

# Novelists' INK

The official newsletter of Novelists, Inc. — a professional organization for writers of popular fiction.

## The Phantom of the Word Processor: Ghostwriters Unmasked

By ALEX THORLEIFSON

**E**ver since Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the words of God inscribed in stone, ghostwriters have recorded the thoughts, deeds, and stories of others. Few people realize that professional writers have served a long apprenticeship. Ultimately, though many are called, few are chosen.

Every successful author has heard friends, acquaintances, and fans say they would love to write a book if only they had the time. To the professionals among them, I'm likely to reply that I would like to design an airplane, try a difficult case, or perform micro-surgery, if I weren't so busy writing books.

Anyone who has achieved a degree of notoriety and who believes their personal story, philosophy, or business practices are uniquely fascinating has probably considered writing a book. Hiring a ghostwriter enables such wannabees to enjoy all the perquisites without experiencing any of the pain.

Throughout the ages, the practice of hiring ghostwriters has been so pervasive that almost any literary work is subject to questions about its authenticity. Did Shakespeare write all his plays or—as literary sleuths have suggested—were some of them the product of Marlowe's genius? Did Margaret Mitchell create *Gone with the Wind* or—as persistent

rumors would have it—was she a photogenic stand-in for her husband? Was the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage* penned by Jack Kennedy—or does the credit belong to Ted Sorenson, as the book *A Question of Character* concludes?

In the past, ghostwriters were regarded as literary guns—quick draw artists who were hired to do a job and, on its completion, expected to leave town before their presence became an embarrassment. No matter how talented, dedicated, and hard-working they were, editors and publishers firmly believed the only name that mattered on a dust jacket was the name of the public figure who had purportedly written the book.

Ghostwritten autobiographies have long been a staple on the non-fiction best seller lists, creating a supposed win/win situation for everyone involved. Instead of scrambling for a sale, the ghostwriter enjoys a degree of economic security. The celebrity experiences the cachet of adding the word *author* to his or her list of credits. And the publishers reap the profits.

On the surface, it is difficult to find fault with such a mutually beneficial arrangement. And yet, according to Webster's Dictionary—which defines fraud as *a deliberate misrepresentation*—a fraud has been committed. More specifically, the dictionary defines a legal fraud as *a dishonest stratagem or a spurious thing passed off as genuine*. And so, by definition, books that are credited to someone other than the author and copyrighted accordingly are a fraud.

Is anyone really hurt if Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public's favorite film star, politician, or sports figure didn't write that best seller?

According to *Time* magazine's October 5, 1992 cover article, "Lying—Everybody's Doing It" (continued on page 5)

**The blame belongs to all of us for permitting ourselves to become so jaded and so disillusioned that we accept a fraud as the normal order of business.**

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# PRESIDENT'S column

## Novelists, Inc.: Who Needs It?

Last week, three thousand miles from my computer, I made an embarrassing discovery. I had just blown a deadline, the deadline for this column. Luckily, I had an understanding editor for once.

The annoying thing about blowing the deadline for this first column was that I had been looking forward to writing it. I had a few things I really wanted to say. I had even made notes and an outline in October, on my way back from the convention in San Antonio.

Then I got dragged into a quick little project that sounded mildly interesting. No big thing, just an outline and a couple of chapters. I figured to knock it out in nothing flat.

The next thing I knew, six weeks had disappeared down the White Rabbit's Hole.

That seems to happen often to people who write stories for a living. We are dreamers.

Nonfiction writers are well-organized. Historians can do outlines and stick to them. Biographers can conduct focused research and utilize every iota of it. Those writers have their lives in order.

But storytellers are scattered. At least their external lives are scattered. I have a theory about that. I think our external lives are chaotic because we spend most of our time organizing the lives inside our heads. We dream the collective dreams. We grapple with the universal archetypes. We're entitled to offices that look like San Francisco after the Big One.

My wife says it's an alibi, not a theory, but I continue to use it. The sad truth is that, like most writers, I am not well organized. I often think I am a lousy candidate for the presidency of this or any other organization. I often ask myself why I took the job in the first place.

The simple answer is that I need this demand because I need NINC. So do you.

Members of NINC are scattered, mentally and geographically, but we all need one another. More than any other time in recent years, we who write novels need an organization that represents our interests in the publishing world. There are a number of alarming trends in publishing. Several of them promise

nothing but trouble for those of us who call ourselves authors.

Consider the following:

- Last year, a writer with a good track record accepted a work-for-hire assignment for a well-known science fiction series. The publisher didn't like the result and had the book rewritten by someone else. When the original author sought to have her name removed, the publisher refused. The author sued.

And lost. In other words, the author didn't own her name in this case. The publisher did.

- A major genre publisher continues to pressure writers to use pseudonyms on their books. The rationale for the policy seems mild, but the contractual result is harsh. It allows the publisher to assert a claim over the author's working name, thus holding a writer's reputation and future hostage.

- Ghosted novels are proliferating. Some bear the names of well-established but dead authors like V.C. Andrews, who ostensibly left a whole closetful of books and story ideas to her heirs.

Some bear the names of muscle-bound celebrities too weak to hold a pen themselves.

Some bear the name of living authors who may or may not even continue to be associated with the books.

All of these examples deny the power of individual authorship. The books involved are corporate fictions, not real books.

No one should be surprised by that. The truth is that modern publishing itself is a corporate undertaking. Modern publishers have corporate values, not individual ones. Publishers value sales. They value sell-through. They value units. They value market share and shelf space and a thousand other merchandising details that go to make up corporate success. They do not necessarily value authors and authorship, at least not to the extent I do.

