

BENJAMIN LEROY'S

DUBIOUS WRITING & PUBLISHING ADVICE

Over the past few years, while blogging over at Hey! There's a Dead Guy in the Living Room! I've given out some questionable thoughts and advice regarding novel writing and the publishing industry based on my experiences.

The following pages are an incomplete compilation of the posts, but one that might be of some value to an aspiring writer trying to understand what goes on in the mind of a publisher.

Or a reader.

Because I am both.

And it is in this spirit that I've put this together and made it available. If you have questions or would like further discussion, please feel free to send me an email.

With love,

Ben

WHY I HATE YOUR PROTAGONIST

Ok, before we freak out at each other in a yelling match, I'm using the word "Your" in this case to sound inflammatory. It's a crass attempt at causing controversy, reinforcing the whole "publishing gatekeepers are jerks" meme, and probably a little bit lazy of me. But really, you, whoever you are, you have created a stunning protagonist that does not fit any of these categories. Or, maybe a little bit of one, but certainly not enough for us to get all worked up into a fight.

(1) **Too Perfect Syndrome**—you ever read about the dude who was a black belt in like six different martial arts, was a professional sniper, could crack a joke, bed a starlet, probably shoot scratch golf, and made restaurant quality waffles? That dude bores the living hell out of me. If your protagonist seems conveniently shiny and skilled, I don't like him. I don't believe him. It's much easier for me to feel empathetic with flawed characters like me.

(2) **Anybody could jump that hurdle!**—I recently read a submission that was well written, had me turning the pages at a good clip, excited to see just how bad things could get for our heroine. How hard would she fall before rising triumphantly to overcome the challenge? Well, as it turned out, it was like she mis-stepped off the curb, lost her balance, did that thing where you pretend to jog a few steps because you don't want to look like a jackass, and then finished her walk to the finish line pretty much unscathed. I need to know your protagonist has been tested for me to cheer her on.

(3) **Frat Boy Wins Again**—though this may sound similar to #1, it's actually different. We see that Chaz Dollarstacks, the Ferrari driving, handsome son of business tycoon Wellington Dollarstacks is living up the night life. Maybe a little coke. Maybe a run in with a black hatted frat boy (likely turned backwards) on the golf course. At stake? A five million dollar antique lifted from somebody's personal art collection. Fuck all of these dudes. I hope an Atomic RazorBomb makes the scene and they're all cut off the map. This differs from #1, because we see that Chaz is flawed—he isn't perfect—but because I don't fetishize hanging out in VIP until 4

a.m. or playing polo in the Hamptons, I don't really give a shit about the guy. Your mileage (and audience) may vary.

(4) **“Oh, this guy?”**—Sometimes when a tv show or movie is really popular, you can watch a wave of what essentially amounts to fan fiction come in over the transom a few months later. Back when *The Shield* was a weekly thing we got a submission at Bleak House about a rogue cop named something like Nick Slackey (that's not it exactly, but it was something just as close) who didn't play by the rules but always got his man (even if during the process he created more problems for himself). I want to believe that your protagonist is a singular character of your invention and not some irregular pulled from the assembly line. I only read about 20 pages of the Nick Slackey book, but I'm pretty sure if I would have finished it, there would have been a love letter to Shawn Ryan at the end that said, “Bro, whaddya think? You wanna adapt this for season six?”

(5) **Plywood and 2×4 Man**—As I've already talked about way too many times on this blog, I like to travel. I love to meet new people in new places all over the country. I'm especially excited to hear new turns of phrases, new dialects, twisted pronunciations, and things like that. I grin like an absolute idiot when I hear particularly good ones. Language is so alive and vibrant. How you say things is sometimes just as important as what you are saying. So when your character sounds like my iPhone reading something back to me in ways that are grammatically correct but are absolutely without spark and are totally unrealistic as far as actual conversations go, I'm tuning out. Without spark, there is no fire. Without fire, I'm cold. When I'm cold I stop reading and look for shelter.

WHY I WANT TO PUNCH YOUR ANTAGONIST IN THE FACE

Even though this is all about bad guys and violence, I'm certainly not advocating socking somebody in your writers' group because their writing doesn't live up to the subjective literary code outlined below.

Quick digression using professional wrestling as a reference point.

