

WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE, Part III.

By

Jo-Ann Power

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Jo-Ann has been writing—fiction and non—for over 26 years for newspapers, magazines, corporations and clients. She has also written 16 novels, with the 17th debuting in September.

The truth is anyone can tell a story. You can. I can. A two-year-old child can. Story-telling is that intellectual ability to use communication for a pointed conveyance of an event, an idea or a fantasy. Separating us from animals, our story-telling ability allows us to inform, entertain, enlighten and improve our lives by communicating in ways that make sense to others.

Therefore, if you have the desire to write a story, fiction or non, you should be able to do so.

But do you have those characteristics that will make your work into a *New York Times* best-seller?

Let's look at a few of those qualities. First, the tenacity to develop a story to the salable length is basic. Secondly, the devotion to polish and perfect your writing is necessary. Thirdly, the ability to act professionally, delivering a sold manuscript on time and with correct grammar and spelling in the right format, is required. But once the work is delivered and your manuscript is in the development stages for print and packaging, what separates a book that sells ten copies from one that sells ten thousand—or ten hundred thousand?

I will focus on those two features of a best seller that I consider to be vital. Of course, there are many ingredients in the writing and production of a great new bestselling book. But the two I hear most often discussed by editors and agents are voice and concept.

Voice. What is it in writing? We certainly know the difference in tonality when we hear a bass like Darth Vader's, a squeaker like Mickey Mouse's...or a soprano's at the opera. We *understand* tonality, too, when we hear a saxophone, a violin or a tuba. But prose. Ah, what is voice in prose?

Voice is the actual written word complemented and embellished by a persona or a point of view of the work. Great, you say, I am still clueless. But you know what I mean when I ask you to think of all of the following authors and their works: Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series. John Grisham's legal thrillers. Nora Roberts' romances. Ernest Hemingway's **Old Man and the Sea**. Rudyard Kipling's novels of India. Sir Walter Scott's **Ivanhoe**.

Each of these famous authors has developed a clear and unique voice through which you see their characters and understand the worlds they live in. Getting to the best seller lists requires, then, not only a grip on conflict, setting, characterization and theme, but also an understanding of your own view of the world. Do you believe that the bad guys always fail? Do the good guys always win? Does love conquer all? Or does tragedy always happen in your books—and do your characters always deal with it in the same way?

While you may consciously not perceive your delivery of your world view in the first few books you write, over time you will recognize it. Beginning to see it creep into your writing, you will then earnestly begin to carve a place for yourself on the stands because you have given to the reading public a valued product that they read over and over again. If these readers buy your books in increasing numbers, you have placement on a best seller list in your future.

But voice is invariably complemented by its partner, concept. And what might concept mean? Concept is the manner in which the story is viewed (often involving a point of view that is unique) and how the plot is resolved.

Concepts you know from other mediums are: Buffy the Vampire Slayer—a teenage girl who fights vampires. Superman—a man with unique powers who can fly through the air and arrive at crimes scenes at the right moments. Ditto for Spiderman, et al. Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum is a young and spunky woman with the improbable job of rounding up criminals who have jumped bail. Jeffrey Deaver created a bed-ridden paraplegic who solves crimes. Larry McMurtry writes authentic westerns. Nelson DeMille writes thrillers about terrorists and the complex world of international law enforcement.

What is your concept and if you have none, how do you come up with one?

Discovering that can be as simple as asking yourself, what is it that I know that no one else does? Remember, the first rule of writing is to write what you know—or know a lot about and would not mind learning more. (Truth is, whatever it is you think you know, once you begin to write, you discover all the facts you do not know...and need to

research!) But you should also become familiar with what sells to understand what Americans read.

To do that, make it a point of your education to read the *New York Times* bestseller list every Sunday. Usually, metro newspapers list this in their book review sections. Better yet, subscribe to the Sunday edition of the *Times* and read not only the lists, Hard Cover and Paperback, but read the reviews and the summaries plus the essays on the business of publishing in the United States.

What will you learn? You'll learn, first and foremost, if what you want to write is being bought in any quantity. Romance? Last week, there were two on the hard list, three on the paper. Mystery? There were 10 on the hard list, 7 on the paper. General Fiction? Two on the hard, one of the paper.

Furthermore, who is writing these books? Eleven male authors hit last week's hard cover list. Five females. And the soft cover list? Eight females and six men.

What is selling in non-fiction? On the hard cover list, six books on politics and/or politics and economics or social issues. Four memoirs. And in soft cover, two on politics, five on history, four memoirs and one—believe it or not—on grammar!

Why do I even bring this up? Because writing what you know and what you want is one issue to address so that you can earn money. But marrying that to a subject and presentation that will attract readers means you need to know what your customer—your reader—wants to read.

And what this boils down to is for you to ask yourself the musical question: What is my goal when I begin to write this particular book? Is it to write it and appreciate it's appearance as a Word Document on my computer? Is it to give it to my children as a photocopied pamphlet? Is it to sell it and earn money from a publisher who will edit and package and market it? Is it to create one block in what will become a career as an accomplished, paid, perhaps even full-time author?

Becoming honest with yourself about what you want from your writing means you will have a better chance of satisfaction with your final product.

Whether you are successful in selling your work is based on how well you embrace the fact that writing is one element in a business called publishing. Acting like a professional means knowing who does what and that your part in this business is to produce the best book you can.

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Part IV: We'll discuss who does what in publishing and why. From how an agent works, to who does the publicity are subjects for August's Part IV.

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