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The Psychologist as Novelist

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Exacting change in patients, students, supervisees, and other parties need not be limited to the classroom, consulting room, self-help books, or psychological texts. Authors may also educate and impact others through fiction. Specifically, the literary or commercial novel affords psychologists the opportunity to enlighten, empower, or otherwise touch the lives of those not normally privy to our expertise. To be sure, some mental health professionals have made the leap into fiction, but psychologists have been slow to follow, especially when compared with other professions (e.g., law, medicine). This article invites psychologists to apply their knowledge of human behavior and facility with the written word to the modern novel. Steps for starting are itemized as is other information pertinent to persisting in the face of opposition and resistance. A case study briefly describing this author's journey is also offered.

Keywords: fiction, novel, writing

Among other things, as psychologists we are trained to write. We begin learning the craft as undergraduates, and as graduate students we refine our skills composing theses, dissertations, and other manuscripts. As professionals, many of us continue writing journal articles, trade manuals, textbooks, and commercial ("pop") pieces for the general public.

Few of us, however, write fiction. This is in contrast to the multitude of attorneys, physicians, police officers, and other professionals using story to entertain as well as educate the public. Although there are many possible explanations as to why few psychologists have ventured beyond the boundaries of nonfiction, there are several reasons some of us might want to consider expanding our range of practice and influence.

In this article I first describe how psychologists possess many of the aptitudes required for successful fiction. Although some of us may be unaware, our skills as clinicians, researchers, instructors, and administrators provide us with many of the elements conducive to crafting the modern novel. Writing is a creative outlet for the psychologist as well as an excellent alternative form of research and professional development. Publishing one's work, of course, is also a potential source of revenue.

Second, I discuss how fiction may be a heuristic alternative to traditional methods of academic study and instruction. Likewise, the novel is a powerful way to reach and educate the general public on psychological principles traditionally limited to the college classroom or popular text. The movie script, of course, is yet another way that fiction may be used to illustrate principles of human behavior, psychopathology, and treatment.

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There are some opportunity costs to writing fiction, however, and the learning curve is steep. Similarly, getting an agent, selling the work, and marketing the material is no small feat, and the amount of rejection and criticism one must endure is sure to thicken the skin. Consequently, my last purpose in this article is to provide information on how to get started as well as persevere when confronted by the inevitable roadblocks to publication.

Psychology and Fiction

As noted above, some of us may not realize we have many of the skills necessary for successful storytelling. To begin with, we have a reasonable working knowledge of the language, given that most of us completed a thesis and dissertation during graduate training. Even if some of us are weak in punctuation, spelling, grammar, and/or other rules of writing, there are basic texts (e.g., Strunk & White, 1979), copy editors, and computer software (Strunk & White, 1990) that can help us with our delivery.

More important is the fact that many of us are natural storytellers. As instructors, for instance, we know a good story is a surefire way of engaging students and helping them digest course concepts. Likewise, as clinicians we can count on patient identification with fictional characters to deepen the work or promote a healthier worldview. It could even be argued that the process of psychotherapy is similar to "The Hero's Journey" (Campbell, 1949; Vogler, 1998) insofar as the therapist–hero encounters a variety of resistances before crafting creative solutions to patient problems that heretofore appeared hopeless.

As psychologists, of course, we are also experts in human behavior. We understand a variety of physiological features, family factors, personality traits, and social principles that motivate conduct, shape character, create disorder, and help or hinder change. We are also experts on relationships—indeed, a good many of us make a living researching interpersonal relations and/or educating and treating others whose symptoms are at least a byproduct, if not the direct result, of disturbances in contact.

Likewise, good fiction, commercial or literary, is about human behavior and, consequently, relationships. For instance, intrapsy-

chic, interpersonal, and group conflict is what drives protagonists, antagonists, and other story characters toward their fate. Character success in confronting these conflicts, and the degree to which the reader relates to their plight, is the first step in a book's success.

Psychologists also have organizational skills. Specifically, we have learned to organize lesson plans, treatment plans, research designs, budgets, personnel, and other resources to succeed in independent practice, academia, and other professional settings. As many of us have also learned, failure to plan can eventuate in lost income, canceled contracts, dissatisfied patients, confused students, fewer grants, and failed tenure and/or promotion.