I'm not trying to demonize publishers. The modern literary marketplace has been very hard on corporations, perhaps harder than it has been on individual authors. Just ask the

hundreds of editors, copy readers, typesetters, book salespeople, and administrators who are no longer in publishing.

In truth, we professional dreamers need publishers. They amplify our dreams. They allow us to share those dreams with others. They make it possible for us to do for a living what most of us would do for free, had we no other alternative.

But writers' values are not always identical to publishers. Authorship is usually singular. It is individual. An author is not a corporate asset, and we should never allow ourselves to become one.

Authorship is like a good reputation; a person can carry it from one house to the next. A writer's good name is the only thing he or she owns. Individual writers must learn to control authorship in the same way that corporations control their assets, because, in the end, authorship is the only asset we have.

We share common ground with publishers. We are all in the same business. But writers are at odds with publishers in a great many other areas. Royalty statements, satisfactory manuscript clauses, options, electronic publishing rights, libel, and slander. The list of issues is not endless, but it is long. We do not always agree with publishers. Nor should we expect to do so.

Nor do we share identical interests with all others in the publishing business. This year's *Guide to Agents* helped to underline the simple truth that our interests as writers do not always coincide perfectly with the interests of people who represent us in New York. First-time writers have to understand that. There are even a few seasoned writers who could stand reminding.

But along with differences, we need to be aware of common ground. The people who started NINC wrote women's fiction, but increasingly, the organization has reached out to other genres. If the group is to continue to grow, we have to reach out to the writers of mystery, science fiction, western, and all their variants. We are all practitioners of popular culture. If we can't find common cause and work together, we will all begin to fade.

We need to reach out beyond storytellers, too. Photographers, commercial and fine artists, historians, and writers of nonfiction share interests with us. If I have one goal in this office, it is to reach out to other organizations of creative people and to explore the terrain we all must cross.

We who live in our heads may be a dying breed. We are individualists. We have to be individualists to stand alone in a world that seems rigged in favor of collectives, corporations, cartels, or churches. Our individualism is the reason we need to give time and energy to organizations like this one, even when we already have too many demands on us.

I did not take this job because I wanted an office. I'm not an office holder, not an organization man. I took the job because I wanted to have as much freedom to dream in the future as I have had in the past. I took the job because dreamers, particularly professional dreamers, have to be organized part of the time.

You are all dreamers, too. You can dream your dreams without my help. But let's work together, with our eyes wide open, when the times demand it.

— Evan Maxwell

## Editor Seeks Your Input

As the new editor of *NINK*, I've inherited the lofty mandate established by my predecessors of addressing timely, relevant issues. *NINK* has always been more than a mere information conduit; it's a forum, a town-meeting type of place where members can share the type of conversation usually reserved for those lively, late night discussions that cause us all to lose sleep at writers' conferences.

Although those who know me well might be shocked to hear me admit it, I honestly don't know everything. I can't run articles about things that interest you if I don't know what they are. And unfortunately, I can't read minds. Which is where you all come in.

Let me know what you'd like to see discussed in *NINK*. Send me any burning issues you want addressed. Fire off a letter. Don't worry about a subject being too off-the-wall or controversial. (After all, I've been accused of being both, myself.) If you're thinking about it, chances are a lot of other people are, too. So let's share.


As for length requirements, I'm easy. Whatever it takes (within reason) works just fine for me.

So, to paraphrase Barbara Walters, we'll stay in touch if you stay in touch. Meanwhile, I'll be standing out by my mailbox, portable phone in hand, waiting to hear from you.

— JoAnn Ross

## Industry News

1993 looks to have been a good year for publishing. According to forecasts prepared by Cahners Economics and reported in *Publishers Weekly*, if trends held through December, adult trade publishing—hardcovers and trade paperbacks—will have increased sales by 14% to nearly \$4 billion. The second highest yearly increase is projected to be mass market paperback sales with a 10% increase to \$1.3 billion.

In what looks to be more good news for authors, Penguin USA will be phasing in a new royalty statement that will reconcile all sale elements with the reprint order. Included on the statement (the first to be issued for the January-June 1995 period) will be: a book's printing numbers and history, gross copies shipped, net cumulative sales in dollars and units, returns (and the reserve for returns), sub rights information and income, number of free and review copies, and current inventories. 

To obtain a copy of the full minutes of the Board of Directors' meeting, send \$2.00 plus SASE to the P.O. Box. For an updated copy of the Bylaws, send \$2.00 plus SASE. For a copy of the Treasurer's Report, send \$1.00 plus SASE to the P.O. Box.

# THIS WORKED for me

THIS WORKED for me is intended to benefit NINK readers. Solutions to professional dilemmas, hints on how to maintain good relations with your publisher, advice on making the work of writing easier, surviving a move across the country, or other major disruptions in the work schedule—all are topics we hope to address. Article length may vary from 250-800 words. Please send contributions to the Novelists' INK editor.

## “This is your Editor Calling . . . .”

By SUSAN ELIZABETH PHILLIPS

**T**he discussion group on “Editing and Revision” at NINC’s San Antonio Conference stirred up one of my more embarrassing memories. I had sold my first book, written in collaboration with a friend, and the initial revision phone call came in from our new editor. Having no experience in the business, I had assumed that the manuscript we had submitted was perfect. (No, I am not making this up.) Wasn’t the function of an editor simply to clean up the spelling and punctuation? (I hope all of you appreciate the way I’m publicly humiliating myself here.)

The editor began by telling us how wonderful our manuscript was. (We didn’t know they always start out like that.) Then she made her suggestions for revision involving (gasp!) clarifying motivations, tightening scenes, fixing transitions. I was horrified by this vicious attack on the precious child of my heart and immediately became defensive. Although I tried to be polite about it (I didn’t call her a brainless bitch), I argued with her on nearly every point she made. When I wasn’t arguing, I was *explaining* what the poor dear was too stupid to understand herself. Two days later, after I’d had time to absorb her suggestions and look at the manuscript again, I realized she was right about almost everything. I also had to face the fact that I’d made a fool of myself.

