



**WRITING THE FICTION SERIES:
The Guide for Novels and Novellas**

©Karen S. Wiesner

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INTRODUCTION

The Appeal of the Series

"The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours."

~T. S. Eliot

Imagine that you've spent a seemingly endless amount of time trying to figure out what it is you want in this world, you've been incredibly

selfish and ignored the best thing that's ever happened to you, and now that person is walking out of your life with the words, "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn." Now it's all over, you can't forget it until tomorrow because it's gone with the wind... Or is it? What if you could go back to Tara? What if you could get Rhett Butler back?

While I'll keep my mouth shut on the wisdom of taking over someone else's story (especially a story whose author so adamantly did *not* want it to continue), the fact is that the sequel Alexandra Ripley wrote to *Gone With the Wind* spent many weeks on the bestseller list because fans of the original desperately wanted to return to Tara and see Scarlett get her happily-ever-after. They weren't satisfied to simply let the story go as it ended. To the point of obsession, they *had* to have more. That inability to let a story go without follow-up or further detail is the hallmark that leads to prequels, sequels, trilogies, and a full series.

Author Thomas Helm has said that the test of a good novel is dreading to read the last chapter. That goes for the author of the book as well as its fans. No one wants to let it go and will avoid anything that looks like "the end." Paranormal author Dana Marie Bell says, "Speaking as a reader, I *love* series. I love revisiting characters, checking in on their happily-ever-after." Mystery/paranormal author S.D. Tooley adds that readers of series get caught up in the history of characters—they become like family, and, because their stories are part of a series, fans know they'll get to see them again. This tempers the sense of loss a reader feels in finishing one story. There's more to hope for.

Writing a series is something that is near and dear to my heart. With five trilogies and twelve series (four of them spin-offs) under my belt or in the works—ranging from three to twelve (currently) books

each—writing a standalone novel is unusual for me. One novel can spawn many more because my characters become so real, I sometimes feel like the secondaries are tugging on my sleeve while I’m immersed in the world they live in, demanding to know when I’m going to write their stories. As Abelard said to Heloise, “Against the disease of writing one must take special precautions, since it is a dangerous and contagious disease.” Writing *series* feels very much like an obsession to me. Simply getting to know characters through the eyes of the main character in a single book has rarely been enough for me. I need to know who they are, what made them into the people they are inside and out, and what they’re going to do now. My characters feel as real to me as the people who populate my reality. The worlds I create are places I want to return to again and again. My readers tell me the same, and so together we fulfill our mutual need for more of these characters, more of this world, more of this particular storyline. You can’t get quite the same satisfaction from a standalone novel because there’s always that sadness at the end because no continuation is in store.

Authors who write series promise readers that the fun doesn’t *have* to end, that there’s more excitement to come, more adventures and worlds to explore, more of these lives to be lived. Books in a series are comfort reading because you know what you’re getting yourself into—there’s no risk if the author is skillful, and you become invested in a way that takes over your mind and heart, allowing you to leave the physical world to go off and join in a quest with the friends you’ve made.

As a series author, you can also spend more time developing your characters over the course of the series. You enlarge your loyal readership with a series since these fans will put your books on their

“auto-buy” lists. This can mean less work because you’ve probably done most of the hard labor with the first book in the series, and all writers know that less research means more writing time.

J.M. Smith, the owner of Wild Horse Press, says, “A series is always intriguing to us because they sell better than most standalone titles. In a proposal, we like to hear what the author has planned for the series.” When an editor contracts a series, he or she is looking for something compelling that will attract readers in droves. If you can get an editor obsessed and looking for future titles within your series, you’ll probably be able to do the same with readers if your promotion is done well. If your readership builds, your publisher will also look upon you more favorably and will try to keep all of your books (in your series *as well as* any others you’ve written for the house) available for those fans who start in the middle and want to see what else you have to offer. Your publisher might suggest that you keep a series going because one book can sell many others. Nearly always, if a series is selling, the publisher will want more. Miriam Pace, the publisher at Parker Publishing, Inc., states, “For an established author whose sales are good, we’ll almost always take a series over a single story because that author already has a reader base. Readers are loyal.”

