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REPRISING A FEW FUNDAMENTALS

1. Writing about what you know best means writing about what you feel. All else is research. Love, hate, sorrow, fear, disappointment, hurt, ecstasy and rage all reside within the author; facts can be found in encyclopedias. Emotions connect writers with readers, conscious with subconscious.

2. Write about your novel before writing your novel. Writers who make it up as they write along create the same uncertainty in readers as is felt in themselves. Remember: most stories are told as if after the fact. Foreshadowing is impossible unless the writer knows what's going to happen; it's during the process of outlining that the writer takes on an air of *authority*.

3. Be wary of exposition. Most inexperienced writers and not a few professionals “warm-up” by “sliding into” their stories, apparently feeling the reader must be supplied with a sort of mini-history to “set the stage” (this is Prologue), or given the background of the characters (this is Resumé.) Of course the writer must know all this, but for use as “sub-text,” not filler.

4. Remember: first person “I” narrators are characters created by authors. Though primarily witnesses, they should also serve as catalysts for the final denouement. Narrators without emotion are usually without character as well. By showing emotion, narrators function as conduits for releas-

ing the emotions of the reader.

5. Every character should have an ‘attitude’. This includes the author. Readers respond viscerally to obsessed characters whose wants drive the action. Obsessed characters need not behave violently; they may, in fact, be gentle souls. But even the meek may want something badly enough to drive them to extraordinary behavior. Passive characters too often merely reflect the author.

6. Remember Aristotle’s proposition: every line of a drama should do at least one of three things: advance the story; develop (deepen) character; establish mood. Perhaps only one-tenth of published fiction attains this ideal, but this does not negate the principle. Test each line to make sure it is pulling its load. If a line, a paragraph or a page, no matter how exquisitely written, does not perform one of these functions, get rid of it.

7. We know we’ve been told a story when a character changes. In relationship stories, characters change each other. Secondary characters should not only affect the main characters, but the action as well.

8. Look for conflict whenever your characters talk to each other. Keep in mind that each character arrives on scene with some emotion, i.e., an attitude. Dialogue is conflict between people made tangible, and is only superficially connected to how we talk in real life. Conversation is not dialogue. Extraneous small talk, however colorful, is dull in real life, duller on the page. (See Fundamental #1.)

9. Once an author understands the point of a scene, it

needn't be stated for the reader to get it! Show, don't tell, which means no exposition. Deliver information only when one character seeks out information from another. Once information has been delivered never deliver it again unless it changes through distortion—by a lie, say.

10. Never betray a reader's trust. Once a gun is shown it must be fired, said Anton Chekhov. Otherwise why show it, say I. Red herrings are a sign of author weakness. Play fair. In fiction as in life, arousing expectations which remain unfulfilled can lead to unfortunate consequences (such as frustrated readers.) Remember: in a mystery every suspect should have sufficient motivation to have committed the murder.

11. Clichés state universal truths about the human condition. Thinking in terms of cliché helps to decipher themes below the surface in your material. Remember: reinvigorating a cliché may be as simple a task as rephrasing it, such as Robert Penn Warren does in his *All the King's Men* 'He turned white as a starched sheet'. Do reimagine tried and true devices: narrators, for example, needn't always be alive—think of the writer in *Sunset Boulevard*.

12. Readers want an excuse to root for your protagonist. Self-pity is a turn-off. Characters need not be wholly admirable; that way lies sentimentality. But we should understand them enough to want them to succeed. Look for ways your protagonists can ingratiate themselves with other characters as well as your readers—sometimes it's as simple as having the good cop offer a suspect coffee, or a kleenex.

13. Withholding information frustrates readers. Authors can use paranoia to their advantage. Reminder: when all else fails to complicate Act II, an act of betrayal, keeping it from the protagonist, but letting the reader in on it, creates an almost unbearable suspense. Passive aggressiveness, on the other hand, where writers do everything in their power to keep the reader in the dark, under the misguided notion that ignorance furthers suspense (as witness the bewildering movie *Syriana*), creates an antagonistic audience.

14. Opening words create powerful images. A character stepping in excrement may be vivid, but look for more positive images to plant in the reader's mind that will reflect more favorably on your material.

15. Do research AFTER you've come up with a story line. Otherwise it's a delaying tactic. The fact that you've chosen a certain historical period in which to set your story suggests that you already know more than you're aware of about that period. Conversely, if the year chosen is of more recent vintage, ask yourself what makes that year more important than the current one.

16. Finally, never assume a manuscript cannot always be made better. But once the *who* and the *what* are made clear, the rest is polish.

