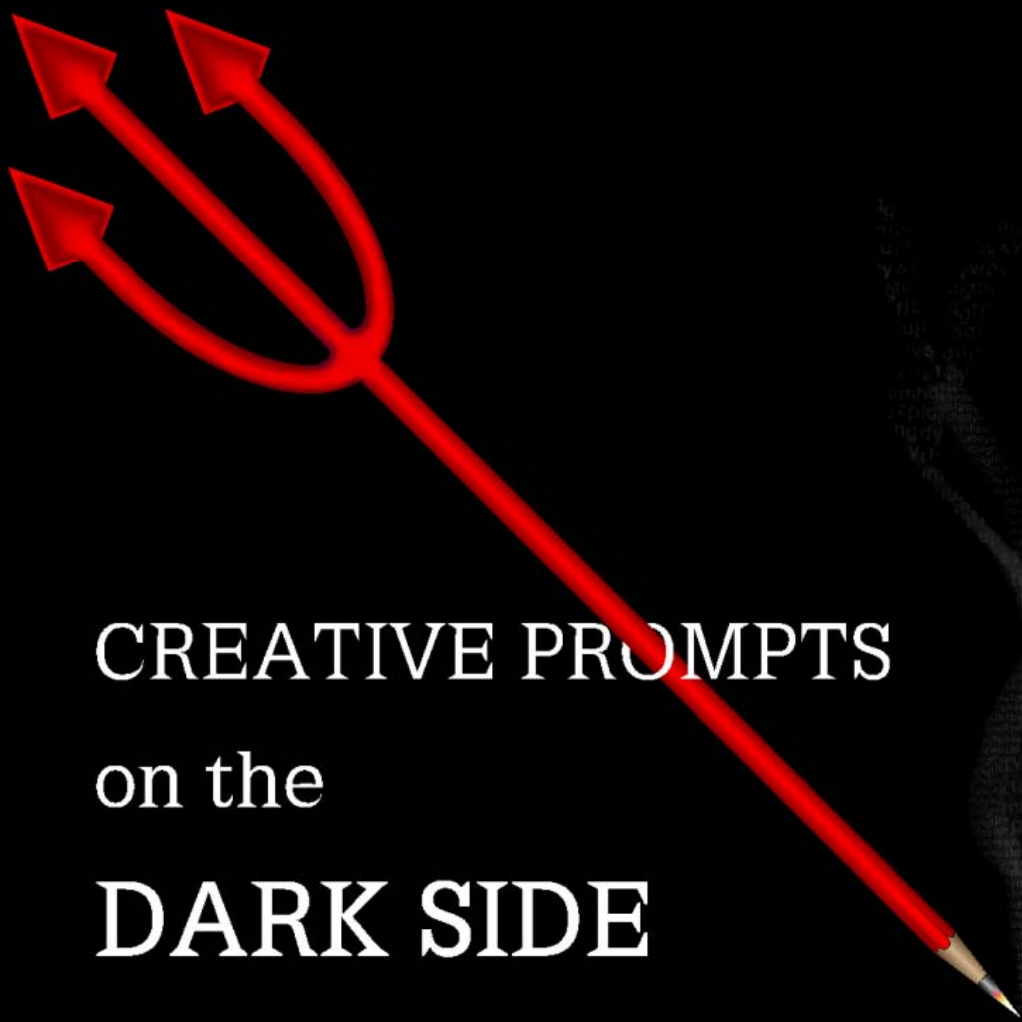


MICHAEL A. ARNZEN

# INSTIGATION



CREATIVE PROMPTS  
on the  
DARK SIDE

## Copyright Page

INSTIGATION:  
Creative Prompts on the Dark Side  
By Michael A. Arnzen

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## Here Comes the Fork: An Introduction

We've all been there. The machine sometimes jams. The wheels stop turning. We step away from the wreckage but find it extremely difficult to climb back in again later. It's like our creative engines have died.

Whether it's from block or burnout, all writers have suffered the fate of creative stoppage at one point or another. The dread of the proverbial blank page, sucking our imagination into it and blanking out our minds in an abyss of possibility, like some insane *horror vacui*.

We're only human. We all eventually bleed out and dry up, without sustenance or transfusion. In life, there really is "the end." Ironically, not so in fiction writing. As creative artists, we have the opportunity to live many lives, over and over again. We can resurrect.

Many pros have developed strategies or habits which keep them limber and healthy and so productive they can produce more books in a year than most people can dream -- but not everyone is so lucky. Even the best turn stale, or get into habits that are akin to "phoning it in." All of us occasionally need to prime the creative pump.

Everyone has their own method -- from taking a walk to taking a shot to taking notes in a journal. I believe that writing itself is the best way to start writing. That sounds redundant, but many of us delay the actual process when we're not quite in the mood for it. We "headwrite" instead of picking up the pen. But headwriting is not writing. It's thinking. The very act of writing -- even if simply sketching out those same ideas we were mulling over -- does something...different. It creates. We say things we would never say in our heads or with our mouths. Things are dredged up that surprise us. Memories flood. Cleverness surfaces. We dream awake. Perhaps we conjure the stuff of nightmares -- and love the thrill of it.

But when we're blocked, we forget the impish joy of all this, losing our grip on what it is we are creating, and we talk ourselves out of starting again, avoiding the pain. Instead, we substitute the more endurable pain of *ennui*. We stall.

One trick to getting started is to sidestep the burden of coming up with ideas or a plot first. That's what a prompt does -- it challenges the writer to respond without having to worry too much about premise or plot. It hands you a deck of cards and maybe even the rules too and encourages you to simply start dealing them out. Like a poker game, what results is hardly predictable. And since no one's really playing but you, possibly just doodling in your journal, you can bluff and cheat and make up the rules of the game as you go along.