There’s no denying that the series “tiger” has sprung and it’s devouring readers of every genre.

Who’s Reading, Writing, and Publishing the Series?

A better question might be *who isn’t* reading, writing, and publishing series? Ask anyone what the most popular books have been in the last couple years, and inevitably the answers will lead to books within a

series: Harry Potter, Twilight, Stephanie Plum, Captain Underpants, Robert Langdon, A Series of Unfortunate Events, Star Wars, and basically anything *series* (okay, and non-series as well) by Nora Roberts. Authors are writing series, publishers are publishing them, and readers are buying them by the truckloads.

In the course of writing this book, I interviewed nearly a hundred authors and publishers of series. These interviews were simply fascinating to me, and you'll be reading a lot from them throughout our time together. I'll also be putting the interviews in their entirety on my website for readers to enjoy. Visit me at karenwiesner.com, click on the "nonfiction" button, and look for *Writing the Fiction Series* to find these interviews.

Like most authors, children's, young adult, and historical romance writer Mary Jo Kelso's love affair with the series started in her childhood. "I write series because, as a young reader, I always wanted to know what happened to the characters after a book I read ended. It was like their lives weren't really over yet. I felt a loss that the story was over and wondered what they would do next."

Charlotte Boyett~Compo, multigenre speculative fiction author, concurs that, "Even if one book in the series isn't as good as the others, most readers will buy the next one simply because they have become invested in the story and the characters. As an author, I don't like leaving them once I've put all that time, energy, and creativity into their conception. It's like abandoning your baby. I always find out something I wish I'd included or had the characters do after the book has been published. Doing another book with the same characters gives me a chance to finish what I started. It also might satisfy the suggestions from readers about where they'd like that character and storyline to go next. I pay close attention to reader and reviewer

feedback. That way I see what works and what doesn't."

Deborah MacGillivray is the award-winning author of Scottish Medieval historicals and contemporary paranormal romances. She adds, "Money is tight for everyone. People don't want to risk those hard-earned dollars on a book that doesn't please their tastes. A series extends that comfort zone. If you like other books by the author and enjoyed the series, you will be more prone to keep buying them. It's cash in the bank for the publisher since a series book is less risk for them. It's also easier to promote." Audiences can be built over the long haul, and that makes sense for authors and publishers. Fantasy author Joanne Hall's experience has told her the same thing: "I think publishers like trilogies and series because they're effectively getting a three-(or more)-for-one deal. It gives them a chance to build interest in an author over a longer period of time and means that people who buy one book in the series are likely to buy the next two, or four, or twelve."

Anny Cook, author of fantasy and paranormal, stressed that she prefers to write series: "I spend many hours creating the world and culture for my stories. It seems wasteful to discard the time spent by only writing one book in that setting. Also, I hate to give up my characters after only one book. Writing series allows me to spend more time with the men, women, and children I've grown to love while writing their stories."

Most of the authors I talked to mentioned how invested they get in their characters. Letting go can be something akin to physical pain. "I write series because I keep "meeting" interesting characters that have their own stories to tell," futuristic, western, and romantic suspense writer Regan Taylor told me. "Things happen in my life, dreams come to me, and, between the two, a story unfolds. I don't like saying

goodbye and knowing I'll never see someone again. With a series, even though the characters aren't real, they are parts of my psyche and parts I don't have to say goodbye to as long as there is another story to be told."

R.G. Alexander, a multigenre author, spoke about why she writes series on a fellow writer's blog. She said she becomes obsessed with learning the story of the hero's brother, the heroine's best friend ... She *has to know* what happens with the other characters. She also writes series so the secondary characters will leave her alone. What is it about the series, Alexander asks, that's so appealing? Is it the familiarity of the world? The fact that we get to delve deeply into the private lives of interesting people? The adventures we get to go on? That we, as fans of the series, can pick up on subtle nuances and inside jokes that outsiders can't? Our own nosiness? Or is it simply "the matchmaker in us that makes us want to see everyone from the villain to the waiter who was over-tipped have a happily ever after?"