In the parlance of the professional wrestling industry the phrase "to get heat" means that a bad guy gets booed. There are two kinds of heat relevant to this discussion. The first is the kind you want—you want the audience to "hate" the bad guy, salivating to see him get his comeuppance. The second kind is when the marketing department has shoved some wrestler down the audience's collective throat, the wrestler's personality doesn't click with the audience, and when the crowd boos, it can be translated to something like, "Get the hell off my tv. You're annoying and I'm going to turn the channel because you suck."

We're going to be talking about how to avoid the "Get the Hell off my TV" kind of heat.

As you'd probably guess, I read a lot of query letters, sample pages, and every now and again, full novels. I also have the good fortune of meeting writers at conferences all across the country. And, because I deal primarily in crime fiction, I see a lot of *bad guys*. If I were in a different field, the antagonist might be nature or something more abstract, but mine is the domain of black hatted, curly mustachioed, slightly accented villains. Here are some things I see too often that make me hate your villain.

Let's go!

(1) **Evil Because He's Crazy Because He's Evil** – Sometimes I'll be sitting at a conference rapping with Author X and the conversation will turn to the novel he's working on tentatively called *Extreme Absolute Justice* or something like that. Here's a sample of how the conversation goes:

Author X: My protagonist, Everchance Purity, is an FBI agent trailing notorious serial killer, The Waxahachie Ax Hacker, when...

Me: The who?

Author X: The Waxahachie Ax Hacker.

Me: Why is he a serial killer?

Author X: Because he's craaaazy!

Me: Why is he crazy?

Author X: Because he's a serial killer...

This circular logic and the subsequent chase around the tree is much less thrilling to the audience than Author X thinks. I'm going to need a little bit more from the "what's my motivation?" department. Also, I've met a bunch of straight up criminals in my life, but I've never met one yet that didn't have some upside somewhere. Funny. Good storytellers. Artists. Can pluck a guitar some. Obviously these traits don't excuse crimes, but they also indicate a little more depth. I want to see that in all bad guys.

(2) **All That for This?** – Occasionally I'll really be enjoying the cat/mouse between good guy and bad guy, trusting the author to layout character motivation, I'll totally understand the protagonist and his struggle for survival. Who will win this battle of wills? But then it turns out the bad guy is going through all of this chase—at great cost to personal treasure and time—because of some totally ridiculous trigger. "You stole my girlfriend in high school, now I've spent \$300,000 and risked a lifetime of prison to follow you around the world to blow up your ski chalet in Zurich!" Oh, Emo Villain, your broken heart could have done so much more.

(3) **Central Casting Called, They Want Their Cardboard Back** – Four day stubble? Yup. Smoking a cigarette in a knit cap while leering from behind the wheel of a dented cargo van? Check. Say things like, "You're all gonna pay, you meddling kids!" Sure thing, Scooby Doo. I understand that sometimes we use archetypal

descriptions to help the reader along, but sometimes we get a smidge lazy. And if you're going to be lazy with the writing, maybe I'm going to be lazy with the reading. Thankfully, the garbage man has a job to do, and the chain of laziness can be broken. Hooray!

(4) Actually, I Won't Be Sad if He Stabs Your Protagonist in the Throat – This goes back to [last week's post](#) about why I may or may not like the hero of a book. In this particular case, if Author X's goal is to establish a dynamic of good v. evil and I find myself rooting for evil (and not just because I want to be a contrarian jerk) because he's more sympathetic than your protagonist, we've got a problem, Houston. Plenty of books, especially the ones I like to read, have a whole lot of grey area when it comes to good and bad. In those cases I might find myself hoping the antagonist triumphs. But the author has more than likely gone into the project with a "nobody is perfect, we're all varying degrees of flawed. This guy is the protagonist only because I'm writing from his POV" approach. Is your *supposed to be bad guy* becoming the anti-hero we cheer because he's legit cooler than your protagonist? Was that your intention?

(5) Pass Me the Mic, I Need the Last Word – There is a time for talk and a time for action. When your, presumably, greatest foe is at the end of a gun, the yakkety yak business is over. As there is likely little satisfaction in delivering a monologue to an audience that cannot provide a review (because, you know, they're dead), really what the hell is the point of going on at great length about all of the clever and devious things you've done in your quest to vanquish him? Oh, there isn't one? Right. So leave that scene out even if it turns out that your almost dead hero has risen, zombie Bruce Lee style, to kick out some justice before the soliloquy is finished. This is hubris.

Confession: I'm something of a deviant.

