

## Ten (or so) Things That Somebody Should Tell Up-and-Coming Writers

*A lecture delivered to the Taos Toolbox Workshop  
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Hi. I'm Ian. More on that in a second. But first:

Your instructors have a tremendous wealth of talent, skill, and experience. Take advantage of that while you're here. (Obviously you intend to, because otherwise why would you be here?) Walter and Nancy have probably forgotten more about writing than I will ever know. So when Walter invited me to come up and give a lecture, I had to think long and hard to figure out if I knew anything that could actually be of use to you. It's not the first time I've received a very kind invitation from Walter, entirely out of the blue, and I've yet to turn him down. (Except for the time he left a cryptic message on my phone, asking if I wanted to fly to Washington to chat with some guys who were "probably" arms dealers. That really happened.) As you'll hear, I owe a lot to Walter.

But, unlike Walter and Nancy, I'm not so far ahead of you. I'm much closer to where you are in the development of your writing careers than I'll ever be to the rarified heights where they dwell. Honestly, I'll never be a Nancy Kress or a Walter Jon Williams. I attended Clarion just 9 years ago. So it won't be long before some of you are where I am now. And some, if not most of you, will be far ahead of me in 9 short years.

So rather than talk about issues of skill and craft, about plot and characters and settings and story structure (although I'm happy to talk about that stuff, too, if there's interest later) I thought instead it would make more sense for me to speak from the perspective of somebody who has been extraordinarily lucky, who has had a few books published, who has just enough experience to take a stab at telling you things that might be useful at this point.

Perhaps I can save you a little bit of time. Or, failing that, spare you a bit of frustration. Or, failing that, lessen it.

Naturally, it's up to you to decide whether or not I'm somebody worth listening to. To that end, let me begin by telling you about myself and the path I took to get here. I'll start by telling you straight away that I am not what many would consider an objectively "successful" writer. I have a good but mentally exhausting day job and I probably always will. I'll never be somebody who gets award nominations, I'll never be somebody who supports his family through writing. However, those aren't my aims. Compared to what I wanted to achieve when I started out, I've been remarkably successful.

(Your goals might differ from mine. That's OK. More on that in a second, too. But my list of things people should tell up-and-comers still applies to you.)

OK. So a little bit about me, since you probably have no idea who I am.

Like all of you, I've always felt compelled to write. I'd been encouraged to write for many years but I'd always disregarded those encouragements. But over the years I read so many great books that it stoked this burning desire to learn how to tell a good story -- just for the sheer joy of "discovering" a story. I wanted to be able to tell myself stories like the wonderful novels I read. I also had from time to time the experience that I'm sure all of you have had, which is to put down a book in annoyance or disgust, thinking, "Oh, come ON. I could do better than this." Rage is a strong motivator.

But I was foolish about how I went about getting started. For many years I foolishly thought that I'd start writing when the time was right -- I didn't understand that writing is something you have to make time for. So I waited until I finished grad school and moved across the country, a thousand miles from my friends and loved ones. And, obviously, away from anything remotely related to genre writing; everybody knows there are no SFF writers in New Mexico. So I made a beeline for the Online Writing Workshop (one of the best decisions I've ever made). And I made a promise to myself: that I would be humble, and that I would take as long as I needed to learn as much as I needed. That was in March of 2003. After a year and a half on the OWW I attended a weekend writing workshop, my first face-to-face workshop. That was a very positive experience, so it gave me the boost I needed to apply to Clarion in 2005. There I met Walter. Toward the end of Clarion, he said, "I notice you live in Los Alamos. Did you know that we have a writing group that meets in Albuquerque? George Martin never listens to us, but it's a pretty good group." Little did I realize that when I took a job in New Mexico I'd inadvertently moved to the epicenter of SFF writing in the southwest.

I'd been in Critical Mass a little while when I got invited to join the Wild Cards Trust. Through that I met my agent, purely socially. Now, Critical Mass has a pay-to-play rule, meaning that in order to participate in the meetings one has to submit work for critique. (This sounds obvious, but believe me, not doing this has been the death of countless critique groups probably since the invention of the literature of fiction.) Which meant that each month I had to come up with a new story plot. Problem is that I'm slow and plot takes a long time for me. So after a year or so I decided that if instead I could work out the plot of a practice novel, I could spend a year not worrying about plot and just concentrating on issues of craft. So I brought an idea to the group to see if they thought it was a viable practice novel. They convinced me that it wasn't such a stupid idea after all, but that it was too big for one book, so my practice novel became a practice trilogy. And the agent that I'd met socially through Wild Cards offered, entirely out of the blue, to take a look if I ever happened to have a book to shop around. She sold that trilogy to PNH at Tor based on the unfinished as-typed first draft of the first book. That became the Milkweed Triptych: BITTER SEEDS, THE COLDEST WAR, and NECESSARY EVIL. I sold another book to Tor after that (SOMETHING MORE THAN NIGHT). And now I'm under contract to write a clockpunk fantasy trilogy for Orbit US/UK, the first of which is scheduled for March 2015.

