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Novelists' INK

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

Collaborating: Are two heads really better than one?

By SHANNON HARPER

After a dozen speeches about my years of collaboration, I felt as if I'd said everything I knew about the subject. Surely, people were tired of hearing me talk, and I wasn't certain what more I could add when the *NINK* editor approached me for an article. However, being blessed—or cursed—with an unflagging curiosity about other people's lives, I decided to conduct a survey of sorts and ask successful writing teams the kinds of questions that intrigue me about collaboration.

From the outset let me warn you that my survey is totally unscientific. I selected writers whom I knew or had heard about and whose addresses I could find easily. I chose teams who were successful and currently working together. Stories about partners who have split might make juicy reading but aren't for this article.

My instrument of survey was a simple one-page questionnaire, with no scientific basis or structure. I also gave the authors the option of ignoring my questionnaire and writing me letters if they chose. Quite a few did. All respondents were honest and eloquent, and their participation is very much appreciated. I realize that I've left out many important writing teams, and I apologize.

The writers who responded were: Dixie Browning, who writes with her sister, Mary Williams, as Bronwyn Williams for Harlequin Historicals and on her own for Silhouette; Nira Herrmann and Phyllis DiFrancesco, who write currently as Anne Harmon for Diamond Wildflower and as Phyllis Herrmann for Zebra; Barbara Cummings and Jo-Ann Power, who write under their own names and also as Ann Crowleigh, with contracts from Pocket, Zebra, and Pinnacle; Carol Otten and Ellen Taber, writing as Tena Carlyle for Zebra; Ann Maxwell, who with her husband, Evan Maxwell, writes romantic suspense as Ann Maxwell and who is Elizabeth Lowell on her own (plus, she and Evan Maxwell have also used the pen name A. E. Maxwell for their mystery series and Annalise Sun for sci-fi); and Donna Ball, one of my partners, who on her own is Rebecca Flanders and Donna Carlyle, and with me becomes Leigh Bristol for Warner and Taylor Brady for Avon. I also write for Harlequin as Madeline Harper with my California partner, Madeline Porter.

What's It All About?

First, I asked these writers to tell me how they work. Who does what, when, and how? For plot development, the response was unanimous. One partner may come up with the concept, but both "work out the kinks together," as Dixie Browning puts it, sharing plot and character ideas until the synopsis is complete.

So what's the next step? That depends on the collaborators. My partner and I break down our synopsis into scenes, looking at action, emotional content, and interaction of the characters. This process can be as simple as a long-distance phone call (both my partners live in other states) or may involve making a detailed list of scenes (via computer and modem). We know the beginning and the end, and we experiment our way through the middle, revising and adding new scenes as the characters come to life. Of course, no two teams are the same, and once the writing of the book begins, the creativity of partnerships is illustrated in the diverse ways they work.

The first/second draft method was the most frequently mentioned by the respondents. One partner *continued on page 6*

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Novelists, Inc.
FOUNDED IN 1989

If you have questions regarding Novelists, Inc., please contact a member of the Board of Directors.

PRESIDENT'S column

The "*R*" Word

Prowling through the presidential archives the other day (yes, they do exist), I ran across a newspaper clipping that jingled my change very thoroughly indeed.

We who write popular fiction for a living are used to literary disdain. It comes with the territory. Critics, reviewers, professors, even some publishers, tend to dismiss commercial fiction as derivative, formulaic, unimaginative, retrograde, and otherwise contemptible.

This characterization is particularly true of the most popular of the genres, romance, the literary form that correct-thinking types love to hate.

One of the best of the haters seems to be Pete Dexter, a bleak-faced and beady-eyed super-realist who scribbles columns for the *Sacramento Bee* and who also writes books, one of which won a National Book Award.

Dexter sparked a nasty little whittling contest in a column some time ago by making reference to "a bunch of old ladies typing romance fiction." The reference irritated a number of men and women, young and old, who read and write romance. Being writers, they fired back with words.

The resulting avalanche of letters must have delighted Dexter. Filling up a regular newspaper column is hard work and the mailbag allowed him to milk one more column out of his subject. But that second column is where he finally managed to unburden himself of the real reason he finds romance disdainful.

Dexter isn't put off by the literary style or lack of it in these novels: he is put off by the content. He dislikes romances because they are about ultimately constructive male-female relationships. He doesn't believe such things exist.

Putting the matter more directly, Dexter is frustrated. He admits it. These books are about sex, he says, and "...let me tell you that unconsummated sex is what the real world is all about."

Poor devil. No wonder he's got his knickers in a twist.

Dexter doesn't go into great detail about his personal life, but he does allude to an incident that seems to have formed his outlook. The reference is muddy, but it appears to have had something to do with being involuntarily celibate for six months, then failing to find consummation because he leaned over to blow out a candle and set his own flowing locks on fire.

All of us have had such embarrassing experiences, but most of us outgrow them. Not Pete, it seems. He continues to live in a world filled with the sound of primal screams and the smell of burning hair.

That's what this disdain for romance is all about, I think. We are not talking about literary skill or philosophical insight; we are talking about different, often diametrically opposed, world views.

Dexter lives in a different world than I do. It's a world inhabited by frustrated (in more ways than one) scribblers who pass themselves off as literati. It's not that he is horny and I'm not. He believes frustration and anxiety are humankind's natural state. I think there are other possible outcomes. So do you, I think, or you probably wouldn't be a member of this organization.

In the world we write about, men and women can achieve constructive relationships. That is not to say that they always do achieve those relationships. Certainly, things go wrong, for a time or forever, between the male and female of the species.

But things go well, too. Things go extremely well, at times, and those times are worth celebrating.

All this may make me sound like a "SNAG" (That's "sensitive, New Age guy"), and I admit that I have had more practice in this area than most men. I am regularly introduced in the literary world as "Mr. Elizabeth Lowell." I have collaborated on books that appear under "Romance" in the bookstores. I am presently at work on a book that could properly be described as a romance with a male point of view.

In short, easy-to-read words, I am not afraid of romance.

