



How to Write Best Selling Fiction

Dean Koontz

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From dust jacket notes: "...In this book, Dean Koontz, whose own books have sold more than 25 million copies, shares his insight into the publishing world and shows writers how to write the kind of book that a publisher can promote as a lead title - a well-written, thoroughly researched, complex, wide-appeal novel that can sell the millions of copies necessary to finance an extensive advertising and promotion campaign. Koontz takes a practical, detailed approach to the art, craft, and business of novel writing. You'll learn how to structure a story for greatest reader appeal, how to provide depth of characterization without slowing the pace, and how to recognize and use the sort of theme that is timely and appealing. Plus you'll receive thorough instruction on other writing techniques as they apply to today's novel, including background, viewpoint, scene setting, transitions, and dialogue. On the business side, Koontz gives an insider's view of how to deal profitably with editors and agents, advice on contracts, and tips on paperback and book club sales, foreign rights, and film rights. His final advice to writers is to read, read, read. To help you get started, he supplies a list of today's best-sellers which will provide further insight into the kind of novel that will succeed today...."

How to Write Best Selling Fiction Details

Date : Published September 1st 1981 by Writers Digest Books (first published 1972)

ISBN : 9780898790450

Author : Dean Koontz

Format : Hardcover 309 pages

Genre : Language, Writing, Nonfiction, Reference

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From Reader Review How to Write Best Selling Fiction for online ebook

Evan says

It is no fault of the author that some sections of this book are terribly out of date; it was written in 1972, and markets and tastes have changed. But a lot of the writing advice is still solid, especially the first chapter, "Hammer, Nails, and Wood."

For anybody seeking direction on how to understand and employ the requirements and forms of genre fiction, this book remains the only one of its kind by a writer whose publication record is proof that his advice is worth taking.

Joseph Carrabis says

This book is an interesting read and dated, both in a number of ways. The two main takeaways seem to be "Publishers are Evil...but not all" and "Read! If you want to write, read!"

There's no question that Koontz is a bestselling author so one would think he'd have a lot to offer. I didn't find much revelatory in this book. Definitely a lack of advice re technique, character, plot, dialogue, ...

Definitely lots of suggestions for whom to read to learn technique, character, plot, dialogue, ...

There's a lot about the business of writing in the book, specifically how bad publishing drives out good publishing (read "lots of bad books drive out good books") and he gives several examples of poorly written, edited, printed, ...books taking up bookstore shelves so there's less room for accomplished writers to put their wares out.

Makes one wonder what he'd have to say about the self-publishing industry.

I've written more about *How to Write Best Selling Fiction* on my blog if you're interested.

Bottom line, the book is okay, not outstanding, probably worth a read but not much more.

Stephanie says

Although an older book, I have used this guide many times. Dean has stated that he does not wish others to read or use this book as he wrote it when he was so young and so much has changed over the years. I can't say that I agree with him totally as I have found a lot of his information has withstood the test of time. It is rare to find for cheap and I'm hoping he will do another writing guide in the near future.

Tim says

I have no doubt this was a fantastic book in the '70's. For the things about genre writing that are timeless, it is spot on, unfortunately, tastes and the market have changed since then and as a result large chunks of this book are now irrelevant. Still, there is value to be had here and even the parts that talk about now forgotten genres/sub-genres are worth the quick review. There is inspiration into how to handle newer genre fiction that wasn't a thought yet then - if you dig and think.

Sue says

An excellent "How to" book from a master writer. Koontz details the necessary concepts for writing - plot, characterization, background, style and more - giving examples of what to do and what not to do. He also gives pointers on how the industry works. This was written in 1981 so some items (typewriters, encyclopedias, etc) are out of date, but most of the advice on writing is valid. The last chapter is a listing of writers and their works that he suggests reading. Again, only works up to 1980 are listed but many authors are recognizable names and their works are classics. My only quibble is Koontz spends time in the book discouraging potential authors to not write genre fiction, specifically science fiction and mysteries yet many if not most of the novels he recommends are from those genres.

Danny Tyran says

I suppose that in 1972 when this book was published, it was a great reference for writers, but now... Meh!

Timothy McNeil says

A lot has changed since the mid-1970s, especially if one is writing about that period while still cognizant of the lingering impact of the late-1960s. It would be wrong to think that the market for fiction is anywhere near the same. While the shift is likely less jarring than the pre- to post-Hemingway era of American literature, genre fiction – the subject of Dean R. Koontz's *Writing Popular Fiction* (1974) – one must consider how different the world is the more recent now.