Good fiction, especially commercial fiction, also involves organizational skills. Specifically, the novelist must be able to structure the book so that it has a plot, subplots, and an integrative flow that moves the story forward. All facets of the plot and subplot must converge during the climax, and an explanation of character roles following the apex of the story is crucial to a satisfying denouement. Some writers, in fact, have gone so far as to say, "fiction is architecture."

Finally, as psychologists, we are at our best when creative. Whether expressed as an unusual classroom activity, homework assignment, clinical intervention, research design, organizational move, or essay, it is creativity that propels our profession forward. Obviously, were it not for the creative musings of Sigmund Freud, Stanley Millgram, Albert Bandura, Milton Erickson, and other pioneers, psychology and psychotherapy as we know them today would be dramatically different.

Creativity, of course, is the wellspring of compelling fiction. The writer must drum up characters from scratch or at least add, modify, and delete features of real persons remade into fictional form. The writer also must create a host of obstacles that interfere with each character's goals and structure a climax that creatively brings all those in conflict together. And, as noted above, the novelist's work does not end with the book, because she or he must constantly search for new and different ways of distributing and marketing the material in an era of fierce competition and little organizational support.

Getting Started

Training and skills notwithstanding, there remain some distinct and not so insignificant differences between conducting scholarly work and writing novels. Specifically, there are rules of plot and structure that are extremely important to know and understand before undertaking short or long form fiction. Likewise, there are rules of dialogue and exposition in fiction that do not apply in professional exchanges. Also, attention to character and its development is never wasted, and last, there are rules of nonfiction the psychologist must "unlearn" in order to successfully create. Although detailed attention to each of these areas is beyond the scope of this article, a few guidelines for getting started are provided below.

Books

The literature on crafting fiction is as voluminous as the literature on conducting psychotherapy. Nonetheless, as in our field, there are certain texts that are widely recognized as gold standards in the industry. For plot and structure they include Jack Bickham's *Writing Novels That Sell* (1989) and *Scene and Structure* (1993) and Chris Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (1998). For an excellent text on character and its development see Nancy Kress's *Dynamic Characters* (1998). For a solid overview of all aspects of writing see *The Writer's Digest Guide to Good Writing* (Clark, Woods, Blocksom, & Terez, 1994). These books can be found in the writing section of any major bookstore or in one's local library.

Audiotapes and Videotapes

Gary Provost (1991) has produced an excellent audiotape and videotape writing series (available at www.writersretreatworkshop.com) called *The Audio Novel Workshop* and *The Video Novel Workshop*, respectively.

Periodicals

Writer's Digest is perhaps the most popular and widely distributed magazine on writing. It is published monthly and routinely has articles on plot, character, dialogue, getting an agent and/or publisher, and other aspects of crafting and selling fiction as well as nonfiction. It also features information on writers conferences and contests for short- and long-form stories. *Fiction Writer* is another monthly periodical devoted exclusively to fiction, and both these magazines (among still others) are easily found at one's local major bookseller. For a steady diet of either of these periodicals, of course, one may choose to subscribe.

Conferences

Like psychology and psychotherapy, every year there are hundreds of conferences devoted to one or more aspects of writing, agenting, selling, and/or marketing one's work. And, again, like psychology, usually these conferences last several days if not a week (even longer, in some cases) and are divided into daily workshops to develop and refine one's craft. Also, these conferences are a useful way to learn from other writers as well as commiserate or get inspired. Such conferences, of course, are usually not complete without opportunities to meet agents or get one's work heard by editors. Some popular conferences include Salt Lake City's *Writers at Work*, the *Santa Barbara Writers Conference*, and the *Maui Writers Conference*.

Writers Groups

Another useful tool in getting started is to join a writers group. Similar to a therapy, supervision, or peer consultation group, the purpose of the writers group is to give the newcomer a place to read and receive feedback on her or his work. Usually, these groups meet for several hours a week (or every other week) and consist of roughly 5–10 members. Likewise, these groups oftentimes function under the umbrella of a larger local writers' organization that meets monthly to network, educate members about upcoming events, and feature new and veteran poets, novelists, and short formers.

