

Page-Turner:

Your Path to Writing a Novel that Publishers Want and Readers Buy

by Barbara Kyle

Chapter One

Anatomy of a Page-Turner

While my husband lay sleeping, I slipped out of bed and down the hall. I moved quietly, but my brain was shouting the idea that had woken me. I reached my office and stood at my desk, too keyed-up to sit, as I scrawled these four words: "Ralph Pepperton must die."

Don't worry, that impulsive moment did not lead me to commit a murder. Rather, it led to a birth: the birth of a book. To be more accurate, it jolted life into a story. It was the first novel I had attempted, and I'd been struggling with it, a lifeless, tangled sprawl of vignettes, until that pre-dawn jolt of inspiration. Ralph's death would devastate my heroine, spurring her to take action that would create a conflict to propel the narrative. Ralph Pepperton saved my book.

You've had the same kind of stirring experience—I know you have. An idea bursts upon you, blazing the way to move your story forward. It's one of the joys of being a writer. As for me, I'm forever grateful to Ralph for sacrificing his life all those years ago. His death gave birth to my writing career. My publisher sold over 75,000 copies of that novel, *The Queen's Lady*, and it became the first in a seven-book series, *The Thornleigh Saga*.

Ralph's was just the first death. Since then, in my subsequent historical novels and contemporary thrillers, I've cut short the lives of over a dozen very nasty people who deserved it, scores of poor souls who didn't, and about a thousand innocent bystanders. I've hanged them,

poisoned them, burned them at the stake, electrified them, slit their throats, shot them, and beheaded them. Not, of course, in that order.

But deaths are easy. (As the actor Edmund Gwenn is reported to have said on his deathbed, "Dying is easy. Comedy is hard.") It is death's *opposite* that quickens a writer's pulse. Creation. Nothing compares to the thrill of creating characters, and making their lives so real that readers wish the story wouldn't end.

The challenge for the emerging writer is how to achieve that. How does one fashion such a story? A page-turner. The fact that you're reading these pages shows you're serious about learning the answer.

This book has one purpose: to give you the practical, in-depth information you need to write a richly engaging story that can compete in today's competitive publishing marketplace. I'll be your mentor to guide you, but make no mistake, you are the hero of this story. It's *your* book we want to bring to the world.

The word "hero" in the classic, literary sense means someone who is on a quest, a challenging one, and on the way learns something profound. And the word "mentor" in the classic, literary sense means someone who prepares the hero to embark on that quest. Your desire to perfect your craft as a writer is a meaningful quest. In fact, I consider it a noble calling, because humanity lives by its stories. In his book *The Writer's Journey* Christopher Vogler outlines twelve steps of a hero's journey, the final one being "Return With the Elixir." The hero brings something back from the adventure—an "elixir" either literal or metaphoric—that heals the tribe, or mends the marriage, or saves the world. Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* brings back the knowledge that "There's no place like home." Your book can be an "elixir" because you have

something to say to the world. But only by perfecting your craft can you say it in a way that will reach a wide readership.

In my career as an internationally published author I've faced every challenge you're facing now. So I speak to you as writer to writer. Having worked in this business for years, I know what agents and publishers are looking for, what they want—and don't want.

What they always want, whatever the book's genre or its target audience, is a page-turner. A book that leaves readers saying, "I couldn't put it down!"

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Your most important step toward success is to take your writing seriously. I don't mean take yourself seriously, none of us should do that; we're all fools. I mean that when you sit down to write you do it with serious intent, no half-hearted dabbling.

I've mentored hundreds of emerging writers in my role as an instructor of university courses, in workshops at writers' conferences, and through my story coaching via manuscript evaluations, and I've found that the way writers respond to my critiques often indicates whether they're committed to succeeding. Many feel energized by a new clarity of vision. (As one put it, "a light bulb moment.") One such writer sent me a Young Adult novel that was superbly written and very moving but lacked focus, which drained its power. I pointed out how she could tighten the central conflict and refocus the sub-plot. She did so with verve, and her rewritten manuscript attracted a top New York literary agent who now represents her.

