

Introduction

What is Good Fiction?

By Steve Laube

Welcome to the exciting world of fiction writing. You have chosen to study one of the most creative forms of expression available to the Christian writer today.

From the time early storytellers first began weaving tales around the fire, people have always clamored for a good yarn. Today readers continue to demand stories that excite the imagination, provide an escape from their daily world, and even help them find meaning in life's circumstance. But publishers tell us they have difficulty finding great fiction, and that's where you come in.

The purpose of this course is to teach you the principles and provide you with a formula that will help you become a successful writer of fiction—not just once, but over and over again. You will learn how to design your own fictional world, inhabited by characters of your own imagination, struggling to achieve goals against formidable odds.

To achieve all of these goals, the writer must create a world of illusion. If a reader wants a story to be an exact copy of life, he or she can read their newsfeed. But fiction is more than reporting the facts. It combines the factual with the imaginative and fashions them into a story to provide vicarious entertainment and hopefully communicate some universal truths.

The fiction writer must somehow distill the truth in an artful way to present a message. The author must help readers see, feel, smell, hear, taste and experience life by presenting interesting characters that are recognizable and plausible—characters the reader can identify with—characters that entertain.

That is what makes good fiction.

Before we get down to the details and the actual writing of your story, however, it is important to lay some groundwork. Here are some preliminary techniques which will get you started and help you to develop your skills as a fiction writer:

1. ***First, you'll need to read good fiction.*** *Read all types of fiction*, both Christian and general market, to notice story openings, plot development, characters, settings, dialogue, sentence structure, and the many other elements of a good story. *Begin a file of stories*, so that as you progress through your lessons, you can use them as models and illustrations of the various story elements.

Too often Christian fiction is criticized as being “vapid” or “unrealistic” or “sicky sweet.” I challenge that assumption because it only means the critic is reading the wrong books.

If you don't know where to start in reading Christian novels, choose one from the following list. If you have one you would rather read—and *it must be one you have not read previously*—you can submit the title for approval. The books below are ten suggested titles of various genres (romance, adventure, science fictions) and can be found in your favorite online store, your local bookstore or in your public library:

Christy - Catherine Marshall
Redeeming Love - Francine Rivers
Wild Montana Skies, Susan May Warren
Firebird - Kathy Tyers
Waterfall, Lisa Bergren
Against the Tide, Elizabeth Camden
Blink, Ted Dekker
Nightshade, Ronie Kendig
Beneath a Southern Sky – Deborah Raney
Some Wildflower in My Heart - Jamie Langston Turner
Havah: The Story of Eve, Tosca Lee
Words, Ginny Yttrup

Another place to find a list of great Christian fiction is to look at the past winners of The Christy Award. This award honors the best novels each year. Winners can be found at ChristyAwards.com.

In addition, begin collecting stories from your friends, co-workers, church sermons and neighbors. Find magazines in the library and online and save stories that interest you. Read fiction anthologies containing the works of noted authors. Study these stories and try to determine what makes them appealing. Remember that the best fiction writers must also be alert fiction *readers*.

Next, get to know which publishers and periodicals publish fiction. Publishers and magazines (either print or online) develop a “personality” regarding the stories they acquire. Figuring that out will help you target market your ideas. All good literary agents will know the right publishers, but you are on your own for the periodical market. Consult a writer's market guide for additional listings.

The best Christian market guide is the annual *Christian Writers' Market Guide* published by The Christian Writers Institute. For the general market consult the annual *Writer's Market*. Do your research. Sending stories without knowing the market is a waste of time and energy.

Look over the writer's guidelines and the themes list to learn what the editors are looking for and how they wish a manuscript to be submitted. Tuck these requirements away in your mind for future use. Meanwhile, file the copies for quick reference when you begin writing your story and again when you are ready to send it off to a publisher.

But there is more.

2. *Second, develop your powers of observation.* Learn to observe the details of your surroundings using all of your five senses. Observe the behavior and appearance of people. Note the habits and characteristics which mark them as individuals.

To help you develop sensitivity, purchase a small notebook that you can carry with you. If you are technically savvy use your smart phone or tablet. Call it your "Idea Book." This notebook can become an integral part of creating colorful fiction as you continually jot down descriptions, sights, sounds, smells and feelings you encounter in your daily life.

For example, in describing a sight you may say, "Sunlight slanting through the pines made warm freckles of light on the lake." For sound: "The wheezy call of flycatchers and bluejays scolding...." For feeling: "She wore her loneliness like a threadbare sweater." For taste: "The sandwich had the flavor of dry clay...." For smells: "A torrid stream of taxis and cars, bathed in exhaust smoke...."

This exercise is a *must* as a writer of fiction. By learning to absorb atmosphere into your writing by using all five senses and you'll create more interesting characters. Throughout this course you will be asked to write illustrations from your Idea Book as part of your exercises. It will help you jump start your habit.

Writing Christian fiction is a calling. It takes know-how, hard work and dedication. This type of writing is difficult to do well, but once it is mastered, it has limitless possibilities for ministry. Just take one step at a time. Keep writing day after day, and you will perfect your style.

Think of each lesson and each story you write as an offering to the Lord. Ask Him to bless your efforts and to use them to His glory. Now, on to your first official lesson.