

Unspoken Rules

The three don'ts
of successful fiction



From the notebooks of

Lilly Maytree

TO MY DEAR WRITER FRIENDS... MAY ALL
YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE.

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Sweetbriar Books
Oklahoma

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INTRODUCTION

Did you know, dear writer, that thousands of books are written every year but only a small percentage of them get published? Did you know there are hundreds of books on the craft of creating fiction that are available, and almost anyone can learn the skills to produce a technically perfect manuscript? That being said, many of the books that do get published... are not technically perfect. So, what's the secret? I believe that it is in knowing what rules your readers have. Because...

READERS ARE THE ULTIMATE JUDGES OF GOOD BOOKS

Whether they are editors making decisions, or the actual reading public, readers are readers no matter what they do for a living. And...

READERS HAVE STANDARDS

They have certain guidelines that have nothing to do with what kind of book is presented to them, but everything to do with story. Readers – first and foremost – want a good story. But there are too many good stories around to study them all, and compare the various elements that make up each

one. There are simply too many elements and too many different types of stories. But the popular ones (those stories that everyone likes no matter what the subject matter is) all have certain things in common. And what they have most in common is what they don't do.

**ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES, YOU WILL FIND
THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT "DON'TS" OF
POPULAR FICTION...**

1

DON'T DISAPPOINT YOUR READERS

Sound simple? Let's take a closer look at exactly what kind of disappointment I'm talking about here. This is not a petition for a ban on all unhappy endings, or for creating a ceiling on book prices. And it has nothing to do with what kinds of books make the best popular fiction, because the answer to that question is all kinds. Plain and simple. You can find a runaway bestseller in virtually every category of book publishing.

Not disappointing your readers has everything to do with storytelling. The number one rule of storytelling that has been in effect since the stone age, is to **give your readers what they are expecting**. Which has nothing at all to do with the "What happens next?" of plot strategies. It means **if you promise something... you better deliver**.

Most good writing teachers will tell you that if a gun shows up in chapter one, it better go off before the end of the book. And they're right. Which is also why if your book is a "thriller" it better be full of thrills. If it's a "romance" it better devote a lot of time to the art and practice of love. If it is a biography of Lincoln, it better not embody your own personal views on the subject and effects of slavery. And if it's a mystery...

You get the picture.

HERE ARE FIVE THINGS THAT DISAPPOINT READERS:

- ◆ Leaders that don't lead
- ◆ Unjust endings
- ◆ Characters that consistently make wrong decisions
- ◆ Villains that go unpunished
- ◆ Inappropriate handling of violence

SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW...

"WRITING FICTION IS ONE OF THE FEW SITUATIONS WHERE THE BEST DEFENSE IS NOT A GOOD OFFENSE."

Of course there's a lot more to it than that (isn't there always?) but if you are as intelligent and resourceful as most people, you can learn everything you need to know about how to write popular fiction. It takes a while. As well as perseverance, and endurance, and a strong sense of self-esteem. Sometimes it even takes money.

Not so much to finance writing courses, as to pay for your own mistakes. Especially if you believe that old saying that "time is money." But I'll tell you something. There are shortcuts available to anyone who is interested. Personal

consultation by a professional is one of them, which usually costs money. Then again, it almost always cuts down on your mistake level. Finding a successful writer who is willing to mentor you is worth their weight in gold, and so is an honest and encouraging critique group.

2

DON'T PASS A READER'S WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

Readers of popular fiction are very forgiving people when it comes to the premise of stories, which is why there are so many types of stories. That's because they have already made the decision to enter into a make-believe world. There is no rule stating that world has to mirror this one. In fact, some best-selling fiction never even comes close.

For instance, the books of Jules Verne were written over a hundred years ago, and you can still buy them off the shelf in nearly every bookstore around the world. They are surpassed in sales only by the *Bible*, and the *Diary of Anne Frank*. And while nuclear-powered submarines and rockets to the moon are common, now, Verne wrote about those things so convincingly, one tends to forget the books were written during the backwash of the French Revolution, when no one had even heard of such things. So, what makes his stories appeal to today's readers?

A recent review of [The Mysterious Island](#) posted on Amazon.com by a young reader states, "After reading this book I now know I could survive..."

The secret is in the convincing.