To another writer I recommended that his very long manuscript be radically trimmed to liberate the fine adventure story buried beneath a smother of overgrown description. When I

identified the specific deadwood that could be cut back, he understood immediately and was eager to embark on the necessary slash-and-burn mission.

And, I fondly recall a writer at one of my workshops who read aloud her exercise, a summary of events in the all-important scene introducing her story's protagonist. She read it to the group, and then, in the nervous silence that followed, looked at me and said, "It's boring, isn't it?" That brought laughter from us all, including her, and I applauded that writer for being so open to change. I pointed out *why* the scene was boring—that the protagonist was passive, just idly observing others—and suggested, as a solution, that she introduce the character engaged in an action with something at stake. She was delighted.

Writers like these are a joy to work with. Their open-minded attitude gives them the best chance of succeeding.

Then there are others. Some are so defensive about their work they're deaf to suggestions for improving it. Some consider writing as merely a take-it-or-leave-it hobby, or as therapy. Some have the talent to produce a promising first draft but balk at the work necessary for a second and third draft. These positions drastically reduce their chances of getting published. The creation of a compelling and marketable book has to fully engage one's energy, mind, and heart. Every serious writer is trying to be a great writer.

Not that success is the *only* reward to writing. Kurt Vonnegut put it quite beautifully when he said, "Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something."

Lovely advice. And true.

But I want more for you. I want your manuscript to be seen beyond a handful of friends and family. I want you to succeed as a writer in the global marketplace. I want you to sign with that agent, and land that publishing deal, and have your book bought by a wide audience of thrilled readers. That requires serious work.

Our culture has an interesting expression: "work of art." There's a tension between those two nouns, "work" and "art." We tend to revere art, elevating it to a mythical level. Critics cultivate the image of the artist touched by genius, while work is denigrated, as though no real artist wrestles with something so mundane; as though writing shouldn't be work at all if a writer has "talent." Nonsense. Nothing could be further from the truth. I suggest that we let the critics and other non-writers obsess about art. We writers will concern ourselves with the work. My recommendation is this: embrace the work.

I sometimes wish we had another word for it. "Work" connotes something tedious, dismal, endless. The cliché images are bleak. Nose to the grindstone, punching a clock, slaves. But the work of writing isn't anything like that. There's no backbreaking labor, no tyrannical boss, and because the energy source is your imagination, there's no restriction on the content you produce. Writing can be a profound pleasure.

However, because of this very freedom, the work of writing requires concentration, and focus, and will. I like the advice of author Wayson Choy: "There's only one secret to writing: A/C—ass on chair." You sit down and write, then re-write, then re-write. There is no other way to master the craft.

I think it's helpful to focus on a different word—not "work" but "process," as in "It's a process." One theme of the enchanting film *Shakespeare in Love* is the magic of the theater. Screenwriters Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman have the theater owner reassure his anxious

investor about the quixotic process of creating a show. In rehearsals, he says, it might seem like the play will never come together, but in the end it always does. "It's a mystery," he adds with a happy shrug.

That's true, in part, about writing a novel too. Your individual nature—your world view, your sensibilities shaped by your unique experiences—will direct much of what you write and how you write, and that aspect of the process will always remain something of a mystery. There's little you can do about your own nature, and that's fine; it will color your writing with your voice, as it should. But, with all due respect, the process is not about you; it's about creating an invisible interface between your story's characters and the reader. That's what you *do* have control over, and that's *not* a mystery. All the basics of the writer's craft can be learned and perfected, in courses, in workshops, in interaction with mentors and editors, and from books like this one. So remember our mantra: embrace the work.

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There are no rules in writing. Every rule that's ever been proclaimed has been broken by some writer, somewhere, to good effect. When I began writing years ago I had a mentor who said, "There's only one rule in writing: thou shalt not bore." Good advice.