Koontz was writing about a world where Peter Benchley's *Jaws* was just released as a book and had not become the first modern blockbuster. George Lucas had made two films at that point, *THX 1138* (1971) and *American Graffiti* (1973); there was no such thing as *Star Wars* (1977). *Star Trek* (1966-69) was a show that had a decent run on network television and had not yet emerged as a presence in syndication. The use of vampires in successful fiction wouldn't emerge until Stephen King penned *'Salem's Lot* in 1975, and it would not be until Anne Rice brought the sexy vampire back with *Interview with a Vampire* (1976) that the undead got to be in something more than a sub-category of the horror genre. Cable television had been around for 25 years but was still something more common in remote rural areas than the sameness of suburbia. Satellite television existed; it had its first single purpose satellite launched in '74. The personal computer was effectively unknown. The VCR existed, but was extremely expensive. It wouldn't be until 1975 that Betamax came on the scene and allowed for the average person to record broadcast television or watch movies at home at one's leisure. Hell, print magazines were still a major and viable outlet for a writer to submit fiction.

Koontz lists seven categories of genre fiction: Science Fiction, Fantasy, Suspense, Mysteries, Gothic-Romance, Westerns, and Erotica. I would argue that Sci-Fi (wildly expanded over what it was by the mid-1970s, for better or worse), Fantasy, Suspense (still very strong), Mystery (Koontz writes about the more traditional, Agatha Christie style mystery, which has been superseded by a more active plot structure since the early 1990s at least), Gothic-Romance (this is a chaste kind of romance, part Brontë sisters' young girl sent off to live in a strange house and long for the unobtainable man, part supernatural mystery; my understanding is that this market died before the 1970s were over), Westerns (another genre that has widely

gone by the wayside; it takes a very well-written book to garner any attention beyond people who go purposely looking for a Western; however, the more modern Western follows a much different plot structure where a man can be a man instead of a slave to the modern world), and Erotica (Koontz divides this category into the Big Sexy Novel and the Rough Sexy Novel; the former category includes everything from the bodice-ripper romance novels of the 1980s and 1990s to the sex-filled stories of Jacqueline Suzanne or Harold Robbins, and even more, while Rough Sexy is effectively porn). To his credit, I think that Koontz did a fantastic job of delineating the categories and his understanding of them. I could not think of a kind of genre fiction that would not fit in these groups (though as noted, I believe the Gothic Romance is dead). More to the point, Koontz, who was not yet 30 when he wrote Writing Popular Fiction, clearly understood all of the genres and the necessary elements to make one acceptable to a publisher.

Koontz is a little too eager to go to numbered lists (this is more of a personal complaint, because if one is keeping the book handy as a resource then this tactic is fine, but it gets cumbersome if one is just reading through the book as a book). Then, when doing so would make the most sense, he avoids the tactic and just lists the information with paragraph breaks. It feels a little odd, but once I understood that he was going to change it up whenever he felt like it, I became much less concerned about it.

One of the better parts of any book on writing is how many forgotten (or at least unknown to me if they have remained popular) books the author mentions as good examples of the genres. For the most part, Koontz rattles off well-known and renowned titles and authors, though in some instances he seems to be well ahead of his time. He praises Lucas' THX 1138 as being one of the two worthwhile (meaning not derivative) science fiction movies, which is impressive mostly because nobody saw THX 1138 when it was released. Still, it became quite clear that not only was Koontz very well read, he also had no problem throwing other writers under the bus when it came to their abilities and works. This stood in odd contrast to his straight-out advice that a writer is better served by writing sub-standard, by the numbers genre fiction to earn a paycheck than in taking a 9 to 5 job and neglecting writing for even a few short months.

Koontz also gives great insight into why the authors of the era were so eager to use pen names. This always confused me, but apparently there was a prevailing belief that an author could compete with himself (or herself) instead of a loyal following buying more books by the same author. Likewise, there were genres (this may still be the case) where the audience was thought to only endorse on gender of author – Westerns needed to be written by men, Gothic Romances only by women – and an author often took a name for each genre in which he or she worked. It still seems crazy to me, but Koontz does an excellent job of explaining that when the publisher tells you to use a different name if you want the advance check, do it.

According to Koontz, a good story needs:

- ① A Strong Plot
- ② A Hero or Heroine
- ③ Clear, Believable Motivation
- ④ A Great Deal of Action
- ⑤ A Colorful Background

That all seems super-obvious, doesn't it? Yet there are several stories I'd love to develop that I have have yet to figure out how to move the plot to the forefront of the tale. I have been known to try to force weak or unlikeable characters into the main role. I cannot remember I time I did not try to hide the characters motivations. I love restricting action (for no reason). And I am weak at describing the alien (Science Fiction or Fantasy) settings, or in bringing out the particulars of an environment and making the story come alive because of them. It is all simple advice, but sometimes I need to be clobbered over the head with it.