Now, if you listened carefully to this précis of my career, you might have noticed a recurring theme. And in fact the moral of this story is actually my first point:

### **1. It's better to be lucky than good.**

Being good is essential in the long run, if you want to have a long run. So if you can be both, great! Aim for that. How do you get good? By doing what you're doing here: Work hard. Analyze your work and the work of others. Form a peer group. Study work that you find brilliant and work that you find terrible. But that's why you're here. You already know this. So you know how to become a good writer, otherwise you wouldn't be here.

But here's a cruel truth of the uncaring universe: in a fair fight, always put your money on luck. Now that might sound disheartening, but it's not meant to be. This is actually good news, so please don't despair. Why? Because:

### **2. You have the power to make your own luck-- good or bad.**

I made my own good luck by joining the OWW, and going to Clarion, and meeting Walter -- it's called "networking". And anybody who tells you that networking isn't a part of the writing business is either ignorant or a liar. True talent and skill will win out in the end -- but it can take a very long time. I've been at the stage of trying to sell stuff for about 10 years, and still every single short story sale I've ever had has come about through somebody knowing me or knowing of me. If there's interest I can talk more about that later. (There are brilliant writers who work very successfully in solitude -- I know that Paolo Bacigalupi was selling stories left and right and had stuff in Gardner Dozois's Best-Of anthologies before he started interacting with other pro writers. He's just that good.)

Notice I say I made my own good luck. Why good? Because I've strived to be humble, and I genuinely try to be a nice guy. I fail as often as not, but I really do try. I've made many friends among my writing peers, genuine friends, not just acquaintances who can help me further my career. Of course, you can make your own bad luck if you so choose, too. That's easy: just be an asshole with a shitty attitude.

If you strive to become a skilled writer, and you strive to amass your own personal store of good luck, you will eventually find success. But what does that even mean? This brings me to point number three.

### **3. My success is not your success. Your triumphs are not my triumphs.**

You, and only you, get to choose what constitute noteworthy achievements in your own writing career. Nobody else has the right to decide that for you. I get to set my own

goals, but I don't get to tell you what your goals should be. And vice versa. Nobody, but nobody, gets to tell you that you don't deserve to be pleased, or displeased, with what you're learning, doing, achieving. Some people strive just to learn how to tell themselves stories and couldn't care less about publication; some people are fulfilled by writing fanfic; some people feel they're not worthy of notice until they have a prestigious juried award. Hey, whatever floats your boat. We're all motivated differently.

Which brings me to my next point.

Show of hands, please:

How many of you are here because you absolutely love to write? Because you can't NOT write? Because if they locked you in a cell for the rest of your life, you'd be the person writing on the walls with your own bloody fingertips after they took away your pens and paper? And after they bandaged your hands you'd be the lunatic smearing stories on the walls with your own urine and feces?

It's OK to say yes. We're among friends here. It's also OK to say no.

**4. It's OK if you're not inclined to write on the walls in your own blood and urine. That doesn't mean you're not a "real writer" (whatever that is).**

But it does mean you'll have days when you'd rather eat broken glass than write a single sentence.

There really are people like that. Maybe there are some in this very room. But here's the thing: it's PERFECTLY OK if you're not that person. But if you want to be a full-time writer, the life sort of demands that of you. It's OK to not want to be a full-time writer, too. I started writing because I was bored and lonely and had been told, long long ago, that I might have a talent for it. I never planned for it to become my full-time career, and in fact I never expected to get as far as I have. But now that I have, I'm more convinced than ever that I don't want to be a full-time writer.

There are as many ways to be a writer as there are writers. Everybody's path is different. There is only one rule for being a writer. I hope you all know it. (What is the one hard-and-fast rule for being a writer? WRITE!) There's more to becoming a good writer, but we all start at the same place.

You're still a "real writer" even after the 20th time somebody asks you what you write and then stares at you like you've grown a second head because they've never heard of anything you've written and, hey, I thought all writers were famous?