Software

Increasingly, tips for generating story ideas, creating characters, structuring plots, and writing swift dialogue are offered in com-

puter programs. *WritePro* (Stein, 1989) and *FictionMaster* (Stein, 1989) are two of the more popular packages available.

Getting Published

Getting an Agent

Unfortunately, writing the book is only the first step to getting published. Unlike nonfiction, where a prospectus and a couple of sample chapters will suffice for a publishing contract, with fiction one must secure an agent before an editor will even look at one's (completed and polished) work. Gone are the days when an editor would work closely with the writer at developing an idea into a manuscript or nurturing a new writer to success. Instead, literary agents are the gatekeepers to publication, and finding one can be as difficult as publishing an article in *The American Psychologist.*

That said, getting an agent is not impossible, and thousands of writers have successfully secured literary representation. Oftentimes, writers will come to the attention of an agent after being referred by a published author. The difficulty, of course, is not everyone knows a published novelist, let alone one willing to read others' work and refer.

Another vehicle for securing representation is to study the Acknowledgments section of writing in one's genre (e.g., mystery, thriller–suspense, romance, literary) and querying the agent listed. The query letter is simply a one-page summary of one's novel and a request that the agent look at the completed manuscript (for more information on the query letter, see any recent issue of *Writer's Digest*).

Last, and perhaps most important, see the annual *Writer's Digest Guide to Literary Agents* (Dickerson, 2006) and the *Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents* (Herman, 2006). Inside, the reader will find the addresses, interests, and submission requirements of hundreds of literary representatives. Look for ones that are taking new clients, and query them accordingly.

Getting a Publisher

Once the psychologist has an agent—and be prepared, for this can take months if not years—it is then his or her job to sell one's work. Typically, the agent has a relationship with and has done previous business with editors in various publishing houses. If they like the work, these editors, in turn, try to "sell" the psychologist and her or his manuscript to powerbrokers higher on the publishing house's food chain. Ideally, a decision is made to publish the work and a contract is offered.

The publishing contract usually will include an advance (e.g., $5,000–$10,000) that will be deducted from one's royalties. Royalties will be roughly 5%–10% of the cover price of the book. Also, keep in mind that the agent receives 15% on advances and future sales; the agent may make even more (e.g., 20%) on movie or other subsidiary (e.g., mass paperback) rights.

Getting Sold

Sometimes six-figure book contracts, star-studded cocktail parties, bicoastal book tours, mood-elevating book signings, and special guest appearances on *Oprah* follow the publication of a novel. Most of the time, however, writers are not so fortunate and the publisher leaves it up to the author to decide how much money and time to devote to selling the work. Fortunately, psychologists have a monthly magazine (the American Psychological Association's *Monitor on Psychology*); regional and national conferences (e.g., Western Psychological Association, Rocky Mountain Psychological Association, American Psychological Association); and perhaps a local, regional, and/or national reputation as a clinician, teacher, lecturer, or researcher that affords other opportunities for marketing one's material. Likewise, psychologists have titles (e.g., PhD, EdD, PsyD) that will open doors to booksellers, talk radio, and TV hosts, and some are Internet savvy and have a variety of other vehicles for marketing in cyberspace.

Self-Publishing

Increasingly, novelists are self-publishing their work. Frustration with agents, editors, marketing departments, and nominal royalties are just some of the reasons why writers are taking less traditional routes to press. According to Poynter (2002), "In self-publishing you invest the money, but you do not have to share the net" (p. 36). He also notes how the writer who self-publishes has more control over typeset, cover, margins, and paper quality. Likewise, the time between submission and release is much shorter (e.g., traditional publishers average 18 months to print work that the self-publisher can finish in weeks), and either way the author must promote his or her own work.

Making Money

Publishing one's fiction is certainly an alternative form of revenue. In some cases, the income can be quite substantial, especially in the event of subsequent printings, TV or film options, and mass paperback and foreign distribution. Indeed, psychologists Jonathan Kellerman and Stephen White and psychiatrists Irvin Yalom and Keith Ablow have been enormously successful and remind us that the extrinsic rewards of writing can be prodigious.