When I asked Christina M. Brashear, the publisher at Samhain Publishing, why she thought series are so popular and whether series books sell better than standalones, she said, "Readers love to revisit their favorite characters. My philosophy has been that new books sell old books."

The love affair writers, publishers, and readers have with series is one that won't go away anytime soon. In fact, it stands to reason that it will only grow in popularity because once you read one irresistible series story, you have to keep going to be satisfied.

The Purpose of This Book and What You'll Find in *Writing the Fiction Series*

One of the things I've noticed in all my years of writing series and particularly while conducting interviews for this book is that little, if any, information exists for writers on how to write a series. What are the common pitfalls in crafting a series, and the best ways to get organized and plan it? I was stunned at the number of times I found authors uncertain about what constitutes a series versus, say, a trilogy or a serial. The confusion I noted about the very *definitions* of the various book groupings was quite a revelation for me, and I'm sure many readers of this book will appreciate clarification in this area as well. I was also surprised by authors who saw the connections that make up the books in a series as set in stone, and I was flat-out amazed at the sheer diversity and creativity of these authors in the handling so many aspects of writing their series. Though I'd written many series already in my career, even I had a lot to learn. I think authors the world over will find this topic as fascinating as I do, especially if you've never written a series before and want to try your hand at one, or if you've written a series or two and wish there were more help and guidelines to aid you in the process of writing a series.

Therefore, the purpose of *Writing the Fiction Series* is to cover all things series and provide a one-stop resource for the who, what, where, when, and why of this monumental endeavor. I will note upfront that I believe a series name is part of its branding (see Chapter Five for more details about branding). Not only should the series title be included everywhere the name of a book is spoken or written about, but the word "series" or "trilogy" should be *capitalized* in order to further solidify the branding. In other words, I never refer to my series Family Heirlooms as simply that. Always, I refer to it as the "Family Heirlooms Series" because that's the full title and most

effective way to brand it to my readers. That's why you'll see every series mentioned within this book with the word "series" or "trilogy" capitalized.

This book is divided into six chapters, followed by two appendices. Chapter One will discuss the catalyst for the series—stumbling into one, setting out to write one with purpose, and having a publisher coordinate one. In this chapter we'll move on to the definitions of the various book groupings, such as the ongoing book series, trilogies, and just about everything in between. I'll round out this chapter with the types of series ties. What connects the books in a series? There are four main types, and we'll discuss them in depth.

Chapter Two will go over the importance of finding the focus of a series, including such topics as story arcs versus series arcs, standalone stories versus cliffhangers, single genre versus multiple genre, and novel versus novella series or a combination of both.

In Chapter Three, I'll delve deeply into the two most crucial aspects of a series—characters and consistency—and I'll also include a section with series readers' and writers' tips covering other considerations when writing your series.

Chapters Four and Five will lay out a variety of series organizational techniques that include worksheets and checklists you'll find useful as you work, along with the most important aspects of marketing a series—namely branding.

Chapter Six looks at series endings: whether they're motivated by the author, publisher, or reader, and whether they are left open-ended or provide definitive closure. We'll wrap the book up with some thoughts on how to make your series stand out in a sea of other series.

At the end of most of the chapters, I'll provide exercises to build

your series muscles. These exercises build on each other so that, by the time you finish the final chapter, you should have a good start for your series plan.

The two appendices hold all the supplemental materials you'll need to write your own series:

- *Appendix A* contains worksheets and checklists to aid you in your quest to write a consistent and well-developed series.
- *Appendix B* contains case study examples of popular series as well as an example of a popular series with all its series, story, and plot arcs broken down. All of the examples will come in handy as you plan for a set of stories that need to show vital connections from one book to the next.

