

Novelists' INK

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

Setting Goals and Making Choices

By MARY JO PUTNEY

Writing is more than a job, or even a career: it's an obsession and a way of life. People who find out that they *can* write very soon decide that they *must* write. It's not uncommon for new authors to hurl themselves into their work like lemmings going over a cliff. (Certainly that's what I did.) But to derive maximum satisfaction from a writing career, it is necessary to think seriously about where we want to go—not only in writing, but in life.

We live in an era where we have more choices and possibilities than any society has ever had. This is a mixed blessing, because there is a price that must be paid for having so many choices. Part of the cost is that we are particularly vulnerable to regret.

We can't possibly pursue all of the available options, so most of us end up with numerous "roads not taken"—things we didn't do, things we thought we would get back to, but now realize we never will. It's easy to resent people who seem to be where we would like to be. Not only is such resentment bad for the soul, but it can poison our pleasure in our lives and achievements. A clear sense of one's own goals can help control free-floating envy and frustration.

There are two big questions in setting career goals: What kind of success do you want? And how high a price are you willing to pay for it? Success in writing requires a certain amount of ruthlessness. You don't have to become a rotten, selfish human being in order to succeed—though it probably helps—but you do have to put your writing first, at least part of the time. When you consider how much you will have to give up, you may decide that major writing success will cost more than you want to pay.

Obviously the cost is highest for writers with significant family obligations. A friend of mine deliberately slowed her career when she realized that she was in danger of missing some of the best years of her children's lives. Another friend who has written

over fifty books said that only now, when her children are through college, does she have the luxury of deciding where she really wants "to put her derriere."

At its worst, obsessive writing could cost you your family and friends. Even if your husband doesn't leave you to find a woman who bakes bread rather than microwaving pizzas, there are many other pleasures you will lose along the way: working in the garden, enjoying your friends, reading for fun rather than to find out what's going on in your genre.

In the first flush of writerly enthusiasm, it's easy to give up things we used to enjoy and not think it a sacrifice because we love what we're doing now. However, it may turn out that the activities we abandoned were necessary to keep us whole and human. Quite apart from the emotional unhealthiness, such narrowing of our lives can contribute to professional burnout if the wellsprings of creativity begin to run dry for lack of replenishing.

Balancing personal versus professional time is an obvious issue. Less obvious is the fact that some goals are mutually incompatible; achieving one might make another unattainable. This is why you must not only know what your goals are, but which mean the most. It might be a good exercise to brainstorm a list of what you want to achieve, then rank the items in order of importance.

A key element in prioritizing is your self-definition of the kind of writer you want to be. Do you define yourself as a storyteller? A stylist? A literary writer? A teacher? *(continued on page 8)*

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PRESIDENT's column

Summing Up

A writer just asked me the question that I asked myself and you last January: What exactly is Novelists, Inc. and why should writers join? This, my last column as president, is a good place to answer the question again.

Novelists, Inc. is the newest of the major writers' organizations in the United States. It was formed in 1989 by a group of writers, primarily of romance novels, who felt a need for a national organization to represent authors of commercial fiction. It has grown to include more than 500 members, all of whom have published at least two book-length works of fiction, one of them in the last five years.

We of Novelists, Inc. consider ourselves to be the heirs of the story-tellers' tradition.

We are not realists, though many of us may write realistically. We are dreamers. We tell the stories that readers like, not the stories that critics applaud.

We are geographically scattered, which means we are not nearly as parochial as the groups who focus on New York.

We are professional, or at least we try to act professionally, since most of our members derive a major portion of their income from the words they put onto paper. More importantly, we are business-like. We are concerned about the business of writing fiction in ways that no other professional writers' group can be.

We are also young enough that we still have to struggle with self-definition.

The answer to the question "What is Novelists, Inc.?" has not changed in the past year. We are still all the things we were and we are still struggling to define our role in the environment of contemporary commercial publishing.

We have, however, changed as an organization in the past year. We now have a toehold, as well as a handhold, on the craggy rock face of reality.

For instance, as one of the founding members of the Authors' Coalition, we took part in a landmark effort to convey hundreds of

thousands of dollars in photocopy royalties to their rightful owners, America's authors, composers and dramatists.

Novelists, Inc. has already cashed its first \$1,000 check from the coalition. That check represents our out-of-pocket expenses in the organizational efforts. We still don't know how much money will be distributed to Novelists, Inc., but I am hopeful that it will amount to between \$5,000 and \$10,000 during the first distribution. The upper figure would amount to a third of our annual operating budget.

There are no strings attached to the money. We can spend it on expensive wine for the convention banquet, should we choose to do so. But we have a moral obligation, it seems to me, to use the money to help American writers. As an organization, we need to begin thinking about how we can do that.

In the longer run, the money may be less important than our membership in the coalition. As founding members of the coalition, we are now on an equal footing with other national writers' groups. In the past six months, Marianne Shock and I, as delegates to the coalition meetings, have met with representatives of the top writers' organizations in the United States.

Some of those groups are well-known, like the Authors Guild or Romance Writers of America. Others are more obscure, like the Textbook and Academic Authors, the Songwriters' Guild, the Artists' Rights Assn., and the National Writers Union.

Marianne and I found, though, that there was a great deal of common ground with these other groups. The creative world is changing quickly. So is the business environment in which we all must operate.

Corporatization of publishing, global conglomerations, technological change, internationalization of rights. Authors, dramatists, composers and journalists have all begun to realize that we now operate on a much broader and more complex stage than ever before. All

of us must be conversant with issues that may not even have names yet.

The Authors Coalition is symbolic of the changed world in which we story-tellers operate. It was formed for the initial purpose of apportioning a type of creators' revenue that didn't even exist five years ago, but its members are beginning to recognize that the Xerox machine is not our only common enemy.

