foot view all the way down to the up-close-and-personal view. As a novelist, you need to master each of these six layers and put them together into a harmonious story. In Chapters 8 through 10, we coach you through each level.
- ✓ **Theme:** Every novel has a core idea — a *theme*. The twin hazards of theme are to put in either too little or too much. Go to Chapter 11 to see how to find your theme by listening to your characters. We also show you what to do to fix the most common problems.

Editing Your Fiction



Great writing never happens in the first draft. It happens when you edit your work — keeping what works, chucking what doesn't, and polishing it all till it gleams.

You can't depend on your editor to fix your novel. Modern editors are vastly overworked and underpaid. When you hand them your masterpiece, it needs to be burnished to a brilliant shine already.

Editing your fiction is hard work, but it's not a hard idea. It comes down to two primary tasks:

- ✓ Reworking your characters so that they come fully alive
- ✓ Revising your storyline at all six layers of plot

In Part III of this book, we tell you what you need to do and show you how to do it. In Chapter 12, you find out about character bibles, backstory, values, ambitions, story goals, and most importantly, the subtleties of point of view (POV). And in Chapter 13, we show you how to create a hook for your story that will be the number one sales tool at every link in the seven-point sales chain that comes between you and your masses of readers. We teach you Aristotle's three-act structure, but we add to it a three-disaster structure that Aristotle never dreamed about.

Your scenes are critical to making your story work, so in Chapter 14, you find out how to triage a scene — when to kill a scene, when to leave it alone, and how to fix it when it needs fixing. In Chapter 15, we show you how to analyze your story paragraph by paragraph to put your reader right inside the skin of your characters.

