BECOMING A WRITER

Although I enjoyed writing in high school and college (even winning a National Movie Reviewer contest in 1969), it wasn't until I was 62 years old that I took up the challenge to write regularly. One of my long-time best friends, Joe Masonick, suggested that I write more after he read my first story -- a true tale called FLORIDA REDEMPTION. That got me motivated. As of now, I have written more than eighty short stories. Twenty are based on my own life experiences, while the rest are fictional. I have covered all the genres: mystery, suspense, adventure, science fiction, romance, western, crime, horror, and fantasy. So far, I have self-published three volumes of my collected short stories. Writing has proven to be a very enjoyable creative outlet for my energies and my imagination.

I maintain that virtually anyone of average intelligence and determination can write. Start with a simple one or two page story about a vivid memory from your childhood. Write about what you know, and what excites you. If you are passionate towards your efforts, your reader will usually return your enthusiasm. Next, gradually increase the length of your stories. When you are ready, try a short fictional story. I like sticking with writing short stories because they are quicker to write and read than a longer novel. Famous authors often need one or two years of concentrated work to produce just one best-seller. If you are that dedicated and convinced of your abilities, then give it a try. But I never wrote for any hopes of fame or fortune. Most of my stories take an average of two to three days to create, edit, then publish -- working on and off six to eight hours a day. An average story for me is fifteen to twenty pages, using Microsoft Word style and font Calibri 18. I write about one story a month in my spare time as the mood strikes. One of my favorite authors, Ray Bradbury, once boasted that he wrote a new short story every day for over forty years! Needless to say, I am not in that professional league.

Writers need to be habitual readers. This act activates a specific part of your brain which imprints resonant thoughts and strengthens one's vocabulary patterns. I am always reading something -- either for my own pleasure, or for gathering information, or for my part-time librarian job, or for my library book club. Our home here in Davis, California currently has fourteen bookshelves. My wife and our daughter are likewise voracious readers.

I have always loved libraries, and visit new ones whenever I travel in the U.S. or abroad. Who has not looked in awe at the mass of books on those hallowed shelves and thought: maybe I could write one too someday? Well, you can! And believe me, it is an incomparable thrill when you see your first book added to the collection, and then see it checked out by curious patrons. Humans are a storytelling species -- we need to speak and listen, then to write and read, about our common reality. Undoubtedly, the more you read, the more your writing will improve. But like any skill, it takes practice and effort. Because writing is entirely an introverted activity, one must be self-motivated and confident. No one will be lording over you, which is just as well. It must come from within. This is also true of the other 'solitary' creative arts of painting, sculpture, and musical composition.

Writing is both a craft and an art. You will notice this the next time you carefully read a good book. The 'craft' aspect is strictly the mechanics of the story -- its 'building blocks': the choice of setting, plot, cast of characters, point of view (usually first or third person), sentence construction and ease of word flow, paragraphing, dialogue, punctuation, and so forth. The 'art' aspect is what distinguishes an ordinary book from a great book worthy of the pantheon of timeless world literature. This relies on expert selective judgment and the use of specific vocabulary word choices in the narrative that create a unique, resonant world of feelings, action, and ideas. Poetry, for example, is almost entirely art in this regard.

People often ask me: Where do your story ideas come from? Ah yes, the legendary Elusive Muse...Well, I can honestly tell you that ideas simply pop into my head on my daily hourly walks around my neighborhood, or when I ride my bicycle out into the nearby countryside . I strive to make each fictional story unique, so I begin there. Often, I imagine a surprise ending of a story, then work backwards. I can see the entire story in minute detail in my mind, just like watching a movie, then I simply describe what I am viewing. That's it. No real mysterious secret. And I don't believe in "writer's block," whereby the writer's brain is supposedly blank, and he or she is paralyzed with the inability to continue. Trust me: if your story plot is exciting enough, you will be so eager to write it that nothing will stand in your way!

To my detriment, I never learned to formally type. In college, I printed out all of my research papers on yellow legal pads in pen, then hired fellow students to do the real job of pecking on a typewriter. Nowadays, still somewhat embarrassed, I have evolved to slowly peck away at my laptop computer keyboard with my two index fingers alone. I take heart, however, in the fact that one of my favorite (and most successful) writers in the world -- James A. Michener -- also typed millions of words on a vintage Royal typewriter with only those two similar digits. (I later learned that those famous fingers were permanently bent from decades of key pounding!) And I do not write or print out my stories in longhand on paper anymore before I type.

Perhaps most writers are paranoid when it comes to worrying about losing their work. I have several redundant safeguards: I always save my writing as a document file on my HP laptop; I backup another copy on a flash-drive; I post a copy on my website (www.jackkarolewski.weebly.com); I put another copy on my self-publishing site (www.lulu.com); and I finally print out a permanent paper copy. Then -- and only then -- can I relax!