If we are lucky, the coalition's work will not stop with the apportionment of Norwegian reprographic funds. A new network has been laid out. New grid lines are up. Connections have been made. If we follow through, the creators' environment will never be the same again.

Personally, I regard Novelists, Inc.'s involvement in the coalition as the most important activity in the past year. It would never have come to pass without the willingness of the present board to jump into the unknown with both feet, even to invest time and organizational money in the process without guarantee of return.

Every member of the board and every member of the organization with whom I talked was eager to make that leap. Everyone seemed to sense that the publishing world has changed, sometimes more radically than we ever imagined, and everyone was willing to change to keep in step.

An organization like this one will work only if it continues to grow and to change in that way. We will continue to prosper as long as we continue to offer our members a good reason for joining and participating in activities and conventions.

That brings me to another point. The final results are now being tabulated, but it appears that we set a new record for convention attendance this year in Atlanta. That fact tells me that record numbers are interested enough to spend a good deal of time and money to meet, face to face, and to discuss common problems. I think I speak for the entire board when I say that we are all gratified by your response. It validates what we all tried to do for the past twelve months.

We all have some other tangible evidence of success, as well. A collection of essays on the story-telling craft by Novelists, Inc. members is being compiled by newsletter editor JoAnn Ross. We hope to conclude a deal with a major publisher for the collection in the next several months.

The newsletter, opened up and expanded to reflect the broader interests of our membership, has spawned a number of brisk exchanges, both among members and between members and publishers. Things got so brisk that yours truly was even accused of the most heinous of crimes in print. Somebody had the audacity to suggest that I had somehow become "politically correct."

I'd rather die.

Whatever the case, it's clear that members and nonmembers alike are paying attention to the newsletter. New York editors and executives are listening, whether they like it or not. We have learned that we have a voice; now, we can begin to learn to use it.

Organizationally, Novelists, Inc. continues to grow. Membership is up. Annual retention of old members is as high as it has ever been. Recruitment is ongoing.

As many of you saw in the last newsletter, an effort to restructure our nominations and election process is underway. We have grown to the point that we need to formalize procedures that have been informal in the past. If that is the biggest organization

restructuring we have to undertake, we should consider ourselves lucky.

So, my colleagues, that's it. Novelists, Inc. has passed its sixth year with a minimum of growing pains and with what we on the board hope is a broadening horizon. We are big-time, both in membership and in affiliation. We all ought to be proud. We all ought to take a bow.

One personal note. I want to thank the other members of the board and the members of the organization for one of the most exhilarating experiences I've ever had as a writer. I told you at the beginning that I wasn't an organization man, never had been. What that really meant was that I had no idea how many people were involved and how much effort went into making Novelists, Inc. go.

I had no idea, for instance, how much energy a dynamo like Victoria Thompson could generate. As convention coordinator and as chair of the site selection committee for the 1995 convention, she has given exceptional and selfless service. I had no idea how much went into those two jobs. Now I know and now I know why Victoria is as well regarded as she is.

I didn't know how intricate the process of running a board meeting could be. Julie Kistler, the best non-practicing lawyer I know, dragged me out of several mine fields. Her counsel was invaluable.

Judy Myers, as secretary, kept all of us up to date on deadlines. She untangled a couple of foolish plans of mine and kept the whole board focused on the formal agenda we had laid out.

Joan Johnston has kept us solvent and has kept the Internal Revenue Service from picking our bones. Hers is a hard job, mainly because there's never enough money. She deserves special thanks.

Marianne Shock, as advisory council representative on the board, has been big sister to us novices. She has an extraordinary reservoir of organizational experience. That experience showed both in Novelists, Inc. board meetings and during the long, exhausting, sometimes tedious formative meetings of the Authors' Coalition. Marianne was a rock.

Central coordinator Randy Russell served as banker and expeditor, effectively keeping the day-to-day business of the organization running smoothly.

There are many others who have contributed time and effort this year and now will continue to do so in the future. I'll do what I can, certainly, because now I understand how much work an organization needs from its members. I also understand that organizations can accomplish more than individuals in certain areas.

As writers, we all are blessed. We can entertain ourselves, telling stories, and sometimes we can even make a living at it. I can think of no job more satisfying.

But we have to remember, this is not just fun. It's a business, and in business, the little guy who fights alone gets ground to dust. Organizations don't write books, but they can represent the people who do. As isolated individuals, we are in trouble. As a group, we may stand a chance.

— 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.

P.S. Hits Nerve

We were dismayed and disturbed by the postscript to Patricia Gardner Evans's *LETTER to the editor* in the September 1994 *Novelists' INK*. She wrote of "a comment by a male NINC member that he thought NINC had more potential than any other organization to become the most powerful force and voice for writers. However, he added, that *couldn't happen with our disproportionate romance and female membership* [italics added by us]."

Not only did this attitude, so prevalent in other writing groups and in the profession as a whole, hit a nerve, but her apologetic remark that she had recruited "at least five new members, two of them non-romance but all female, I admit," was even more discouraging. Since nearly half the mass market sales are in romance, which is mostly written by women, having a large female membership should be expected, particularly since women writers are not confined to the romance genre.

As women and romance writers we resent having to justify our presence in this organization, regardless of the proportion of the membership females and/or romance writers comprise. That Patricia Gardner Evans felt moved to justify her actions is a sad commentary on the turn our organization has taken. Without the female and romance membership, NINC would have neither the resources nor the numbers necessary to become "the most powerful force and voice for writers."