As a result of this experience, I made some drastic changes in the way I deal with this part of the revision process. I accept the fact that I’m going to feel defensive when the editor first calls with her suggestions for revision. It’s my book, and I’m allowed. But I also have to accept the fact that all my editors have been intelligent, experienced professionals who want the best for my book.

Not all editors begin the revision process with a phone call. Some of them send out a revision letter, and then follow it up with a call several days later simply to avoid the sort of scene I’ve described. But sooner or later, most authors will work with an editor who uses the phone to initiate discussion. Maybe these suggestions that have worked for me over the years will also help you.

**DON’T DEFEND ANYTHING IN THIS FIRST PHONE CALL.** Even if it’s obvious that the editor has misread something, I don’t argue. Instead, I make noncommittal

sounds such as *Mmm . . . Ah . . . Oh . . .* I don’t want to risk even the possibility that I will react emotionally instead of logically. With every book I’ve written, I’ve had a few points of disagreement with the editor. I want to pick my battles and fight them in a logical and systematic fashion. This initial phone call is not an appropriate place for that to happen.


**LISTEN! TALK AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE.** This is a hard one for me, but, in the end, rewarding. I want to *hear* everything the editor says. (Hard to do when I’m talking a mile a minute.) I take copious notes even though most of my editors have followed up these phone calls with a letter.

**RESTATE.** To make certain I understand her point, I’ll frequently restate what I hear the editor saying. “You found the hero’s motivations weak in the first three chapters.” Whether I want to hear it or not, this is an important piece of information. (Hint: This does not work if your voice is dripping with sarcasm.)

**ASK QUESTIONS.** In addition to my *mumms* and *ohs*, I permit myself to ask questions. “Did the end of chapter five work for you?” I don’t comment on the answers I hear at this point. (More *mumms*.) I want to pick the editor’s brain while her reading of the book is still fresh.

**GET OFF THE PHONE.** When the editor finishes, I’ve found it best to end the conversation as quickly as possible so I can lick my wounds and grab my wine bottle. I generally say something like, “Thanks so much. You’ve given me a lot to think about, and I need some time to absorb all this. Let me get back to you in a couple of days.”

**WARNING!** Editors are so accustomed to having authors get defensive during this part of the revision process that responding like this can throw them for a loop. I once had a terrific editor get upset because I wasn’t arguing with her. I had to reassure her that I just needed to think things over, and once I’d done that, I would give her lots of feedback.

I’ve been using this approach for the past ten years and wouldn’t do it any other way. When I do get back to the editor, I’m ready to be agreeable about the changes that need to be made, but I’m also prepared to take off the gloves and fight hard to avoid any change I believe will hurt the book. It pains me to admit how seldom I’ve been forced into one of those battles. Don’t you just hate it when they’re right? 

# Ghostwriters Unmasked

(Continued from page 1)

(Honest),” lying has become as much a part of America’s collective persona as eating apple pie, celebrating the Fourth of July, and saluting the flag.

Is it reasonable to hold the publishing industry to a higher standard?

A major breakthrough for ghostwriters occurred in the ’80s with the publication of *Iacocca: My Biography*. With William Novak’s name in small print beneath Iacocca’s, the book climbed to the top of the best seller list and stayed there for months. Iacocca became a household name and one of the most trusted men in America—and William Novak found himself in demand as a co-author.

Thanks to writers like Novak, Kenneth Turan, and Mickey Hershkowitz, nonfiction ghostwriters have come out of the closet. These days, it’s rare for a celebrity autobiography not to include the co-author’s name on the cover and the copyright. Ghostwriters, who used to receive a flat fee, are now demanding and getting a 50/50 split.

The recognition that celebrity co-authors achieved in the ’80s has carried on into the ’90s. When Knopf announced that they had made a pre-emptive \$1 million bid for Arthur Ashe’s biography, the fact that the co-author had won a Pulitzer added to the project’s luster. Indeed, when it comes to celebrity autobiographies, the term *ghostwritten* has gone the way of the dinosaur.

Sadly, the practice of using ghostwriters has found a new and fertile field in which to flourish. The bottom line-oriented ’80s saw every publishing house scrambling to add famous authors to their lists. However, writers who have achieved star status were and are in short supply. To meet the demand, publishers created a new category of ghostwritten books—*celebrity-driven novels*.

Simply put, a publisher gets a famous person—preferably someone with the

glamour and notoriety of an Ivana Trump or a Beverly Sasso— to act as a front for a book. The real author’s name is carefully protected. Often, the writer’s only recognition is a brief mention in the acknowledgments, *i.e.*: This book wouldn’t have been possible without the help of . . .

To add a touch of authenticity to such works, the books often fall into the category of *roman à clefs*. Trump’s first novel, *For Love Alone* (written by Camilla Marchetti), detailed the life and loves of a Czechoslovakian sports star who married an American real estate tycoon. Sound familiar?

Sassoon’s book, *Fantasies* (written by Lucianne Goldberg), was a thinly veiled recounting of Sassoon’s tempestuous relationship with a bullfighter. And Maureen Dean’s *Washington Wives* dealt with scandal in Washington, D.C. Does anyone remember Watergate?

So many famous people are reported to have been inspired by the literary muse that every celebrity novel is suspect.

We all know the single-minded dedication required to produce a book. Sitting in front of a word processor for hours on end doesn’t leave time or energy for other pursuits.