I've long been fascinated with historically infamous people. Musicians. Killers. Athletes. In fact, the very publishing company I run is named after one of Major League Baseball's great boogeymen—Tyus "Ty" Cobb. By most folks' accounts, Cobb was a ball of rage prone to violence both on and off the field, including one

fateful day when he ran into the crowd to beat the hell out of a heckler, stomping on the *armless* fellow with his cleats.

If that were the sum total of Cobb's story, I'd be glad I wasn't in the stands when he played and I don't suppose I'd care too much one way or the other about him. But there are other layers to the Cobb story.

Perhaps most notably, Cobb's mother killed his father, the only man whose respect and acceptance Cobb craved. The killing occurred weeks before Cobb would be called up to the Major Leagues to play professional baseball for the Detroit Tigers, and, as Cobb would later confess, he played his whole career with the *ghost* of his father on his heels, propelling him. There was never, for Cobb, a chance to gain the acceptance and approval he sought. All of the records set and the legendary feats ultimately didn't mean *enough*. There is something hugely fascinating about a story like that to a degenerate like me.

Your bad guy can and should have depth.

Enough for me to love him. Enough for me to hate him. Enough for me to want him to stay on my tv.

THE PATENT OFFICE CALLED, THESE PLOT DEVICES HAVE GONE ON TOO LONG & ARE BEING IMMEDIATELY RECALLED

I used to know this guy (he's dead now) who built all kinds of crazy ass gadgets that you would *never* think there was a need for, but that he'd build just because he was intrigued by the idea and he was one of those obsessive/brilliant types who would conjure things out of thin air.

Here are examples.

“Oh, Ben! Don't you think it'd be cool if your remote control—the very remote control that manipulates your television could also raise your garage door?”

“Hey! I had an idea. What if I converted this scooter into a scooter *and* lawnmower?” Most of the things were neat parlor tricks, but nothing with meaningful long lasting implications. Once you've seen one toothbrush with a floss dispenser, you've seen 'em all. Seen enough.

Speaking of *seen enough*, I've seen enough of these plot devices in books.

(1) **Hey Look! It's Cousin Oliver and He's Got a Smart Phone!**—You know that feeling when you're reading a book, things are going well, the protagonist is in a bit of a jam and you say, “Don't you die on me! I care about you! How are you going to survive *this*?” And then some floppy haired, bespectacled character who hadn't been mentioned before, or who had only been mentioned in passing shows up with a big neon sign flashing “ANNOYING SIDEKICK” and arrows pointing at him. I'm not expecting your protagonist to know everything and be some super self-sufficient loner machine, but for Lil' Baby Shakespeare's sake, can we at least try to not make it so damn heavy handed when we need help from others? And also, once that dude is on the screen, can we try to tone down the “This is So and So and his gimmick is...” Not everybody has to have a super power and your reader isn't stupid. We get it.

(2) **She sure is pretty and she looks good, too!**—I've met a lot of people in my life, and I can tell you that none of them have only existed in my life to look good. If the first thing your protagonist notes, and then repeats in variation a hundred times in subsequent pages is something about “Look at the drumsticks on that one!” or “her

shirt was filled out in all the right places” or “the raven haired temptress in the short skirt” then your protagonist might just be a misogynistic asshole who will, inevitably and monotonously, remind us 53 times that there is a woman in the book and you should pay attention. There are variations on this one—like when the protagonist is having conversations with “black dude” who says things stolen from a mid 70s Blaxploitation flick every time he opens his mouth. Human beings are three dimensional, just because the page is flat doesn’t mean your supporting cast needs to be, too. Ya dig?

(3) **Let’s Win the Lottery AND Get Hit by Lightning on the Same Day!**—My father is more apt to believe in straight up coincidence than I am. But I’m more likely to get irrationally pissed off about those same coincidences when I see them in a book. Listen, I know sometimes the universe conspires to do us a solid and that’s cool, but let’s not push our luck with pieces of microfiche that may be of interest to your protagonist buried deep in the library’s vault, but that somehow the 22 year old library intern just had to catalog a few days earlier. If your book is glued together by freakish chance, your book will fall apart.