Most writing prompts I've seen are pretty tame and generic. So often, they come to us like something out of a classroom. They typically take the form of generic questions intended exclusively for an audience of beginning writers or college students. They lob softballs. As a genre, "writing prompts" fall squarely into the PG-13 territory of "inspiration." Rarely do they push you to do something truly weird, taboo, goofy or unthinkable (ergo, original). Even worse,

hardly ever do you find them focused on genre topics or geared toward writers who already know a thing or two. One reason for this is because genre fiction often requires having an original premise, and the assumption is that this unique idea must emerge entirely from the writer's mind, like gold lifted from a sacred mine. But a well-written prompt can generate an original spin on a conventional plot thread or an unexpected variation on a conventional theme. Good genre writers and speculative fiction authors spend a lot of time (and pull a lot of hair) coming up with ideas -- indeed, they trade in a market of originality, because it is dominated by "the unexpected" -- but the best genre fiction always marries convention with invention. Good ideas can emerge from the writing process itself. As many novelists will say, the end of a book doesn't occur to them until they're approaching it. So one doesn't have to start with an original idea; it can come along the way. In fact, sometimes the best stories start on the "common" ground and lead us into unfamiliar territories. The problem, though, is just getting started down the path to discovery.

I teach creative writing courses at Seton Hill University -- a place that's genre-friendly enough to allow me to teach courses in my specialty -- horror fiction -- because we offer an MFA in Writing Popular Fiction and a similar certificate for undergraduates. Often, I need to generate strange scenarios, exercises and prompts for my students to instigate them into brainstorming on the dark side. That's where the idea for "Instigation" began. Because a number of writers subscribe to my electronic newsletter, The Goreletter <gorelets.com>, I started sharing them in there, too. This became quite popular, eventually leading to a weekly column in *Hellnotes*, a horror journal, which paid me for them for a good two or three years, until I had to step away.

Admittedly, many of these "story starters" were (and still are) ludicrous and goofy. When I first started down this pathway, I felt like I was playfully mocking the genre of the writing prompt, and my tongue was firmly in my cheek. But the flavor started to grow on me, and over time I began to feel that these prompts could do much good by "outing" genre cliches and pushing writers to do something different with them -- to flaunt the license that their genre gives them to go all out and over-the-top. In horror, only the unexpected is expected...and too often beginning writers play it too safe, satisfied with merely meeting expectations. I could tell that my little writing exercises were starting to "prompt" them to reach beyond their own safety nets, and take risks to try something new. And in my classes, I saw the joy of writing come back from the dead in my students and their work.

Resurrection!

But once both writers and students started reporting that these story starters were not only triggering great ideas, but also producing marketable manuscripts, I knew I was on to something even bigger than that. And so I've kept writing them. And posting them online. And coming up with devious ways to proctor them in my writing classes at Seton Hill. And in 2012, after a decade of publishing things like these on my website, Raw Dog Screaming Press offered to publish a treasury of them (along with hundreds of poems and other neat things) in a wonderful hardcover book called *The Gorelets Omnibus*.

This present book is a largely expanded edition of "Instigation," taking my original collection of prompts and revising, updating, organizing and supplementing them with so much more. And I am quite pleased to share all this with you now in order to instigate you into making some very dark, peculiar writing.

But I do not merely think of Instigation as some kind of remedy for writer's block. I do want to help you with that, but I don't assume you have it. My hope is that these prompts will help any reader write in a more devious way than they already do. Like a pitchfork in your back, I hope to prod you a little closer to the edge above the dark pit of your unconscious. Or like a finger in the ribs, I hope you'll get an uncomfortable chuckle out of these and have some taboo fun by going places in your writing you'd never normally dare to tread. In either case, I encourage you to forget about the marketplace for your writing, the classroom drills of your youth and the editor looking over your shoulder. Though you can approach the contents of this book as writing exercises, I like to think of them as something else.

They're dares. Literary challenges. Dangerously mad experiments. A starting pistol aimed at your head.

Get started. Be a daredevil. Be the insane writer cackling in his laboratory with Frankenstein-like glee. Run wild! Forget about the marketability of your output or your worthiness as a writer or your ego's sense of what is right and proper for awhile. Just let the demons out and follow where they take you. Go anywhere, even if you feel you're heading astray. *Especially* if astray. Follow your muse into a level of hell that no one would ever see coming, and no one would ever want to. Go ahead and get yourself into imaginative trouble. Only trouble is interesting, no matter what genre or media you work in, and that's really all we want to read from you. The troublesome bits. The disturbing stuff. The weirdness.

You simply need the courage to go over to the dark side to get there. I know you've been dipping your toe over the edge already. But you're not there yet. Perhaps you just need a push.

Here comes the fork.

-- Michael Arnzen, <http://gorelets.com>

## How to Use this Book

Those who know how to use a book like this have already skipped this section and have gleefully leapt right down the hellslide.

But for you, reading this now, perhaps even procrastinating from actually writing something: I do have a few words of advice.

There is a cardinal law to the creative process: "Do whatever works."

And in dark fiction, there is a liberating corollary, infamously espoused by Clive Barker: "There are no limits."

Which means that there is no singular way to use a book of creative prompts. This book is my invitation to play with some words and ideas I've set out for you, but there certainly aren't any rules to this game.

So by all means, do what you will. Browse wantonly or practice each one in turn. Violate order or go through them backwards. Pick and choose and toss some away. Skim for a favorite and pounce. Copy the words on the top of the page and rewrite them for awhile until you start. Remix the prompts. Trample over the words and strangle whatever last breath you can out of them. Erase some. Add some. Look some up.

But soon you must write.

And if you find you cannot write, then you must dream.

And take notes so you can write later.

Writing is work, but if you're experiencing writer's block, I recommend you just start journaling or freewriting. WORK TO OPEN THE ESCAPE HATCH. You'll find that if you just start, sometimes you fall through it when you're not paying attention to it anymore.

