

Novelists' INK

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

Togetherness! Working with a Partner

By SERITA STEVENS

Working with a partner can be—to paraphrase Dickens—“the best of times and worst of times.” I know, I’ve been through them all! There are actually three different types of partners: good, bad, and indifferent. And I think I’ve probably worked with all three, each in a different way. Finding the perfect partner is like finding the perfect mate to marry. You need someone who could have been your soul mate (perhaps in another life or in another sex). That someone is hard to find and so you go through a process.

There are pros and cons of working with partners and there are ways of dealing with partners to make sure the worst doesn’t happen. If I had but known....Even so, I probably would have rushed foolhardily into the “danger” because, despite its problems, working with partners can be a refreshing change.

Why work with a partner? Well, for one thing, writing can be lonely. Some people find that they are more creative in the company of someone they like. It’s nice—when you get along—to have the repartee and to be able to bounce ideas off your co-worker. For another, you don’t sound so crazy when you are voicing your story out loud. And in the best of times, it can be fun. You also have a shoulder to cry on when the editor comes back with rewrites that you disagree with or don’t think need doing—or even if she rejects the project totally.

Of course, in the worst of times, it can be double ulcer producing! Believe me, I know this from experience!

After almost every partnership, I usually say “Quoth the raven ‘nevermore!’” but like the people addict I am, I usually do it again. Passing the bakery and smelling the Danish, I almost

always go in. Sometimes I buy, sometimes I don’t. But it always tempts me, especially if I like the idea. However, I have developed a checklist of my own to see if the “Danish” is fresh or stale.

That’s not to say I don’t write on my own. I do, and have several of my own projects going—usually at the same time I’m working with a partner. Mostly, it’s my own sense of self that can sometimes get swallowed up in the partnership, since with teamwork the voice is neither uniquely yours nor your partner’s, but a mellow combination of the two.

Before my collaboration on *Deadly Doses*, I had attempted to work with partners, but it never quite went anywhere. Usually, it would be a coworker from my real-life nursing job, or another friend who had an intriguing idea. More often than not, I’ve had people come up to me with “brilliant” ideas they wanted me to write with or for them. Mostly these ideas were mundane and stereotypical and not worth my time or energy. I would tell the seeker that it was a good idea but best that he/she did it on their own.

Unfortunately, most of the time, the people who wanted to partner with me were novices who knew very little technique and even less of the work it took to produce a book. One time, I attempted to work with someone who had a novel idea based on some real-life experiences that I found intriguing. However, once she saw what work it was to actually produce a book—which she (and many like her) thought could be thrown together in a long weekend—she backed out. Since she had helped to create the “child” plot, I decided in this case—and others similar—that joint custody was too much to fight for, and I let them keep the baby.

With Anne I made my standard offer. Her idea had intrigued me. We had been folding newsletters for MWA at Joyce Madison’s home. Because I’m a nurse, she asked me medical questions for a novel she was working on. “There ought to be something about poisons that everyone can understand,” she said. I quickly agreed. She stated she had checked out the books and there was nothing that was understandable for the lay person.

Because I don’t believe in stealing ideas, I feel I have two choices when I hear a good idea: to buy out the idea, giving the

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PRESIDENT's column

Opening Remarks

I had a great time in Atlanta. I stayed busy all four days, but none of what I did involved getting up at three in the morning to feed an infant, whipping a jury into a state of indignation and outrage, or figuring out how to get Ben Kincaid to take yet another seemingly unwinnable, fictional case. Instead, I got to take the fabulous CNN tour (two sets and a gift shop), trekked across the street to the supermall (Was I the one who emptied his wallet at the Warner Brothers store?), and got to chat with many, many Novelists, Inc. members.

One of the key advantages of almost never opening your mouth is that you have a lot of opportunities to hear what other people are saying. And boy, did I ever! Time and again, NINCers took the chair beside me and spontaneously began explaining in detail what was wrong with this organization, what needed to be done, what needed to be fixed. Some of them didn't even realize I was the President-Elect. They just had something on their minds, and they wanted to share it. Personally, I was grateful to have the input. It helped me get a sense of who my fellow members are and what they care about. It helped me get a sense of what's important and what's not. And it helped me formulate a sense of what, if I were a different kind of president, I would be calling "my Agenda."