Not that your make-believe world exists, because we already know it doesn't. What a reader truly wants to be convinced of, is **that it is possible to bring something from that world back into this one.** If it presents itself "real" enough.

This phenomenon happens through a bridge of personal experience. Such things as humor, fear, hope, and encouragement are tangible emotions that have no boundaries. They operate equally potently in both worlds. Their only enemies are the unexpected reminders that a fictional world is not true.

A painful jolt back into reality (such as a character that gets into a red car, only to climb out of a green one, a block later) is like a splash of cold water on a new fire. In the same way, a cowboy that opens a can of beans (even though canned beans did come along in time for cowboys) is not the accepted lifestyle of our cowboys of literature, who readers have a different illusion of. Such "illusion breakers" make readers uncomfortable.

Truth is, the general public of literature holds a lot of misconceptions. Of course, there's no rule that says a writer has to go along with them all. But you have to be extremely convincing to get anyone to follow along with you when you leave them behind. How convincing? At least more than *Tarzan*. Because of him, most people still believe that Africa is mostly jungle, no matter what the world atlas looks like to prove differently. We're not talking right, or wrong, here. We're talking the world of popular fiction, which has a set of standards all its own.

It has unspoken rules.

HERE ARE FIVE THINGS THAT READERS DON'T BELIEVE:

- ◆ Coincidences
- ◆ Characters who act out of character
- ◆ Melodrama
- ◆ Author's voice
- ◆ Predictable plots

SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW...

"WRITING SUCCESS IS NOT MEASURED BY HOW MANY READERS STEP ONTO YOUR FICTIONAL BRIDGE, BUT BY WHETHER OR NOT THEY FALL THROUGH BEFORE REACHING THE OTHER SIDE.."

When H.G. Wells wrote *The Time Machine* there was no proof that time-travel was possible. There still isn't. Yet time-travel continues to be one of the most engaging themes of popular fiction. The books that are based on it spend little or no effort trying to convince readers of the possibility, because the loyal readers of such books have already agreed to "willingly suspend their disbelief" for the duration of the story. That's what they came for.

But had the author ended his tale by having a benevolent witch cast some spell that sent our hero home, again, the book

never would have achieved its classic status. Yet, that is the very way Dorothy made it home in *The Wizard of Oz*, but it was quite all right for L. Frank Baum to do that, and achieve the same popularity. Because **each of these worlds were true to themselves**. An author may invent new worlds, and even a new logic that exists in them. But after that, **the world of fiction is a world of extreme order**. Without this fascinating symmetry it will not hold our interest. And like a spider's web, it will either be admired for its beauty, or brushed aside for its commonness... depending on the design. That's why, it is only when you give readers a clear and convincing picture of your world (and stick by it!) that your readers will, too.

Creating a convincing fictional world is fascinating stuff. But that's another subject. One which I explore in another section of my notebook, called:

Real Fiction

Three ways created worlds become famous

More secrets of the writing craft that took me a very long time to discover. Of course, you can learn the same things on your own, if you have the time. Not to mention access to information that cannot be found in most ordinary public libraries, these days, or a simple search on Google.

3

DON'T WASTE YOUR READER'S TIME

Readers value their time. They have just as many things vying for it as most people, and the decision to devote a portion to reading fiction has (almost always) already become a lifelong habit by the time they pick up your book. A lot of "flash in the pan" sales at the beginning of a book's release are aimed at these avid readers, who consume enormous amounts of books every year. But contrary to popular opinion, that part of the reading public is not made up mostly of pushovers.

They are a unique collection of very savvy, literate, and knowledgeable people who beat the television-only entertainment group, hands down. Which is the reason a "hyped up" book might rope in a few of them at the beginning, but it will never get them all. Even more important, its author will not be able to catch those readers a second time. Maybe even never again.

Because of the buzz.

That infamous wildfire judgment that all authors crave, and every publisher aims for, is untouchable when it comes to being influenced by fads, money, fame, or even fortune. It lives in that high and incorruptible tower where "readers only" are admitted and the word comes down from... readers only.

A simple "Don't waste your time" from members of this group can put the skids on any advertising promotion, no

matter how much money was spent on it. On the other hand, the coveted declaration of "You have to read this!" is rumored to travel faster than email.

