

All of us want to sell more stories and write better ones. It is hard to believe that there exists a writer with soul so dead that he would not. But, from careful observation, I have come to the heartbreaking conclusion that while writers usually *want* to do this, they generally fail to try.

Writers are the laziest people on earth. And I know I'm the laziest writer. In common with the rest of the profession, I am always searching for the magic lamp which will shoot my stories genie-like into full bloom without the least effort on my part.

This is pure idiocy on my part as I have long ago found this magic lamp, but not until a couple years ago did I break it out and use the brass polish to discover that it was solid gold.

This lamp was so cobwebby and careworn that I am sure most of us have not looked very long at it in spite of its extreme age and in spite of the fact that it is eternally being called to our attention.

The name of this magic lamp is RESEARCH.

Ah, do I hear a chorus of sighs? Do I hear, "Hubbard is going to spring that old gag again." "What, another article on research? I thought LRH knew better."

In defense, I instantly protest that I am neither the discoverer nor the sole exploiter of research. But I do believe that I have found an entirely new slant upon an ancient object.

In Tacoma, a few months ago, I heard a writer sighing that he was having a helluva time getting plots. This acute writing disease had eaten deeply into his sleep and bankbook. It had made him so alert that he was ruined as a conversationalist, acting, as he did, like an idea sponge. Hanging on and hoping, but knowing that no ideas could possibly come his way.

As usual, I injected my thoughts into his plight—a habit which is bad and thankless.

I said, "Here's an idea. Why not go out and dig around in the old files at the library and the capitol at Olympia and find out everything you can on the subject of branding? There should be a lot of stories there."

He raised one eye and leered, "What? Do all that work for a cent and a half a word?"

And just to drive the idea home, I might remark that one day I happened into the New York Public Library. Crossing the file room, I slammed into a heavy bulk and ricocheted back to discover I had walked straight into Norvell Page and he into me.

I gaped. "Page!"

"Hubbard!" he whispered in awed tones.

Solemnly we shook each other by the hand.

CHORUS: Well, this is the first time I ever saw a writer in a library!

These two instances should serve to illustrate the fact that research does not rhyme with writer no matter what kind of mill you pound.

Research is a habit which is only acquired by sheer force of will. The easy thing to do is guess at the facts—so thinks the writer. When, as a matter of facts, the easy thing to do is go *find* the facts if you have to tear a town to pieces.

Witness what happened last summer.

Staring me in the face were a stack of dangerous-profession stories which have since appeared in *Argosy*. At that time they were no more than started and I sighed to see them stretching forth so endlessly.

I chose *Test Pilot* as the next on the list and started to plot it. I thought I knew my aviation because the Department of Commerce tells me so. Blithely, thinking this was easy, I started in upon a highly technical story without knowing the least thing about that branch of flying—never having been a test pilot.

For one week I stewed over the plot. For another week I broiled myself in the scorching heat of my self-accusation. Two weeks and nothing written.

Was I losing money fast!

There wasn't anything for it then. I had to find out something about test pilots.

Across the bay from my place in Seattle is the Boeing plant. At the Boeing plant there would be test pilots. I had to go!

And all for a cent and a half a word.

I went. Egdvedt, the Boeing president, was so startled to see a real live writer in the place that he almost talked himself hoarse.

Minshall, the chief engineer, was so astounded at my ignorance that he hauled me through the plant until I had bunions the size of onions.

I sighed.

All for a cent and a half a word!

I went home.

About that time it occurred to me that I used to write a lot for the *Sportsman Pilot* and as long as I had the dope and data, I might as well fix the details in my head by writing them an article.

That done, I suddenly saw a fine plot for my *Argosy* yarn and wrote that in a matter of a day and a half.

Two months went by. Arthur Lawson came in as editor of *Dell* and promptly remembered *Test Pilot* in *Argosy* and demanded a story along similar lines.

In two days I wrote that.

A month after that, Florence McChesney decided that she needed a twenty-thousand-word flying story." "*Test Pilot*," says I, "do your stuff!"

Each and every one of those yarns sold first crack out. Article for the *Sportsman Pilot*, short for *Argosy*, short for *War Birds*, twenty-thousand worder for *Five Novels*.

One day of research = several hundred bucks in stories.

This naturally made me think things over and, not being quite as foolish as editors think writers are, I added up the account book and promptly went to work. Thus, the moral is yet to come.

On the dangerous-profession stories which followed, I almost lost my life and broke my neck trying to make them authentic. On each one I kept a complete list of notes and a list of plots which occurred to me at the time. There is enough writing material in that file to last me at least a year. It is the finest kind of copy because it is risky in the extreme, full of drama and high tension. I haven't any fears about mentioning this as any writer who is crazy enough to go down in diving suits and up in spar trees deserves all the help he can get.

But research does not end there and that is not the point of this article.