Most novelists, however, make little on their work. In fact, writer Jean Brody (personal communication, 1998) once said, "the average novelist makes only $7,000 a year." It has also been said that 90% of those writing are novelists, yet only 10% of what is published is fiction. Indeed, the competition is keen, and most books do not survive after the first printing. Likewise, Hollywood, major supermarket chains, and other countries may never come calling. Hence, "don't quit your day job."

Resistance

Others

As implied above, writing fiction is a labor of love. Like other activities, the enterprise will be considerably more satisfying if one finds intrinsic satisfaction in the process. Others, however, are not privy to our peak writing experiences. Consequently, they may not understand, let alone accept or appreciate, the time one spends crafting novels. In fact, academic psychologists may encounter resistance from colleagues when proposing published fiction as reason for tenure and promotion. Likewise, the academic or any other publicly employed psychologist is unlikely to secure release time or a sabbatical to write stories. One may argue (as I do below)

that fiction can augment classroom texts and bring psychology to the general public, but in most professional settings, this is a tough sell.

It also may be a tough sell with family and friends. Initially, they may be quite excited, curious, and supportive. Writing takes time, however, and after a while friends feel rejected, children feel abandoned, and spouses start snapping, "Show me the money!" Initially, therefore, one may elect to consider writing as an avocation and work it into one's schedule with the same consistency and finesse as with other hobbies.

Self

Resistance may also be internal. In other words, there are a variety of restraints one can place on oneself in a way that interferes with creating. As implied above, writing takes time and, consequently, it must come from other areas of one's life including, but not limited to, hours with friends, family, or self. Writing a novel is also much more time intensive than a journal article and, therefore, impatience and frustration can interfere with satisfaction and productivity. Once one completes a draft, the delight in having written a book can be quickly compromised by the fact that now it must be rewritten (and rewritten and rewritten. . .) and, again, place one at odds with finishing the project.

Time spent writing must also be scheduled; otherwise, one is less likely to complete the work. Like our patients or classes, one must make daily appointments with the book to get it done. It is too easy to tell oneself, "I don't have enough time," or "I'll write this summer." Then summer arrives, or other demands surface, and the next thing is, "I'll write once the kids are back in school." As horror–comedy novelist Chris Moore once said, "You've got to set aside time to write. Every day" (personal communication, 2001).

Resistance to seeing the manuscript through to publication may also increase the more familiar one becomes with the industry. As noted above, writing the book is just the first of four steps to publication. Getting an agent, finding a publisher, and marketing the work are the remaining hurdles, and each offers additional reason to surrender. Jonathan Kellerman, for instance, wrote eight books before he published his first novel, *When the Bough Breaks* (1985). John Grisham's first book, *A Time to Kill* (1989/1992), took a long time to sell and did poorly until he released *The Firm* (1991). Recently, a highly respected literary press suddenly cancelled a colleague's book contract after telling him for 2 years how excited they were to publish his first novel, *Let Heaven Swallow the Smoke* (Coffey, 2005).

Finally, one can easily decide never to write another word once reviews arrive, formally (e.g., newspapers and magazines) or informally (e.g., comments from friends and family). To be sure, some people will love our work. We are the next King, Capote, or Kellerman, and when we hear such praise we bashfully, humbly say, "Oh, gee. Don't."

Then there are the others. Consider a review of my second novel, *Reality Testing* (Moreno, 2005), by a published and very successful writer:

> You've written a 260-page book about dying babies. I think the marketing obstacles are manifest. I don't know how I would overcome them, but I don't think a rewrite is going to do it. . .I'm at a loss on this one. . .I can't think of anything more painful for a writer than to hear he just spent a significant chunk of his life working on an ill-advised idea, but I think that's what you have here (C. Moore, personal communication, 2001).

Fortunately, this comment was offset by favorable comments from a number of other reviewers, including published novelists. Nonetheless, the comments stung and were yet another painful reminder that we cannot please everyone.