Normally, I don't sneer at anyone who makes his or her living with words, but I am fed up with the constipated, smug superiority of modern so-called realists and frustrated newspaper hacks. Pete Dexter has his world and I have mine. They are different worlds and I don't expect that they will ever be reconciled. I don't expect him to apologize for that fact, but I'm not going to, either.

This isn't the place to launch into a full-scale discussion of the extraordinary appeal of romance fiction. Jayne Ann Krentz and eighteen other highly successful authors have already put that ball into play with *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (University of Pennsylvania Press).

Nor is Novelists, Inc. an organization devoted entirely to romance. We are popular fiction authors banded together in the interests of our craft. But fully half of all popular fiction in the marketplace is classified as romance, and this organization will probably always reflect that fact.

I took this job with the understanding that Novelists, Inc. was trying to broaden its appeal and its membership base, to draw writers in from other genres. I still hold that as a goal, as do the other members of the Board of Directors and of the Advisory Council. But, as my chiropractor says, we can't grow straight if we treat our backbone with disdain.

I write books. It's really up to the publishers and the rest of the world to decide what to call them.

And if Pete Dexter wants to dismiss what I write as "drooling pap," the term he uses for all romances, then I can live with that. I just wish he would go out and get unfrustrated.

Bet he does, too.

A note, in case you missed it. The *Wall Street Journal* established its own weekly bestseller list last month. If I were Bill Clinton, I'd claim the move was in direct response to my February column, the one in which I said we needed more such lists to dilute the very meaning of the term "bestseller." But Hillary won't let me make that claim, so I'll just welcome the *Journal* to the fray.

Like *USA Today*'s new list, the *Journal* relies on national bookstore sales, avoiding the skewing effect of wholesale buys or statistical projections.

It also provides an interesting comparative analysis. The best-selling fiction title for any week is assigned a value of 100; all other titles are reported on an index relative to that figure.

The first week's list was fascinating. Danielle Steel came onto the list strongly, with an index of 100. The second fiction title, Michael Crichton's *Disclosure*, only recorded an index value of 57, which means he sold 57 percent as many copies. Robert James Waller's two novellas each tailed off to 38 and 32, and the 15th fiction title on the list, Tom Clancy's *Without Remorse* had an index of 11.

The nonfiction list uses the same index, a telling comparison for us novelists. The top nonfiction title, *Embraced by the Light*, only recorded 75 percent as many sales as Steel. Howard Stern, at #15 on the nonfiction list, had an index of 12.

Fascinating stuff. We can see who's really hot and who's only comparatively so. The publishers may or may not like such figures to become public knowledge, but a little dose of reality never hurt anyone, not even those of us who write fiction for a living.

— Evan Maxwell

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." In the interest of fairness and in the belief that more can be accomplished by writers and publishers talking with one another rather than about each other, when a letter addresses the policies of a particular publisher, the house in question may be invited to respond in the same issue. Letters may be edited for length or* NINK *style.*

Publisher Replies Welcomed

I was very pleased to see the responses from Walter Zacharius and Candy Lee to the letters by members expressing concerns with Zebra and Harlequin policies—and immediately, not a month or two later. In my first career, I spent far more time than I cared to listening to the whining and bitching in teachers' lounges, always directed toward "the administration." None of those whiners and bitchers ever made their complaints to the perceived cause, which is probably why I served time as the equivalent of shop steward.

When I began my second career, I was dismayed to hear and read the same whining and bitching. The only difference now was there wasn't a shop steward in sight. I enjoy whining and bitching as much as the next person and no one will convince me that there isn't a need as basic as food and air to do it, but the newsletters and journals, and too often the writers' organizations themselves, seem to be little more than one long gripe session with no real attempt at resolving anything, *because the other side is never brought to the table.* All that griping without any real attempt to sit down and deal with specific complaints and questions is useless and frankly immature and unprofessional.

Novelists, Inc. is still a very new organization, and we have been trying to find a unique niche for ourselves, something which sets us apart from other writers' organizations that demonstrates the wisdom of joining us. Well, I think we may have found it in last month's newsletter. There were two very legitimate complaints made in the letters to the editor, and the editor sought responses from those toward whom the complaints were directed. Not a particularly earthshaking event, especially in LA, yet it may well prove to be very significant. As Candy Lee said, a dialogue was opened, one that I, too, hope will continue, not just with Harlequin/Silhouette and Zebra, but with all publishing houses. That doesn't mean that NINC will become a shill for publishers or that *NINK* will become their forum because responses to members' letters will appear only when the editor has solicited and ➤

LETTERS to the editor

(Continued from page 3)

approved them. What it does mean is that NINC can be seen as a truly strong advocate for writers since it will fill a need that no other organization has so far: providing an ongoing dialogue between writers and publishers. While the responses may not be what we want to see, it is always an advantage to know, *in writing*, exactly who and what we're dealing with. So-called yearly summits, while laudable, are neither frequent enough nor open to everyone. The Author's Guild, with a journal that arrives months late and full of years-old reprints, certainly doesn't fill the need. Neither, as far as I've been able to discover, does any other writers' group. The fact that NINC is the only one who fosters open communication between writers and publishers would certainly be a strong selling point to potential members.

There may be some who feel that NINC should not allow publishers to repond because our membership is solely writers. However, a subscription to our newsletter is available to anyone with the price, and Harlequin/Silhouette does subscribe. Other publishing houses may also, for all I know. Reading some of the closet complaining that appears, editors and other staff must wonder why the complainers aren't coming to them. It's hard to have respect for people who smile to your face and curse you behind your back. We might also keep in mind that now editors are eager to come to our annual conference. Will they continue to be if we write nasty letters without giving them a chance to respond? That's similar to the anonymous book reviewers who take potshots at us when we can't shoot back. It's only fair play to give the other side their say, yet some people don't feel secure enough to bring up an adversarial issue with their publishing house. As seen with the letters published last month, NINC can serve as the "shop steward," allowing anonymity to those who desire it while still providing advocacy on specific issues.

We opened the closet door a little last month. I hope we open it more; clear out the stale, negative, self-defeating air; and discuss real and perceived problems like the reasonable, mature professionals we are. Certainly we won't always come to an agreement, but—like the prologue to LETTERS says—"more can be accomplished by writers and publishers talking *with* one another than *about* each other."