— Nira Herrmann and Phyllis DiFrancesco

Patty Gardner Evans Responds:

We in NINC clearly can write but reading comprehension sometimes falls a bit short. Honesty isn't, at least in my thesaurus, synonymous with apology. In trying to prod non-romance, non-female members to recruit more, I pointed out how many members I've brought in and truthfully reported who so I wouldn't leave the impression that it's easy for women romance writers to recruit male members when most of the writers we know are women—whether they write within the romance genre or not. Otherwise, male and/or non-romance members might not have seen the need to make similar recruiting efforts.

Now, to prove possibly that I can misread as well as anyone, I have to wonder about resenting "having to justify our [women's] presence in this organization." A little defensiveness there, maybe? Why? None is called for, certainly. To be eligible for NINC membership, applicants are asked what they've published, not which bathroom they use. I must admit (again—honesty, not apology). I expected I'd get an angry response or three from male/non-romance members accusing me of wanting them to justify *their* presence in the organization by recruiting more members. Go figure.

Something all of us who write romance, romantic suspense, women's fiction, etc. ought to keep in mind when we get to feeling smug about that 48-50% share we have of mass market sales—40% of all fiction sales—is that we don't command that share of every publisher's mass market and fiction sales. 75% of romance genre sales in the U.S. belong to Harlequin/Silhouette. That's a large majority of the market share concentrated at one house, meaning romance is *not* a major or even significant presence at many of the other houses. While NINC would have little chance of becoming the leading voice and force for writers without its female and romance membership, it doesn't stand any more chance if it doesn't have significant representation at the major houses. That means more non-romance genre members and, since men are the published majority in some genres, more male members, too. Thinking otherwise is just kidding yourself.

Agent/Writer Self-Censors

I have followed the continuing debate re: editor membership, yes or no, with both interest and trepidation for obvious reasons—because I am personally affected/implicated/involved in this debate whether I speak publicly to the issue or not. So, I might as well speak up.

I have been a member of Novelists, Inc. for several years. I am also a practicing literary agent and was previously an editor. I have always been aware of the potential precariousness of that position, belonging to a strictly authors organization and sitting on the opposite side of the desk, so to speak, at the same time. Of course, I am a published author as well, and was so many years before becoming an editor and then an agent. However, during the entire tenure of my NINC membership I have been what we refer to as a "publishing professional" (though I have long thought that term should be used in reference to authors as much as to editors and agents). I have understood from the onset of that membership that there was the possibility of conflict of interest here. Consequently I long ago formulated some rules for myself to mediate that conflict.

First of all, I have never, until now, editorialized in these pages. That has not always been easy. I come from a long line of mouthy, opinionated folk. Several times I have been so exercised

by the wonderful/terrible controversies aired in this newsletter that my fingers fairly itched to strike the keyboard with all the zeal I could muster. Also, there have been times when, sort of being in that soapbox frame of mind, I have felt that my unique perspective as author cum editor cum agent might offer some useful addition to the subject at hand. However, I have resisted both of those impulses. I did so because I feel that this is a forum for writers to speak among themselves, often about the sectors of this industry I represent. As the hybrid I am, I have always considered it inappropriate for me to intrude upon that forum in a public manner—though I have followed the discourse with much interest as an observer.

Similarly, I have never attended a NINC conference. That is a particularly difficult choice this year when the venue is Atlanta—*Gone with the Wind* country and thus associated with much of my personal nostalgia about romance fiction. Still, I will not attend because to do so is, in my mind, once again inappropriate. I could attend and absent myself for the writers-only sessions; but, to be perfectly honest, the writer part of me would be very sorry to have to do so. Worse yet, however, would be the risk of making a client of mine feel restricted in what she might say, or to have any author feel that way for that matter. I have been called over-abstemious in this regard. I accept that designation but will continue to be so.

Thus, in return for the considerable pleasure and edification I have received from reading this newsletter, I have imposed upon myself what amounts to a limited membership in this organization. In other words, I have kept a low profile. Those of you who know me personally may be able to attest to the fact that low profile is not my usual shtick. I do, however, believe it is the proper stance for me to take in this instance, though I of course do not mean to impose that standard upon anyone else. I am simply clarifying the manner in which I have attempted to walk this tightrope all of these years. I hope that the current debate will not snap that wire too taut for me to maintain my balance.

Nonetheless, that is exactly what could happen, for it is my contention that, if Ann LaFarge is denied membership because she is an editor, other dual-role types, including myself, would have to be subject to the same denial. Personally, I would hate to have that happen. I would miss this newsletter and the camaraderie of writers it has allowed me to share. The author side of my persona, too often left less nourished than it would prefer, is grateful for that experience. Still, this is an issue that reaches beyond my personal preferences and needs. It must be decided by the membership at large, perhaps in a referendum, a written ballot that would determine NINC policy on this question for good and all. I, for one, would willingly accede to whatever determination such a vote might produce. It is after all the most American of all endeavors—the democratic way.

— Alice Orr

Making a Living

Do we have statistics on how many of our total membership are full-time novelists? A recent comment by Michael Seidman in his syndicated column “Ask Michael,” made me wonder. He admitted he had no statistics but had learned from a source he trusted that only about 300 people in the whole country are full-time novelists, meaning that they do not have second jobs.

I know that many of us have second professions or outside jobs as well, but I got to wondering. In my local organization about half the published novelists do nothing else for a living. The other half work outside the home as well.

I’m not arguing the point that housewives do a full-time job as well as write. I know parenting is a full time job. I’m interested in finding out how many of us actually support ourselves financially by writing novels and doing only other related activities such as selling the rights to the movies, doing writing workshops, promotion tours, etc. Do we know what this percentage of our membership is?