So, okay, apart from that one, there are no rules. But there are principles that have shaped the art of storytelling for centuries, and the wise writer studies them. A rule says: do this. A principle says: this works, and it has worked through all of remembered time. Those timeless principles of storytelling form the core of this book. They are encapsulated in what I call the Three "A"s:

Actors

People. A book's characters. They are the lifeblood of your story. People are what readers come to a book for, and why they stay. Long after a book's plot intricacies and carefully sculpted sentences have become a blur in the reader's memory, what lingers is the impact of the characters. Vibrant, unique characters live on for years, even—like Ebenezer Scrooge— for centuries.

Architecture

Story structure. The backbone of your book. You likely have a good instinct for this already, but that will take you only half the way. When instinct falls short and talent gets stuck, an understanding of story structure gets you moving again. This knowledge is essential, yet often under-appreciated by emerging writers. The cleverest wordsmith and most gifted creator of characters cannot bring these riches to a wide audience unless they are delivered in the "story" form the human mind is hard-wired to receive.

Adornment

Style. The actual words you write. I use the somewhat dismissive term "adornment" to convey the vital truth that of the Three "A"s, style is the least crucial. Don't misunderstand— word choice is very important. Tinted by evocative imagery, it can even be sublime. But a deeply engaging story with vibrant characters will live for a reader even if the prose is unadorned. The reverse is not true: exquisite prose cannot carry a stagnant story about dull people.

So what, exactly, constitutes a page-turner? What is the mysterious literary essence that hooks a reader? What holds them so hard, they simply must keep reading, often long into the night? To emerging writers who want to break in, and published authors who want to produce a breakout book, I offer a one-word answer. Emotion.

Sounds simplistic? After all, I've just gone on about the hard work you must do to perfect the many complex facets of our craft, to create evocative characters, hone your story structure, and chisel finely sculpted sentences. But structure and style are not ends in themselves. They are merely tools to produce the result we want: an emotional experience for the reader.

It's why children gleefully cry, "Read it again!" It's why, after over four hundred years, Shakespeare's characters continue to enthrall us, because they tap into a profound emotional wellspring. When characters in a story move your readers to pity, or laughter, or loathing, or dread, or just the simple warmth of human fellow-feeling, *that's* what makes them keep turning pages. They crave to know: what's going to happen to these people? They *care*. The fine details of craft drift past the reader like mist unless the hand of emotion reaches out to snag them and hold them.

Raymond Chandler, a founder of the noir mystery genre in the 1940s, knew this. Here was a writer famous for his action stories—as he put it, stories that were "tough and fast and full of mayhem and murder"—yet he said: "Readers just thought that they cared about nothing but the action; but really although they didn't know it, they cared very little about the action. The thing they really cared about, and that I care about, was the creation of emotion."

The wise writer uses this knowledge. When I mentor writers, I sometimes use the word "manipulate." Effective writing means you're manipulating your reader. It's not a trick. It's

anything but shallow. It is, instead, a bonding with humanity's deepest consciousness. What moves us, imprints us. The evoking of emotion is what turns the writer's craft into art.

You've now set out on a journey toward success as a writer. Author Herman Wouk calls it "the long, lonely, stony uphill way of the novel," but I know it's the path you want to be on, or you wouldn't be reading this book. And you'll have me as your guide so you won't get lost in the woods, or lured by enticing sidetracks—the bedazzlement of style, and the giddy false freedom of writing by the seat of your pants, with no plan—that can lead to dead ends.

The poet Robert Frost said "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" but adds the reminder that you "have promises to keep, and miles to go" before you sleep. The most important promise is the one you made to yourself: to write your novel and get it published. This book will help you through the woods. Follow its guideposts. Each chapter contains a cache of information about craft that you'll need on the journey. At the end are pointers on orienting yourself for the last leg, the rocky terrain of the publishing industry.

I know you're ready to stride ahead. How do I know? Because you're reaching out to turn this page.

So, turn the page. Grow as a writer. Dare to succeed.

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