Does anyone believe that William Shatner—while hosting a weekly television show and riding horses in competition has time to pen a science fiction series? Is Margaret Truman the author of a dozen mysteries set in our nation’s capitol? How does Joan Collins fit writing mainstream novels into a globe-hopping schedule that includes performing in stage plays and starring in television mini-series?

It does stretch one’s credulity. However, the list of celebrity novelists continues to grow. Between tennis tournaments, Martina Navratilova is said to be writing a mystery set in—what else?—the tennis world.

*Who is really writing these books and why do they do it?*

While advances for literary superstars have grown astronomically over the last >

## One Vote “No”

**W**hen my agent asked if my ego could stand a situation where I would do all the work for half the money and none of the credit, my response was: *I don't think so. However, the concept for the proposed novel was exciting, challenging, and outside the realm of my usual work. I ended by accepting the project.*

*The largest difficulty during the writing was finessing a non-writer's suggestions, few of which were workable, while keeping in mind that her name would be on the book, and therefore, despite the contractual agreement that I had full creative control, her suggestions had to be viewed seriously. Much of this—such as including the dog's viewpoint—drove me absolutely crazy.*

*The book was successful in the U.S., more so in Britain. I consider the actual writing as some of my best work.*

*However. This novel wrecked my relationship with a fine agent. From this point forward, my agent pushed me hard to concentrate my career on mainstream women's fiction. At one point, my agent expressed her frustration that many of her clients wanted to write “big books” and lacked the talent, whereas I had the talent but wanted to stay in romance. I began to feel diminished; I felt the agent lost all interest in helping me build in romance. The agent wanted to discuss my “big book”; I wanted to know where she had sent my latest romance proposal. I ended by terminating our association.*

*I would never again consent to ghostwrite a novel.*

—Maggie Osborne

# Ghostwriters Unmasked

(Continued from page 5)

decade, lesser known authors' advances have failed to keep pace with the cost of living. To make the novelist's life even more uncertain, the marketplace is shrinking as marginally profitable publishers either close up shop or sell out. The result is that fewer titles are bought and published every year.

Unless a writer is independently wealthy, it's virtually impossible to resist a publisher's carrot-and-stick approach to ghosting a novel. Do this book for us, they say, and we'll really get behind your next work.

Financially, the deals are as varied as the authors and celebrities. However, they all have one thing in common. The actual author is under a virtual gag order. If *Publishers Weekly* hadn't revealed that Hollywood screenwriter and novelist Camilla Marchetti was scripting *For Love Alone*, I doubt anyone else would have mentioned it.

Avon Books's best-selling *Pirate* is the most recent—and one of the most upsetting—examples of a celebrity-driven novel. By touting the idea that someone could write a romance—despite having a tenuous grasp on the nuances of the English language—

all romance writers are denigrated. Small wonder that so many people think they could write a romance if only they had the time.

Fabio is reported to have received a low six figures for the use of his name, his pecs, and his flowing mane in a three-book deal. The real author is said to be getting one-tenth that amount for her efforts. And I don't think Ivana invited her to the Fabio-Ivana launch party either.

My heart goes out to the unsung and unappreciated author of *Pirate* because I have walked in her shoes. I know what it is to be offered a sure thing when I had no guarantee my next book would ever sell—and I know how hard it was to walk away.

As I see it, the fault doesn't lie with the struggling authors—or with the celebrities. Nor can I blame publishing houses who have been swallowed up by huge conglomerates that demand ever-increasing profits. The blame belongs to all of us for permitting ourselves to become so jaded and so disillusioned that we accept a fraud as the normal order of business.

Does everyone in America lie? The answer appears to be a resounding yes.

## . . . and a tentative "Maybe . . . ."

**I**n 1983, I was happily under contract to a publisher who literally bought everything I could write. When I was approached with the idea of ghost-writing a book for a popular actress, words like "huge publicity budget," "major project," and "millions" (of dollars? copies?) were used. I was no fool. I snapped it up.

From the beginning, the project was embroiled in in-house political disputes. My editor was certain that the opportunity to work on this project would be a feather in her cap; the editor-in-chief wanted the feather for herself. I sided with my editor and immediately made an enemy of the editor-in-chief. Everyone in the company wanted to have input on what the book should be about. Civil war broke out in the marketing department. I, in the meantime, finished one book and turned it in, started on my next contracted project, and dashed off a 20-page synopsis for what my editor described as "the most important book of your career"—all without ever meeting or even speaking to my "collaborator."

I did eventually meet the actress, who was charming. We, in fact, became very close friends during the course of the ordeal—mostly because she knew her job (promotion), and I

knew mine (writing). It was agreed my name should appear on the cover, in tiny print, of course. A major New York public relations firm was hired to handle the two of us, television and personal appearances were scheduled, book tours lined up. And not one word of the book had been written, nor a release date set.

In March, I received my deadline: May 1. For me, this was where the nightmare began. To write a 100,000-word book in six weeks was difficult enough; coupled with the promotional obligations, the "collaboration" pretense, and trying to avoid the flying missiles from the in-house wars, it became a near impossibility. I made close to a half dozen trips to New York during this period, sometimes just for the day. Often I would work on the manuscript until 2 a.m., shower, change, and head to the airport in time for a 5:30 flight. Once I flew to New York to deliver the partial manuscript—wrapped as a birthday present so that the editor-in-chief (who now would not even speak to me in the halls) wouldn't know how near to completion it was.

During the final stages, my editor came to stay with me at my home, literally editing the pages as they came out of the

# INTROducing

Ultimately, this article should serve as a cautionary tale for all the parties. The road to quick profits is strewn with the literary carcasses of celebrity-driven novels that didn't live up to anyone's financial expectations. Wouldn't the publishers have been better served if they had invested those large advances, and the attendant dollars spent on publicity, in breaking-out one or two of their most promising authors?