— Patricia Gardner Evans

Bretton Article Fuels Feedback

I can't thank the publishers of *Novelists' INK* enough for Barbara Bretton's courageous article on burn-out in the February issue. It wasn't until I read the article that I realized that for the past seven years I have gradually narrowed my world to the point where there is little room left in it for anything except me and my computer.

In 1987, I quit a good job as a managing editor for a suburban newspaper chain to take an entry-level secretarial job with regular hours so I would have time to write romance novels at night. My former co-workers seemed vaguely embarrassed when they encountered me in public. I had left journalism to be a *secretary*, for God's sake! It was as if I had left a promising career as a brain surgeon to become a garbage collector. But I didn't care *what* they thought, because I was writing. Some of them attempted to stay in touch, but I ignored their overtures. I had more important things on my mind than mere friendships with people whose lives were no longer relevant to mine.

In 1988, I sold my first book to Zebra and managed to write 300 pages in two months to fulfill my contract. The following year, I sold and finished my second book in four months. After that, while still working full time, I embarked on a series of local speaking engagements and book signings. I wrote press releases. I went to national conferences. And I was writing up a storm. It was wonderful—until my third book was rejected. I haven't sold a book since, despite my stubborn adherence to a writing schedule that makes the long hours I put in as a managing editor look positively slothful by comparison. I've been beating myself up for five long years.

Bravos to Bretton

Just wanted to compliment Barbara Bretton on the wonderful article. It was super!

— Lori Copeland

Barbara Bretton's piece was just great and inspirational. I appreciated her sharing this with us.

— Lois Kleinsasser

Still, until I read Ms. Bretton's article, I was suffering from the delusion that I still had a life. After all, I am married and have a full-time job apart from writing. I have friends. I have a family. Never mind that my poor, long-suffering husband has stopped asking me what we're having for dinner. He now asks *if* we're having anything for dinner. I still work full time, but I recently left a better job with an opportunity for advancement to take a lesser job with a shorter commute so I can spend an extra two hours a day at the computer. I have stopped inviting friends over. I am too busy writing to do the extra cleaning, menu planning, and shopping that entertaining people entails. When we are invited to someone else's house, I feel guilty about the time I'm spending away from my current project. I have started ordering my clothes from mail order catalogs because it's faster than shopping at real stores. I've never asked my father to postpone an angiogram as Ms. Bretton admits she once did, but it's hard to feel smug about it when I haven't called my parents, who live 200 miles away, in almost a month. I still have friends, but I rarely call or make plans to see the ones who aren't writers unless I'm between books. And lately, it seems, I'm *never* in between books. I start one right after another, the way chain smokers light new cigarettes from the still-

burning butts of their discards. After I read Ms. Bretton's article, I wrote a letter to a writer friend in Minnesota and was horrified when I re-read it.

The letter was three pages long, but it could be paraphrased thusly: I just got off a three-day chocolate binge because the book I told you about in my Christmas letter was rejected. Meanwhile, I am writing a new one. I just fired off a proposal to Harlequin (Zebra/Bantam/Harper). What are you working on now? Have you sold anything since I saw you last? Have you heard any good publishing world gossip? Are you going to any conferences this year? What have you read that's good/bad lately? Have you read the latest Laura Kinsale (Kathleen Eagle/Mary Jo Putney/Pamela Morsi/Theresa Weir/Jude Deveraux)? What did you think?

That was it. I didn't ask about her health. I didn't ask about her holiday. (In fact, I have long considered the holidays an unwelcome disruption of my writing schedule and can't wait for January to come so all those New York editors will get back behind their desks where they belong and read my latest proposal.) I didn't ask about her family. I didn't ask about her love live or her vacation plans. I didn't tell her about mine. I realized that all of the letters I've written to friends over the past six months are essentially the same.

I am now re-examining my goals and trying to put my writing career into its proper perspective. Perhaps I will copy this part from Ms. Bretton's article and tape it to the wall above my computer screen:

"Years ago I wished I had the time to do nothing but write. Eleven years later I found I had all the time in the world and nothing left to say."

If I sell a book this year, I will be very happy. But if I don't, the world as we know it won't end. Many thanks to Ms. Bretton and *Novelists' INK* for helping me realize that.

— Kathy Chwedyk

Reissue Retake

Just an "As I See It" observation re: Dixie Browning's letter to the editor March, '94 *NINK* . . .

Although I empathize with Dixie's point, the whole issue of trying to accommodate reader complaints about reissues seems a lot like trying to close barn doors after sending out blatant invitations to complain. By sending out newsletters/fanletters and asking to hear from readers about everything under the sun, by offering home addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, P.O. Box numbers, E-mail addresses, and so forth to encourage fan response, many romance writers have *long* invited the sort of reader response that Dixie now finds the need to deal with. Harlequin's Candy Lee is right: *All* other genres suffer this reissue problem, too, and readers have either learned to check the copyright or to keep a list of author titles: why should romance readers expect to be any different simply because they've been asked to let writers know if they have any problems with the work?

— Terey daly Ramin

Impacting Image

Such a good March issue! So many things to comment upon!

"Name Withheld" #1 is so right! *Playgirl* is not the kind of image any fiction author wants. I, too, was approached. I, too, was sent a copy. Tacky! Tacky! Tacky! My fantasies are far better than their reality! I'll take *Romantic Times* over *Playgirl* any day.

Re: Evan Maxwell's column. Right on, sweetie! His: "They are fine writers, all, but their success is media-generated," is on the money. Any fiction writer serious about her/his business knows publicity sells books, and the success generated by that publicity sells more books; but how many of us have heard: "You don't need publicity. You can sell on your name." And this from a 23-year-old publishing twinkie who was nine years old when I had my first *NY Times* bestseller. Arrrrrgh!

And now let me alert you to a new trend. Making historical swashbucklers from old screenplays, thereby bypassing today's authors. Several are coming out, and I question their success already because the females in these antiques are in subservient roles. Wake up, Hollywood! I ask the impossible.

— Bertrice Small

Evaluations Both Ways?

Candy Lee's willingness to provide brief evaluations to Harlequin/Silhouette authors once a year should be embraced and encouraged. Without performance reviews, authors are left to twist slowly in the wind when their careers are perceived by their publishers to be on the wane.