And write freely. There is no rulebook. There is only writing. See where it takes you. Freedom is essential to the creative process. There are no censors here. Writing is your private space. Your zone alone. This book is merely a tool. And if you want some extra tips on making this tool work for you, I've even included a D.I.Y. ("Do It Yourself") chapter later in the book called "Re-Instigation" that might help you re-purpose or desecrate this tome to your heart's content.

I can't tell you what to do. But I will tell you this, because it might help you to apprehend the structure of Instigation.

Most collections of writing prompts offer themselves up as "story starters": quirky scenarios,

improv situations, puzzling questions, suggestive titles, or other bits of text that aim to get you started writing. The dominant part of this book -- "365 Sick Scenarios" -- is composed of these. The number 365 was chosen, obviously, because you can do one a day for a year. But that's just one technique, for those who like disciplined exercise. You might alternatively just chose one at random whenever the mood strikes (or whenever you're not in the mood to write). The best way to do that is just to pick a random number and run a search on your ebook device (this explains why the prompts are numbered the way they are: if you want a prompt, search for "1.x" where x is the random number of chapter 1).

When you choose a prompt, don't think yourself out of it. You might not "get" it at first; or you might fool yourself into thinking it's something not worth trying. The real goal here is just to start writing. With a prompt, you've been handed the proverbial football -- and you should just run with it...in fact, run right off the field if you like. You'll get somewhere interesting, and hopefully you'll touchdown somewhere unexpected.

The normal thinking behind a writing prompt is that it can be used for public journaling (blogging), private freewriting (unedited brainstorming), workshop assignments (torturing...I mean "collaborating"), or simply sketching out a story idea (outlining). In the trade, this stage of the writing process is called "**invention**": inventing new story premises, creating something new from scratch. Some writers find no use for creative writing prompts because they feel constricted by the nature of them: that is, that someone else (in this case, Michael Arnzen), already did all the "inventing" and so it won't work right. But I see it differently. You have to trust yourself to "know better" than the prompter. To take the rules and rewrite them. And more importantly, to *invent while you're writing by discovering new things along the way*. You might start with a prompt, but you'll actually forget it the further you get into your own territory -- like starting blocks pushed behind the runner on the race track. They're just tools you jettison behind you and forget.

The key term I want to highlight here is not forgetting, though. It's **DISCOVERY**.

Too often, prompt collections just give you starting blocks. But sometimes -- especially in marathon-length tasks like composing a novel -- writers take pit stops along the way. They pull over to grab a drink and realize they don't know where the track went to or where they're going and they pass out or sit it out. The race has turned...boring or insurmountable or stupid. Things aren't working and we know it.

The fun part -- the thrill of *discovery* -- has faded away during the actual **composition** of the piece.

So I've included a section I call "Spurs" -- sick little prods to keep you moving forward. You won't ever get anywhere if you don't keep moving. I first wrote these "spurs," actually, to help novelists who were engaging in NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month -- see [nanowrimo.org](http://nanowrimo.org)), which challenges writers to pound out a complete novel in the month of November. If you're muddling through your middle, spinning your wheels, or painting yourself into some kind of imaginative corner, perhaps these will help you discover some new facet to

your work-in-progress that is interesting enough to keep you going.

But discovery doesn't just happen before or during the act of creation. It can also happen afterward, during **revision**. In fact, so many writers miss a golden opportunity to generate fresh material because they won't dare to tamper with what they've already created, and they end up playing it way too safe. So I've included a few radical ways you might rethink your assumptions about your first draft of a piece. You might find yourself instigated into making it a wilder yarn than it was the first time through...something your reader will appreciate, I am certain. Good can always be made better. And sometimes it takes a radical change to do so. The section called "Resurrections" seeks to help you bring a story back from the dead during your revision process. This section might not lead to any "radical" changes, but it may help you to discover -- that is, to re-see (revise) your work in a new light, by steering you into an unexpected direction. Take that new light and head into the shadows -- a deeper level of darkness.

In getting ready for this book, I culled my files and discovered (there's that word again) numerous journal prompts I have used over the past twenty years or so in a variety of my writing classes, and I felt it would be a waste not to include them here for you, too. Even if they are not quite as "dark" as the cover of this book implies, I've included them. This is the section called "Memoir Mayhem," which will be particularly helpful if you are the sort of writer who likes to write in a journal every day, and want something fresh (or weird) to write about, beyond the scope of dark fiction. It is a mix of various themes related to the lives of writers -- from the trade to childhood to food to death -- and it might help you "write what you know" on the dark side.

And then finally, there's the D.I.Y. section -- which I call "The Devil Made You Do It Yourself" -- which gives you some tricks for coming up with your own writing exercises and even ways to customize and re-purpose all the prompts in this book, or any other book like it (if there is any...I'd like to think not, as I've yet to see a book ask you to describe the flavor of your own brain matter).

Finally, I've included a few short articles you might turn to if you are feeling brutally blocked, or in a melancholy mood that forestalls actual writing. If that's you, then don't despair -- you're already doing the first thing one should do when they can't write: **READING**. Just putting yourself into the "zone" of literature will likely inspire you to pick up the pen and do it yourself. I tend to pick up a book when I'm not otherwise spending my spare time writing. I listen to the writer, and then I get compelled to "talk back to the book" and I head to the computer.

Feel free to "talk back" to this one all you like. Do it in your journal. Or send me a message. Or post to your blog and share the link with me. Sometimes it helps to know there is an audience out there. If you want me to, I'll post a link to your prompt-inspired work (whether published or self-published) in the "Instigation Showcase" on my website at <http://gorelets.com/showcase>

Although I don't believe there is another book like *Instigation* out there -- mostly because it is very, *very* weird -- I do lead you into this enterprise knowing that the concept (a collection of creative writing prompts) is not an original one, by any stretch of the imagination. These things



are often a dime a dozen... as you'll see in the appendix to the book, which features books, apps, and websites that are either free or cheap or available in your library. All of this might stimulate you to keep challenging yourself to keep practicing, keep journaling, keep growing, keep running that race on a track made of brimstone coals.