— Pat Werner

3,000 Romances Burned

Yesterday I received a letter from Anne De Santos, a faithful fan of many years, *apologizing to me* for not having written in the past year and asking me to change her address on my mailing list so that she could continue to receive my newsletter. To explain her extended silence, she told me about the nightmare she and her family have endured over the past fifteen months. On July 5, 1993, her family of eight were burned out in a fire that consumed their apartment in five minutes. They escaped with their lives, nothing else. Anne’s collection of 3,000 romance novels burned along with everything else she owned. They remained homeless until December, living in motels, shelters, and sometimes on the street. Anne contracted pneumonia after one particularly cold and rainy stint without a roof over her head. Complications set in and she lost the use of her legs. She spent several months in a nursing home, learning to walk again. Now she is living at the Oregon City Retirement Center, separated from the rest of her family. One of the few things that escaped the flames last July was an envelope with my return address on it. Anne wrote to me not to beg for favors or handouts, but to ask me where she can buy my out-of-print books to begin rebuilding her collection. I’ve decided to package up copies of all my novels (from my private stock) and mail them to her immediately. I thought some of you might want to send her books too. Although Anne is an avid reader of all genres, she’s especially fond of time-travel.

Her address is Anne DeSantos, Oregon City Retirement Center, 515 10th Street, Oregon City, OR 97045.

I’d like to make this a really Merry Christmas for this faithful romance fan!

— Becky Lee Weyrich

For Love and Money

Robin Davis Miller, executive director of the Authors Guild, reported that a romance author told her that her editor said she should be writing because she loves to write, not for the money.

After Evan Maxwell's PRESIDENT's column a few issues back dealing with the futility of voicing complaints behind closed doors — and because after spending a fair amount of time working on this, someone besides me, dammit, is going to read it—I'm opening a door. Many of us are less than ecstatic over the royalties paid on Harlequin/Silhouette direct mail sales. We have heard the explanation that mailing lists are so expensive to maintain, advertising so costly and deadbeat subscribers so numerous that, despite not having to discount cover prices 40+% for retail sales, Harlequin/Silhouette would lose money if they had to pay authors higher royalties on book club sales. A look at Torstar's (Harlequin/Silhouette's parent company) annual and quarterly reports for 1992 through mid-1994 shoots that explanation through the heart.

To quote directly from Torstar Corporation's 1992 annual report to its stockholders, in book publishing "North American revenues account for 53% of the total (revenues)—35% from the direct marketing business and 18% from retail. Book Publishing profits reached a record \$61.8 million in 1992, up from \$52.4 million in 1991. The \$9.4 million increase in profits came from the North American direct marketing division, the overseas markets and favorable foreign exchange rates." Since overseas markets, mainly retail, accounted that year for 47% of revenue, I think it is safe to assume a good half of that \$9.4 million came from North American direct marketing. Just FYI, Torstar has three operating segments: newspapers and printing, book publishing, and catalog marketing (Miles Kimball). In 1992, the three segments' total operating profits were \$80 million—\$9 million from newspapers and printing, \$9 million from catalog marketing and \$62 million from book publishing. That \$62 million was 77.5% of Torstar's operating profits for 1992.

Lest you think business declined after 1992, Torstar's first quarterly report for 1994 predicted that Book Publishing operat-

ing profits "for the remainder of the year are expected to exceed 1993 results." That's a reasonable expectation since in the June 13, 1994 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, Torstar announced that in 1993, Harlequin/Silhouette's operation profits rose another 12% in the U.S., based on increased sales of 11%—note higher profit percentage increase than sales percentage increase. Gains in the North American direct marketing division offset declines in retail as direct marketing continued to (meaning this year, 1994, too) account for the largest percentage of North American revenues. The Canadian market accounts for only 5% of North American revenues, by the way.

Those of us who publish with Harlequin/Silhouette know they have been pushing direct market sales hard the the past few years. After seeing where the majority of their North American profit is coming from, can anyone wonder why? Does anyone still believe they are not making more on direct sales than on retail? And that disproportionate profit isn't accounted for solely by the 57.5% lower royalty authors are paid on direct mail sales, not by a long shot.

We should be making the same royalty on North American book club sales as on retail sales—hardly a new point. We did once, as Libby Hall mentioned a few issues back. How to get back to that point? As much as no doubt most of us would like to demand 6% immediately on all new contracts, I think we would have a better chance of achieving that rate in increments. Not only would it probably be more possible and also show us to be reasonable, it is fairer to Harlequin/Silhouette. Before you load your weapons to shoot me through the heart for that last statement, consider that companies have long range growth plans that are based on anticipated revenues.

While increasing direct mail royalties tomorrow to 6% wouldn't severely hamper Torstar's plans, it could have an impact on acquisitions and expansions it has planned for the near future. Harlequin/Silhouette has made some smart acquisitions recently to broaden its publishing base and position itself for expansion into multi-media, and a stronger company only benefits us. Phasing in higher book club royalties over a three-year period shouldn't forestall any of their plans.

The way most Harlequin/Silhouette contracts read now lists the direct mail royalty rate as 2.55% of cover price. Another bar-

gaining point—and a fair one, I think (please hold your fire again)—would be to figure the direct sales rate on the actual price to customers. Currently on Intimate Moments, it is 83% of cover price. Unlike retail sales that may be temporarily and randomly discounted, we know that direct sales are always discounted, so figuring royalties on that discounted price is fair and it would equal the rate paid early on. Back when book club royalties were 6%, the contracts I've seen figured that 6% on the amount received by the publisher, meaning it was figured on the discounted price.