That's the buzz. Whether or not you, as a writer, want to pay any attention to it, is up to you. But the truth is, **the buzz is the single most important element that makes or breaks popular fiction**, and it's making and breaking books every day. Mostly breaking, when you consider the length of time and space between the really great books. And once again, it's more revealing to look at what the great books don't do, rather than what they do. That's because popular fiction does just about everything.

At the same time, **all successful popular fiction has something of value that a reader can take home to the real world**. It doesn't have to be a big something; just something that works the same in both places. It can be anything from an earth-changing revelation, all the way down to a good recipe for goulash. Readers are fairly liberal in the requirements for these things. The bottom line is, they have to have something. If they don't, they will consider the entire reading experience a waste of their time.

HERE ARE FIVE THINGS THAT WASTE A READER'S TIME...

- ◆ No usable information
- ◆ No memorable scene
- ◆ No transferable emotions

- ◆ A story that evolves differently than first presented.
- ◆ Poor writing skills

No book that has ever made it to the timeless halls of successful fiction, will waste a reader's time. Yet, hundreds are published every year that do. The proof is in the fact that only the successful ones last. The ultimate challenge to writers today is not, "Can I get it published?" but rather, "Will it last?" The answer to that question is one that is reserved solely for the readers.

Readers are the ultimate judges of a good book.

Whether or not you take into consideration the “unspoken rules” of the reading public, is up to you. There is no one around to police the beat when you don't. But the truth is, that every successful work of fiction does: whether on purpose or by pure accident.

How you handle the primary secrets of successful fiction, will determine your place, or loss of one, in the literary world. What are the primary secrets? Here's a basic truth for you to think about that will lead you to your own version of the most important one:

Times change, people don't.

4 PORTRAIT OF A READER

There is no limit to the imagination, in the world of fiction, and it would take more than one lifetime to study it all. That's what readers are doing, by the way, when they commit to that lifetime habit of reading. Studying. Seeking voraciously for something they can take away and keep as a part of themselves.

All readers are human. They are forever looking for something that explains the condition, gives them a tip, or shows them a way out of the typical messes we all get ourselves into. Most of all, they dream. They dream about what they could be, if they hadn't been; how far they could go, if they knew the way; and especially, about the way things ought to be. **They dream of doing things they would never attempt in real life** because they have too much (or not enough) at stake. They dream of being heroes or villains, or living in a world that makes more sense.

The most popular character in the world of fiction is the one who has everything against him to start out with, and gets where he was aimed at in spite of it. A character that just won't quit... because most of us do. In the world of fiction, a reader can have the experience of being someone better, or worse. For a brief time, he or she can understand the

whole picture, and maybe even catch a glimpse of how something might be done about it in the "real" world.

It wasn't until Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver* that substantial social changes came about in the workhouses of London, even though child labor and human bondage had been going on there for generations. Readers paid similar homage to such works as, Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and even *Exodus* by Leon Uris. The list of books that have impacted the real world is too long for this little study. But it is interesting to note that they are not all large, serious volumes aimed at social change.

Sherlock Homes, is a character that also came into being over a hundred years ago, and still has active fan clubs all over the world. Its members are often seen dressed like him, drawing on pipes (lit or otherwise), and carrying magnifying glasses. Considering the fact that Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective series was not always technically perfect (especially by today's standards) what's the draw? The fascinating rules of deduction by which the brilliant detective lived. **Everyone wants to be brilliant.**

Which is why, when it comes to rules, it is often the ones that are not stated, that turn out to have the most impact on our lives. One way, or the other.

The unspoken ones.

SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW...

"SUCCESSFUL FICTION IS NOT BASED ON WHAT CHARACTERS DO OR DON'T, BUT RATHER ON THE CALIBER OF THE RULES BY WHICH THEY ARE GOVERNED... THE BEST OF WHICH TRANSCEND ALL OUR WORLDS."

A note from Lilly Maytree...

Thank you for traveling with me on this small journey into the study of the writing craft. If you would like to ask me a question, or simply get in touch with me for any reason, you can send an email to:

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You can also find out more about me, and my inspirational adventure novels, by visiting:

www.LillyMaytree.com

I love hearing from readers! Until then...

“MAY THE LORD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU. MAY THE LORD MAKE HIS FACE SHINE UPON YOU, AND BE GRACIOUS TO YOU... AND GIVE YOU PEACE.”

NUMBERS 6:24