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44. The dropping in of backstory should be active.
45. Progressive revelation keeps readers turning pages.
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64. In the hunt for an agent, take aim and more than one.
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Introduction

Sun Tzu, so far as we know, never wrote a novel.

Nor did he live in L.A., which makes it nearly certain he never tried his hand at a screenplay.

What we do know is that the author of *The Art of War* was a Chinese general writing sometime between 400–320 B.C. who recorded his aphorisms based upon actual experience in the field.

The approach to war in Sun Tzu's day was a chaotic mess. By bringing orderly principles to bear, he enabled generals to finally achieve clarity in planning for battle.

The publishing business is a messy affair, too. There are many obstacles on the way to publication—including one's own mental state—that it seems daunting and downright hostile out there.

What I want to do with this collection is offer you some helpful observations based on more than twenty years in the fiction writing game. This is *not* a comprehensive “how to” on fiction. I've written two other books in that form. Rather, I seek to fill in some “cracks” in what is normally taught in writing books and classes.

I still read books on writing. My philosophy is if I find just one thing of value, even if it's only a new take on something I already know, it's worth it. Anything that helps me become a better writer, I want to find. That's the spirit I hope permeates this text.

Because I am, like you, a writer. We understand each other. We are not like other people. We are, in fact, pitiable wretches.

Let me explain.

Back in the 1940s, a novelist named Jack Woodford gave advice to young writers, among which was the following:

So there you are. A free-lance writer! Oh pitiable wretch! Oh miserable fool! Of all the business you could have gone into—operating a movie theatre, or making guns, running a drug store or learning how to be a tailor or a plumber, a typographer or a hot dog cook—you insist on going into the business of cash and carry prose. Well, you know best. As for me, I know there isn't a so-and-so thing I can do to discourage you or make you change your mind. I admit (reluctantly) I've made a pretty good thing out of it myself. *But* I've had some breaks ... Can *you* be sure of getting breaks? Of course you can't. That's what a break means—a stroke of luck that nobody expects, all pine for madly, and mighty few ever get. Where

would I have been without my breaks? God knows.
I don't!

— Jack Woodford, *How to Write for Money*

So *The Art of War for Writers* is my modest attempt at a field manual for all writing wretches, because I know how hard it is out there. Following Sun Tzu's example, I'll keep the subjects compact, subsumed under three main areas:

1. RECONNAISSANCE. This section is primarily about the mental game of writing, because what happens in your head affects everything else.

Dick Simon, of Simon & Schuster fame, once said, "All writers without exception are scared to death. Some simply hide it better than others." Mental landmines are everywhere and, if not cleared, will keep you from producing words that sell.

A successful writing career must be built upon mental discipline. That doesn't mean you have to give up your role as the town eccentric. It does mean you have to write smart if you want to get published.

2. TACTICS. Here, we'll talk about craft. I've taught writing for fifteen years and written a couple of books and numerous articles on it. I've also benefited from writing books and articles myself, none of which I throw away, and all of which make my living space smaller.

What I want to provide in this section are practical tactics and techniques to help you go *deeper*, to do things that will set you apart from all the vanilla slush that's poured into the offices of tired editors and agents.

Think of these as the extras Q gives James Bond. You know, like cufflinks that are really flame throwers. Pens that turn into parachutes. That sort of thing. (See also "Utilize the Q Factor as a strategic weapon for motivation at just the right time." on page 136.)

These are all techniques to put in your toolbox, ready to use on your novel.

I've seen a great many manuscripts in the last few years that have been very good, yet failed to sell. The writing was solid, the characters and plot workmanlike, the structure sound.

Yet, no placement. Why not? Because *good enough* isn't good enough anymore.

Sun Tzu understood that it was the accumulation of small advantages that added up to long-term victory. You need to view your manuscripts the same way.

And here's the good news. If you can take just one aspect of your writing to that storied "next level," it will be quite evident to an agent or editor. They see so much that is mediocre that their literary eyes will light up with delight at seeing something better.

3. STRATEGY. Finally, I offer some advice on the no man's land of the publishing biz. Anything can happen here,

and often does. You have to be aware of the possibilities, and take a long, strategic view of your career.

Simply put, you must be devoted to quality.