Throughout this book, I'll be providing off the bookshelf examples of various series. For the bookshelf examples, in nearly every section, the offerings include one listing from the following genres (in this order):

1. Young Adult/Children's
2. Romance
3. Horror/Paranormal
4. Mystery/Suspense/Thriller
5. Science Fiction/Fantasy/Futuristic
6. Historical/Western/Time-Travel/Regency

Keep in mind, of course, that most genres overlap, so many of the examples could be listed in more than one genre. Listings less than six are in no particular genre and, in some cases, were the *only* examples I could find.

Getting Started

While at first glance writing a series may seem easy—maybe even a no-brainer—the fact is that a series that isn't well planned is one that won't be well read. *USA Today* Bestseller List romance author B.J. Daniels says, "Series are a lot of fun—and a lot of work. But once you get into it, they become easier because you know this place, these people. There is a comfort there. Just don't get too comfortable because the books need to be different enough that a reader won't read the back cover and wonder if she's already read it."

Deborah MacGillivray wisely advises that, no matter how you approach writing a series, "always treat each book as a standalone. Imbue your novel with that special life-force that is all its own, and then your series will be strong from start to finish. If your readers don't love that first book, that second one will never be read." Same goes for the third, fourth, or twenty-eighth book in a series. Each book must be at least as exciting as the last and bring something new to the table. Don't we all get disappointed when a favorite author gets sloppy, stuck in a groove, and boring and begins to coast along in a series that no longer has vitality for anyone involved? Don't let that series be your own. This book can help you avoid that common pitfall.

Returning to the idea of treating each book in a series as a stand-alone, don't forget that the point of a series is that readers who follows it from one book to the next *will* get a richer, more complex, and emotional experience than those who only read a single book in the series. Those readers will understand the subtle nuances that one-time browsers won't pick up on. If you as the author aren't making enough vital connections from one book to the next in your series, readers will lose the purpose in reading a series at all. Each book in a series should come with your unbreakable promise to the reader that she'll get something extra, something more exciting and fulfilling, by following

the series—something she wouldn't get with a book that simply stands alone (whether part of a series or not). Each book in a series must fulfill the handshake contract the writer has silently made with the reader: *Stick with me, and I'll show you a world, characters, and adventures you'll never grow bored with.* Break that promise and the series as a whole will suffer—and reap other unwanted consequences, since many publishers decide the fate of a series and its author based on sales...or lack thereof. Beware! Fulfill the handshake agreement, and you'll have readers with the kind of fierce loyalty you and I both dreamed about while standing in line to purchase the last Harry Potter novel a few years ago. I think all authors can agree that those are the kinds of fans you never, ever want to disappoint.

So how do you get started? Well, first, you need a germ of an idea for a series. Maybe you've already finished a first book and know that you wanted to go further with it. Maybe you've had an entire series mapped out in your head for a while, but you haven't started because you're not sure how to develop it into a series. Or maybe your publisher has commissioned you and other authors to write a specific series. Whatever the case, have an idea and *grow* that idea. While most will advise you to write what you read or write what you know, I've often wondered if that wasn't a questionable way to make a decision this important. I've read countless fantasy novels but (so far) have never felt compelled to actually write one. My favorite genres to *read* in aren't necessarily the ones I could ever imagine myself *writing* in. In the same vein, I've written novels about undercover spies, werewolves, and abused victims. I don't have any individual experience with any of the three, but I wrote each with realistic, ultra-empathetic, and personal verve (according to readers and reviewers). As über-hot series author Janet Evanovich says, "If I wrote about what

I knew best, my books would be about someone sitting in a room with a parrot squawking in the corner—typing away for hours on a computer. Bor-ing!” Instead, always go with the idea that burns inside of you, the one that absolutely must be told *by you*. The rest will get done one way or another.

Once you’ve got your idea for a series, you’re ready to get started!