We could ask for the royalty rate to be figured on the full cover price as compensation for sales lost to used book stores because direct market books are available for resale before titles hit the retail stores, but it would be a planned concession point as far as I'm concerned since I am unconvinced we're losing that many sales to used book stores. I *do* have a good idea how much we're losing to 2.55% royalty rates. *The Economist* reported Harlequin/Silhouette produced 744 books in 1992 that earned \$345 million in sales, averaging \$485,000 on each sale. Figuring an average of one-half direct sales for each book, the author of each of those titles lost about \$4,500 because of the lower book club royalty rate. That additional money would have meant a great deal to the individual authors; it wouldn't have meant as much to Torstar. It would have cost the company \$3.3 million, reducing its book publishing profits that year from \$61.8 to \$58.5 million.

Is it possible to negotiate a higher direct market royalty rate? Yes, I believe it is. Will it be easy? We know the answer to that. But nothing will be accomplished if, as Evan said, "we don't speak openly and directly." Negotiating my last contract, I, as have several others recently, asked for an increase in direct market North American sales; in my case, from one-half of the retail royalty rate to three-quarters (less 15%). The answer from Toronto was, "I'm sorry to say the changes you requested in the royalty section of your agreement are not negotiable in series romance contracts." Once, the use of a pseudonym wasn't supposed to be negotiable either. The more authors who speak "openly and directly" about higher book club rates, the more chance of success. The majority of writers, according to Toronto personnel, sell only two books to Harlequin/Silhouette, so it is the minority—us—who are writing—and best-selling—the majority of what they publish and accounting for much of that 77.5% of Torstar's profit. Wouldn't you like a little more of that \$400,000+ your book earned? Aren't we writing for love *and* money?

—Patty Gardner Evans

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

My husband is taking a graduate level course in historical research, and he brought home an invaluable piece of information: how to read a reference book in one hour. Begin by reading the preface (yes, I always skip that part, too) in order to find out what the book is supposed to be about. Then read the first and last paragraphs of each chapter and the first sentence of each paragraph within the chapter. When you're finished, you will know as much as if you had read every word of the book. If you get caught up here and there and end up reading more than a sentence, no problem—you probably needed that information anyway—but you won't have wasted your time plowing through a lot of useless stuff.

—Victoria Thompson

Upcoming in the December Issue of Novelists' INK

Tour Tips from the Trenches: NINC members share their experiences on the book tour circuit.

Atlanta Conference Reports: A distillation of the discussion groups at this year's conference. This should whet your appetite for next year's Denver conference. Mark your '95 datebook now for the second weekend of October.

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Setting Goals

(Continued from page 1)

An author of bestsellers?

A writer needs a reader to complete the arc of communication, so most of us want to reach as many readers as possible. In the nature of things, more money and more recognition will go hand-in-hand with a larger audience, so large print runs and good sell-throughs are usually prominent among our goals.

But there are plenty of other possible objectives. Perhaps it's vital for you to have the freedom to write what you want with minimal editorial interference. If writing quirky, offbeat stories is your most important goal, be aware that you may achieve it at the cost of sales. You may have to go to a small house that will give you more creative elbow room. Also, you might always be a mid-list author because your interests are not those of the mass market.

If you are a more literary writer and critical approval is important to you, it might come at the cost of bestsellerdom, because the best-written books are not necessarily the *best-selling* books. Many literary writers must support themselves with academic positions and write on the side.

Perhaps you want to be in hardcover because of the increased cachet, or so people can find your books in libraries twenty years from now. However, while hardcovers may seem upscale, they may also mean a lower income and a smaller audience.

Do you want to write a wide variety of books, going from thriller to romantic comedy to historical saga? Unless you're very prolific, you'll have trouble building a body of work—and an audience—in any one genre. If you use the same name on all your books, readers may be wary because they won't know what to expect. But if you use pseudonyms, loyal fans may be unable to follow you.

Variety may also make publishers less willing to promote you because of fears that they won't get a return on their investment. If you're Ken Follett and already a best-selling author, you might be able to make the switch from thriller to medieval saga and have your audience follow you. But first you must build that audience, and usually that will come through consistency in your writing.

In career building, short-term sacrifices of time or money must often be made in the hope that they will contribute to long-term success. Sacrifices wouldn't be so bad if we knew exactly what we were giving up, and exactly what we would get in return.

Unfortunately, when there is a difficult decision to be made, you will seldom have all the information needed to make an informed choice. Sometimes you'll never know if you made the best decision; other times, you'll find you made a big mistake when your new editor leaves the week after the contract is signed.

A typical strategy decision might involve a desire to double your income. One way to achieve that would be by writing twice

as many books of the type you are doing now. If your current publisher isn't willing to publish you twice as often, you may have to find a second house, and perhaps use a pseudonym.

Another way to increase income is to write a different kind of book that is potentially more profitable. However, taking the time to do that may actually reduce income in the short run.

The first route is probably more reliable, the second may take you further in the direction you want to go. The correct decision for you must be rooted in your individual career goals. If you are a blood-and-bone storyteller and want nothing more than the opportunity to tell as many tales as possible, quantity is probably the way to go. On the other hand, if you want to push your creative boundaries, the second option might be preferable.

Perhaps your chief goal is to be able to support yourself solely through writing. Few writers achieve this; luckily, the chances are better in popular fiction than any other area of writing.

But not everyone wants to quit her day job. Some authors have other work they love. For others, writing is not the primary career, but an escape into a world where everything can be made to come out right, the way life often refuses to do. Also, while many writers adore the solitude of writing, extroverts may need outside work to prevent cabin fever. If you're thinking about quitting a day job to write full-time, first consider how much you need the daily interaction that an outside job provides.

Perhaps one of your goals is to be the best writer you are capable of being, even if it means fewer books and making less money. It's an extremely valid goal because the knowledge that we are doing our best work can help sustain us in a crazy-making business where very little is within our control.