Just one question: May authors also evaluate their editors, lines, and publishers so they'll know what *we* think about *their* performance?

— Pamela Browning

Warning: Credibility Gap

My "burning issue" of the moment is a poorly researched book that is being recommended as a writers' tool ("Semi-Precious Gems," *Novelists' INK*, Vol.4, No. 11, pp. 5-6). As a historical writer and, thus, a serious student of nineteenth-century literature and history (and as a graduate gemologist, incidentally), I believe it proper for the following title to be shelved alongside its fellows in the fiction category:

Pool, Daniel. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: from Fox Hunting to Whist—the Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

You see, I had the opportunity to read Mr. Pool's book last week and found it largely disappointing. I realize that many of the errors must be of small interest to the general public, but when a book's very title proves unwarranted—and yet the book obtains favorable notice—I feel compelled to respond.

It is my sincerely held conviction that nonfiction titles should be exactly that: *nonfiction.*

— Melissa Lynn Jones

Collaborating . . . better than one?

(Continued from page 1)

writes the first draft; the other edits/rewrites/adds/subtracts until both partners are satisfied with the outcome. Even though the procedures vary in detail, Browning-Williams, Otten-Taber, Harper-Porter, Maxwell-Maxwell, and occasionally Harper-Ball use this system. It seems straightforward, but it requires, in my opinion, tremendous trust on the part of both partners and an unerring vision of what the book should be.

Ann Maxwell gives a brief summary of how she and her partner handle the first/second draft scenario. "Evan selects a backdrop. We discuss characters and work out a plot. Evan goes to his computer and does a draft (Plot, methodology, and hardware are his department.) I take the floppy of the entire draft and put it in my computer and do what I want. (Style, pacing, and character are my department.) Evan reads our draft. If something bothers him, he changes it. I read the changes to keep the styles consistent."

Maxwell adds: "Short form: Evan gets the first word, and I get the last."

Barbara Cummings and Jo-Ann Power collaborate in an entirely different way. For their romance and mainstream work, they " . . . sit side by side from conception of characters, plot, and theme. Sometimes one of us will begin a sentence and the other will finish it. Sometimes one of us is going great guns with an idea or description. If so, the other of us usually gives over the keyboard to the superwordsmith." Cummings-Power go on to say that this method implies "that one person trusts the literary judgment of the other. In fact, that's the key word in our relationship—trust."

However, when Cummings-Power write their mystery series, Clively Close, they move to yet another method of collaboration. Under the pen name of Ann Crowleigh, using their "Bible" about the Clively family, Cummings writes from the viewpoint of Miranda Clively and Power from that of Clare Clively-Murdoch. However confusing this might seem to others, Cummings-Power have produced a remarkable 13 books individually and together since their partnership began two years ago.

Phyllis DiFrancesco and Nira Herrmann give yet another twist to the partnership game. "We both do everything: plotting, character, dialogue, narrative." Herrmann, if she can snag it, begins the first chapter, and DiFrancesco works on the next scene or chapter. Herrmann says, "Every once in a while the characters get away from us . . . and we have to postpone a scene or rework it to fit the character's current mood. . . . We've learned to be flexible about changing the nuances of a scene while keeping its broad details. We alternate chapters and as we get close to using up our detailed outline, we flesh out the next few chapters." Like Cummings-Power, DiFrancesco and Herrmann work in the same room, but each on her own computer.

Donna Ball, who has collaborated on 13 books, says, "My partner and I have tried just about every method of working together. She has done the first draft and I've revised, and vice versa. We've taken alternate chapters; we've each taken separate characters and worked on their stories. I've done the characters; she's done the plot; I've done the emotional chronology; she's done the physical time line. . . . The work seems to go faster, however, when we divide the book in half, according to characters and each does her own thing." Ball concludes, however, that the work is easier for her when she writes the first draft.

It seems to me that a partnership's success doesn't rest solely on the talents of the authors. Equally as important are the ways that collaborators use and combine those talents to meet the demands of a particular project.

Everybody Wants to Write a Book

The respondents were all working authors when their partnerships began. Some were published, others were not, but all were seriously involved in writing. None was a dilettante or casual collaborator.

Most writers are approached at some time in their careers by a friend or co-worker or acquaintance or even a stranger at a cocktail party who has "a great idea for a bestseller." I've been offered collaboration on a book about psychic dreams, an autobiography about a woman whose parents were housekeepers for a famous Hollywood director, a *Roots*-like novel about Afro-American history, and on and on.

After further exploration with the newly awakened author, I invariably learn that my job is to turn out a 300-page manuscript while my collaborator supplies me with a newspaper article or a page of scrawled notes. When I explain to my prospective partner the responsibilities of collaboration, interest dies quickly. Both partners work, and both must perceive that each contribution is of equal value to the partnership. If one partner sees herself as the star (or maybe the workhorse) and feels she is carrying the other, trouble looms ahead.

When Fantasies Collide. . . .

My head reeling from the diverse and imaginative collaborative techniques of my respondents (and the numerous pen-names), I looked at a more personal area of collaboration. My next survey questions were *What do you disagree about?* and *What's the downside of collaboration?* Cummings and Power admit to "disagreeing often and well," about the work and its inherent problems, but "not fighting for control." Maxwell echoes that sentiment. "The important thing to remember is that you argue to resolve. If you argue to win, then you will both lose, whether it's writing or marriage."

Browning mentions that occasionally her fantasies and her partner's collide, but "we both know when it works and when it doesn't. We're both careful not to tread on each other's egos."

DiFrancesco-Herrmann tune in to sections of their work that each finds herself changing again and again on the other's draft. "We sit down and talk about what we don't like that the other person is doing and usually come up with a third approach that solves the problem once and for all."

I know from experience that partners cannot write for any

length of time without tensions and disagreements, especially when both feel strongly about the project. So how do successful teams handle problems?

Cummings-Power: "We understand that there is no single way to write something. The English language is so rich, we are willing to work together—allowing one to correct or expand the ideas of the other—in order to get the best results."