When the interests of commerce and art clash, must commerce always triumph? Should the publishing industry be held to a higher standard than other businesses?

The answer rests in the hands and hearts of all of us—publishers and authors alike—who honor the written word. NINK

*In addition to writing John Wayne—My Life with the Duke with Pilar Wayne and Behind the Candelabra—My Life with Liberace with Scott Thorson, Alex Thorleifson is the author of several novels. Her novel, Lawless, will lead the launch of Denise Little Presents/Pinnacle Books, in June, 1994.*

printer. The manuscript was express-mailed to corporate headquarters, reaching New York before my editor did. Almost faster than the speed of light came the telephone call from the editor-in-chief: She hated the book. It would have to be rewritten from word one.

Why didn't I see this coming?

Several lawyers and a brand-new agent later (yes, during all this I was unagented—my mistake) an agreement was reached. The publisher took one of my old manuscripts—the next one scheduled for publication on their regular list, as a matter of fact—slapped the new cover on it, and released it as the fabulous new work by the famous actress. One amusing side note on the original manuscript: the reason given to me by the editor-in-chief's boss for their problems with the book was that it was "just too good!"

Given all this, it should surprise no one that the book didn't sell nearly as well as expected. Marketing personnel fell like dead wood. My editor left the house. So did I. The original manuscript was sold in haste as an act of revenge (my bad judgment) and was published poorly. The actress and I no longer correspond.

Shortly before the release of the book, one of the publish-

**Address changes** which have previously been published in this column while it was part of *Inside INK* will hereafter be included in the semi-annual roster updates, which will continue to be confidential to the membership of Novelists, Inc.

**A reminder:** Membership renewal forms have been sent to all Novelists, Inc. members (enclosed with the *Guide to Agents* mailing to those members who did not attend the San Antonio Conference). Have you remembered to send in your renewal for 1994? If not, why not do it today?

## NINK NOTE

Conference capsule reports in this issue and the December issue have given you a taste of what a Novelists, Inc. conference can be. Now you can play a part in determining the 1994 Atlanta "banquet" of workshop ideas. Send your suggestions for workshop topics and possible speakers to Conference Chairman Victoria Thompson, 563-56th Street, Altoona PA 16602-1233. Volunteers for conference committees are needed as well. Volunteer early and often . . .

ing executives tried to assure me that someday it would all be worth it. I assured him that if the book earned \$1,000,000 in royalties it would be worth it. If it earned \$999,999, it would not. That remains my answer to the question, Would you do it again? Only today, with cost-of-living increases, my price is \$2,000,000.

As I look back, I see that this was a catastrophe of greed, politics, and mangled expectations that had little to do with the actual ghostwriting process. I therefore can draw no broad conclusions about the pros and cons of ghostwriting a book—except to warn that whenever the potential for extraordinary commercialization exists (witness the recent Fabio furor) publishing executives are going to go into a feeding frenzy. And when this happens, the writer needs to take extra care not to become lunch.

— A Ghostwriter

**Editor's note:** Although it is not the practice of *NINK* to run anonymous articles, due to the delicate nature of ghostwriting (along with certain contractual conditions) and because I felt this experience might prove helpful to other members considering ghostwriting a novel, I agreed to withhold the writer's name.

# Writing Novelizations

or

## “Do I Really Want to be a Surrogate Mother?”

By TERRI HERRINGTON

**S**urrogate motherhood isn't a bad way to make a living—unless you have visions of birthday parties, graduations, and weddings. The fertilized egg may not have been yours, but you still carried it, nurtured it, and grew it into a baby. Though that's an extreme example, writing novelizations can be similar to that experience. You take a property that has already been produced, or is about to be produced, usually as a film or television series, and you make a novel out of it. The problem is that you have no control over the plot or storylines, your name does not go on the cover, and in most cases, you only get one flat fee and no royalties. There are no book signings upon publication, people don't recognize your name, and often, no one believes you even wrote it.

On the flip side of that, however, are a few benefits. Writing a novelization is easier than writing an original work, since the plot is already constructed. After it's released, it looks good on your résumé. Often, people assume that, if you wrote the novelization, you must have been the creator of the film or series. Sadly, those assumptions often afford you more legitimacy in the eyes of those poor, ignorant souls than your own original work can do. After all, they may have heard of *Romancing the Stone*, but *One Good Man* may have slipped their notice.

I'm by no means saying that novelizations don't deserve respect. Of course they do, just as any writing does. All writing is hard work, and not just anyone can do it. Writing good novelizations is an art unto itself, for it takes a talented writer to take a property that isn't his, a project that was originally designed for a visual medium, and make it into an entertaining, sometimes best-selling, novel—which may even be better than the film.

But often, that's not how it works.

Several years ago, my editor at Silhouette, Roz Noonan, resigned and went to work for Pioneer Books, to start their new *Soaps and Serials* line. Her new job was to contract novelizations of several popular television soap operas from ABC, CBS, and NBC. The idea was that people who had only watched them for a few seasons could go back to the beginning and learn what had happened to those characters, say, 20 years ago. Pioneer acquired the rights to most of the daytime soaps, as well as prime-time soaps such as *Dallas* and *Knots Landing*. Then Roz set about finding writers for these novelizations. They were about 45,000 words in length, and she provided either the scripts or the story lines for each book. She was looking for writers who could do the job very quickly, since she was working under the gun herself. My work with her at Silhouette had proved to her that I worked well under pressure, so she asked me if I would like to write some of these. It seemed like an interesting, refreshing new challenge to me at the

time, so I contracted for three books—two for *Dallas*, and one for *All My Children*.

