*How to Create A Successful Fiction Series*

**Intro –**

* The Question to Settle upfront – Should you write Stand-alone novels or Books in a series?
  + Some famous authors who wrote (or still write) Stand Alone Novels:
    - Ernest Hemingway
    - Michael Crichton
    - John Grisham
    - Nicholas Sparks
  + Famous Authors who wrote (or still write) in series:
    - CS Lewis
    - JR Tolkien
    - JK Rowling (Harry Potter)
    - Suzanne Collins (Hunger Games)
    - George RR Martin (Game of Thrones)
* Having written many novels in both formats, I now have a Firm Opinion that writing a Series is FAR BETTER…will explain why.
* Another question to settle upfront is…*Are you independently wealthy and have no need to earn income from your books? Or, do you to actually hope to earn income from your books*?
  + If you’re independently wealthy, you can write whatever you want, whatever makes you happy. You don’t have to worry about book sales or what readers want most?
  + If you’re like 99.9% of us, things like book sales and what readers want MUST factor into your writing priorities.
* Basically Two Types of Books Written as a Series:
  + Single story arc that’s too big for one book and is fleshed out over several books.
  + Self-contained, episodic stories that resolve by the end of the book and follow the same cast of characters, and often the same setting.

**Which Sells Better – Stand Alones or Books in a Series (and Why)?**

* From what I can gather on the internet – while there are some huge exceptions to this, books written in a series sell much better than stand-alones.
  + Stand-Alone exceptions – Catcher in the Rye, To Kill a Mockingbird, Dickens classics.
  + Series Examples – Harry Potter books, Hunger Games, Lord of the Rings, Twilight saga, Left Behind, etc.
* From my experience — and for a lot of reasons — books that are in a series sell better than stand-alones (for most authors).
  + Think about what you like as a reader, or even as someone who watches TV’s and movies.
  + As a reader – if you read a great book with a great story and great characters, what’s your first reaction when you come to the end?
    - Also with a series, it’s VERY EASY to market/promote the other books.
    - Just end Book 1, with the first 3 chapters of Book 2, and a link (then do the same for each book till the last one).
  + As a watcher (TVs and movies) – if you watch a great show with a great story and great characters, aren’t you glad when there’s a bunch of episodes? Even better… several seasons (fairly new term – *Binge Watching*).
  + It’s very clear, if we read or watch a great story with great characters, when it’s over, we don’t want it to be. We want it to keep going. Which is why books written in a series — IMO — sell better.
* Having said all this — and I can’t stress this enough — a phrase I kept repeating was: *if you read a great story with great characters*. In other words, everything I’ve just said only works *if you’ve written a great book*.
  + I won’t have time in this workshop to tell you how to do that. That’s why all the other writing workshops are so important.
  + But you have to spend the lion’s share of your energy crafting a great story with great characters.
  + If Book 1 is mediocre, they’ll assume the rest will be too.

**A Successful Series – in a Nutshell**

* If you *have* learned how to write a great book — in simplified form — all that’s required to create a great series is…KEEP IT GOING.
  + In other words, take this winning combination of a great story with great characters and ask yourself the question: “*What happens next*?”
  + What other stories, mysteries and/or adventures might these characters encounter next? If there’s a romance, where does it go?
* ILLUSTRATION – My Jack Turner Suspense Series
  + How this series grew from 1 “hopeful experiment” to 8 books (and counting).
  + I told you this little saga to illustrate this point: **If you write a great book, a series is just**…*Keeping it going*. Take the main characters and storyline to the next logical place.
  + But when you do this, you have to *color within the lines*, or stay *within the boundaries* you created with *the first book*.
  + An Illustration from my Jack Turner series.
* Since it sold so well and got such great reviews, we decided to *keep it going*. It wasn’t all that hard for me, because I loved the characters and setting we created, and it gave me an outlet to also write suspense.
  + But I also realized after writing Books 2, 3, and 4—I had painted myself into a corner. A *credibility* *corner*.
    - The problem was…how many murders could take place in a small southern, college town — with a World War II theme — that could credibly be solved by a military history professor?
    - By the time I got to the 4th book, we felt like I had maxed out the situation.
  + Fortunately, I had continued to make one character - Sgt. Joe Boyd, a significant character in all four books. And it makes perfect sense for a homicide detective to investigate murders.
    - We decided NOT to retire Jack so much as to SHIFT THE FOCUS over to Joe. I created the spinoff, sequel series with the now promoted Lieut. Joe Boyd investigating Cold Case murders.
    - So now, my “credibility corner” had become a doorway for an infinite number of brand-new cases (and more books for the spinoff series).
* The Success of this Series is—Essentially—taking what worked in Book 1 and “Keeping it Going.”