When the Maxwells find themselves disagreeing, usually in the early stages of plotting ". . . discussing something that can't be nailed down," they call a halt, and " . . . agree to disagree until there is something on paper which can be discussed rationally."

DiFrancesco-Herrmann: "You have to understand at a very basic level that having someone change your words is not a personal attack; that the goal is to produce the best possible story and that both of you are committed to that goal."

Donna Ball: "I think a sense of humor and a sense of perspective are the two most important tools a writing partnership can have. After all this isn't brain surgery; we're not discovering a cure for cancer or feeding the homeless, and nothing that goes into a paperback book is worth damaging a friendship over. Inevitably, a project will mean more to one partner than to the other, and it's important to be sensitive to this."

Sensitivity, compromise, communication, flexibility, trust .... Hmmmm, this partnership thing is sounding more and more like a marriage, a comparison mentioned by half of the writing teams.

As for the downside of collaboration, the majority of respondents mentioned having to share the money. Partners don't get paid double for being partners, and although the theory may be that two people can write twice as many books, sometimes it doesn't work out that way. Ball believes that collaboration can slow the writing process, "But if you're really good together and you get the right breaks, this can pay off big time."

There's also a more subtle downside to being in a partnership, involving image and ego. Being sensitive writer-types we pick up on putdowns, even those done in all innocence. I will never forget a fellow writer's introduction of me at a large conference: "This is Shannon Harper," she said, smiling brightly. "I guess you could call her half a writer." Would someone introduce Bob Woodward as half a reporter or Will Durant as half an historian?

Partners also complain of being asked to speak at conferences only on the topic of collaboration . . . as "if this is the only subject we know." Collaborators feel that they can speak or write knowledgeably on many phases of writing. And not always as a team. No, we're not joined at the hip.

Despite their complaints about money and being thought of as a unit instead of individuals, partners find many good points in collaborating. Browning puts it simply: "Two brains are better than one." And she mentions that her partner's strengths cover her weaknesses and vice versa. Browning, who has written over 60 romances on her own, says succinctly of her partner: "I need her for the longer books."

Ellen Taber speaks of writing with a partner who has a wonderful imagination, who is an artist and a very visual person. She feels their individual strengths complement each other and together they have found a "third voice" for their five books.

Donna Ball, who has written over 50 books without a partner, says of writing with one: "In our case, two heads were really better than one . . . almost always we shared a similar vision for the book." As her partner, I can add that Ball's strengths covered my weaknesses, and we both feel the work we did together was the best that either of us has produced.

Maxwell, who has written 37 books on her own, puts it a different way: "Evan and I have written and continue to write alone. We write together for the same reason that we continue to be married: together we create something that neither one of us can create alone."

DiFrancesco-Herrmann speak of the emotional support a partner gives. "You will never find anyone who loves your characters as much as you do, is willing to spend hours debating the finer points of their personalities . . . understands your joys and tears over each book the way a writing partner does."

Sure, we all have phone pals or critique group members who give us feedback on our work, but a partner is different. She was there from the beginning. She is a buffer against loneliness and isolation; she will spur you on when the words won't come. As Ball says, "It's scary out there alone; at least in a partnership you can designate the anxiety."

And, of course, to save time, partners can also designate certain responsibilities. One can make editor or agent calls, arrange publicity, write articles, attend book signings, etc., while the other works on new proposals or does revisions or completes a final edit. Or handles a crisis at home or (better yet) goes on vacation. Respondents report that occasionally division of responsibilities can lead to problems—only one partner gets a revision letter from an editor or a phone call from an agent, but the glitches are minor and not difficult to handle if the partners communicate well.

Ball has been published without a partner as have Browning, Power and Cummings, and the Maxwells. For Ball, there are certain kinds of books she wouldn't write with a partner—mystery and suspense for example. But as for the question, is it better or worse to write with a partner, she hedges. "Because every book is different, I can't give a generalized opinion on which is better or worse . . . (but) writing alone has all the advantages of any other kind of independence: you're responsible for no one's career but your own, you're able to take more risks, you make fewer compromises, you're accountable to no one but yourself for mistakes."

Barbara Cummings, with eight titles under her name, and Jo-Ann Power with four, admit that even when they're writing separately the other is there to critique and edit. They worry that if they worked only together their teamwork might suffer. The combination of writing as a team and individually gives them an energy that Cummings-Power say is not multiplied by two, but by five.

Maxwell feels that collaborating is neither better nor worse than writing alone. It's simply different.

Any Conclusions?

This is the part of the article I've been looking forward to—the opportunity to use my amateur (yet insightful) skills to analyze collaboration. First, it seems to me that articles and workshops on "How to Collaborate" are probably wasted. Each team is going to work out its own method depending on unique strengths, ➤

Collaborating

(continued from page 7)

weaknesses, and needs. There are no rules.

Successful teams appear to function on two levels. Turning out a good book is their *stated* priority and thus they are willing to compromise and sacrifice for that goal. However, their commitment to the partnership and to each other seems to be equally as important and is zealously protected. Successful partners feel as though they are gaining more than they are giving and as Nira Herrmann says, "growing and learning and changing over time."

Successful partners are realistic about themselves and their partners and deal with the positives and negatives. They are mature enough to realize that there are many choices in crafting a novel.

In a successful partnership, dependence doesn't cause resentment but generates respect for what the other partner contributes. And successful partners seem to like and admire each other; spending time together is a pleasure for them, not a chore.

I asked my respondents to give advice to writers who might be thinking of collaborating. Several mentioned finding a partner who has a similar view of the world, yet is different enough to complement the other's strengths. Also, finding a collaborator with similar work habits and attitudes about deadlines eases strain between partners.

After working with two partners, my advice is, first, find a partner with a sense of humor who can laugh at you, at herself, and at the bizarreness of the business we're in. Shared laughter, even when it's hysterical, goes a long way in resolving tensions. Next, spend some time with your prospective partner before you begin writing. My partnerships grew out of long-term friendships after we had learned about—and accepted—the other's quirks and idiosyncrasies.

To go further, Donna Ball warns that collaboration isn't a decision to be made out of impulse . . . or desperation. She suggests a written agreement between partners that spells out what will happen to the name, the royalties, and the unfulfilled contracts "in case of disaster."