The *Dallas* books encompassed two episodes, or two scripts. The *All My Children* books encompassed about a year of storylines. Since I had been a fan of *Dallas* from the beginning, I remembered the two episodes I was to write about. This made it very easy for me. I already knew the characters, and I had seen the action played out on the screen. All I had to do was translate it to paper. As for *All My Children*, I had not watched it in years, but since I was commissioned to do one of the launch books for that series, my book covered the first year of *All My Children* episodes. Ironically, my mother had been an avid viewer of *All My Children* when I was a child, so I had watched it, too, and I remembered many things about the characters, such as nicknames they had for each other, motivations, backgrounds, family situations, etc., which were not covered in the story line I'd been given.

I found this change from my own tight writing schedule to be refreshing. For once, I didn't have to worry about plotting problems or contrivances. There were actually many, many contrivances in the plot lines, but since they weren't mine, I couldn't change them. When the pilot light in Phil's basement just *happened* to go out, thus causing the house to fill with gas and nearly kill him, and when Nick just *happened* to show up at Phil's house at exactly the right moment, and just *happened* to find the door unlocked, and just *happened* to rescue Phil at the last possible second, only to discover as a result of all this that he just *happens* to be Phil's real father. . . . Well, you get my drift. These contrivances were not my problems, and all I could do was grit my teeth, chuckle a little, and write on.

**M**y contracts for these books specified that they were “work for hire.” In other words, they hired me to do a job, and then I was to walk away from it, with absolutely no rights to the property afterward. My name was not on the cover, and I was paid a flat fee of \$4,000 a book—\$2,000 on signing, \$2,000 on completion, no matter how much money the books ever earned the publisher. I had about three weeks to write one, but since I didn't have to plot, and most of the dialogue was provided, I found it rather easy. At the time, I felt that \$4,000 wasn't bad for three weeks' work. Unfortunately, the company went bankrupt, and I was not paid for the third book, even though I did complete it.

I learned several lessons from this experience, and have found that these lessons have served me well in my business decisions since.

The first thing I learned was never to get in on the ground floor of a new venture. New ventures often fail, and when they do, someone has to be left holding the bag. In this case, I wound up



writing an entire 45,000-word novel—which may or may not have ever seen print—and didn't get paid the entire amount I was promised.


Second, I learned that "work for hire," while it's a good way to supplement one's income, does nothing to add to an author's own body of work, and does nothing to advance a career. I have never included these books when counting my total number of published works. They aren't mine and never were. The fact is, "work for hire" may actually have hindered my career in some ways, since I took valuable time away from writing my original novels, novels that would have had my name on the covers and would have earned royalties.

**T**hird, I learned that three-week deadlines aren't conducive to quality work. I'm not particularly proud of the work I did during that period, and sometimes am secretly glad that no one has to know I wrote them.

Finally, it isn't much fun to write something that isn't your own brainchild. After the first novelization, I began to get tired of the work. The newness was gone, and it became drudgery. I no longer felt enthusiastic about getting to my computer, yet I had to stay on deadline, so I forced myself to write. There was little creativity involved in the process, and I longed to create my own motivations for the characters, my own plot twists, my own dialogue.

I've since kept the novelizations on my résumé, and they often wind up in my bios and lists of credits. Why? Because people consider "television writing" a more legitimate enterprise than writing novels. You'd be surprised how impressed some people are by the fact that I've done novelizations of television series, while they disregard the fact that I've sold over 30 original novels. When I'm interviewed, the novelizations inevitably come up, as if those are my few legitimate credentials. When I'm speaking to groups who don't know my work, I always hear a gasp when the person introducing me mentions the novelizations. Sometimes I just want to shout out, "That didn't mean anything! It wasn't important!" I choose, instead, to be amused and go along with it. Hey, I'll take respect wherever I can get it!

While I wouldn't choose to do a novelization again, I wouldn't absolutely discourage anyone else from doing one. For someone who's hit a slump in his career, novelizations might be a wonderful way to keep working and keep those checks coming in. Work is work, after all, and writing "work for hire" is certainly better than getting a "real job." Some publishing houses have entire departments devoted to novelizations and movie tie-ins, and they're always looking for writers to hire for those projects. But I would advise anyone entering into an agreement such as this to proceed cautiously, not to nurse any delusions of glory, and if the money actually comes, take it and run.

Then use it to your advantage whenever someone is impressed by it. Surrogate motherhood, after all, is no picnic. But it does help pay the bills. 

*Terri Herrington is the award-winning author of more than 30 original novels. Her current title, One Good Man, was published by HarperPaperbacks.*

## LETTERS to the editor

LETTERS to the editor is the most important column in our newsletter, since it is the monthly forum in which we can all share our views and express our opinions. Anonymous letters will NEVER be published in NINK. Upon the author's request, signed letters may be published as "Name Withheld." Letters may be edited for length or NINK style.

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### Clarifying British Book Sales

At the recent conference, as part of the debate about used book stores, it was said that in Britain no book could be sold under cover price.

This struck me as wrong, but I had no facts. Now I have. There is a law in Britain that prevents *discounting*. It does not affect remaindering, or used book sales.

I am quoting here from a post I received through Internet when I raised this question.


"In the UK, most new books are sold under the Net Book Agreement, a contractual arrangement between publishers and booksellers enforced by law. That says all booksellers have to sell the books at no less than the publisher's stated price when selling them as new. This does not apply *at all* to second-hand books, which is why there are so many second-hand book shops here (antiquarian book shops are a small and specialized part of the second-hand book trade, just look at the Yellow Pages for a UK city). Some categories of books are not covered by the NBA, mainly school textbooks. A further exemption to the NBA is for libraries, which are entitled to a 10% discount."