A short time ago I began to search for research on the theory that if I could get a glimmering of anything lying beyond a certain horizon, I could go deep enough to find an excellent story.

I stopped doing what I used to do. There was a time when I expected a story to blaze up and scorch me all of its own accord. I have found, however, that there is a premium on divine fire and it is not very bright when used by a pulpateer. This gentleman has to write an immortal story about once every three days to keep eating.

On this plan I began to read exhaustively in old technical books, ancient travel books, forgotten literature. But not with the idea of cribbing. I wanted information and nothing else. I wanted to know how the people used to think here, how the land lay there. Given one slim fact for a background, I have found it easy to take off down the channel of research and canal boat out a cargo of stories.

In other words, I have no use for an obvious story idea as laid out in *Popular Mechanics* or *Forensic Medicine*. I want one slim, forgotten fact. From there a man can go anywhere and the story is very likely to prove unusual.

In one old volume, for instance, I discovered that there was such a thing as a schoolmaster aboard Nelson's ships of the line.

That was a weird one. Why should Nelson want a schoolmaster?

Answer: Midshipmen.

When did this occur? Answer: The Napoleonic Wars. Ah, now we'll find out how those old ships looked. We'll discover how they fought, what they did. And there was the schoolmaster during battle. Where? In the "cockpit" helping hack off arms and legs.

Next lead indicated: Surgery during the Napoleonic Wars.

Wild guess in another allied field: Gunnery.

Again: Nelson.

A battle: On the Nile.

A ship or something strange about this battle: *L'Orient*, monster French flagship which mysteriously caught fire and blew up, throwing the weight of guns to Nelson.

Incidental discovery: *The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck* was written about the son of *L'Orient's* skipper.

Back to midshipmen, the King's Letter Boys: They were hell on wheels, arrogant, ghastly urchins being trained as officers.

And with all this under my mental belt, I girded up my mental loins. Complete after a few days of search, I had *Mr. Tidwell, Gunner*, which appeared in *Adventure*.

All that because I chanced to find there was a schoolmaster aboard Nelson's ships of the line.

This is now happening right along because I haven't let the idea slide as my laziness dictated I should.

The final coup d'état arrived last winter.

Boredom had settled heavily upon me and I sat one evening staring vacantly at a shelf of books. They were most monotonous. Whole sets stretched out along the shelves with very little change in color or size. This annoyed me and I bent forward and took one out just to relieve the regularity.

It proved to be Washington Irving's *Astoria*, his famous epic of the fur-trading days.

It had never been brought home to me that Irving had written such a book and to find out why, I promptly started to read it. The result was, of course, a fur-trading story. But the method of arriving at this story was so indirect that it merits a glance.

Irving only served to call to my attention that I was out in the fur-trading Northwest and that I had certainly better take advantage of the history of the place.

I roved around, found very little because I had no direct starting point. I went to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to discover a bibliography of such source books and started out again to ferret them out.

All these books were contemporary with fur-trading days, all of them written, of course, by white men. But everywhere I kept tripping across the phrases, "The Warlike Blackfeet," "The Bloodthirsty Blackfeet."

This finally penetrated my thick skull. I did not like it because I thought I knew something about the Blackfeet.

Were they as bad as they were represented?

Into the records. The real records. Into Alexander Henry's journal. Into this and out of that until I had a stack of material higher than my desk.

And then I capped the climax by locating a young chap in Seattle who happens to be a blood brother of the Blackfeet. Lewis and Clark's Journal contained about five pages concerning the circumstances which surrounded the killing of a Blackfoot brave by Lewis.

The way this suddenly shot down the groove is remarkable to remember.

The Hudson's Bay Company, the Nor'Westers, the Blackfeet, John Jacob Astor . . . The story pieces dovetailed with a click.

Coupled with years of experience in the northwest, these hundred sources jibed to make the story.

The result was *Buckskin Brigades*, a novel being put out this summer by Macaulay.

Buckskin Brigades came to life because I happened to be bored enough one evening to sit and stare at a line of books on a shelf.

This account of researching is not complete unless I mention a certain dogging phobia I have and which I suspect is deeply rooted in most of us.

H. Bedford Jones mentioned it long ago and I did not believe him at the time. But after rolling stacks of it into the mags, I know that B-J was right as a check.

He said that it was hard for a person to write about the things he knew best.

This gives rise to an ancient argument which says pro and con that a writer should write about the things he knows.

Witnesseth: I was born and raised in the West and yet it was not until last year that I sold a couple westerns. And I only sold those because somebody said I couldn't.

Know ye: The Caribbean countries know me as El Colorado and yet the only Caribbean stories I can write are about those countries which I have touched so briefly that I have only the vaguest knowledge of them and am therefore forced to depend upon researching the books and maps for my facts.

Hear ye: I wrote fine Hollywood stories until I came down here and worked in pictures. I wrote one while here and the editor slammed it back as a total loss.