Writing never ends, you see. Even after you've finished a story, there's revising to do. Or the next book to write. If you're like me, you jot down story ideas for the next book while you're working on one project, or you're constantly busy juggling several writing projects at once. It's a cruel form of self-torture.

Everyone presumes writers and creators on the dark side are sadistic. The truth of the matter is that we're masochistic workaholics, obsessed with putting ourselves into danger zones of mind and body. We know there's no greater joy than feeling those coals sizzle under our feet when we're doing it right.

The secret to success in this business is not genius; it is persistence. I hope that the prods of my proverbial pitchfork help keep you going until you need no prodding from me or anyone else any longer. By that point, the devil will be inside of you already. Your demon muse will become your best friend.

So don't just do what these prompts direct you to. Write to find the story within the story, and the story you can write after that one. Keep surprising yourself. It's the only way to know you're surprising your reader, too.

Now get cracking.

Oh wait -- hold on -- one last thing. An important thing.

I want to assure you of something. **Any body of work you produce as an *outcome of responding to these prompts is entirely your own literary property.*** I only control the copyright of this collection and the right to publish the actual prompts themselves. These are my matchsticks, but I'm asking you to strike the fire. The fire you create is all your own, whether it fizzles out or blazes strong. And I won't sue if you write a blockbuster movie or breakout bestseller as a result. I'd love to hear about it, though. And credits are always a courtesy that are appreciated.

Finally, I hope you'll also recommend this book to other writers who might not have heard about it. Post a review on your blog or share a link on your social network. If you post something online that you wrote inspired by this text, I would appreciate an acknowledgment via a link to <http://gorelets.com> -- you'll be turning your readers on to more good prompts which I promise to continue to post online into the indefinite future.

If you wish to use these prompts in a classroom or workshop, I encourage you to extract some for that purpose. If uncertain about the amount of prompts you are using, write me at [arnzen@gorelets.com](mailto:arnzen@gorelets.com) and I'll likely give you permission, within reason. I believe in educational

fair use, so long as you don't give a large chunk of the book away when you otherwise would have students buy it. Not because I enjoy bilking students of their financial aid, but because there's something to be said about having people buy their own books: it makes them more "invested" in actually reading and *using* them...and they're more likely to keep them as a tool they will turn to again in the future.

I hope you will, too.

Okay, this way-too-lengthy introduction is over now. Get out of the blue...and into the black....

# **1. Prompts: 365 Sick Scenarios**

## **Introduction**

When I first started publishing prompts, I put them in a department in my newsletter called "Instigation: Twisted Prompts for Sicko Writers." That subtitle might give you all the context you need before you proceed: these prompts are very strange. Don't be afraid. I want to encourage you to run with them and see if you can make them even weirder. Getting started means getting freaky, not racing to the end. So get your weird on and let that freak flag fly.

Here you have 365 sick scenarios. You could do one a day in order if you're bold (or if you're a calendar fetishist). But I think random is better. Random makes you stop and think in unexpected ways, launching you into new directions.

[TIP: exploit your ebook device: try running a search for "1.x" (replacing x with any number between 1 and 365) to truly generate a random prompt from this section. Or get a friend to call out a number. Or use the website at [random.org](http://random.org) to have the ghost in the machine choose for you.]

### **Prompt-1.1**

Narrate a gory feasting from the point-of-view of a flock of vultures (third person plural; e.g., "We peck..."). Be sure to appeal to all five senses.

### **Prompt-1.2**

A homeless man has a sign that says "Will work for food." A passer-by has a devilish job for him to perform. Write the encounter.

### **Prompt-1.3**

Depict a veterinarian or zookeeper who is experiencing the sudden onset of an animal trait.

#### **Prompt-1.4**

Write a serial killer's confession.

#### **Prompt-1.5**

"Satan0666" instant messages you. Script the conversation. Be sure to have the unwelcome prince of darkness utilize emoticons and chat room shorthand.

As in: ]:-<-

(a sad li'l devil with blood dribbling from his pathetic left fang)

#### **Prompt-1.6**

Craft a piece whose theme is captured by this anonymous quotation from the world of zoology: "An effective way to deal with predators is to taste terrible."

#### **Prompt-1.7**

Car crashes are common, but traumatic, experiences. Dramatize one in which something really surprising happens mid-crash.

#### **Prompt-1.8**

I've developed a mouth on my chest, just above my heart. Why? What does it want? Write a first person tale or mock journal entry that reveals the answers.

#### **Prompt-1.9**

Take a criminal or horror story stereotype and make a comic book superhero out of it. Try to avoid making the character a villain. Strive to be as campy-yet-horrific as you can.

#### **Prompt-1.10**

Your main character is handed a dossier that reads "The Beehive Murders." What's inside?

### **Prompt-1.11**

Describe the first birthday party for a disturbing mutant.

### **Prompt-1.12**

Write the graduation speech for Horror High (or any of its extension campuses: "Werewolf U" or "School for Schizos" or "Parasite Prep Academy"... you get the picture).

### **Prompt-1.13**

Where would you least expect a chainsaw? Rev it up and write.

### **Prompt-1.14**

Create a numbered list: "Rules for Human Hunting"

### **Prompt-1.15**

A character discovers a paper mask pressed between the pages of an early edition of Poe. Account for it.

### **Prompt-1.16**

Write a television commercial or other advertisement for a poison, plague, or natural disaster (e.g., "Ebola Beer. It's Pustule Time." or "Sars Imports...when you think cars, think SARS!").