Writing success always involves other people—editors, publishers, art directors, sales reps, and so forth.

Hence, stable relationships with an editor and publisher are vital aspects of career building. A senior editor with more power inside the house may be able to do more for you, but a junior editor who is ambitious and loves your work may be more enthusiastic at selling you in editorial and promotional meetings. Never underestimate the power of enthusiasm—but remember that junior editors hop like bunnies and may go to another house, leaving you high and dry.

You want to be with a publisher that has a track record for building authors, and which does well with the sort of book you write. If your work is gritty, you may want to avoid a house associated with frothy books, and vice versa. However, if your first choice has so many authors that you can't be published often enough to build a name, you may be better off elsewhere.

If your main goal is to be a bestseller, you need to study and

analyze other best-selling authors to understand how they got to the top, and—equally important—how they have managed to stay there. While no two career paths will be identical, understanding how people succeed can enhance your chances of success—if that's what you want.

There is no point in saying you are a better writer than so-and-so, so why is she rich and famous when you aren't? The top authors are where they are for good reasons. Even if they are not terrific writers in a technical sense, they generally have a visceral understanding of the fantasies and conventions of their genre, along with excellent storytelling skills.

Most best-selling authors also have some special voice or quality that is their own. It may be powerful characterization, machine-gun rapid plotting, humor, or marvelous atmospherics. Look at your own writing to learn what special qualities you can develop that will strike powerful chords in readers.

Luck is always a factor in publishing. If your luck has been consistently bad, the only comfort I can offer is my belief that in the long run, talent will always find an audience. It will just take longer if the breaks are against you. (Patrick O'Brian was almost eighty when his Aubrey and Maturin seafaring tales went from cult classics to international bestsellerdom, but it did happen.)

Just as a writer's concerns change as soon as she sells her first book, there are a whole new range of worries that accompany serious success. A lead author belongs not only to her editor, but to everyone else in the house who is working to promote her books—publicity, sales, promotion, art. Not to mention the readers. The weight of other people's expectations can be suffocating, which may be why many successful authors seem to get into a rut, producing very similar books over and over.

There is a real Catch-22 to creative work: if you're very successful doing a particular thing, you're encouraged to keep on doing it, and you run the risk of going stale. We all know writers whose work we loved at first, but which began to seem repetitive after a while. Yet if your writing evolves in new directions, you run the risk of losing your initial audience. There is no way you can please everybody, so you have to decide what will please you.

While there are certainly worries at every level of writing achievement, I think that writer's anxiety is normal and even valuable if it creates a constant striving to do better, to keep the edge on one's work. Complacency is the death of creativity. On the other hand, too much anxiety can tie a writer in creative knots so that she can't produce anything.

Though I've talked about large scale success, it's worth emphasizing that bestsellerdom is not the only worthwhile goal. It

has been said that success is getting what you want, but happiness is wanting what you get. What matters is the satisfaction we find in our work. There is nothing wrong with choosing more modest goals that give satisfaction and still leave time for other aspects of life. If that choice is made consciously rather than by default, you'll be happier and feel more in control of your life.

It's difficult, perhaps impossible, to write what you don't love, so there is a limit to how far you can go in your desire to be commercial. Your writing must come from the heart and be true to your own voice and talent.

On the other hand, talent is not a raging beast that can never be controlled or shaped. I usually have half a dozen story ideas simmering, but the next book I write is always the one I think is most likely to take my career where I want it to go. And when I write it, I make sure it is the best book I know how to write at my current level of skill.

I don't know if my decisions are always the right ones, but I always try to make them based on a balance between rational business considerations and emotional, creative considerations. That's what works for me. You need to decide what works for you. **NINK**

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:

Denise Domning, Phoenix AZ
Donna Gimarc (*Elisabeth Fairchild*), Dallas TX
Anne Wolfe (*Hillary Wolfe*), Pittstown NJ

New Members:

Karen Amarillas (*Susan Amarillas*), Granada Hills CA
Patricia De La Fuente (*Patricia Oliver, Olivia Fontayne*),
Edinburg TX
Jennifer Smith (*Jennifer Crusie*), Alpha OH
Karen Young Stone (*Karen Young*), Thibodaux LA

Rough Spots

By SERITA STEVENS

I recall dreaming about my first published book: how wonderful it would be, how after that I would be rich (I wish), would have no worries about getting anything of mine accepted ever again and I would soon sail to the top of the charts.

Little did I know how much I would struggle and that my seventh written would be my first published. Or that I would have to push and shove my way through so that four of the first six would eventually see the light of day. (After considerable rewriting and polishing, of course.) Nor did I know that after the first acceptance it would be several years before I would have a second.

The second book being a teen romance.

Surely, I thought, now I've found my niche. But back then, while I was never publicity shy, I didn't realize quite the extent we authors had to go to get our names around.

And so there was a wait for another two years before my third, another historical romance, came out again. Blaming it on my agent, I began pushing myself. I felt better when Zebra started doing gothics and took on a new version of my early manuscripts asking for more.

Was I making it yet? Surely the money wasn't there but it would come. I had faith. It would come.

Then I switched agents yet again. I haven't found the right marriage partner yet and I haven't found the right agent either. Both are crucial to our careers but none so crucial as our own self confidence and willingness to set and work toward goals. (You know the cliché—God helps those who help themselves. Surely if the Lord wanted me to be a successful writer, he would make it happen.)

My new agent was friends with an editor at a new historical line. They wanted my Boudica revolt novel. But even as I finished typing *The End* on the page, they were typing their bankruptcy clauses. I was pleased to get the rights back, but I wanted the book out.