I received a number of replies saying the same thing, but this was the clearest.

Incidentally, all those who are afraid of computer networks might take note of how cheap and efficient they make this kind of check.

— Jo Beverley

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NINK is always in need of short articles (100-250 words) to be used as fillers. If you have a resource you'd like to share or an interesting anecdote to relate, please send it to the editor. 



*The NINC conference is where you realize you're not alone. It's a support group for writers, all of whom have similar concerns and all of whom need reinforcement. We're all in this together.*

—Lillian Stewart Carl

## Professional Sessions

Editor's Note: Moderators' capsule reports on the workshop sessions of the 1993 San Antonio conference continue from the December *NINK*.

### It's a Long Way from Texas to New York

Ardath Mayhar is a prolific Texas author of novels, short fiction, young adult fiction, and poetry and a used book store owner with her husband. Her first published work was a poem in *Young America Sings* in 1946. She has written a western series under the name of her grandfather, Frank Cannon, and is currently writing a Bantam Mountain Man series as John Killdeer. As herself, she has published innumerable poems; pieces of short fiction in fantasy, science fiction, and horror publications; award-winning young adult novels; and science fiction and fantasy novels. She is also writing a prehistoric American Indian series (*Island in the Lake*, 1993).

Ardath began her session by showcasing her storytelling skills, which salt her anecdotes with earthy and vivid expressions. Like Miss Jane Marple, she finds a world's worth of material in one small town; hers is Chireno, Texas, and fertile ground for a rich assortment of fiction.

In recent years, Ardath's indignation at a local political brouhaha that resulted in a woman's home being torched and her two sons killed has made her a community activist in one of Texas's most corrupt counties. Even in this crusade, Ardath's talk made clear, lie the seeds of many future tales, perhaps even a true crime book. A writer is always working, no matter what she does.

— Carol Nelson Douglas

### Researching the Courtroom Drama

How do you learn to depict a trial in your books? Our two writer/attorney panelists, Jay Brandon and William Bernhardt, agreed that the most convenient source of information, television and movie drama, is often the most unrealistic. TV and movie trials have little or no connection to reality. They are full of exchanges that would never happen in a real courtroom, or, if they did, would lead to a mistrial. Granted, scriptwriters have less time to tell their stories than novelists, but dramatic license is often taken to outrageous heights.

Books, Brandon and Bernhardt agreed, give writers more time to "get it right." First and foremost, though, your story should focus on what's going on *outside* the courtroom, not within it—on the characters' lives and feelings. The trial itself is best depicted in dramatic bits and pieces. Remember, in a real trial, many things are going on at once—in the thoughts of the judge and jurors, in the sometimes-complex strategizing of the opposing lawyers, in the minds of the defendant and plaintiff. You have to think carefully about what you want to include and what point of view you want to use.

It may be helpful to go to a local court and watch some actual trials, or, if you have a friend who's an attorney, to follow him or her around for a couple of days. Court TV (on cable) is another possible source of information.

Finally, I asked each panelist to choose one of his books where he felt his courtroom material was especially well done, as research fodder for NINC members interested in this genre. William Bernhardt selected *Blind Justice*; Jay Brandon chose *Rules of Evidence*. And both pointed to the courtroom scenes in John Grisham's first book, *A Time to Kill*, as exceptionally good.

— Debble Gordon

### Weapons for Writers

Writers and weapons experts Pat and Mark Elrod showed slides of various firearms, pointing out common mistakes that writers make. In recommending reference books, Mark commented that the Writer's Digest book *Armed and Dangerous* contained some errors. William Brohaugh, of Writer's Digest Books, who was in the audience, promptly offered Mark a voice in the next edition.

Mark also demonstrated several bows, shot arrows at a target (intriguing the hotel staff), and spoke about fencing with different kinds of swords. He and Pat mentioned several movies, some as good examples (Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, Basil Rathbone in the Erroll Flynn version of *Robin Hood*, and the Japanese film, *Ran*), some as bad. They concluded by telling of their personal experiences in using various weapons—how long, for example, would a swordfight actually last? Those in attendance went away with a list of reference books and a much better appreciation of the realities of weapons use.

This excellent session could easily have lasted twice as long, but the hotel needed the room.

— Lillian Stewart Carl

### Being a Writer in the Southwest

Guest speaker Robert Flynn was going to give a prepared speech on being a writer in the Southwest, but because our group was so small, we held a discussion about Texas instead. Topics covered were the attitude toward women in Texas now and in the past, Texas geography and its effect on lifestyles in the various parts of the state, and how Texans are different from other people. Mr. Flynn was a delight, sharing his knowledge and insights and answering our questions.

— Victoria Thompson

### The Frugal Publicist

Sandy Huseby of The Huseby Agency warned that authors often become too focused on promoting the title of their latest book name. The primary thrust of the advertising should focus on the author's name, and only secondarily on the current title. Books come and go; the author, with luck, will endure. She proposed an economical four-point plan for self-promotion:

1) A white press kit folder, with your name handwritten in a bold, colored script across the front;

2) A career summary, with the information presented in reverse chronology. This should focus on your writing, not your personal life, unless some fact in your personal background will act as a credential for your current book;

3) Third-party testimonials: these could include commercial reviews, cover blurbs or a quote from a famous author ("logrolling"), a bookstore blurb (even from a small, independent store owner), and/or quotes from an expert in the subject matter of your book; and

4) A press picture, which should harmonize with your personality, your natural appearance, and the type of book you have written. If you and your book are homespun, don't go with a glamour shot. Sue Grafton's photo on *I is for Innocent* is a good match-up. If you write in several genres and can only afford one photo, go for a simple, tailored head-and-shoulders shot with a plain background. Try for contrast: light hair/dark background and vice versa. Keep it simple and look directly at the camera so that you can "bond with the audience." To keep expenses down, approach a newspaper photographer, an advertising freelancer, or the photography class at your local community college.