### **Prompt-1.17**

Pick a random word from the dictionary. Nouns work best; try to avoid names. Then add the word "Kills" next to it at the top of a blank page (e.g. "Trivia Kills"). You've got yourself a title. Now write the story that goes with it. If you get stuck, try again with a new word. (Random direct objects -- like "Trivia Kills Quizmaster" or "Trivia Kills Sicko" -- can help).

### **Prompt-1.18**

Describe a house fire from the viewpoint of a person (or ghost?) trapped within the burning building.

### **Prompt-1.19**

We've all seen those cartoon versions of "cannibal stew" (e.g., the man in a pith helmet, stewing in a cauldron filled with boiling water and carrots). But what would a cannibal's dinner *really* look like? (Or dare I ask, *taste* like?)

### **Prompt-1.20**

Write the diary entry of a madman; begin by detailing some event (whether personal or in the news) that actually occurred today. Even if you actually went insane, fictionalize it.

### **Prompt-1.21**

You are a new doctor at a bizarre institution. You've been assigned to work "The Ward of Failed Suicides." Describe your first day.

### **Prompt-1.22**

Write a necrophiliac's love song.

### **Prompt-1.23**

Clot a wound or make a tourniquet with an unexpected object.

### **Prompt-1.24**

A serial killer has been removing the tongues of his victims. What does he do with them? Be clever, but allow the writing process to generate a motive.

### **Prompt-1.25**

Torture a popular cartoon character or personality from children's television.

**Prompt-1.26**

Describe a seven course meal that gets increasingly disgusting with each new entree.

**Prompt-1.27**

Begin a new piece by describing the decor in the "love pad" of a monster or villain of your choice.

**Prompt-1.28**

What if -- via genetic mutation -- an organic "optical illusion" was created? Describe an original one. Make it do something nasty to someone else.

**Prompt-1.29**

Have fun with carpentry accidents.

**Prompt-1.30**

Script a conversation with your own evil twin.

**Prompt-1.31**

Your character is trapped in an amusement park ride that won't stop. In fact, the mechanics seem to be speeding up! Describe the escape attempt. (Alternatively, write this from the viewpoint of a parent who helplessly watches as their child is trapped in such a situation).

**Prompt-1.32**

Write about a magic mirror of some kind, set in a banal location (like a roadside rest stop or the lobby of a fast food restaurant).

## 2. Spurs: 31 Turns for the Worse

### Introduction

Here we have something a little more specialized. I call them "turns for the worse" because they're meant to help you with something you've already started -- and maybe stalled part-way through -- and to spur you to take things into an unexpected direction.

While any of the following prompts *could* help instigate new work, they will be more useful for books or outlines already in progress. They were originally written for writers who might have hit the "muddle in the middle" of their novels during National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo -- a collective race to write a whole book in 31 days, which runs each November). There are 31 provided here, in honor of a "month," but it would likely generate an incoherent piece of fiction if you used one a day in a month-long stretch. Perhaps page through one a day and ask yourself if it could help stimulate an idea. Otherwise, come back and choose at random if you ever get stuck in the middle of a novel, story, or outline.

These "spurs" aren't just here to help you keep going; the hope is that they instigate you to take your work into a much weirder direction than you originally planned. The unexpected turn is always the more enjoyable turn, to both reader and writer alike. NEVER worry about yanking the wheel and taking a hard turn. It just might be the course correction you need to get you to the finish line in an exciting way. You can always revise later. For now, drive crazy!

[Remember: exploit your ebook device by running a search -- this time for "2.x" (replacing x with any number between 1 and 31) to truly generate a random spur. Or ask a friend to call out a number. Or drop your finger blindly on a calendar page. Or visit [random.org](http://random.org)]

[Related reading: "Binge Writing and NaNoWriMo," included in the back of this book.]

### Spur-2.1

Your character is desperate. Literally have them make a sacrifice.



To a named deity.

Even if it's just a silly, imaginary one, like "The Great God of Caffeine" or "Vile Demon Dog of Desperation."

### **Spur-2.2**

Torment with temperature.

### **Spur-2.3**

Plan to give your next scene an extremely unexpected or traumatic outcome.

Now **START** with a summary of that outcome, and write the rest in flashback or in reverse chronology, till you arrive at the cause.

### **Spur-2.4**

Start a chapter with your protagonist listing (out loud or in their thoughts) a catalog of events from the book so far, or from their own personal backstory, that begins with the line "These things just aren't supposed to happen."

### **Spur-2.5**

A document, object, statement, or clue that is somehow crucial to your storyline is now discovered to be a forgery.

### **Spur-2.6**

Luxuriate in twisted exposition: take a moment to describe the beauty in something disgusting or offensive.

### **Spur-2.7**

At the start of the next chapter or scene, repeat the first sentence of your story/novel. Then precede to contradict it or reveal a new shade of its meaning.

## 4. Memoir Mayhem: 151 Prompts For Journaling

### Introduction

Next to "show, don't tell," the classic (if not cliché) bit of wisdom that most writers hear at one point or another in their lives is this: "Write what you know."

This isn't about having directly experienced events that you can transfer directly into fiction (though that helps -- it's called "research"). Instead, to "write what you know" means to have the ability to write in a way that draws upon your emotional history in order to show how humans would genuinely feel in any given situation.

To *show* it, not explain it.

So, to be able to "write what you know" means to be able to observe how human nature expresses itself in minute and often invisible ways. Horror and noir fiction is an expressionistic genre, so most of the time you are writing about characters deep, dark emotions but externalizing them through behaviors, looks, settings, and silences. You have to "know" how humans express these inner secrets externally.

And the best way to know it is to closely examine yourself.

