

## Tip #21. Hold That Elevator

Last month I touched on an aspect of writing more pertinent to those wishing to make a living out of writing: the dreaded '**Back Cover Blurb**'. Continuing in this vein, I thought I'd raise the spectre of another teeth-gnashing hurdle in the path to publication and profit: crafting your **Elevator Pitch** (sometimes called a logline – but not to be confused with a tagline, although the two can overlap). If you're getting the message that making a living out of writing these days is roughly forty percent 'actual' writing and sixty percent marketing, then you're getting the right message.

So, what then, is an Elevator Pitch?

In this literary world of ours, it's a sweet and snappy one-liner aimed at baiting your audience. The idea being that if, by some random quirk of fate, you find yourself sharing an elevator with the likes of say, Steven Spielberg and, on nonchalantly striking up a conversation with him, he politely enquires, "So, what's your book about?", in the mere seconds you have left before the doors ping open and you go your separate ways, you are able to capture their attention. To the point where they pause, reflect, look you in the eye and ask, "And what happens?"

This scenario assumes the worst. It assumes you have minimal time and only one shot at the goal. It's a good assumption to make.

It's also something I never envisaged having to do once I had set off down the road of self-publication. After-all, I wasn't looking to convince a publisher to sign me up. I was going it alone, so why bother with this blatantly tacky, razzle-dazzle, marketing schtick, employed by snake-oil salesmen the world over?

Turns out my naiveté was unceremoniously exposed the first time I tried to sell my books at a market.

I thought I was prepared, until my first prospect grudgingly asked me, "So what's this book all about?"

My reply brought a cold sweat to my armpits. "Well, you see, it's about a boy and he... and he kindov goes around...he kindov discovered this old Zulu relic see... and he kindov wants to try and see if he can maybe..."

By this time my brain was screaming; '*Read the blurb on the back of the book you idiot! That's what it's for! I'm a writer not a flippin talk-show host!*', all while trying to avoid heaving at the drivel coming from my lips.

I have since learned that the very act of creating an elevator pitch (even if you never get to use it!) is immensely powerful. It's a focal point, a guiding light, something solid to stand on when all around you is shifting sand and amorphous fog.

So how does one go about it then? In essence, you want to drill down to the core of your story. The very kernel

within the seed within the fruit. The one exciting thing that makes your story different. This is no time to be fancy or long-winded. You're not trying to impress with your 'wordsmithery'. You're aiming for maximum enthusiasm with minimum description. And enthusiasm relies on comprehension, so be clear. How many words? Many suggest fifteen...tops. And less is even better.

It can be fiendishly difficult. Never have fifteen words been so elusive. I find it easier to describe my book in a page. Then I whittle this down to a paragraph. From there, down to a couple of sentences. And from there down to one short but 'muscular' sentence. By muscular I mean a sentence with no flab, no irrelevant or unnecessary words whatsoever.

What makes a great elevator pitch, then? Experts differ. In fact, just about everyone differs on this. Some pitches seem to work, and some fail miserably. However, different audiences aside, the following points are worth noting:

Be clear.

Be intriguing.

If your story is plot driven, then place higher relevance here. i.e. no need to mention characters by name.

If it's character driven, then highlight character quirks that make your character intriguing.

Give the context, and be as specific as possible. This speaks to your audience and is crucial. i.e. "Courtroom drama" might appeal to some, but only if the drama is in the present...in a civilian setting...on planet Earth. You get the idea.

Capture the root conflict - the big-ticket item. Appeal to an emotion in the reader.

Raise questions. Questions that cry out to be answered.

Allude to the big payoff. i.e. what's in it for the audience.

In the final analysis, the best elevator pitches are the ones that have sold lots of stories. Look ye then to Hollywood, where successful elevator pitches abound, from the somewhat bland, yet unarguably succinct...

"A teen romance between an ordinary American girl and a boy who is actually a vampire." - *Twilight*:

...to the more intriguing...

"A troubled child summons the courage to help a friendly alien escape Earth and return to his home-world."

- *E.T.*

“Following the Normandy Landings, a group of U.S. soldiers go behind enemy lines to retrieve a paratrooper whose brothers have all been killed in action.” - *Saving Private Ryan*

“A travel writer on a cruise is certain she has heard a body thrown overboard, but no one believes her.” - *The Woman in Cabin 10*

...to the sheer creative genius of...

“The Sopranos in Middle Earth.”- *Game of Thrones*

(Although this is essentially a tagline, considering the sheer magnitude of the work, it works beautifully as an elevator pitch as well, in that it pretty much “says what it does on the tin”, i.e. a soap opera with swords, gore and dragons.

As I said earlier, your elevator pitch can be extremely powerful, not just to pro’s, but to yourself as well. So much so that I highly recommend trying to craft one based on your story idea even before you begin writing your first draft. Why? Simply because, if you can’t get to the essence of your story, there’s a good chance it’s not strong enough. Creating a one-liner elevator pitch enables you to quickly and easily see where you can inject a bit more dynamism into your plot, at the outset, rather than finishing your story and discovering it could have been so much better, so much more intriguing, if the hero had been blind for instance.

Till next time, keep pitching up at the writing desk!