You, and only you, get to decide how writing fits into your life. You and only you get to determine the parameters of that relationship. Just don't be a poseur, and don't be a

dilettante.

Speaking of relationships, that brings me to my fifth point. A friend once told me that relationships are like sharks: either they keep moving forward, or they die.

### **5. Your relationship to writing will change over time. This is natural and inevitable.**

Again, this doesn't mean you're not a "real writer." Just the opposite. It means you're a real writer locked in a real relationship to a difficult endeavor. It's OK to get discouraged from time to time. If you don't get discouraged from time to time, you're probably doing this wrong.

I said a few moments ago that it's OK not to be consumed with bloody-fingertip hypergraphia. I also said that if you're not that person, you'll inevitably have days when you'd rather eat glass than write.

When I was just starting out and knew nothing, I could easily write and revise and edit and rewrite for 9-10 hours a day on my days off. I loved it -- I looked forward to weekends so that I could write nonstop. Sound familiar?

Fast forward a few years. My relationship to writing has changed. There are days when I can barely muster the energy to be a part-time writer. At its worst, I've entertained thoughts of repaying my advances just so that I could stop embarrassing myself with my pathetic scribbles. If I really want to, I can do that. Meanwhile, though, the extra income is nice and I recently got married and want to have some extra cash for our honeymoon.

Look. Sometimes you write for the sheer joy of storytelling, the sheer joy of creation. And sometimes you write because it'll pay for repairs to a leaky roof and pad the retirement savings. Both are perfectly legitimate.

Try to nurture your relationship with writing. Be pragmatic, of course, but don't forget the love that started you down the path that took you here to Taos. Because writing is a long, long path and in just a few years from now you'll look back over your shoulder and you won't be able to see the trailhead.

Which brings me to my next point.

### **6. Be patient.**

Things will happen in their own time. I have a story in F&SF right now that I wrote at Clarion and took NINE YEARS to sell. I have another story that I wrote for a Rio Hondo workshop here a few years back. Couldn't sell it anywhere. Got some very

discouraging automatic rejections on it. Then a couple years later Cat Valente, who had been at that Rio Hondo, became the editor of Apex Magazine. First thing she did was email to ask if that story had ever been published. She bought it, published it, and it got reprinted in a year's best anthology.

And if you think that's maddening, publishing can be even more maddening when it comes to novels. More on that momentarily. But peaking of patience...

How many of you have spent the past, say, five years (minimum) building a solid reputation and a large online peer group? How many of you have already established a solid online fan base of thousands waiting for your first novel to drop? I'm asking how many of you have spent years building, and being an integral part of, a dedicated community?

This is relevant. Why?

**7. Once you break in (assuming you choose to follow a path where that concept makes sense) the community at large will decide — very, very quickly — whether or not you're one of the cool kids.**

And if you're not, there's not much you can do to change that. Don't obsess over it. Just keep doing what you love and keep your head down and keep driving. Don't try to force it, and don't obsess. You didn't become a writer because you wanted fame and fortune. (If you did, you've made a terrible, terrible mistake and people should ridicule you.) You became a writer because you want to write. So concentrate on that.

I have a story that somebody (not me) put in front of a pair of editors who were putting together a very top-flight anthology. One thought it was great, in fact better than several of the stories they'd already commissioned. But the other refused to buy the story because I wasn't famous enough to include in the anthology. Quality had nothing to do with it. It would have done wonders for my career -- it would have launched my career in a totally different way.

Sometimes that's how this business works. It's really fucking unfair at times. Editors talk about the thrill of discovering a new writer. I think they're sincere when they talk about that, but sometimes they're forced to be a lot more pragmatic about it than they might want to admit.

It also goes the other way, by the way. Just because you have buzz or success one year doesn't mean that halo will follow you around forever. The great sales database in the sky is riddled with errors but it has a long memory. That's why we have pseudonyms. Just because you're a cool kid one year doesn't mean you're always getting behind that velvet rope.

For a business built on one of the most human endeavors -- storytelling -- this business is painfully impersonal in the way that can hurt the most. Be ready for that.

Speaking of the cool kids:

**7a. Envy others' success makes about as much sense as getting angry with the ocean for being wet.**

If they're finding success along the same path that you hope to follow, study what makes them successful, study what they've done right and what they've done wrong. Your path is your path and nobody else's. Don't look at the George R. R. Martins of the world and wish you could be there. Instead, study how the GRRMs and Stephen Kings and J. K. Rowlings (and even, heaven help us, the Dan Browns) of the world got to where they are.