Writing on the dark side always draws from personal experience. You don't have to be a goth, a daredevil or a Satan worshiper to write horror fiction. You don't have to be a private eye to write noir mystery. You just have to be in touch with the darker side of your own emotional experience. To reflect on the fear of death and the pain of loss -- as well as the imp of the perverse that dances in your brain when you "get away with something" or indulge a taboo desire. To be able to empathize with the full dynamic range of fear and torment, pain and pleasure, power and suffering, is to be able to create characters and behaviors that will ring true -- particularly in horror fiction, where dread dominates.

People always assume that as a horror writer, I must be some kind of creepy freak who enjoys pulling the wings off of flies. The exact opposite is true. I think I've been successful because I am afraid of everything. I've had my share of suffering, and I've witnessed acts of human ignorance and sin and abuse. I always imagine the "worst case scenario" in any given situation -- indeed, I get paid by the word to do just that. But I also see the absurdism inherent to that comedy known as civilized life in the modern era. We are a civilization built upon fantasy, repressing it here and letting it steam out over there. I've also learned how to play peek-a-boo with the universe -- I wonder about *everything*...especially the things I seem most eager to avoid or turn away from. Art does the opposite for its audience. It looks. It confronts. If you want to

write on the dark side you don't have to endure hell, but you do need to "go there."

I give you this final cluster of 151 prompts (Why 151? I like the ring of it). These are specifically intended to inspire journal entries, private reflections or autobiographical pieces you might publish on a blog or anywhere when you take off the mask and talk to your readership in earnest. Most of these prompts are adapted directly from courses I've taught that involved memoir writing or the personal essay. Some of the prompts are not overtly "on the dark side," but if you keep your beacon pointed toward your shadow side, I'm sure you'll wind up there. In writing about what you know -- even writing about the light -- you're bound to encounter the darkness. Sometimes, even, the hazy gray area in-between...where story conflicts and strange characters are lurking.

Final point: writing on the dark side is not just writing for a genre audience. It's a worldview. Work through this set of prompts and let your worldview pour out so you can get to know it better.

But also remember this: Writing about your sins and confessing your crimes in print can actually be used against you in a court of law. It also makes great fodder for break-ups, family feuds, fist fights and divorce proceedings. Don't censor yourself, but don't be stupid. If you must write about things that will come back to bite you, don't publish them. Or change the names to protect the innocent (or the guilty). And burn after writing.

But you must write.

That, by now, you know.

[Remember: exploit your ebook device by running a search -- this time for "4.x" (replacing x with any number between 1 and 151) to truly generate a random spur. Or ask a friend to call out a number. Or visit [random.org](http://random.org)]

### **Memoir-4.1**

Think of an iconic "voice" from horror films or noir thrillers (Boris Karloff's or Alfred Hitchcock's, for instance). Now write your author's bio or any kind of autobiographical piece (about something you do often in that voice).

### **Memoir-4.2**

What is "the ultimate sin" in your personal bible?

### **Memoir-4.3**

Write a stream of consciousness scene that dramatizes a near-death experience, whether based in your personal history or simply your imagination.

### **Memoir-4.4**

Which internal organ do you find the "sexiest"? Explain.

### **Memoir-4.5**

Which bone in your body do you think would make the best trophy, if extracted and polished up. Why?

### **Memoir-4.6**

Create a crazy storefront and imagine yourself standing behind the counter as its proprietor.

### **Memoir-4.7**

"It is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all" -- Is this true? Make your case by discussing a relationship you no longer have with a person. Try this exercise again later, using a relationship you no longer have with an OBJECT instead.

### **Memoir-4.8**

Research and write a response to a poem by the current Poet Laureate. How does this writer's work reflect the current cultural/political climate? Can you put a dark spin on the same idea(s)?

### **Memoir-4.9**

What rules do you routinely disobey and why?

### **Memoir-4.10**

Dramatize a specific event in your life where you were extremely clumsy, inebriated, or weak.

### **Memoir-4.11**

Write a warning letter to yourself on graduation day.

### **Memoir-4.12**

What "gross-out" stories or films have disturbed you the most? Analyze an unforgettable gross-out moment from one of them...was there more to its effect on you than just the gore?

### **Memoir-4.13**

List three-to-five things that you are most passionate about and why. Then dramatize a "crime of passion" related to one of them.

### **Memoir-4.14**

Did you ever miscommunicate with comic or tragic results?

### **Memoir-4.15**

In present tense, describe your morning routine...along with the dawning realization that you might be the "last man on earth."

### **Memoir-4.16**

Make out your Last Will and Testament (To Susie, I leave... To my ex-boyfriend...). But don't just leave material objects; include the memories associated with them.

### **Memoir-4.17**

Reflect on playground politics or a "Lord of the Flies" moment from your youth. Were you ever in a fight or bullied? Did you ever push a weaker person around and now regret it? Were you ever a victim or tormentor of your peers as a kid?

### **Memoir-4.18**

Reflect on one "guilty pleasure" that you know is absolutely wrong, but have chosen to do anyway.

### **Memoir-4.19**

There's a famous saying about death: "You can't take it with you." Talk about the things you wish you could take with you. Or, conversely, the things you will be glad to leave behind.

### **Memoir-4.20**

How would an academic respond to your darkest writing? What would they say is your "signature" as a writer on the dark side? Would a critic celebrate your life's work or condemn it, and why?

### **Memoir-4.21**

Write a conversation between a cell phone addict and their phone...which has uncannily come alive and begins to speak (or text) with the addict.

### **Memoir-4.22**

Discuss a moment in your life where you experienced *deja vu*.

### **Memoir-4.23**

What is your personal stance on Satan? Is Satan a concept, a myth, a reality, a god, your spouse, your boss, your biggest fear?

### **Memoir-4.24**

Recount some event in your life that you would have preferred to keep secret, but for some reason were forced to disclose.

### **Memoir-4.25**

Who -- or what -- in your childhood had the largest impact on your growth as a dark creator?

