



Black Ink Interactive Farm Fiction

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The only difference between fiction and nonfiction is whether it really happened.

Take projected profit, for example. A happy ending this year may seem likely or all but impossible, depending on how the year has unfolded and what is yet to come.

A sub-genre in fiction is called “fan fiction.” Look it up online and you’ll see how the interactivity keeps story engines humming as mostly school-age writers explore plot twists, hinges and consequences. Facebook has an interactive fiction game called “Farmville.”

Truth may or may not be stranger than those fanciful exercises, but you do get to write most of your own chapters in life. Let’s look at the plot elements.

Whether your fortune is looking up, down or in the middle, it is the result of two main factors: things you could not control and those you could. Notice the word is could, rather than did.

Looking back, few will argue with the big things placed on the “could not control” pile. Drought. Flood. Lightning.

But what about markets? Mechanical breakdowns? Politics? There are some gray areas subject to your influence through risk management, proactive maintenance and even voting.

Then there’s all the stuff that just happens, but with a do-over you could bend to better support a happy ending. Most of those are decisions. Things you shoulda-coulda-woulda done, or not. Timing of words and deeds.

We often look at life one year at a time, especially in agriculture. There is an obvious annual cycle of planting and harvesting crops, and cattlemen try to manage cows to produce a calf each year.

Many things take more than a year to play out, or even move on to the next logical chapter. Some things are a life’s work, like building a

cowherd that produces the most profitable calves every year and builds demand for beef.

But still we look at the annual rhythms and break time down further into what needs to be done this week, today, before supper, so that our plans work out for the next week, month or year.

Every day holds some possible hinges of history for our year, our profit projections, even our lives. Unfortunately, we can’t always know the significance or perhaps irreversible nature of a decision when it’s made. And this isn’t a drill.

Those with spring-born calves are planning to wean now, if drought or discipline has not already set an early-weaning program into play.

We don’t have to wait till the end of the year to judge whether weaning is successful, but the hinges are probably there several weeks prior to the big day and others will turn the pages toward or away from profit for six or seven weeks after.

The basics are nutrition, health, handling and communication. Therein lie a bunch of potential plot twists.

Maintain those mineral feeders, introduce calves to a hay and grain ration and water from a tank or waterer. You can run through alternative story lines that skip some of those steps.

If the calves had no shots in the spring, it will pay to vaccinate a few weeks before weaning and then booster on the day. A lot of nonfiction research can illustrate consequences.

Plan your facilities and flow to minimize stress and security. Discuss all plans with your crew, veterinarian, marketer and cattle feeder. This a rich area for plot and character development, but if communication breaks down, keep it clean.

If you have not taken an active enough role in writing your story, now’s the time to jump in and save the day, or at least set up a cliff hanger with potential for a happy ending in the next episode. Δ

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