

Rick Arneson Author Q&A

Do you recall how your interest in writing originated?

I was writing little stories early on, maybe around the age of eight or nine. My grandmother had an electric typewriter that she showed me how to use and would let me type away at for hours. Over time, as I developed my artistic ability, I'd create entire comic books to show my friends and family, sometimes composed of notebook pages stapled together. I started writing about sailing when I was a teenager, because it was my job as a fleet captain to put together articles for our club's newsletter. After I finished school, my art and writing backgrounds became useful in developing marketing collateral and advertisements. So, I guess now everything from my drawing to my writing for business and sailing has coalesced into this new book.

What inspired you to write your first book?

The ideas expressed in the book have been on my mind for well over a decade. The notion of the material came mostly from my personal experience as a sailor and the recognition of how the lessons I'd learned on the water tended to carry through into life on land. That concept grew over time as I got into coaching and started reinforcing those lessons with others through teaching. I'd long imagined writing a book of some kind, but I assumed that it would be something I'd do much later in life. When I joined the editorial board of the US Snipe Sailor, it gave me a chance to stretch my writing muscles again after a bit of a break from that kind of writing during graduate school and the years following, so getting started on the manuscript was a natural next step.

How did you come up with the title?

"Plotting the Course" was actually just a working title that I never changed. I'd only written about ten pages before I started kicking around potential titles, and the theme of the book was always going to be how sailing can metaphorically guide a person's path off the water. As I imagined a person looking over a chart and wondering what heading to take, I came up with "Plotting the Course" and it stuck.

Do you have a specific writing style?

I've noticed that my narrative voice varies at times throughout the book, from casual and conversational to a more formal and academic style. But, I decided to leave it that way because that's the way I actually am. People who sail with me know that I consciously switch gears as needed from being laid back and casual to being more sober and serious, and it kind of shows in my writing. It seemed more natural to me in this book to allow the tone to rise and fall throughout the way it did as I wrote it.

Who is your favorite author and what is it that really strikes you about their work?

If I had to pick one author from history to meet and learn from, it would be William Shakespeare. He seemed to have an ability to portray the human condition from every angle, writing brilliant comedy, romance, drama, and even a bit of fantasy. He not only created sophisticated storylines, but also the beautiful prose that we know so well to this day. I also admire the writing of F. Scott Fitzgerald for his ability to draw from his own experiences to create a genuine narrative without pulling the reader out of the story or sacrificing subtlety when it's used to its best effect.

Read more about Rick Arneson and *Plotting the Course* at RickArneson.com

What are some of your favorite books?

I churn through a lot of books every year—I think some of the bookstores I visit look for me when they open each morning. For non-fiction, I like history and biographies, and virtually anything about sailing. I also read business and finance books, but I've learned to avoid the technical stuff for bedside reading. For fiction, I like sci-fi as well as the classics, from authors like Mark Twain, J.D. Salinger, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Alexandre Dumas. I don't expect everything I read to be transcendent material—I'm often happy to read a simply entertaining story.

Is there anything you find particularly challenging in your writing?

It would be nice to be consistently inspired when I sit down to write, rather than having ideas in the middle of the night or other times drawing a blank when I'm trying to get some writing done. Creative projects are tough because you're not at your best every day, so you need to find ways that work for you to get the juices flowing. I tend to write out whatever I'm stuck on, and come back to it later after I've cleared my head. Maintaining the correct posture while I write has also been a challenge—my “sailor slouch” kicks in when I'm at a keyboard for too long!

Is there a message in your book that you want readers to grasp?

One of the premises of the book is that we have the ability to become more comfortable with unfamiliar circumstances by relating such situations to scenarios that we understand more deeply. For me, sailing was always a go-to when I needed some inspiration to help me tackle a dilemma off the water, because it was what I knew and what I loved, and where my comfort zone and expertise lay. This can work in other areas too, depending on the person, but it made sense for me to cover sailing's lessons for life, since that's where I was coming from.