When you send out your kit, aim for a ripple effect by sending it to distributors, since they then see a hundred or more booksellers. For press releases, customize them for each market recipient. (Your computer makes this easier.) Add and subtract details accordingly. You wouldn't send the same release to both your hometown paper and the *New York Times*. Weekly papers are a better bet than dailies because they're hungrier for material. Over time, build a promo media list on your computer and keep it up to date. Divide it according to each category's special needs. For example, if you choose to send "fan" information to fellow writers, you may wish to preface it with a Post-It note which says, "Thought you might like to see what I recently sent out."

Since your goal is to increase book sales, be sure to include all of the information needed for easy ordering: title, author, publisher, price, ISBN number, release date, publisher's 800 number (if available), and any specific applicable details about the books promotion, such as lead title status, national print advertising campaign, newsletter mailing to readers, author appearance in five states, bookmarks available, etc.

These are the bare bones of what proved to be an immensely informative session. Sandy Huseby, who obviously knows her business well, is a compelling and entertaining speaker even when she is busy showing us ways to get along without her.

— Judy Myers

## Publisher Forum

### Zebra Publishing

Beth Lieberman, senior editor at Zebra, conducted the forum at which she explained Zebra's latest projects. These include a line of contemporary mainstream romances, short contemporary romances, young adult novels, erotic thrillers, short historicals, multi-cultural romances, reality-based romance novels about married couples, fantasy romances, mysteries with an amateur female sleuth, and special contemporary romances with unique elements

such as futuristic or fantasy approaches, ghosts, reincarnation, myths, retold fairy tales, etc.

Beth also informed us that we could get print run and sales information from our editors (although she stressed this is at the editor's discretion), as well as the schedule for our individual galley proofs so we'll know when to expect them. We are also free to use Zebra's FedEx account for express mailing things to them.

— Victoria Thompson

## Night Owl Session

### Computer On-Line Services

All but one of the members attending were already users of one or more computer services (including America OnLine, CompuServe, GENie, Internet/Delphi, Nova Net, and Prodigy). Those who used the public bulletin boards agreed that it was most interesting if they logged on frequently, since that let them "get to know" the other users nationwide and follow the threads of the current discussion topics and debates. The good news was the ability to make nationwide friendships and enjoy instant communication with other writers; the bad news was the "addictive" amount of time it can consume.

Frequency of use was less of a factor for members who used the services primarily for research. On-line encyclopedias are available, but the more usual and useful research benefit came from a user's ability to contact other computer users whose area of expertise matched the researcher's needs. Several writers mentioned instances where they had posted a question and, within days or even hours, received several detailed responses expressly tailored to the requirements of their story.

Changes in the pricing and details of each service happen fairly frequently. Knowledge Index has been bought by CompuServe; Prodigy radically restructured their pricing, lost a slew of members as a result, and has now backed down to offer a compromise on rates; a new service, People Together, is in the works, reportedly with an 800 number for user access. America OnLine recently lowered its rates and was said to be a "graphic" system, similar in screen appearance to Prodigy, with a lot of "point and click" features designed originally for Macintosh users.

Those with IBM-compatible computers found that a program called "Aladdin" made it much quicker and easier to get around in GENie, but it was not yet available for Macintosh computers. Questions about GENie could be resolved by calling 1-800-555-1212 (the 800 general operator) and asking for GENie Services. Jo Beverley of NINC is on staff with GENie and would be willing to answer questions, as well.

— Judy Myers



*Novelists, Inc. runs a great conference — valuable, professional, and fun.*

— Steven Axelrod  
The Axelrod Agency

# *the NEXT PAGE*

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At least two months preceding publication, please send publication information to JoAnn Ross, 43 E. Boca Raton, Phoenix AZ 85022-4713. You're welcome to submit this information as soon as your publication date has been confirmed.

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Bittner, Rosanne: *Unforgettable*, Zebra  
Criswell, Millie: *Diamond in the Rough*, Harper  
Monogram  
Di Benedetto, Theresa w/a Raine Cantrell: *Tarnished  
Hearts*, NAL Topaz  
Flores, Jan w/a Risa Kirk: *The Dog From Rodeo Drive*,  
Harlequin Superromance  
Gellis, Roberta: *A Silver Mirror*, Berkley (Reissue)  
Gellis, Roberta: *Roselynde*, Leisure (Reissue)  
Gerard, Cindy: *Perfect Double*, Bantam Loveswept  
Gonzales, Deborah Martin w/a Deborah Martin: *Silver  
Deceptions*, Topaz Historical  
Hannah, Kristin: *If You Believe*, Fawcett  
Harper, Shannon w/a Madeline Harper: *The Pirate's  
Woman*, Harlequin Temptation  
Horton, Naomi: *Born to be Bad*, Silhouette Intimate  
Moments  
McConnell, Ashley: *The Wall*, *Quantum Leap #3*, Ace  
McLaughlin, Pat w/a Patricia McLinn: *Not a Family  
Man*, Silhouette Special Edition

Minger, Miriam: *Wild Angel*, Berkley/Jove Historical  
Osborne, Maggie w/a Margaret St. George: *An  
Accidental Princess*, Harlequin American  
Ross, JoAnn: *Risky Pleasure*, Harlequin By Request  
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Scott, Theresa: *Yesterday's Dawn: Hunters of the Ice  
Age*, Leisure Lovespell  
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