Leisure's top management, also friends with my lawyer-agent, agreed to take three of my books and one of them was my book, *Lightning and Fire*. I had a hot spot for a while but then the night fell.

Not wanting to stay with Leisure, I pushed myself on, only to realize that I obviously wasn't ready for another book yet because it was four years before I came up with the idea for *Deadly Doses: A Writer's Guide to Poisons*. Two years of hell suffered with a partner who didn't want to work and didn't want to pay the publicity fees. But it was a big hit and I was nominated for numerous awards because of it, becoming a minor celebrity in the writing field.

Even so, it took nearly two more years before Ruth Cavin at St. Martin's purchased *Red Sea, Dead Sea*. Well, at least it was hardcover, even if the money was a lot less than I hoped.

I continued slugging away at the nursing, working and earning as best I could, but often getting reprimanded for doing my

writing on company time. I was doing all I could, so why wasn't God helping me?

St. Martin's quickly purchased the second book in the series, but as I was writing it I fell in what I thought was love. Needless to say, this book took longer to do. Thank goodness I finished it before things really started falling apart in my life, because between my relationship with him and his daughter, his demands and my work demands, not to mention planning the wedding, and moving, I hardly had time to write.

While leaving him was the best thing I could have done, it nevertheless has taken me nearly two years to recoup my mental abilities and return to my writing. Stories that have haunted me over months and years were now able to come out again.

And I found the callous which had formed in my brain began to smooth out.

So, nearly three years after my last sale, I have again sold, partly in thanks to my friend Marsha Landreth, who told me that she didn't want to continue with NAL's medical soap series and gave me the chance to jump in.

I can't say that this roller coaster ride of my writing life has been fun but it has taught me a few things: keep your goals in mind, keep them focused, write them down, keep them on a poster around the house, have people around who support and love you, and do what you can to help others because it might one day come back to you, and lastly, God does help us when we help ourselves. He just tells time a bit differently.

I recently became a Mary Kay consultant. I was, at first, very reluctant until I realized just how positive and self-affirming their program was and how my self confidence grew in the few months I've been with them. It was one of the best things I have done for myself. And it helped me to return to the keyboard.

This doesn't mean you have to do Mary Kay, but it does mean you have to have faith in yourself. No matter if you're in a smooth spot or a rough spot, take a deep breath and keep going, keep the faith and keep hitting those keys and no matter how many times you are rejected, don't give up. What doesn't sell today, could sell tomorrow, and what isn't right for now, could be spiffed up for another place.

Rid yourself of the riffraff and non-supportive objects (yes, objects) which drain the life out of you.

If you are halfway decent, you will find a publisher who will believe and support you. The rest is up to you to deliver a good book and publicize.

From one of my Mary Kay classes:

*I have a premonition that soars
on silver wings*

*It is a dream of your
accomplishment of many
wonderous things*

*I do not know beneath which sky
or where you'll challenge fate*

*I only know it will be high. I only
know it will be GREAT!*

NINK

Code for Publicity Persons, Part 2

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6. Buy some maps. One of the commonest complaints of traveling writers is that the publicist doesn't seem to realize how long it takes to get from one part of this country to another, or even from one part of a big city to another part. You **MUST** allow ample time between appointments. Traffic gets tied up, planes are delayed, cars break down. If you are not familiar with the city or the area, ask someone who is—the escort service, if you have arranged for one. (See #9 below.) Escorts don't appreciate those ten minute intervals between appointments either. They are the ones who are blamed if the author doesn't get there on time.

7. Do not confirm invitations or arrangements without checking first with the author, and comply promptly and without whining with her requests for changes in the schedule. One would suppose no such admonition would be necessary, but unfortunately there are substantiated examples of the violation of this rule of basic courtesy. One author arrived in a foreign city suffering from a bad cold, complete with chills and fever and other unpleasant symptoms, and requested the publicist to cancel her appointments for that day. The publicist did not do so, and the author was informed later that afternoon that the television crew from station X was in the lobby waiting for her. Being a professional she flew into her clothes, tried to cover her bright red nose with make-up, and did the interview, box of Kleenex in hand. She did not kill the publicist. Some people would have.

8. Double-check all reservations and arrangements. This applies most emphatically to hotels during peak travel periods but it also applies to signings and other appointments. How many writers have arrived at a bookstore or a radio station and found that they were not expected, or that the store did not have their book? (Don't all raise your hands at once.) This is a serious issue. Failure to conform could result, not just in inconvenience, but in actual physical danger. A certain stupid author once found herself beating on the locked door of a radio station in downtown Phoenix at seven a.m. on Sunday morning. There was nobody around but her and the winos. It was—have you guessed it?—the wrong radio station. She didn't have an escort because in those days they were only supplied to big names, and there wasn't a taxi in sight. Fortunately she was within walking distance of the hotel, but it was not one of the most carefree strolls she ever took, and, sadly, there is no reason to suppose a similar situation couldn't arise again under even more perilous circumstances. (She didn't kill that publicist either. She was younger and kinder back then.)

9. Get everything in writing and forward copies to the author.

10. Escorts. They are far more common than they were once, but they are by no means the rule. They ought to be. Not only do they provide much needed security in these dangerous times, but they save enough time and aggravation and missed appointments to make them well worth the expense. New Yorkers take note: it is not always possible to find cruising cabs on the streets of other cities. Cab drivers don't always know how to find out-of-the-way places like radio studios. The writer won't know either, if she is

a stranger in town. If she is on a tight schedule she may miss a live show or an appointment for recording time unless she has an escort. If it's worth sending a writer on tour, it's worth the expense of an escort.