(4) **They Died Yesterday, Today We Get Revenge!**—I know I harp on this all the time. If you’ve heard me speak at a conference or you’ve read this blog for more than a month, this is one of those dreadful things that I go on and on about. It’s also something that when I say it, there is probably a long line of people, fashionably dour, telling me I need to man up. I don’t really give a shit about them, though, so, I’m willing to go out on a limb and make this confession—when somebody close to me dies, it’s tough. There are a lot of emotions to sift through. A guy like me, if he got dropped into a book where all of his neighbors or co-workers or whoever have been slaughtered, he wouldn’t pick up a gun and say, coolly, “Oh, it’s on now.” I hope you realize when you have a high body count with no time for reflection on the lives lost, it pretty much makes all of those deaths irrelevant. And I further hope, that if you take the time to think about it, if there’s a need for a death in a story, there are vast reservoirs of emotional resonance that you can tap into to make your protagonist breathe and the consequences he faces even more universal.

(5) **Special Investigators Dr. McGilligutty and Sgt. Jack Daniels and the Rest of The Emo Alcoholic Gang**—obviously I sift through a lot of crime fiction, some stuff we publish, other stuff that has been published elsewhere. So believe me when I tell

you, I've seen a whole lot of The Emo Drunk as Detective. Sure, sometimes he's passed off as cold or unfeeling or just straight up tough guy. But if you dry him out and scratch at him a bit, you know what you find? Just a regular old, run of the mill Emo Drunk dude, not unlike the guy at your local bar who is all mopey and won't play darts with his friends or pretend to have a good time because he's trying to impress the girl at the pool table that he's deep or reflective or "damaged goods" and maybe she'll get the urge to try and save him. We're all haunted (or we're boring), but remember last week's story about Ty Cobb's mom shooting his dad and how Cobb played violent baseball with the ghost of his father on his heels? That's infinitely more compelling than a sloppy drunk trying to find a bad guy.

FIVE THINGS TO REMEMBER, ASPIRING AUTHOR

(1) **There Isn't Enough Time Isn't a Good Excuse.** We live busy lives! The world may or may not be collapsing! Forty hour work week turns to fifty hour. I had to go to a wedding last weekend! My son has soccer as soon as I get done with work! Remember that episode of *Saved By the Bell* when Jessie Spano was freaking the fuck out with the whole "Time?! There's never enough time! I'll never get into Stanford..." diet pill bender?

Well, Jessie Spano was a hysterical high school girl. And if you're listening to her and saying, "Yes, that's why I don't have time to write," you're taking your life lessons from a corny character on a corny tv show (that I happen to be able to recite nearly every line of dialogue from).

In the real world, no matter who you are, somebody else has a harder life and manages to find time to write the things in his/her gut. It is a matter of desire. You can always set the alarm clock a little earlier. If this is really what you want to do, you'll find a way to do it. It's not always going to be easy, it might hurt like hell on occasion, but it should also give you the most profound sense of being alive (because you're living for multiple people) and that is payment enough.

(2) **Don't chase trends.** Remember when the *Da Vinci Code* was the big thing? It's likely that even after it kinda slipped from your mind a little bit, it was still fresh in mine. Why? Because I was a huge fan? Because I was obsessed with how much money it made? Nope. Neither of those things. Mainly it's because approximately one out of three queries I received in the 18 months following the height of the buzz were...you'll never believe it...complete rip-offs of the *Da Vinci Code*. Judging by the submissions I read, 0% of them were good books. Some of them because they may have been technically well written (words were in the right places, punctuation was fine, etc.), but the stories themselves were totally derivative and lifeless. But there was also the class of people who had clearly given little to no thought about writing a book before sitting down to write Michaelangelo's *Mixtape*. If you're going to write a book, write it because it means something to you. Write it because the story matters. And for all that is good in the world, write it because your characters have something to say.

(3) **When it's Done. It's Done.** I can speak from personal experience when I say, sometimes as authors, we get so sick of looking at our Work in Progress that we simply want to shoot it off our desk and into the world. You must fight that impulse until it is actually done. The difference between a great idea and a great book is a whole lot of editing. You have to be absolutely sure you've said it the way it was supposed to be said before it goes to market. You won't be there to explain yourself. You don't get to hold the reader's hand to pull them where you want them to go. They go where the map takes them. It's on you to layout the bread crumbs correctly. The first time. Even when it means you need to hack through the overgrowth and false starts you created for yourself. Is it hard? Certainly. It's also what separates real writers from people who have a computer based hobby.