### **Memoir-4.26**

How would you creatively vanquish the villain(s) in your personal life?

### **Memoir-4.27**

Contemplate how the death of a world leader has led to an unforeseen impact.

### **Memoir-4.28**

Describe the ugliest person you would be willing to make-out with. Don't just describe the person. Describe the make-out session in all its disgusting glory.

### **Memoir-4.29**

Among those you encounter on a daily basis, who do you respect the most? If you were to write their eulogy, what would you say?

### **Memoir-4.30**

Was there ever a strange house or strange old person in your neighborhood growing up? Reflect on it.

### **Memoir-4.31**

Write a poem related to a suffering worker, the hell of employment, the worst boss in the world or the most painful workplace you can imagine.

### **Memoir-4.32**

If there was one scene from a film that all writers in your genre should study -- but that most have not seen already -- what would it be and why?

### **Memoir-4.33**

Did you have a hiding place as a young person? Reflect on it. (Do you have one now? Compare and contrast them.)

## **6. Essays on Writing on the Dark Side**

### **Introduction**

If you've found yourself paging through this book, hoping to find inspiration, but feel like nothing's happening, then maybe you need to read rather than write. For fiction writers, nothing substitutes for a good novel. But if it helps, here are some thinkpieces and advice essays to get you wheels turning about your craft. You'll no doubt see yourself reflected in here at some points, and have differing opinions at others. If you feel emotions or ideas strongly surging, it might be good to stop reading and write about those reflections and ideas now. This book will always still be here, waiting for you to reread later.



## Binge Writing and NaNoWriMo

I'm a big fan of surprises. I love it when secrets are revealed or when something in plain sight all along calls attention to itself. There are moments in life when "realizations" and "revelations" come out of nowhere and slap us upside the head -- and I love those kind of wake-up calls. Some call them "epiphanies." I call them "thunkadunks." Whatever you call them, they are meaningful.

They're why I read. My favorite writers thunkadunk me on the forehead time and time again. Whether within the story's world or in my everyday life, they wake me up to surprises I should have seen coming all along, had I really been paying attention.

Reading sharpens our skills at paying attention. And good writing has to reward us for doing so.

We writers sometimes get too hung up on order, structure, and planning. We plot and outline. We organize experiences into chapters, scenes, paragraphs, and sentences. This is natural. Language is a system; words fix meaning and emotion and all things in the universe into a seemingly concrete form. But sometimes we kill all the chaos out of our stories, to the point where all the thunkadunks go clunk: the action feels too scripted, the plot twists are signposted too much, the prose is too pedestrian. The reward for all our careful machinations? Readers see everything coming and start to feel strung along in a very mechanical way.

I think it is important to modulate our well-intended impulses toward orderliness with a little free play of randomness and chaos, so that we even throw ourselves off the path we hope to beat once in a while.

Obviously, this is risky and some writers might benefit from doing the opposite: from giving their bizarre and virtually schizophrenic imaginings more linear clarity and forethought. But I believe most writers err on the side of being overly cautious. Cautious pre-planning is, literally, the safe way to go, because it ensures good communication and also lowers the "odds" of rejection in that most unpredictable risk of them all: submitting to a publisher.

However, when it comes to pure storytelling, no matter what editors and agents might tell you, readers simply don't want us to play it safe all the time. Genres like horror, suspense, and mystery are built on surprising revelations. But even the most gentle and whimsical of tales have some chaos and conflict at their center -- and to quote a mantra I borrow from Janet Burroway, "Only trouble is interesting!" We need to go through the trouble of risking chaos in order to trouble our readers enough to care about the story's outcome.

To be honest, the pleasure of reading comes from both our need for order and our joy in chaos, and so it is important to not fall too far overboard when working without a net (or else you'll mix metaphors like I just did). Reading is like a game of cards: it's limited by the number

of possibilities in the deck, and we "win" by organizing our hands effectively, but in the end, both the success and the fun come from working carefully with whatever random cards we happen to be dealt. Pull a pair of deuces on the first deal? Do you dare dump it to chance a flush on the next draw instead?

You've got a lot of leeway when working on 100,000-word book. What risks should you take when writing a novel?

As I write this, it's mid November, and professional fiction writers and wannabes alike all across the country are madly hacking away on their "Nano" book. It's National Novel Writing Month, a.k.a. "NaNoWriMo" -- <http://www.nanowrimo.org/> -- and many find the creative community and looming month-long deadline a great motivator to finish the book they've always wanted to write. They are taking the plunge. But most never finish. And of those who do finish, many never submit and most of the remainder get rejected. It doesn't matter to them, really. Cranking out pages and getting something done is the quest. Just taking the challenge is both the risk and the reward for most of these writers.

From what I've heard, people who do NaNoWriMo tend to succeed most when they plan the month-long journey in advance, using an outline (perhaps arranged with tasks assigned to each day in their monthly calendar) to organize their drafting. The rest succeed by putting a proverbial gag on their inner censor, and going hog-wild with the ideas, come what may. They think of an elephant? They let the elephant loose in the story, whether it belongs there or not. The truth is, both techniques (planning and "pantsing") are extreme; they are coping techniques to meet the sadistically self-imposed one-month deadline, rather than methods that spring from the creative act itself, inviting chaos while enjoying the pleasure of making sense out of nonsense.

Those who never finish their Nano novel will point to a wall called "Writer's Block" and shrug their failure aside until next November, when the itch to be a novelistic daredevil returns all over again, and they run full steam toward that wall again too, hoping this time to pass the hurdle. Some of these writers are like Charlie Brown, charging toward Lucy's football -- they kick air and land on their back over and over again.

What Charlie fails to realize is that he does not need Lucy to hold the ball for him. He'd do better to kick it himself.