11. A few words on the subject of hotels. Most of us would much prefer comfort to charm. Forget the cute bed and breakfasts and the cozy family hotels unless your author requests same. Make sure the hotel has running water, an elevator (even if a writer does not have a broken leg she usually has lots of luggage), a restaurant, and room service that doesn't quit at 9 p.m. Author X, her (non-dinner, but who can eat airline food anyhow?) flight delayed, arrived at her destination already tired, starved and disgruntled only to be told, when she requested sustenance, that there was none on the premises. Late at night in a strange city she preferred not to risk her safety searching for a restaurant. She was therefore forced to fast until morning.

12. And speaking of food, don't assume that your author will be fed at the various functions to which you have sent her, even if a buffet or luncheon is part of the deal. She has a better chance at a sit-down luncheon, but she won't get much to eat, especially if she is the featured speaker; she'll be too worried about the talk or about spilling coffee on her blouse and getting lettuce stuck between her teeth. (Incidentally, why don't the people who plan these things give the speaker a ten-minute break after the meal and before the speech? At the very least said speaker might want to run a comb through his or her hair before mounting the podium.)

As for stand-up food, such as is served at a cocktail party or reception, heaven help the poor writer who counts on consuming enough calories to keep her functioning. There she stands with (if she's lucky) a drink in one hand and a canape or a cookie in the other, and a fixed smile on her face...talking. That's what she's there for—to talk and smile. Unless she is a boor, like a few of us who don't give a damn about manners if there is a brownie anywhere in the vicinity, she won't try to talk with her mouth full or excuse herself from her admirers in order to forage for food.

13. Don't expect a writer to save you money by occupying the hostess's spare room instead of sending her to a hotel. Make it clear to the hostess that the writer is available only for the talk, signing or panel, not for any extra-curricular activities, including meals, unless the author has specifically agreed to such. If you do not provide transportation to and from the event, make certain the hostess has done so.

IN SUMMARY: Most of the difficulties that arise in the course of publicity tours stem from the failure to observe two basic rules:

I. Consult the author on all points, well in advance, and in writing. Ask for her suggestions and make use of them.

II. Be considerate. Give the author the same care and attention you would give your aged mother if you were planning a trip for her.

One final note: In all fairness it must be said that publicity persons are not solely to blame for unproductive, inconvenient scheduling. If an author demands a publicity tour and insists on visiting every two-bit bookstore and radio station in the country, it's her own fault if the tour turns out to be a waste of time. Our code is designed for writers as well as publicists, particularly for writers who are their own publicists. We hope said writers will take it to heart.

the NEXT PAGE

At least two months preceding publication, please send 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.

Baer, Judy: *Double Danger*, Live! From Brentwood High #3, Bethany YA

Baer, Judy: *Three's a Crowd*, Cedar River Daydreams #22, Bethany YA

Bocardo, Claire: *Home for Christmas*, Zebra "Joy of Christmas" Anthology

Brown, Irene Bennett: *The Plainswoman*, Ballantine

Browning, Dixie: *Plain Fancy*, Silhouette Desire

Browning, Dixie: *The Love Thing*, Silhouette (reissue)

Brownley, Margaret: *Wind Song*, NAL/Topaz

Campbell, Marilyn: *A Dreamspun Christmas*, Topaz "Dreamspun" Anthology

Cassteven, Jeanne Savery w/a Jeanne Savery: *A Christmas Treasure*, Zebra Regency

Christian, Zita: *First and Forever*, Harper Monogram

Di Benedetto, Theresa w/a Raine Cantrell, *A Time for Giving*, Signet "A Country Christmas" (reissue)

Di Benedetto, Theresa w/a Theresa Michaels: *Fire and Sword*, Harlequin Historicals

Douglas, Carole Nelson: *Irene's Last Waltz: An Irene Adler Adventure* (mass market edition), Forge (Tor)

Eagle, Kathleen: *The Wolf and the Lamb*, Harlequin Historical "Mistletoe Marriages" Christmas anthology

Eberhardt, Anna w/a Tiffany White, *A Kiss in the Dark*, Harlequin Temptation

Evans, Patricia Gardner: *Keeping Christmas*, Harlequin Historical "Mistletoe Marriages" Christmas anthology

Feddersen, Connie w/a Debra Falcon: *Midnight's Lady*, Pinnacle Books

Garrod, Rene J.: *Holiday Tradition*, Zebra "A Christmas Embrace" Anthology

Hoffmann, Peggy w/a Kate Hoffmann: *Lady of the Night*, Harlequin Temptation

Kleinsasser, Lois w/a Cait London, *The Bride Says No*, Silhouette Desire "Jilted" Collection

Linz, Cathie: *Bridal Blues*, Silhouette Desire

Lockwood, Karen: *Stolen Kisses*, Jove Tea Rose Historical

McMahon, Barbara: *A Bride to Love*, Harlequin Romance

Martin, Kat w/a Kasey Mars: *Silent Rose*, Pinnacle Denise Little Presents

Meinhardt, Shelly Thacker w/a Shelly Thacker: *A Stranger's Kiss*, Avon Romantic Treasure

Orwig, Sara: *Texas Passion*, Zebra Lovegram

Richards, Penny: *The Greatest Gift of All*, Silhouette Special Edition

Richards, Penny: *Unanswered Prayers*, Silhouette "Crystal Creek" #21

Sawyer, Robert J.: *End of an Era*, Ace Science Fiction

Thorleifson, Alex w/a Alexandra Thorne: *Boundless*, Zebra Denise Little Presents (prequel to *Lawless*)

Van Nuys, Joan: *Beloved Deceiver*, Avon

Warren, Pat: *Only the Lonely*, Silhouette Intimate Moments

Wilkins, Margaret w/a Margaret Moore: *Christmas in the Valley*, Harlequin Historical "Mistletoe Marriages"

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