Fiction as Education

Once finally published, one may use the work to educate others. As many of us are aware, good stories have long offered important lessons and information about people, places, and things that otherwise might have remained unfamiliar to readers. How many times, however, have we, as psychologists, cringed at a novelist's (or filmmaker's) depiction of a therapy session, personality type, or form of psychopathology? No doubt, some novelists capture aspects of the trade so well they warrant honorary doctorates. But many writers are inaccurate in their portrayal of psychological principles and practice, despite their benign intent or facility with the written word.

To date, one might be able to fill a small classroom with mental health professionals who are published novelists. A handful are psychologists. Most clinicians write mysteries (Stephen White, 1991, *Privileged Information*), whereas some pen literary fiction (e.g., Irvin Yalom, 1992, *When Nietzsche Wept*). A few writers offer compelling portrayals of psychotherapy (e.g., Irvin Yalom, 1996, *Lying on the Couch*, and 2005, *The Schopenhauer Cure*), psychopathology, (e.g., Jonathan Kellerman, 1993, *Devil's Waltz*), assessment–diagnosis (e.g., Anna Salter, 1997, *Shiny Water*), and chemical dependency (e.g., Keith Ablow, 1997, *Denial*). Compared with the proliferation of work by attorneys, physicians, and police officers, however, the market remains wide open for additional dramatization of applied psychology.

Case Study

In graduate school, I was heavily invested in clinical quantitative research. Following graduation and licensure, however, I became increasingly interested in qualitative research and published case studies accordingly. Then I met George.

George was my mother's latest significant other, and an Almighty One at that, given his position with the Orange County Superior Court. Listening to the Honorable Mr. G., I became transfixed by his recollection of courtroom dramas. I began taping our conversations and one day sat down to transcribe his stories. Fictitious characters, events, and outcomes, however, leapt off my fingertips. Suddenly, I was keystroking dialogue I had never heard.

The result was a couple of short stories having little to do with the good judge's life. When George and my mother separated, I divorced his script (intellectual property rights is another issue) and ran off with an idea of my own. Over the next several years I penned my first novel, *A Duty to Warn* (Moreno, 2000), a psychologist's legal–ethical–moral dilemma resulting from his AIDS patient's refusal to tell his lovers of his condition. Eighty rejection letters later, I finally secured a literary agent. One year after that, I fired her because the manuscript never left her office.

Frustrated, I started my second book, *Reality Testing* (Moreno, 2005), the story of a premature infant whose struggle to survive is complicated by suspected malfeasance among hospital staff. Several dozen rejection letters (and rewrites) later, the book landed a top-flight literary agent with a stable of well-known and prize-winning authors. The bad news is she wanted me to serialize my books (a la Kellerman) and plunk my protagonist into one prickly predicament after another. Unwilling to do this, I am, once again, without representation.

So, I've started my third book. *The Soma Solution* is the story of a 78-year-old widow who tees off her family by forsaking a promising marriage proposal to play professional golf. I will probably ditch *A Duty to Warn*, even though the first chapter was recently accepted for publication as a short story (Moreno, in press). Frankly, I'm sick of it, and according to one prospective agent, AIDS is "passé." (I told her to tell that to someone who has it.) *Reality Testing* remains worthy, and I will probably rewrite it (again) before adventuring back into the jungle of literary agents.[1]

Implications for Practice

Writing fiction can be terribly satisfying. It is an outlet for the psychologist's creativity and may expand the clinician's, researcher's, and/or instructor's range of professional development and practice. It is also a vehicle for reaching a wider audience insofar as it affords our patients, students, and the general public an opportunity to be educated as well as entertained. Specifically, there is room for psychologists to provide accurate descriptions of characters in relationship as well as accurately dramatize a variety of assessment methods, psychiatric conditions, treatment interventions, and outcomes. On the other hand, the reader is reminded that there are many hardships in the process and, unlike most journal articles or textbooks, it may take years—perhaps longer—to see the work in print. Like the novelist's protagonist, however, if one is persistent, clever, and patient the result can be rewarding for oneself and others.

[1] The distinguished judge, George, by the way, is alive and well, albeit in Bermuda, where he remains in hiding after fleeing California following his arrest for cavorting with the wife of a Mexican Mafia fellow over whose trial he was presiding.

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