Ann Maxwell, who has written 16 books with Evan Maxwell, mentions that her agent said that theirs was the only collaboration he had ever handled that lasted *longer than three books*. The shores are littered with the wrecks of failed partnerships.

Ball goes on to give some tough advice: "If you're possessive, jealous and opinionated, argue violently with editors or are crushed by criticism from your critique group, you're probably better off working alone—and so is any potential partner!"

In closing I'll quote the ever-philosophical Dixie Browning, whose brief words say it all: "Respect each other. Know and admit all strengths and weaknesses. Some books will be more hers than yours. ACCEPT IT. It's the end that matters, not the process."

***Shannon Harper** is an award-winning co-author of over 40 books, including historical romances, series category, single title releases, and a four-part western series.*

_INTROducing

The following authors have made application for membership in NINC and are now presented by the Membership Committee to the members. If no legitimate objections are lodged with the Membership Committee within 30 days of this NINK *issue, these authors shall be accepted as members of NINC:*

New Applicants:

Donna Kauffman, Sterling, VA
Ellen Jones, Los Angeles, CA

New Member:

Carol I. Wagner (*Marisa Carroll*), Deshler, OH

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.

Conference Update

By VICTORIA THOMPSON, Conference Coordinator

We've got some exciting events planned for the 1994 Annual National Conference, including a field trip to tour the studios of CNN and another to visit the Atlanta Historic Center, where we can tour the best Civil War exhibit in the state and a genuine 1840s plantation house. Complete details will appear in the conference brochure, which you will be receiving in June.

We still need your help, though, for that special part of the conference that the members design themselves: the Night Owl Sessions. These sessions take place on Thursday evening, and they are the ones specifically designed to appeal to our members' special interest. If you have a topic you'd like to discuss with your peers, even if you think only two or three others might be interested in the same topic, this is the place for it. If you'd like to meet with other authors who write for the same publisher to discuss areas of mutual concern, this is the time for it. Or if you'd like to discuss a subject too controversial for the regular sessions, this is where we'll schedule it. Or maybe you just think we forgot a really important or hot topic; we'll be glad to put it in right here.

We need your ideas and suggestions—and if you'd be willing to moderate the session, tell us that, too. Send them to: Victoria Thompson, 563 56th Street, Altoona PA 16602. Phone/Fax: 814-942-2268.

THIS WORKED for me

If It's Good Enough for Sandy Brown . . .

By DEBBIE MACOMBER

It's true. It's because of that dashing trendsetter Sandy Brown that Linda Lael Miller and I set up an office outside our homes. All right. I'll admit it, Linda moved out first. For an entire year she rented a nine-by-twelve room, and I wondered about all the tax advantages she was losing.

Like most of us, I was deducting 10 percent of my mortgage payment, 10 percent of the utilities, and 10 percent of just about anything else including my subscription to *TV Guide*. If my deduction made it past the scrutiny of my accountant, it went on the tax form. If Linda chose to ignore the more-than-obvious tax advantages of an office inside the home, then far be it from me to point this out to her.

But that was the summer Linda finished *Yankee Wife*, and she wrote it without dealing with a neighbor who needed someone to take her dog to the vet, salesmen pounding at her door, and a kid under her nose looking for entertainment. She went "to work" in the morning, and when she finished, she returned home and relaxed.

Relaxing at home was something I hadn't done in a good long while. Don't misunderstand me; I didn't work every minute of every day, I just *felt* like I should. There were galleys to read, plots to plot, art fact sheets to feed the dog.

Not until after I enjoyed the incredible read *Yankee Wife* did I start thinking that maybe Linda had stumbled onto something good. I mean, she wrote this during the *summer*. Only those of us with school-age children can appreciate what an accomplishment this is.

Sandy Brown and Linda weren't the only writers setting up offices. Word started to filter out all around the writing community of novelists with their own offices. Linda claims she's much more productive now that she's working outside the home. When Jennifer Blake spoke at our local writer's conference, she told of her office and secretary. Office. Secretary. The words were beginning to have a musical sound. That was when Linda and I came up with the idea of sharing an office and the expenses.

By now I'm sure you're asking what my accountant had to say about all this. Surely he objected to letting go of all those valuable exemptions. He didn't. He simply pointed out that I'd be acquiring a whole new set of deductions. It's six of one and half a dozen of the other.

True, in setting up an office, I relinquished deducting 10 percent of my utilities, but I've gained something far more valuable. I discovered what Linda had that first year on her own.

Home was home and work was work. It's a pleasure to go home at night, kick off my shoes, and relax in front of Oprah. Home has gained a new appreciation in my life. It's a pleasure to walk in the door and feel home's welcome.

On the other hand, work is work and that's what I do while I'm at my office. I'm not tempted to stew about what I'll fix for dinner (hey, stew sounds good!) or worry if my son's gym shorts are washed. Nor do I eat my lunch in front of the Noon News and contemplate wallpapering the living room.

Another thing I don't do is run four or five times out to the street to check the mail box. Best of all, in the months I've been in my office, not a single friend has stopped by, flung herself on my sofa, and announced she'd come to kill an afternoon.

When I start work in the morning, it's more than falling out of bed, pouring myself a cup of coffee, and schlepping my way to the computer. For the first time since I became a writer, I'm actually acquiring a wardrobe.

One of the agreements Linda and I made when we decided to share an office was that we wanted to create a professional atmosphere. That meant dressing in something other than sweats. Frankly, it's been years since I owned this many pairs of pantyhose.

One of the unexpected benefits of working outside the home has been how it's broadened my social circle. I'm out there in the everyday world, meeting and networking with other professionals, and it's great. I've met some wonderful hardworking people, just like you and me, who think it's neat to have writers in the building.

As far as I'm concerned, Andy Rooney gave us a bad name. If I'm a social misfit, it's because I was stuck at home and the only one to talk to was a mixed breed dog who barked at falling snow.

Linda and I are fortunate to be established enough in our careers to hire a secretary. We've become spoiled with someone to screen our phone calls, answer our mail, produce our newsletters, and make a soup-run to the deli. We realize we're blessed in this area.