Issue Number One, in virtually everyone's mind, is the membership: who it is, and who it should be. On this matter I was surprised to find a split of opinion. Most people I spoke with want to see the membership expand and diversify. A few, however, expressed the sentiment that NINC should be content with the current membership composition and "stop trying

to be something it isn't."

I side with the former viewpoint. Don't get me wrong; I don't have any problems with the current membership. But NINC was designed to represent serious commercial-fiction writers, and so it should. That means the organization cannot be perceived as being restricted to a single genre, or even to genre novelists. We want the best and the brightest, the hard-working and most successful, from all fields of fiction. This is more than just a philosophical preference; it is a practical necessity.

Our outgoing (pun intended) president, Evan Maxwell, said in his last column: "As a group, we may stand a chance." He's right. Individually, we will never have much clout unless our books meet with extraordinary commercial success—and even then, the clout will be restricted to certain "approved" areas and will have no effect broader than our own career. If we are to make a real difference, we must bring together all the successful scribblers who have attained a little clout and create an organization with a lot of clout. Only then can we make real strides.

I was genuinely moved when I read Patty Evans's recent column about the inequities of the royalties paid on Harlequin's direct mail sales, a topic I have heard other writer friends complain about for years. But I also know that no amount of complaining will ever make a corporation change a policy that is significantly profitable to them. NINC can write articles and file grievances and bemoan and wail till the cows come home; as long as publishers can find writers willing to accept abusive, unfair terms, our contracts will be full of them.

It is a great irony that the author, the one person in the publishing chain who makes a unique, indispensable contribution, is also the party with the least influence. But it's true, at least in most cases. To my surprise, I have heard some writers suggest that this power imbalance is inevitable. This is the sad theory that writers are by nature loners and nonjoiners and ill-suited to negotiation,

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and thus will always be poor wretches trod upon by ruthless publishers. Well, I don't buy it.

If you don't believe me, go to Hollywood. Every professional screenwriter is a member of the Writers Guild of America. Most producers won't look at a script by a non-member, because they know that if they do, they'll be boycotted by the Guild membership—meaning virtually every writer in Hollywood. The result? Hard, fast, and very lucrative minimum-payment schedules for screenplays. A first-time, never-before-sold author of a script for an hour network TV show is guaranteed over \$18,000. Guaranteed.

Well, you say, that's not so much. But remember, that's a *guaranteed* minimum; that's the floor. How many of us got that up front on our first book? Certainly not I. So what's the difference? Is screenwriting tougher than novel writing? Hardly. Most writers would say just the opposite. The difference is organization and clout. The Writers Guild is for screenwriters what NINC should be—and can be—for us: an organization with enough punch to make a difference. That's why we're going to try to expand and diversify the membership.

What else? Many members have expressed a desire to see the Grievance Committee take a more active role in investigating professional complaints and fighting for remedies. An organization representing many writers is obviously in a much better position to command corporate attention than a lone individual. Other writers' organizations have demonstrated that a well-chosen, well-executed audit can cause a

publisher to treat all the organization's members better. Some people have also suggested that NINC take a more active role in policing and insuring professional conduct from agents. These are just a few examples of how an organization can help a writer in a way the writer alone usually cannot, with a result that benefits all of us.

And then there's the used-book store issue. I'll write more on this in the future, after the board has had a chance to meet, but this is a topic that has been discussed for some time by the Advocacy Committee. The issues have been identified; the time for action is upon us. Other artists' groups have protested "used" stores, and have attracted a lot of sympathetic publicity in the process. Why can't we?