**Moving from the Nutshell to the Nuts and Bolts (Practical Considerations)**

* For storytelling purposes, 95% of Book 1 should read like a great Standalone.
  + It’s got to be a great, totally engaging story with extremely likable characters (except for the bad guys…who at least must be memorable).
  + The 5% should be various things you’re laying into the story that hints/points to the sequel (foreshadowing).
  + The 95% needs to be a complete story, where most (if not all) the conflicts and plot points you opened are resolved before the book ends.
* A Word About Characters - Don’t readers get bored reading about the same characters in book after book after book after?
  + Possible, but not likely if they are great characters and great stories.
  + To further illustrate this point, I’ve been reading a couple of series myself—very faithfully—over several years.
  + To keep things interesting, it’s perfectly fine to increase a reader’s understanding of your main characters as the series progresses.
    - Can create scenes—flashback memories—that further the new episode while helping us gain more understanding/sympathy for the main character.
    - Such scenes can give you more freedom to do new things with your characters in the new stories.
    - The only thing that matters is, the new data you insert needs to fit into the persona of the character, so be careful how you tie it in.
* It’s also perfectly okay to introduce new secondary characters as the series unfolds.
  + They can add flavor into the books, as well as give you new people that either help or hinder your main characters in their adventures.
  + Must decide whether to use them for just one book or grow them into the storyline, so they become part of the rest.
* CAUTION - Do NOT write a Cliffhanger Ending on ANY of your series books.
  + A great way to anger your readers.
  + Fiction Novels are not a TV series, where viewers can just watch the next episode with little to no time in between. Most authors need 6-12 months to create a novel.
  + 6 months is WAY too long to make a reader wait to learn how your book ends.
* As much as possible, Plan Out where your series will go.
  + This is do-able. You sit down and start imagining/creating as many possible “episodes” for your series as you can.
    - This is what script writers of TV/Cable-streaming shows have to do in order to sell their project to producers/investors (or companies like Netflix, Hulu, etc).
    - The whole project has to be thought out from beginning to end.
    - If they can do this, so can we.
* When Planning, Understand the Difference Between the Story Episodes and the Character’s Personal Stories (as the series unfolds).
  + Each episode (book) should have its own complete story.
    - Imagine a reader picks up a book mid-series.
    - Will it work well as a stand-alone? It should.
  + But you want to build into the series *almost a separate storyline* about the characters themselves, that grows and shifts with each new book. Examples:
    - X-Files – the romantic tension between Mulder and Scully, as well as the continuing mystery about Mulder’s missing sister and the shadow government trying to undermine the X-Files, conceal the UFO mystery.
    - Endeavor (Masterpiece Mystery – Young Inspector Morse: Each episode solved a different mystery but the main characters have their own stories that grow and evolve as each episode unfolds.
    - All Creatures Great and Small – PBS stories based on James Herriot’s books. Almost every episode includes new stories and animal/owner mishaps, but there’s also the constantly growing relational aspects between Herriot, his boss, boss’ brother, Tristan, and Herriot’s romance with his future wife.
* Create a Series Bible – a File to Capture Important Details and New Ideas
  + A Journal for Important Details.
    - May be writing this over several years. With each book, you reveal certain details, especially about the characters and the setting.
    - Make a log of these things, as you write (or when you’re done while it’ still fresh).
    - You may remember much about the main characters. But believe me, you won’t remember dozens of things about secondary characters and unique aspects of your setting.
    - But readers WILL remember these things and WILL include them in their 3-Star Reviews ☺.
  + Create a “New Ideas” File for Your Series.
    - Again, since you’ll likely be writing a series over a period of years.
    - Great ideas for your characters or new episodes can come at the oddest times. It’s great to have a File already created that you can simply open up and jot them down (so they’ll be there for you down the road).