If I had it to do over again, I would have moved into an office years ago. I'd do what Ann Everhardt does. Anna, who writes as Tiffany White for Temptation, has the ideal set-up. She rents space in a complex with 80 other small offices. Secretarial services are available, along with a fax and copy machine. Whenever Anna uses any of these services, she's billed at the end of the month. Another advantage is that the front desk accepts her deliveries, so she isn't tied to her office.

There's been a good deal of speculation on what we can do to improve the image of the romance writer. I'm not going to suggest that renting an office or hiring a secretary is going to give us the respect we deserve. We work hard no matter where we plant our computers. The difference has come in how I perceive myself, and that attitude shows in my work. NINK

Reprinted from RWR *with permission from the author.*

***Debbie Macomber** has received the 1985 Waldenbooks Romance Award, and is the two-time winner of the B. Dalton Award (1991, 1992). Several of her books have placed Number One on the Waldenbooks Bestseller List.*

Tax Rules for Writers

By PATRICIA RICE

It has been said that there's nothing more certain in this life than death and taxes. While I'm not in a position to comment on the former, like many people, I have more than enough to say on the latter.

By the time you read this article, most of you will already have gone through the hassle of pulling together last year's records and presenting them to an accountant for tax purposes. Like most people, you will be swearing you'll do better next year.

Well, next year has arrived.

As a certified public accountant, I not only have completed numerous tax returns in my career, but I've sat before the IRS to explain where the numbers on those returns came from. I know our local agents, I've talked tax laws with them, and I have a good idea what most of us are going to be up against in the next year or two as they process 1993 returns. It ain't pretty.

Thanks to Reagan's "tax simplification" acts, our Congress of convoluted legal minds, and the IRS's own desperation, the tax laws have become so intricate not even the most experienced of tax lawyers can completely untangle them. For every word I write in this article, there will be at least one exception and one pending court case. For that reason, I give you generalities: the way the IRS would like you to think. For details, I recommend you talk to your accountant. If you don't have an accountant, if you're in the writing business, I recommend you find one—preferably one who thinks as conservatively or as radically as you do.

The reason for my recommending an accountant will be come obvious as we cover just the one small topic of tax law that I intend to cover in this article: travel expenses. In our seminar in San Antonio, we discovered most of us present had accountants, but all of us had questions and concerns about travel expenses. For writers, travel expenses can be the largest expenditure on our returns, and the one most IRS agents scrutinize closest. Therefore, it pays to know the rules and to heed them:

Rule #1. Auto Expenses

The business use of your vehicle is deductible. For those of us not fortunate enough to jet everywhere, cars are the predominant means of travel. We use them to travel to local writers' meetings, the library, to out-of-town conferences, on research trips. If we document that mileage clearly each time we use our car for business, listing where we went and why, what day and how many miles, we can deduct the expense of that use. Most of us know that. Few of us keep adequate records. If you don't have those records, the IRS will throw out that expense. Period. They love listening to us whine that we can prove we've been everywhere we said we were, but unless you have that piece of paper or little mileage book, they'll laugh in your face.

There are two methods of taking auto expenses once you have your mileage record compiled at the end of the year. A good accountant will explain the details (and there are thousands of details). I'll just keep it to explaining the two basic methods of taking expenses: the standard deduction method, which is the simplest, and the actual expense method, which requires excellent record-keeping.

The *standard deduction method* simply means you multiply the number of business miles recorded against the flat rate used by the IRS for the current year. For 1993 that rate was 28 cents a mile. If you traveled 1,000 miles on business last year, you're entitled to deduct $280 in auto expense against your business income. As of this writing, I've not heard of any change for 1994.

The *actual expense method* is precisely what it sounds like: deducting actual expenses for the number of business miles driven. This means keeping track of all your gas, insurance, taxes, repairs, maintenance, and depreciation on your car for the year and multiplying total expenditures by the number of business miles versus the total number of miles driven. This method is easiest if you have a business account and a business car, and all expenses related to that car are run through the business account and into your regular bookkeeping. If you have more than one car and/or no business account, this method can be hair-raising. Not only must you keep track of all those miles, but the actual receipts. When was the last time you got a receipt for gas?

Rule #2. Out-of-Town Travel

If you thought Rule #1 was bad, wait until you work your way through this one: "A deduction is allowed for ordinary and necessary traveling expenses incurred by a taxpayer while away from home in the conduct of a trade or business."

That seems perfectly simple and logical enough until you run it through the brains of tax lawyers and the IRS. The result is then regurgitated hog mash.

Every word in that sentence is defined through pages of tax law and thousands of tax cases. I'll not even attempt to explain the ramifications of "ordinary" or "home." Ask your accountant if you're uncertain about the legality of what you want to deduct.

We'll just assume that we're all taking perfectly normal, legitimate business trips that last overnight some distance from the place where we normally live. Even then we're walking dangerous territory because the IRS is quite likely to call into question certain conference expenses or the necessity of a research trip or the amount of time spent actually researching and who went along with you.

The absolute very best way to deal with a potential IRS audit of travel expenses is to take copious notes and keep thorough records. They will be so completely flabbergasted that you actually have the acres of information they're going to demand that they're quite likely to shuffle the papers for a few minutes and drop the whole subject—unless it's a boring day, in which case you'd better be prepared.

Your hotel room while away on business is deductible. Keep the receipt or they're likely to think you spent the night with a friend. It will also prove that you were where you said you were at the time you said you were there. You will need your check or credit card receipt to show how much of the bill you actually paid.

It was suggested in our conference seminar that every time you go on a trip you bring along an envelope or use the one in the hotel room to keep together all the pertinent information. This is an excellent suggestion. Just carry that envelope around and shove everything into it, or keep the receipts in your pockets or purse and add them to the envelope at the end of the day. You can make notes on the envelope as to where you went that day if you're on a research trip. You can keep a running record of cash expenditures for which you don't have receipts. The possibilities are limitless. When you get home, you will have a nearly complete record of your expenses to give to your accountant.