Enough already. This should give you a glimmer of an idea of where I think this group is and where we should be heading; with any luck, it will get all those imaginative, inventive minds in our membership thinking in the same direction. If any of this has sparked thoughts in your head, or if you have a concern I haven't mentioned (yet), give me a call. I urge those of you who have suggestions or ideas regarding the membership drive, or anything else, to contact me or one of the other board members.

We'll be anxious to hear from you.

— William Bernhardt

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.

Member Retention

After Walter Jon Williams kindly acceded to my request to reprint his SFFWA *Forum* letter about his problems with Viking/Penguin/NAL in *NINK*, I learned that another author has also had similar problems with NAL this year, problems so serious that it took the threat of her bringing a lawsuit against NAL for an agreement to be reached. Since this author was a member of Novelists, Inc., I contacted her and asked her if she, too, would write up her experience for the newsletter; events such as this at a major publishing house merit our attention, after all.

The author told me that she had already planned to write an article for *NINK* about her experiences with NAL. However, due directly to her problems with NAL, she was broke when it

was time to renew her NINC membership. She asked for—and was grated—an extension. Come summer, she was able to pay her membership renewal dues, and so sent in her check to NINC. However, the check was returned to her. She was informed that she was not a member, and she was sent an application form. She had already had previous annoyances with NINC and considered this the last straw.

She wrote to the president of NINC about her problems with the organization. She never received a response.

Not too surprisingly, she got fed up with these petty irritations, canceled her check, canceled her article, and decided not to join NINC again.

I think such a decision is just as likely to be the choice of any other writer who finds NINC inefficient and annoying to deal with, especially if they are already members of an old and influential guild like SFFWA, a growing and increasingly influential guild like RWA-PAN, or an active advocacy group like Sisters in Crime; or if they are new members trying out NINC at the urging of a friend; or if they have already felt uneasy about some other aspect of NINC, such as its heavy romance-genre membership.

I gather that certain members of the guild have invested considerable time in finding out why members leave and don't come back. And I appreciate that all work done in NINC is done on a volunteer basis by busy professionals. However, as

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LETTERS to the editor

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the first Outreach Committee chairperson for NINC, I have invested a lot of time in getting new members into the guild, so I find it extremely discouraging when a multi-published, award-winning, active author like the one I have herein described finds it more trouble than it's worth to remain a member of NINC.

— Laura Resnick

Defining Income Arbitrary

I, too, was intrigued by Pat Werner's question about how many NINC members were full-time writers. At the time, I was drawing up the dues renewal form for 1995 and deciding what questions we should ask our members this year. I thought this would be a good one until I discussed it with our Central Coordinator, Randy Russell. He pointed out something I hadn't thought of before, namely the difficulty in defining "making a living." For example, because my husband lost his job several years ago and has been under-employed ever since, my writing income is virtually supporting our family of four with two kids in college. If asked whether I was "making a living" with my writing, I would say a resounding "Yes!" However, I have a writer friend who earns approximately the same amount annually as I do, but *her* husband is a corporate executive with an income that makes hers, by comparison, little more than pocket money. I'm sure she would say she *doesn't* earn a living with her writing. Even though we have the same income, one of us would say yes and one of us would say no, and we would both be right. Therein lies the problem. We could, of course, ask our members if they earn over a specific dollar amount annually, but setting that amount would be arbitrary. The amount needed for a comfortable lifestyle in Altoona (where I

live) is lot less than someone in New York City would need. Do we decide that "earning a living" is making more than \$20,000 a year? \$30,000? \$40,000? And, oh yes, if we ask our members how much they make in real dollars, we can be pretty sure they just won't tell us, since it's really none of our business anyway. That's the other problem., and until somebody can solve it, we'll just have to wonder how many of our members are full-time writers.

— Victoria Thompson

Rental of Advance Reading Copies

A new and incredibly disturbing twist to the used-book store business has recently come to my attention. I have been told about a store which is reportedly renting out advance reading copies for a \$3 fee. Talk about killing the goose that laid the golden egg! This practice cuts drastically into orders and sales at all levels, hardcover and paperback. The store need not even buy a single copy of the title initially before making big bucks on its rental. Worse, it's all happening prior to the book's release.