It's no secret what happened to the Detroit automakers in the 1970s and '80s. They put out products inferior to the Japanese who were excelling in both design and reliability. As a result, Detroit car manufacturers dug themselves into a hole from which they have never fully recovered.

In any enterprise, quality is job one. Quality is defined by two things:

1. appeal of the workmanship
2. absence of defects

Never flag in the pursuit of writing excellence, for that is your workmanship. The Japanese were inspired by the concept of *kaizen*, the philosophy of seeking constant improvement in all aspects of business, every day, all the time.

At the same time, keep learning about the common defects found in unsuccessful writing and in the operations of the publishing world—so you won't engage in them.

Sun Tzu wrote: "He wins his battles by making no mistakes."

My hope is that this manual will help you avoid mistakes and write stronger books and win the battle to get and stay published.

part II
TACTICS

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士買五
才周
才周
子周

士買五
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子周



Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing. Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions. He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain.

—Sun Tzu

Write. Remember, people may keep you (or me) from being a published author but no one can stop you from being a writer. All you have to do is write. And keep writing. While you're working at a career, while you're raising children, while you're trout fishing—keep writing! No one can stop you but you.

—Katherine Neville



The writer of potential greatness settles not for “mere fiction.”

A couple of years ago some writer friends and I were discussing the merits of *Moby-Dick*. As I recall, only one other intrepid soul joined me in extolling the virtues of Herman Melville’s classic. The language is like the ocean itself, I opined, with highs and lows and storms and calms. (One of the other writers thought this sounded more like a Harlequin romance scene than a description of the book, but I digress.)

It turns out that the loudest howls of protest came from those who had been forced to read *Moby-Dick* in school. Not many kids are ready for that. I was lucky to read *Moby-Dick* for the first time after college, just because I wanted to. I loved it. (As an aside, if you do decide to give the book a try, or *another* try, be sure to pick up a version with illustrations by Rockwell Kent. They are the perfect meeting of artist and novel.)

I do think there is one point the critics and supporters of *Moby-Dick* can agree upon, and that is this: Melville can never be accused of writing *mere fiction*. He was *going for it*. In sports parlance, he was leaving it all out there on

the floor. Herm could have made a good living writing penny dreadfuls, but he was after more than a living. He was about that elusive dream of literature as apotheosis. He was himself pursuing a white whale of artistic vision. God love him.

By the way, that term *mere fiction* comes from an essay by the late John Gardner, the noted novelist, teacher and essayist. I like the term, because there is too little time for anyone to be settling for mere fiction.

While heeding the profit of my counsel, avail yourself also of any helpful circumstances over and beyond the ordinary rules.

—Sun Tzu



So I was roundly castigated in the group for daring to enjoy *Moby-Dick*. This went on for some time.

I had to laugh, then, when a couple of days after what I now call “The Great Moby Dustup,” I picked up my copy of *Salem’s Lot* by Stephen King. I’d read it years ago, but my son got me the new, illustrated hardback edition for Christmas. And it had a new introduction by the author.

At this point in his career, King was still an unpublished novelist. *Carrie* had yet to come out. But he had this vision for a vampire book that was breathtaking in its grandiosity, especially for a twenty-three year old

without a novel on the shelf. He wanted to combine, he says, the vampire myth of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* with the "naturalistic fiction of Frank Norris and the EC horror comics I'd loved as a child Did I really think I could combine *Dracula* and *Tales From the Crypt* and come out with *Moby-Dick*? I did. I really did Was I daunted by the fact that *Moby-Dick* only sold about twelve copies in Melville's lifetime? Not I; one of my ideas was that a novelist takes the long view, the *lofty* view, and that does not include the price of eggs. (My wife would not have agreed, and I doubt if Mrs. Melville would have, either.)"

Well bravo for King. And Melville. No mere fiction for these two. And look! Melville, forgotten in his lifetime, is still talked about today and taught in college courses. King himself is taught *right now*, and has sold considerably more than twelve copies.

Which is to say, *go for it*. Don't settle for mere fiction.

Have a little of the twenty-three-year-old Stephen King 'tude. You won't fail. As the old advertising man Leo Burnett once said, "When you reach for the stars you may not quite get one, but you won't come up with a handful of mud either."