(4) **Not Everybody is going to like everything, ease off the death threats.** If you've ever used the internet for anything, you may have noticed that some folks have strong opinions (seemingly about everything) that they aren't afraid to voice at full volume. It's quite possible that your book may end up with an arrow in its flank courtesy of Amazon User #529. Do those reviews suck to read? Depending on who you are, they certainly can. I'm not going to lie—even as a publisher—when I see somebody slamming a book that we've published I get a little bummed. But then I remember that I liked the book and other people did, and that's the balance of the world.

The explosion of ebook self-publishing and online reviews has created a sometimes combustible playground filled with personal conflicts where reviews aren't really about the book and authors, who should recognize that not everybody is going to love their precious baby (especially if it's poorly written because of the When it's Done it's Done above), but who ultimately freak out on a reviewer for having an opinion and try to bully reviewers into saying nice things. Because, y'know, every "I love you" uttered at the end of a knife is sincere.

The stakes just aren't that high. Do not escalate them Emo Writer, I promise it won't help your cause and it will distract you with high school theatrics during time you could be using to develop your writing talents.

(5) **We're All Gonna Die.** Back when I was an emotionally fragile teenager combing through old literature for moody quotes to write in my well-worn high school notebook, I found this one particularly upbeat gem from Aldous Huxley: "A belief in hell and the knowledge that every ambition is doomed to frustration at the hands of a skeleton have never prevented the majority of human beings from behaving as though death were no more than an unfounded rumor"

Don't meditate on that one too long, it's actually kind of a bummer. But basically I just want to let you know that we're all going to die. Armed with that knowledge, may I suggest to you that you should live first and if you're concerned about being forgotten, one way to improve your chances of sticking around in the collective conscience would be to write a really great book.

FIVE MORE THINGS TO REMEMBER

Hello everybody. I'm in that, *Well, the holidays are over, but real work really doesn't start until Monday* phase, and I guess that's got me a little introspective and chatty. Some of this has to do with publishing, other parts, not so much.

Happy 2014, here's a list.

(1) That book you're writing? It has to be from the gut. Do not recycle plots from tv shows, movies, other books, etc. that you *think* other people will like. Write what matters to you and write it true to your vision. Chasing trends might work for somebody, but it *fails* for a bunch of other people. You've got a limited amount of years with your life, spend them doing things you won't regret on your deathbed.

(2) Anybody that tells you books are simply "commodities" is full of shit. I know I'm preaching to the choir, but books are *special*. At least, *great* books are. They're transformative, they're life altering, they're perspective changing, and they give us a chance to examine who we are and the world we live in. If you're one of the people protesting with a, "but, but, they're widgets, they're interchangeable *products* to temporarily amuse/entertain the masses," I've got a middle finger for you and your entertainment.

(3) Nobody ever stayed famous for being an asshole on the internet. You wrote a book? Somebody didn't like it? Throwing a public temper tantrum on Amazon or Goodreads because your snowflake wasn't celebrated the way you want it to be? Poor form. You're better than that. And if you're not, then get the hell out of the way for the grownups.

(4) I don't like okra. I've had it fried. I've had it snuck into bigger dishes where, when I stumble upon it, it ruins the whole thing. What I'm telling you is that—okra isn't for me. You could put together a coalition of one million people telling me how good okra is and that *this particular okra* is *the best okra* and it wouldn't matter. It's nothing personal against the preparer, I just don't like okra. I respect that others will have a different opinion. And that brings me to this—The validation for your life is not in the power of gatekeepers in the publishing industry. If one hundred agents and publishers pass on your book, that doesn't make you a bad person or a failure, it simply means your book, as written, is like okra to me. **YOU ARE NOT THE OPINION OF OTHERS ABOUT YOUR BOOK.** Eat that. Digest it.

(5) A whole bunch of really crazy stuff, subject to coincidences, luck, chance, and impossible to calculate calculations happened to get you here, right now. Be mindful of that. Some mornings are harder to shake than others. Some nights close in faster than we'd like. There are speed bumps and distractions around every corner. But so are the Grand Canyon, stars, millions of miles of highway, seven billion people, and an infinite collection of forks in the road for you to choose. When one doesn't work, go a different way. Throwing your hands in the air and believing you are stuck is the only thing that makes it true. But remember—you can always pick a different path, you can always back up or run over walls or, as our friend Nemo is told, *just keep swimming*. A new year is a great time to evaluate your life and make resolutions. But so is a new day. A new hour. Waiting for arbitrary rolling of the calendar is fun and clickbait for Yahoo, but it's not a good excuse. If you see something is wrong, stop. If there's something you want to explore, throw on your headlamp and *go*.