Hopefully this is an isolated situation, but I wanted to alert authors to be on the lookout for the spread of this insidious practice. I'd suggest advising publishers at once whenever a store is spotted renting ARCs with such blatant disregard for the income of the very authors whose books keep them in business. While we may not directly be able to stop the practice, we can certainly curtail it by seeing that such stores are removed from publisher lists for any advance reading copies

— Sherryll Woods

Atlanta Conference Report

When Hollywood Comes to Call

This was a small session of writers who had movie options, had had their books read by Hollywood, and—as one put it—hadn't had a glimmer of interest from Hollywood in their books. We discussed Hollywood agents and attorneys' comments that they like to come to the talent rather than have the talent come to them. One writer described how positive reviews of her books in *Publishers Weekly* had generated Hollywood interest, another how her agent's extensive Hollywood contacts had helped her catch Disney's eye. Also, we discussed agent and attorney comments that it's easier right now for "name" authors to get movie deals, although two writers present had options on books that weren't bestsellers. The perils and opportunities of "free options" came up: one writer said that her Hollywood agent was even grudgingly accepting free options because

they've become so common, while another said her Hollywood attorney said to limit a free option to 90 days. An author, however, needs to be careful that s/he's not forced to hire an attorney (who gets paid by the hour, not on commission) to negotiate a contract on a free option: in that case, it's probably best to work through an agent or to pass on a free option rather than risk losing money. One writer quoted a mega-bestselling writer who said "there's many a slip between cup and lip" when it comes to Hollywood. In other words, a deal can fall apart at many stages right up through the end...but we all have our fingers crossed that the writer present whose deal is still active will see her story on network television.

— Carla Neggers

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Working with a Partner

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author created-by credit, or suggest they join me in writing it. The latter is what I did with Anne.

Deadly Doses was the first book I finished in collaboration and I learned quite a few things about working and not working with a partner. I learned even more when doing *Red Sea, Dead Sea* with another partner, and now I am doing *Thy Bastard Daughter* (a historical mystery) with a distant partner and *The Unwanted* with a psychologist partner.

In this last instance, I had seen an article on a psychologist with a new approach to things. I had called her and asked if she would like to assist me doing a book on her topic. After a few meetings, she agreed. I am essentially doing most of the writing, while Judi is feeding me material on her clients, which we are fictionalizing, and on the facts associated with the diseases. In this case, Judi will give me the material, lend her name for credence—since I am only an RN and she is a Ph.D.—and assist with reading over and editing the material for factual content.

While it seems like it might be less work to write with a partner, it is actually sometimes more—especially if that partner doesn't do his/her share of the work. But even so, depending on how you work, it can be more time consuming since you have to match schedules. Not an easy thing to do with two busy people.

You must be prepared not only to work hard, but to sublimate your ego. The story is ALWAYS the bottom line. If what you are suggesting works the best for who that character is, then fine. In *Red Sea, Dead Sea*, I wanted Fanny to be more religious but Rayanne had a good point about making her more like the majority of the Jewish population so that a greater readership could relate to her.

It's also important that you are both passionate about the story you are doing, like the character or the concept, and are convinced it will sell well.

Once we start out with the concept, even working alone, the baby grows and decides on a different career than what we had planned for him—even more so with a team effort. When two parents raise a "plot child," the baby often comes out totally different than either expected.

When there were plot and other problems arising out of the partnership that we couldn't seem to resolve on our own, Rayanne and I decided to go to a marriage counselor. Yes, you read right: a marriage counselor. In the height of our working together, we were seeing more of each other than we were of our respective live-in mates. The fact is, when you spend a lot of time with someone, issues are bound to arise and it helps to have a third party to listen and sort things out.

How do you meet the perfect partner? As I said, I've run into people that I've partnered in different ways. Sometimes I've sought them out, sometimes they sought me out, sometimes it was just plain luck.