My overall reaction to this book is positive. I think I would enjoy a conversation with Koontz more than his books (and non-fiction to his fiction), but he clearly has mastered the craft of getting the readable, serviceable story in print quickly. Dated, sure, but worthwhile.

Michael Lewis says

Truly one of the classics! Extremely hard to find and very expensive on the back market. Worth every penny. Koontz gives the budding author inside information on writing and the industry (at the time). Great resource for any author. Highly recommended.

Brian says

A little dated, but super helpful if you wanna become a writer.

Jordan Lombard says

Some of the information here, such as what the "current" market is doing, is out of date. However, the middle sections were Koontz gets into the nuts and bolts of writing a novel, are extremely valuable to the new writer. He talks about plot and structure, dialogue tags, and researching places you've never been, among other things. He writes in a clear, precise manner that is easy to understand and I appreciated how he worded a few things.

On top of all this, he lists 99 authors he recommends and talks about a few of their titles he especially likes, many of whom are well known, like Robert Heinlein and Dashiell Hammett.

The sucky part about this book is that it is out of print and used copies can run from \$150-\$400+, likely because collectors of Koontz's work have driven the price up over the years. He's been saying he'll write a newer edition for awhile now, but I've not seen any indication that one is on the horizon. If it ever does happen though, rest assured, I'll be the first person waiting in line for it.

Eustacia Tan says

Previously, I talked about how *Tell Lies for Fun and Profit* taught me a bit about writing. Well, after that, I went to hunt down more books about writing and found *Writing Popular Fiction* by Dean Koontz. And you know what? It taught me a lot about plot.

Basically, the book deals with category fiction, and then in each category, discusses the basic plot-types, plot pitfalls and things that are absolutely necessary to include if you want your book to sell. In fact, compared to *Manual for Fiction Writers*, *Writing Popular Fiction* is mercenary in terms of how it assumes that the whole point of writing (or being an author) is to sell something.

The category fiction discussed in the book is: Science Fiction and Fantasy, Suspense, Mysteries, Gothic-

Romance, Westerns and Erotica. If your future novel is going to be in any of the above categories, you should definitely take a look at this book. But anyway, there are quite a few chapters on writing in general, which make it worth looking at even if you don't think you are writing in any of these categories.

My biggest takeaway from this book was that it made me realise that my NaNoWriMo novel is going to be very close to (if not actually) Science-Fiction. I don't have any new technologies or such, but I'm definitely writing a "In The Near Future" story. And from that section alone, I have a lot more things to consider about the background of the world I'm creating. I may not include all the information, but I have to consider them if I want my novel to feel realistic.

Towards the end, some of the advice gets very dated, especially when he talks about submitting your manuscript (and typewriters). In the age of e-publishing, you can completely by-pass the traditional gatekeepers if you're so desperate to get your book out. Even if you want to be a traditional published author, I have a feeling that the submissions method/getting an agent process is different. But then again, I don't work in the publishing industry so I don't know.

If you're stuck on plot, this is definitely the book to read!

First posted at With love from Japan, Eustacia

Lonnie says

Interesting insight from a best selling author before he became as large as he is. Some of the items mentioned were very dated but funny that Koontz was ahead of his time on a couple of others. The funniest tidbit about this book comes directly from Koontz's website: " He suggests this book is only for collectors who are completists, and he doesn't recommend that anyone turn to it for valuable writing advice."

Jaylia3 says

Out of print but worth getting your hands on even if you only fantasize about writing fiction. My daughter grew up with this book and wanted to take it to college because it is such a pleasure--using one of his exercises we made up a title for a book we haven't yet written--Orbiting Body Parts.

Lauren says

Given the difficulty in tracking down a copy of this book (to say nothing of the cost if you do find one) and how outdated some of the information is, I'm not sure why this book enjoys such a cult status. Actually, I answer my own question: it's hard to find and expensive, ergo it must be brilliant.

It's fine. Like I said, a lot of the information is outdated, and too many chapters are less advice and more personal opinion (although this book did get me thinking about what the line is between opinion and advice, so points for inspiring a good philosophical debate?).

Honestly, most of the advice contained in this book is such that aspiring writers can find it online for free.

And there are many, many more recent books on writing fiction that are just as good or better. Not recommended.

Mary Crabtree says

Don't be turned off by the boldness of the title. This is really a good book for anyone that wants to write. Koontz offers advice on pacing, voice, point of view and even his recommended reading list. It's out of print, hard to find and kinda expensive but well worth the trouble. A generous look at some of Koontz's tricks of the trade.
