

THE DANCE OF CHARACTER & PLOT

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Chapter 1 – The Beauty of Dance

*To write is to feel the dance of your soul
swirling in a dream that drips imagination
onto paper.*
—DiAnn Mills

Rhythm, grace, and beauty describe a dance where two people move to music as though they were one. With perfect fluid motion, they sway and whirl, bend and lift—and we observe in awe. Simply by watching the couple express the joy of their unique gift, we are entertained, inspired, and encouraged to be better people.

Such is the art of writing a novel. The dance of character and plot blends unique steps that carry the reader away. The choreography varies with the genre, mood, and setting, as we will explore in the pages to come.

For the writer, this book will challenge you to reach your novel-writing goals, to learn the art of fiction, and apply those principles to your writing project. As a dancer must stretch before the music begins, the writer must stretch her mind to embrace the techniques of a master storyteller.

Stretching requires determination.

Stretching requires practice and application.

Stretching requires scheduled time to study and write.

Stretching requires discipline and commitment.

Stretching requires writing when you don't feel like it.

Stretching requires completing the exercises in these chapters.

Stretching means you are on your way to success.

I've chosen an easy-to-understand method, using simple format and language. The stretching portion at the end of each chapter will help you apply new techniques to your novel. Learning these fiction skills is not difficult. Neither is the art a mystery, but it does take commitment to study and apply each chapter's information.

Our collaboration begins with this chapter and continues long after *The Dance of Character and Plot* concludes. For the new writer, the contents will help establish good habits—while adding new steps to the craft. For the seasoned writer, the reminders will help tighten the manuscript. Writing quality fiction means a lifetime of learning and challenging ourselves. We must be limber, flexible, and open to change—while deeply appreciating what makes humans behave the way we do.

Professional Formatting

The basics of writing fiction begin by formatting our manuscript according to publisher guidelines. Adhere to one inch top and bottom margins and paragraph indentions. Include a title page. Type the name of the manuscript and the contact information on the upper left. On the bottom left, type “copyright,” the year, and your name. Insert a page break from your tool bar. Double-space your work and include a header, with your last name and the name of the writing project (Mills/Dance of Character and Plot). Leave room for

the automatic page numbering. The header with the automatic page numbering begins on the second page. Do not use a footer.

Double-space the text of your story. Use a readable font such as 12-point Times New Roman or Courier. Fancy fonts and other deviations from publisher guidelines signify an amateur. You are a professional!

Don't depend solely on the submission guidelines posted by agents and publishers. Keep an up-to-date market guide on your shelf, such as *The Writer's Market*, published by Writer's Digest Books. Market guides provide many opportunities to sell your work, connect with writers' groups, locate an agent, discover writers conferences, and even enter contests.

A tip: Before submitting a proposal or manuscript, e-mail the literary agency or publishing house to ensure the agent or acquisition editor still holds that position. Verify the e-mail address and the spelling of that person's name. Let's give agents and editors the respect they deserve.

Overcoming Your Excuses

A word about excuses. Sometimes it's hard to get started. We want to write, but we fear the hard work, so we keep thinking and talking about it—telling ourselves someday we'll write a novel. Today is the day to begin.

Here are some common excuses for not writing. If one fits you, begin to stretch now to make amends.

Time

Establishing time to write takes discipline. Too often our schedules are like yappy dogs at our heels. Writing may mean getting up earlier. My alarm rings at 4:30 a.m. Yes, it's early, but it's also very quiet then. Your peak creative hours may come after everyone is in bed. Many writers have day jobs that include a lunch break. Brown-

bag your meal and write. Motivation and a passion to communicate lead to scheduled writing time. As it's often been said, composing one page a day equals a book in one year.

Organization

Some of us are organized and others are challenged. If you struggle with this disorder, I'm sure you have a friend (opposites attract) who would love to help you get beyond the clutter. Treat her to lunch or offer to dedicate your first book to him or her.

Tools

A writer doesn't need the latest Mac or PC. Many published writers began writing on a computer at their local library. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by firelight after she put her seven children to bed. I don't think she had an iPad. I wrote my first book in the second grade on a Big Chief pad with a #2 pencil. And an editor pored over this manuscript using a \$300 netbook and a free, open source word-processing program.

Fear

Psychologists say fear of failure and fear of success rank the same on the stress scale. It can be scary to admit you're a writer. Enroll in a creative writing class, or submit your manuscript for publication. Tough it up. Write through the tears and conquer the shaky fingers.

Rejection

Rejection letters are redirection letters, nothing to be ashamed of. They are declining your material, not rejecting you. Usually you'll receive only a computer-generated letter. But if you're lucky, an agent or editor will take time to explain why the manuscript didn't fit their

needs. Take encouragement from that personal attention. And keep submitting.

Writing is not for the weak hearted. It's a contact sport. Writers must be strong to finish the dance.

Maintain professionalism by reading current titles in the genre you want to write. Highlight passages that leap from the page. Study the authors you admire and respect. Read the bestsellers and dissect why the novel reached this status. Besides reading *Writer's Digest* each month, study how-to books, follow respected bloggers, and apply the principles to your work.

How are you holding up? Take a deep breath. Look how far you've come in the first chapter. The exercises in the next section, our stretching sessions, will help you apply what you've learned. When you are tempted to skip the exercises, remember when you stop stretching, your muscles stiffen. So stretch—and get ready for a dance that will never let you go!

Stretching

- Tell yourself every morning, "I am a writer."
- Craft a mission statement. Include your passion for writing and your reason for penning a novel. Review it often.
- Make a list of your writing goals.
- Prepare a schedule for your writing.

Reasons for Rejection



- ☒ The editor is not interested in the plot or characters
- ☒ The writer did not research what that house is currently publishing.
- ☒ The manuscript is poorly written.
- ☒ The publishing house is planning a similar title.

- Stick to it.
- Write something every day.
- Get organized.