

How NOT to Write a Novel

Thursday, 01 May 2008

Last Updated Saturday, 08 November 2008

What a fabulous book! Here's our review of a new book about all the mistakes you're likely to make while writing your novel. Reading this book can save your skin with publishers.

How to Write a Book Series - How NOT to Write a Novel

200 classic mistakes and how to avoid them - A misstep-by-misstep guide

A couple of years ago we ran a novel writing contest. We only received 23 entries, but that was plenty.

A few were decent. Three had potential. The rest were, and I'll be nice, not quite up to snuff. Honestly, half of the entries were horrible. We couldn't imagine how these folks could have thought their books were complete.

Typos... misspellings... poorly constructed sentences. Lack of editing was just one small part of the problem. The books were dull. The characters were predictable or flat. The story line in some cases seemed to be missing in action. Oh, it was a grueling process for us...

So when I was asked to review the new book by Howard Mittlemark and Sandra Newman, How NOT To Write a Novel, I jumped on the chance.

Learning from the mistakes of others is always valuable. Reading well-written novels should be a top priority for any aspiring author, but sometimes it's nice to know if you're making any of the classic mistakes. That's why I like this book.

First, I'll assume that you read voraciously if you're a writer. If you're not, I recommend that you read a half dozen good novels before reading this book.

Now, assuming you read consistently in the genre in which you intend to write, you'll have some sense of what works. This book shows you what doesn't work - and why. The book is divided into seven parts.

- Plot

- Character

- Style - the basics

- Style - perspective and voice

- The world of the bad novel

- Special effects and novelty acts - Do not try this at home

- How not to sell a novel
How to Write a Book by BAD Example

What I like about their book is how Mittlemark and Newman provide specific examples of bad writing to illustrate their points. Some are quite humorous. Others are downright painful to read.

For example, in section 1 on Plot, they provide an example where the plot is too slight:

"Fools," Thomas Abrams thought, shaking his head as he completed his inspection of the drainage assembly under the worried eyes of Len Stewart. "Foolish, foolish, fools," he muttered. Squirring out from under the catchment basin, he stood up and brushed off the grit that clunk to his gray overalls. Then he picked up his clipboard and made a few notes on the form, while Len waited anxiously for the verdict. Thomas didn't mind making him wait.

"Well," he said, as he finished and put the pen away. "Well, well, well."

"What is it?" Len asked, unable to keep a tremor out of his voice.

"When will you people learn that you can't use a B-142 joint-enclosure with a 1811-D-nipple cinch?"

"B-but--" Len stammered.

"Or maybe, let me take a wild guess here, just maybe you confused an 1811-D with an 1811-E?" He paused to let it sink in before delivering the death blow. "... Again."

He left Len speechless and walked away without a look back, chuckling ruefully as he managed the look on Len's face when he fully realized the implications of his mistake.

"Death blow?" Oh, my... that's really bad. Sucks you right in, doesn't it?

The authors go on to provide examples on plot lines that are delayed too long, the character's childhood is recounted to no purpose, and in which the leader is intentionally misled. And that's just a quarter of what's in the first section.

Fortunately, they don't leave you hanging after one of their examples. They'll tell you why the passage doesn't work and what you can do to improve it.

The section on endings is particularly good, as that's one place many authors struggle. "How do I end this, or get rid of this character?" They give the example of one inconvenient character offed himself for no good reason. "For a moment hope flared in him -- was there a way out? No! It had all gone too far. Damn that merger! As he pulled the trigger he hoped there would be a way to atone for all his sins in the other world."

In the chapter on getting to know your hero, they provide a nice list of reasons why your readers won't necessarily like your hero. They won't like him just because he meditates or goes to Burning Man. They won't care that his maid is like a best friend or that he has green eyes. While these descriptions may round out your character, they won't make him emotionally appealing to your reader.

I could go on, but I won't. Buy the book for yourself.
Here's what we recommend...

My suggestion: Don't just read the book. Take one example every day for the next year and rewrite it. Can you do better?

As a marketing copywriter, I watch for bad copy to rewrite as often as I look for good copy to emulate. I learn and grow from both. Great novel writers do the same, especially when just beginning. Ten or more drafts of a first novel is not uncommon. Successful authors often throw out complete sections of their first draft, eliminate characters, and completely

change the ending. Don't be afraid to learn from what doesn't work.

But also don't be afraid to make mistakes. You'll look back on your first attempts at writing and say, "eeeyuuu... that's BAD!" So what? Do it anyway.

One more thing: read the final chapter of their book a couple of times. They provide one of the best and most concise explanations of how to sell a book that I've seen. They provide several examples of query letters and explain the process that you'll go through to find a publisher for your book.

Enjoy