An experienced writer can create almost anywhere: at home, at a coffee shop, in a library, on a train or plane. The surrounding atmosphere can be silent, calm, or busy, or with compatible music playing in the background. It can be sunny outside, or cloudy and gloomy, or raining. If your story is energized and driving you, your focus will be such that you will be in another world with your thoughts. Nothing else matters.

Although I try to be completely original in my works, I have written a few stories borrowing some well-known favorite characters of mine from television, motion pictures, and literature. These include James Bond, Captain Ahab, Captain Nemo, Sherlock Holmes, Captain James T. Kirk, Jack London, and Captain James Cook. I have also been inspired by the late 1950's television series "The Twilight Zone." Each episode told a complete tale in thirty or sixty minutes with usually a poignant or startling ending. Several were written by the series creator, Rod Serling.

How does a writer name his or her characters? I invent them, and try not to repeat either the first or last name in other stories. For beginners, you can simply pick out appropriate names randomly from a telephone book or a similar source. Also, have a dictionary and a thesaurus handy, so as to spell correctly when you proofread, and so that you avoid using the same descriptive words over and over. (If you prefer to save time, there are some good, free spelling apps that you can download on your phone or tablet.) While your vocabulary choices should remain basic, some fresh word variety is always welcomed by your readers.

The easiest writing for me is telling true tales from my own life. All you have to do is write down what you remember. The next easiest process is writing science fiction or fantasy, because neither require any real research or advanced mental outlining. It's strictly your imagination. But all other genres need you to do some detailed preliminary research, especially historical fiction. I pride myself on precisely arranging those stories around actual dates and places. I will even research distances and times used in a specific era for a particular mode of travel -- be it walking or riding, or going by rail or ship. My imaginary characters must fit in seamlessly to the historical events surrounding them, and must dress, eat, speak, and react as a person would who was living back during those times. If you fact-check the details of these stories, all will be authentic. Because of my love of (and advanced education in) history -- coupled with my extensive, first-hand travel experiences around the world -- this task both challenges my organizing intellect and brings me much joy. I immerse myself in the past so deeply that I am often mentally back in time with my characters. They become almost real to me. I have even, on occasion, gotten emotionally moved at having to leave my characters forever at the end of a particular story!

But I would say that the biggest shock I have discovered as a writer is the mixed reaction of my readers. Many are encouraging and enthusiastic. Bless them! They provide the necessary feedback an author needs: Did the story capture their interest? Have I shown any improvement as a writer since my last story? Was the plot and ending satisfying? Did you enjoy the characters? Did I overlook any spelling or continuity errors? Yet other readers are rather lifeless and unhelpful. I have had to cajole such people or even badger them to read something that usually takes only twenty to forty-five minutes to consider. I might wait days or even weeks to get any kind of reaction. Then it is typically something brief and bland like: "Oh, it was good." Or "I liked it." And that's it. Some opinion! The feeling must be the same for an artist who works tirelessly on a painting or sculpture or musical composition -- only to have it glanced at or partially heard, then casually moved past. Arrgh! The final irony here is that those who know you best are often your most disappointing critics. Budding authors -- be forewarned! Such disregard will hurt.

Fortunately, there are many writer's blogs, Facebook groups, and other websites that cater to your needs for inspiration, support, and feedback. In such free digital environments, you will feel part of a respected community of authors like yourself. "Beta-Reader" partner groups will also give you reasoned critiques and advice as to how to further improve your skills.

How do you finally get your works in print? Well, you can spend a lot of money and find a book agent, and hire a professional editor and cover design artist, and market your book on Amazon or Barnes & Noble. True, you will get some of that money back in royalties, providing your work becomes popular and sells a lot. Or you could be extremely fortunate and create a huge best-seller and become quite wealthy. But the easiest and least expensive way to publish your book is by using one of several online self-publishing companies. I have successfully used www.lulu.com three times so far and will continue to use them. They will produce your final book version in hardback, paperback, or as an e-book. There is no minimum purchase, so you can have just one finished copy for yourself if you prefer. They use a handy template which allows you to simply drop in your Microsoft Word file pages, choose the colors and photographs for your cover design, and check the final product before it is produced. Then you can order multiple copies if you want -- a sliding discount scale is used -- or people can go to the company's website and buy it directly themselves. For a typical 400-page hardcover book with dust jacket, the cost is just under $20. The shorter the page amount, the less expensive the book. Paperback and e-book versions are even cheaper.

Writing is a fascinating process, in that you ultimately create something out of nothing. All the people you have met in your life, and all of your adventures and experiences, will subtly morph and eventually slip into your works. Regardless, coupled with all the books you have read over the years, you will still produce a totally unique product which will hopefully give you and others lasting pleasure over the years.

It is said that all of us will be forgotten after only two generations, because the oral memories of those who actually knew us once will be gone. But if you write something down, it will likely endure -- somewhere and somehow -- as such things have continued to exist for thousands of years. Hence, your humble 'word-smithing' could potentially provide you with a rare, small touch of real immortality.

So... what are you waiting for?

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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