You're not a failure just because you're not Stephen King or GRRM or JK Rowling or Dan Brown or Seanan McGuire or John Scalzi or Charlaine Harris or Charlie Stross. As long as you're doing what you love, and doing it honestly, and doing it in a way that won't suffocate that love, you'll never be a failure.

This isn't to say that you won't suffer setbacks from time to time. You will. It's part of the writer's life. Which brings me to point number 8.

**8. This is a small community. Rage in private but be politic in public.**

Setbacks happen. The market where you sell your first story might fold before it's published. Your agent might retire, or stop returning your calls. Your publisher might get bought out, and in a corporate restructuring your editor gets fired or reassigned and your books are orphaned. (If there's time later, let's talk about editors and why they're important.)

Or things can go really pear-shaped during the publication of your debut trilogy.

Everybody gets discouraged from time to time. And of course you'll need, and deserve, to get it off your chest. But remember what I said: this is a small community. So rage in private but be politic in public. Even when it's not fair.

(Now, to be excruciatingly clear, I'm not talking about things that absolutely should be made public, such as if somebody in the community is dangerous or has a history of sexual harassment.)

When the publication of my debut trilogy went wildly off the rails, I stewed for a long long time. And I got very depressed. Few people could offer any useful advice. Eventually, though, enough readers kept asking me about when my second novel would finally be

published that I had to make a public statement about the situation.

So I did something very risky: I spoke about it in public. I aired the dirty laundry by writing a very long post about it on my blog. But, to give myself credit, I did something smart. I drafted the post in depression and anger and helplessness, but I didn't post it in that state. I let it stew, and I came back to it when I could look at the situation dispassionately. And I stripped all emotion from the post: all I did was list the facts, openly but fairly, and I didn't point fingers.

My post went viral. Traffic to my blog spiked by a factor of 20 for about a week following that initial post. And thanks to Google Analytics, I could see that people all over the publishing world were reading the post -- including people inside my own and other Big 6 publishers. (This was back before the Penguin/Random House merger.)

Later, when my foreign-rights agent was shopping that trilogy around in the UK (where it eventually sold to Orbit), one publisher said she'd heard "something" about these books. John told her to read my blog post about the situation -- he pointed an industry professional to the place where an author was doing the thing he's never supposed to do: air dirty laundry. And you know what? John later told me that my blog post actually helped him sell the trilogy overseas, because I was so diplomatic about it.

So just to reiterate. Rage in private. But politic in public.

## **9. Never listen to zealots.**

Don't listen to anybody who speaks with the fervor of a zealot. Don't listen to anybody who speaks of one-size-fits-all approaches to a writing career. Every single path is different. Your job is to figure out what's right for you. To figure out how and where and why writing fits into your life. There is no right or wrong answer. My answer is not your answer, and your answer is not my answer. And your answer today might not be the right answer for you tomorrow, or next week, or next year.

Don't listen to anybody you tells you that print publishing is dead and that any author who takes a contract with a big six publisher is a fool. Don't listen to anybody you tells you that small press and self-publication is for charlatans and hacks and that traditional print publication is the only route to respectability. The landscape is changing, and there's room for both. Diversify, but don't burn bridges.

But please, for the love of God, never listen to anybody who tells you that Amazon is your champion. (But don't be so fervent that you won't take their money. I get nice royalty checks from Audible.com, and they've been a big supporter of my work. Audible is owned by Amazon.) Because I've been screwed over by Amazon's negotiating tactics twice — once while I was at Tor, under Macmillan, and now again with Orbit, which is under Hachette — I haven't spent a single dime at Amazon.com in years. The

point is that we all have to diversify, and we all have to understand that every other player in this game has their own agenda. Sometimes it aligns with ours, and sometimes it doesn't.

But never trust somebody who wants to control the acquisition AND the publication AND the distribution. This is NOT good for writers. Work with Amazon, sure. Use Amazon to further your goals, sure. It's sure as hell using you.

**10. Finally: Always keep improving. There is always room for improvement. There is always room for excellence.**

Challenge yourselves every single day.

My best work has always -- always -- come about from tackling something that seemed daunting or even impossible. The very best projects are inevitably the ones that force me to learn new things, to acquire new skills, and to stretch myself. Never feel complacent with your skill set. Never feel that your toolbox is large enough.

But, of course, I don't have to tell you that. That's why you're here.

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