While I normally would suggest that outlining and methodical planning is the more rational and practical way of approaching a novel, in the case of NaNoWriMo and similar instances when the deadline is a pressure cooker forcing you to boil out something lengthy, I think that the hog-wild daredevils and seat-of-their-pants binge writers are actually the ones who are doing it right. Not because they are generating words, but because they are generating new ideas that will compel the narrative energy forward more organically. The deadline makes their grinder turn more quickly. These impulses toward playfulness might lead them toward better, more surprising, stories. These writers can (and should) always edit later. But writing is more exciting when it emerges from a process of discovery -- one that the audience can feel when they read the

results. Binge writers are those who are more open to the "surprises" and the revelation of "secrets" that I love to encounter so much when I read.

If you're not a "binge writer," try being a "binge reviser." Maybe the same benefits apply.

However, I think that many binge writers are too loose in their "off the cuff" improv of a plot, which leads to some predictable trouble spots, beyond the usual rough draft typos and continuity errors.

One common mistake of the binge writer is letting dialogue do too much of the plotting...people talk about what is going to happen, or what just happened, or what might happen, all too much. It's almost like they're writing a TV show...with the screen turned off. These writers are sourcing their plots by "broadcasting" character thoughts when they should instead show the character's motivations through actions that lead to palpably felt surprises. The same is true of lengthy interior monologues, where characters reflect on their own backstories, their own desires, their own conflicts. A "backstory" should still be a story. If a character has a "desire," then they will be compelled to act on those needs and wishes, and we should see them doing just that. If a character is "conflicted," then that conflict needs to be dramatized in an external way. But because binge writers are so busy conceptualizing a character's experience, they fall into this trap of having that character do all the conceptualizing, and the drama becomes a "concept" told or transcribed, rather than directly portrayed.

Another trouble spot that emerges from binge writing is a natural constriction of style. The more hurried our composition is, the more we risk losing our voice in the process. Think about this literally: if you are in a rush -- say, reporting something scary over the phone to a 911 operator -- how does your voice change? Don't you abandon your personality in the name of communicating a message succinctly and as quickly as possible? The art of persuasion drops away and the "command voice" takes center stage. We speak in clipped, short sentences. We choose simple words. We tell, and waxing prosaically in an effort to describe any non-essential details is a no-no. Many advisers would say that clarity of diction and simple "subject-verb-object" sentence structure is a good thing in fiction. And it's true. But if we are racing toward a deadline, we often fall into "911 voice." Readers want to be seduced a little bit by the language choice, and surprised a little bit by a carefully spun phrase. Syntactical variety is key to triggering the surprise effect of prose.

Wouldn't it be surprising if a 911 caller actually did begin to describe the tragedy in alarming detail? And dwell on the details, swooning in their splendor?

That's how you surprise a reader. You can still race through the writing, but take the idea itself in an unexpected direction. Occasionally pivot and do a 180 -- doing the exact opposite of what you think you "should" be doing -- and see where it takes you. Don't run in a straight line. Jump, pivot, and twirl.

A final way that binge writing backfires is that the plotting follows cause-and-effect sequencing in such an orderly fashion that we forget that "only trouble is interesting" and we let

the fat of verbiage-for-verbiage sake fill pages. Often this kind of "fat" collects in the story's arteries because the writer doesn't really care what is happening to the characters or in the drama, as much as they care about shoveling words onto the page. Sometimes they succeed at this but have no story in the end. Otherwise, they soon realize the fraud that is being perpetrated, and the writing tap switches off.

They have nothing to say, but their lips keep moving. Or they have nothing really to say, and they stop altogether...blocked.

This is when misdirection is imperative. Steer off the road. Follow a new lead to see where it goes. Throw a wrench into the works.

Be receptive to randomness.

Sometimes the world is telling you what to do, if you take a second to listen. Trust your unconscious. Follow your instincts blind.

Have your goal in mind but dive in the air to reach it.

Dunk what you thunk.

[An earlier version of this essay first appeared in *The Gila Queen's Guide to Markets* (2010).]

## About the Author

Michael A. Arnzen is a college teacher by day and a horror writer by night. He has been educating novelists since 1999 as faculty in the Writing Popular Fiction graduate program at Seton Hill University (near Pittsburgh, PA), where he is currently Chair of the Humanities. Arnzen's energetic workshops on genre fiction writing have been popular at Odyssey, Alpha, World Horror Convention, Context, Pennwriters and the Horror Writers Association's annual Stoker Weekend event. He was awarded "Professor of the Year" at SHU in 2010. The instructional guide he co-edited in 2011, *Many Genres, One Craft: Lessons in Writing Popular Fiction*, is also highly acclaimed.

Publishing since 1989, Arnzen's often funny, always disturbing horror stories have won four Bram Stoker Awards, an International Horror Guild award, and several "Year's Best" accolades. The best of his short work is collected in the book, *Proverbs for Monsters*, which won the Stoker award in 2007. A longtime proponent of new media experiments in the genre, his writing has been adapted to audio (*Audioville*), short film (*Exquisite Corpse*), electronic media (*Gorelets*) and even refrigerator poetry magnets (*The Fridge of the Damned*). Raw Dog Screaming Press is re-releasing his second novel, *Play Dead*, in paperback and ebook formats in June 2013.

To see what he's up to now, subscribe to The Goreletter: an award-winning newsletter of the bizarre, hilarious, and pithy -- which always features creative writing prompts for writers of the strange. It is available free at <http://gorelets.com>

## Also by Michael A. Arnzen

### NONFICTION:

*Many Genres, One Craft: Lessons in Writing Popular Fiction* (as co-editor)

### NOVELS:

*Play Dead*

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### FICTION COLLECTIONS:

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Invent a prompt of your own twisted imagination and share it on twitter with hashtag #Instigation. Or search for that tag and write a story in response to a reader's prompt. Just because you're working on the dark side doesn't mean you have to be lonely in the darkness.



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