There are only a few exceptions to this. I have been able to cash in heavily upon my knowledge of North China because the place appealed to me as the last word in savage, romantic lore. The last exception seems to be flying stories, though after flying a ship, I can't write an aviation story for a month.

The final proof of this assertion came in connection with my Marine Corps stories. Most of my life I have been associated with the Corps one way or another in various parts of the world and I should know something about it.

But I have given up in dark despair.

He Walked to War in Adventure was branded as technically imperfect.

Don't Rush Me in Argosy, another Marine story, elicited anguished howls of protest.

And yet if there is any story in the world I should be qualified to write, it is a Marine story.

These are my woes. The reason for them is probably very plain to everyone. But I'll state my answer anyway.

A man cannot write a story unless he is deeply interested in it. If he thinks he knows a subject, then he instantly becomes careless with his technical details.

The only way I have found it possible to sidetrack these woes is by delving into new fields constantly, looking everywhere for one small fact which will lead me on into a story field I think I'll like.

This is not very good for a writer's reputation, they tell me. A writer, it is claimed, must specialize to become outstanding. I labored trying to build up a converse reputation, hoping to be known as a writer of infinite versatility.

I did not know until two years ago that the specializing writer is *persona non grata* with an editor. Jack Byrne, for instance, rebuilt *Argosy* with variety as a foundation. And once I heard Bloomfield sigh that he wished some of his top-notchers would stop sending him the same background week in and week out.

Maybe I am right, possibly I am wrong.

But I believe that the only way I can keep improving my work and my markets is by broadening my sphere of acquaintanceship with the world and its people and professions.

– L. Ron Hubbard

GLOSSARY

Astoria: a city in northwestern Oregon, founded in 1811 by American merchant John Jacob Astor (1763–1848), who planned Astoria as a key trading post in the beaver fur trade. The post was taken over by British interests but eventually returned to US control when the boundary between the US and Canada was settled (1846).

Astor, John Jacob: (1763–1848) American merchant and fur trader. Astor was born near Heidelberg, Germany, and immigrated to the United States in 1783. Entering the fur trade, he set up the American Fur Company in an effort to combat British interests and established trading posts, including one at Astoria (now in Oregon).

Bedford Jones, H.: (1887–1949) Canadian historical adventure, fantasy and science fiction writer.

Bloomfield: Howard Bloomfield, editor of the Pulp magazine *Adventure*.

“Boy Stood on the Burning Deck, The”: a reference to the poem “Casabianca” by English poet Felicia Dorothea Hemans (1793–1835). The poem tells the story of the deaths of French naval captain Louis de Casabianca, commander of the flagship *L'Orient*, and his ten-year-old son Giacomo during the Battle of the Nile (1798). The boy had been put on watch by his father, but the ship caught fire and the captain was mortally wounded. Though others of the crew fled, the boy remained, standing heroically in an effort to help his father until the ship exploded.

cockpit: (formerly) a space below the waterline in a warship, occupied by the quarters of the junior officers and used as a dressing station for those wounded in action.

cribbing: stealing someone's ideas or work; plagiarizing.

Egtvedt: C.L. Egtvedt (1892–1975), president of Boeing Aircraft Company (1933–1939).

Hudson's Bay Company: a fur-trading company originally established by English merchants in 1670 for the purpose of trade and settlement in the Hudson Bay region in northeast Canada.

Irving, Washington: (1783–1859) American writer and one of the first whose works received recognition in Europe as well as in the United States. Besides his well-known stories *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Irving also wrote stories of his travels in the American West and in Europe as well as historical works on figures such as George Washington and Christopher Columbus.

Letter Boys, the King's: in the British Navy, the nickname for midshipmen (junior officers in training) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Young boys of good families were sent to sea with a letter of service, a document advising the ship captain to see to the boy's instruction in seafaring.

Lewis and Clark: Meriwether Lewis (1774–1809) and William Clark (1770–1838), the first explorers to travel across the northwestern United States, from the Mississippi River across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast and back (1804–1806).

McChesney, Florence: editor of the pulp magazine *Five-Novels Monthly*.

midshipmen: formerly, the boys or young men who formed the group from which naval officers were chosen.

mill: a typewriter, in reference to it as a machine for composing written copy, likened to a machine that performs certain operations on material in the process of manufacture. Used figuratively.

Nelson: Horatio Nelson (1758–1805), England's greatest admiral and naval hero. His victory over the French at the Battle of the Nile (1798) forced Napoleon to withdraw from the Middle East, while his 1805 victory over the combined French and Spanish fleets broke France's naval power and established England's rule of the seas for the rest of the 1800s.

Nor'Westers: the North West Company, a fur-trading company in northern North America from the 1780s until 1821, when it merged with its main rival, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC).

Page, Norvell: (1904–1961) American Pulp fiction writer, journalist and editor best known as the author of the majority of the adventures of The Spider, a crime fighter wanted by the law for executing his criminal antagonists