How was the cover designed?

I worked with Monkey C Media, a great design firm in San Diego. When I was looking for a picture to put on the front cover, I wanted something that called attention to the ongoing navigation that a sailor does, and the most popular photo choice among the people I asked for their opinions actually now appears on the back. I went against the flow and chose the placement of the picture you see on the front now because it reflects a turning point in a race, very similar to a visual that I use in the book that shows how life can sometimes be like a boat sailing in a circuit around a set of buoys. It worked for me aesthetically and symbolically, so I stuck with it. I loved the other photo as well for its image of the open horizon, like a sea of possibilities, and that's why I still wanted to find a place for it.

What were the challenges of writing your book?

There were a few challenges, for sure. Research for the book was time-consuming, and it continued on even when the book was about 2/3 finished. The research from a sailing standpoint came easier to me, because much of it was from what I've seen and done over many years following and competing in the sport, plus I was able to talk to some great sailors who were good enough to contribute some quotes to add to certain sections. The business research was moderately tough, because although I'd always had the concepts and principles in mind for inclusion, some specific examples took a little bit of extra digging. Probably the hardest research aspect was the historical examples, because I had thousands of years of recorded human history to fish through, looking to reinforce particular principles from the stories I'd relate. I wanted to include some historical examples where I could, but I didn't concern myself with adding a specific amount of historical material, rather putting it in wherever I felt it fit best.

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Logistically, there were a lot of moving parts to the process, so I pulled together experts in the publishing field to help me through it. I got lots of good advice and a great end product by seeking out bright and talented people to work with. It's always worked for me in my sailing, and it's worked well for publishing this book. The time management of the project was challenging, not just in getting the sequence of tasks leading up to publication lined up, but also in adapting the timeline for various changes and revisions I made to the book along the way. I believe in putting in that little extra attention to making something the best you can, but you also can stand in your own way by delaying completion while you obsess over minutiae (this is one of those things I'm trying to learn to take my own advice on!). So, there was an added psychological challenge in releasing the book at last. In the end, I think I've learned from this process how to organize future book projects a little better.

Did you learn anything from writing your book and what was it?

I learned constantly throughout the process, but I was delighted at how much the lessons I covered in the book came back to help me even as I struggled to complete it. I think I ultimately gained confidence that I was on the right track with the material when I found inspiration within the very pages that I was struggling to finish. A good example of this occurred with one of the final changes that I was looking to make. I was going to add a new paragraph to a section that talks about sailors deciding whether to tack or stay on their present course. To add it in was going to delay going to press after much work on interior redesign. It was an interesting example that I wanted to put in, but really only on its own...it just didn't seem to fit in quite right with the rest of the chapter. Furthermore, the point that I made in that paragraph from a sailing standpoint is that a racing sailor doesn't tack unless he's got a good reason. After re-reading those words and giving them consideration, I didn't feel that I had a good enough reason to "tack" in this case, so I didn't add the new material after all, feeling that the chapter already could stand on its own without the change.

If you had to do it all over again, would you change anything in your book?

I'm such a tinkerer when it comes to anything I create, I continuously want to go back and tweak something, just to try to make it a little bit better. For this book, I had to overcome that desire and "let the baby be born", or I might have kept revising it forever. Creative types often struggle with knowing when to stop working on the project. There's a saying in the film industry that motion pictures aren't released, they simply escape. I think I'll always find something I could have done differently, in this book or any other, but it's probably better to focus on what's ahead rather than spend too much time looking back.

Do you have any advice for other writers?

The best advice I ever got about writing is to start with a blank page and a clear mind, and let ideas go from your brain to the keys without any filter. You can fix typos and refine the language later, but you can't recapture that spark of inspiration the same way twice.

Do you have anything specific that you want to say to your readers?

I'd like to thank them for picking up the book and giving me the opportunity to share the material with them. There are a lot of great books out there, so I really do appreciate the reader's willingness to "give the rookie a chance."