Unfortunately, your meals while away from home on business are not as deductible as they used to be. There are now more limitations than I care to cover, many of them affecting the way we tend to eat at conferences. The largest limitation is one most of us know about. In 1993 we could only take 80 percent of our meal expenses. In 1994 we can only take 50 percent. It is obvious that the IRS is working toward the disallowance of all food expense. Perhaps it's their way of encouraging a healthier, happier nation by cutting that extra fat.

I know our conference coordinator is going to shudder when I throw this in, but if a conference fee includes the expense of meals, the IRS really would prefer that the amount for meals be stated separately—so we can only deduct the allowable 50 percent or 80 percent of the meal part of the fee. I think it would make most auditors' hairs stand on end if we told them that we pay for the meals but seldom eat them since we're usually schmoozing in the hotel restaurant instead of where we're supposed to be. I think they would also try to make you eat the expense, so don't tell them.

They will also get the shudders if you try to explain that you ate lunch with your editor who paid for your meal and then ate lunch with another writer you haven't seen in years and picked up her tab, figuring you'd break even. If you want to keep thorough records of where you ate, who you ate with, what you discussed, and how much it cost, go for it. They'll be so amazed they probably won't even try to identify the disallowable entertainment expenses, as long as you don't go for extravagant meals. Remember, IRS agents have to eat on $26 a day. That will give you some idea of what they consider extravagant.

Which leads us to another solution to the ever-pressing tangle of meal allowances. There is a standard meal deduction that even self-employed people may use. Actually, there are half a dozen standards now, just ask your accountant. But for people who eat light or forget to keep track of cash expenses, this may be the simplest solution. (It beats trying to figure out how much of your breakfast tab belonged to your spouse or writing partner.)

First, you have to justify that you are entitled to the standard deduction. You can only take it for those days you are actually away from home, and must prorate it for days when you're on the road going to and from your home. You have to prove the days you were away (hotel receipts or airline stubs work well) and that you were actually on business. If you can prove all that, you may take a standard rate of $28 a day (after March 12, 1993) for low-cost localities and $36 a day for high-cost localities (call your accountant or the IRS for a copy of publication #463 for a list).

Rule #3. Travel Companions

The IRS does not have a rule that says specifically "Thou shalt not take anyone with you" when on a business trip, but they may as well have. As a matter of fact, in 1993 a bill was passed effective as of the first of 1994 stating expenses of "spouses, dependents, or other individuals accompanying a person on business travel" will be denied unless (a) the person is an employee of the person paying the expenses; (b) the travel is for bona fide business purposes; and (c) the expenses would be otherwise deductible.

The IRS doesn't care if you bring your spouse of child along (although they're likely to question whether or not it's vacation travel if you do), they just don't want you deducting expenses for that person. If the motel room charges for an extra person, you can't deduct the difference. You can't pick up their meals, airplane tickets, museum admission, etc. They even have books showing which hotels charge extra for additional people so you can't smuggle anybody else's charges onto your tab if you're audited. Big Brother has big eyes, so don't try to fool him.

However, if you feel your spouse serves a legitimate business purpose (and I'll tell you right now that huge corporations have lost this one), talk to your accountant, get the facts down on paper, pay your spouse a market wage, and go for it.

"Go for it" may be the simplest piece of advice anyone can give you when it comes to tax law. Get the facts, know where you stand, and if you feel you have a legitimate business deduction, take it. The IRS only prosecutes the fraudulent: the ones who lie and deliberately conceal the truth, knowing they're in the wrong. If you take a business expense with good reason, the IRS may disallow the expense, but they aren't going to prosecute. They're only there to collect what they consider is their due. Even if the first auditor disallows the expense, you can appeal your case to a high authority without going to court. So don't let the complexity of the law frighten you. Know the laws that affect you, keep good records, and take every expense to which you're entitled. The IRS isn't going to give your tax dollars back just because you're too timid to take what rightfully belongs to you. NINK

the NEXT PAGE

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.

Broadrick, Annette: *Mystery Wife*, Silhouette Special Edition

Browning, Dixie: *Grace and the Law*, Silhouette *Spring Fancy* anthology

Douglas, Carole Nelson: *Cat on a Blue Monday, A Midnight Louie Mystery*, TOR/Forge (hardcover)

Dreyer, Eileen: *Nothing Personal*, Harper

Evans, Patricia Gardner: *Keeper*, Silhouette Intimate Moments

Ferguson, JoAnn: *The Smithfield Bargain*, Zebra Regency

Ferguson, JoAnn: *Lord Chartley's Lesson, A Mother's Joy* anthology, Zebra Regency

Gaffney, Patricia: *Crooked Hearts*, NAL Topaz

Guntrum, Suzanne Simmons w/a Suzanne Simms: *The Brainy Beauty*, Book 1 of *Hazards, Inc.* series, Silhouette Desire

Hart, Alison w/a Jennifer Greene: *Bewitched*, Silhouette Desire

Kleinsasser, Lois w/a Cait London: *Lightfoot and Loving*, Silhouette *Spring Fancy* anthology

Lowry, Harold A. w/a Leigh Greenwood: *Seven Brides—Fern*, Leisure

McConnell, Ashley: *Prelude, Quantum Leap* #4, Ace

Munn, Vella: *Daughter of the Mountain*, TOR paperbacks

Myers, Helen R: *A Father's Promise*, Silhouette Romance *Fabulous Fathers* series

Ross, JoAnn: *The Return of Caine O'Halloran*, Harlequin Temptation *Lost Loves* series

Small, Bertrice: *Love, Remember Me*, Ballantine Historical (Trade)

Springer, Nancy: *The Boy on a Black Horse*, Atheneum Books for Children

Springer, Nancy: *Metal Angel*, ROC (Trade paperback)

Willman, Marianne: *The Court of the Three Sisters*, HarperPaperbacks

Breaking News . . .

The Hearst Corp., parent company of Avon/Morrow, has suspended buyout talks with Putnam. Hearst officials announced renewed commitment to rebuilding Avon/Morrow.

Harlequin's new mainstream, single title imprint is MIRA Books.

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"For me, the best aspect of the Novelists, Inc. conferences is the absolute freedom from stress that is always such a part of the 'larger' conventions. The easy ambience of discussing problems and solutions with one's peers is a wonderful change from the high pressure atmosphere of other conferences."

— Judi Lind

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