With Rayanne, I was doing a private duty case and my patient, a quadriplegic, had to get her car fixed. Rayanne, also crippled from a work accident many years ago, was getting a hand control on her car. When I entered the waiting room with my patient, she was reading a Harlequin romance. "Oh, I write

that type of books," I said. "So do I," she responded.

I sat down next to her, and we began talking. I was editing my mushroom chapter for *Deadly Doses* and handed it to her. "Here, help me with proofreading this." She agreed and during the course of the morning, we found we were both animal lovers and into metaphysics.

Because of her accident and constant pain, Ray had essentially stopped writing. We became friends and I dragged her screaming and kicking into a screenwriting class with me, and then we did a screenplay together (*Murder Me Twice*) which has been optioned several times but so far not produced.

When I came up with the idea for Fanny Zindel and *Red Sea, Dead Sea*, I ran it by her. She came up with some wonderful plot twists that I hadn't thought about, and she was able to ground and make logical some of the events that I had just hanging. So we decided to try writing the book together.

That brings me to this part. Now that the nitty gritty of choosing a partner is done, how do you actually work together?

There are a variety of ways, and each couple has its own way of doing things.

I know one couple living in Los Angeles and New York who are a successful team. I always thought that hard until I took on a partner for my historical mystery whose works I've read and enjoyed but who lives in Ohio.

Laurie had been one of my clients when I was doing some agenting. She wrote historical romance and specialized in the medieval period. Recognizing that the romance field was changing, I tried to encourage her into another genre. I came up with a simplistic plot-line suggestion. She liked it but was having trouble adding on in the right direction, so I finished it for her and wrote the first chapter—and by then I was hooked. We decided to try doing the book together.

With this method, I do a few chapters, send them to her for editing, and she sends them back, I re-edit and we go back and forth a few times before we are satisfied to continue with the next group of chapters. It's a long process—much longer than I anticipated.

With Anne, we did much the same only we didn't live quite so far—LA versus Orange County. She did her assigned chapters and I did mine. However, when it came time to merge the two very distinct voices into one, I had to do the rewriting as Anne declined, believing that a good writer never rewrites.

My second partner lived, at that time, in the city, not twenty minutes from me. We had identical computers and word processing systems, so we would switch back and forth from her place to mine, sitting side by side at the computer and composing as we went. Sometimes she would talk and I would type; other times visa versa. We would laugh at our typos and be outrageous with our character, we would also be close enough to scream and tear each other's hair out—practically. But the good thing was—as I said above—we were friends first and foremost and almost always calmed down enough to see reason and what was best for the story.

Even though she only had two books published prior to our

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writing together, she was nearly at my place in development, since she had certain strengths that I lacked and I had others where she fell.

It was with her that I saw the marriage counselor. Unfortunately, Rayanne moved up to Oregon for her health, and so we now communicate via fax, modem, phone and post. To work on the next book, I will probably go up there, since we have found that, for us, being in the same room and working on the same computer stimulates us more than working separately.

When it comes time to publish, you have to make a decision—do you use separate names, or do you merge the names into one? With most of the books, I prefer to use my own name and have my partner use hers. This is because I have a following already and want people to know I helped write the book. With *Thy Bastard*, I will be going under a pseudo with Laurie only because her publisher insists on keeping the name Laurie is currently using. We decided to use Deborah Miller (her married last name and my middle name).

The advantage of using a new name is that if your past sales haven't been spectacular, the new name starts a new record for you.

Most publishers prefer one name rather than two because it's harder to shelve and to catalog, but they will accept it if that's what you want. Usually the first name listed, when it's a duo, is how the book is found in book stores and in libraries. So whose name goes first?

Usually the one who has done most of the work, or the senior partner, goes first. In *Red Sea, Dead Sea*, Fanny Zindel was my original character, so my name went first. In *Deadly Doses*, it was my knowledge and I did a greater percent of the work, so we even put Anne as a "with" rather than a "by." With *The Unwanted*, we will probably put Judi first since she is the Ph.D. Sometimes, it's best just to let the editor determine who will go first; or, if you are doing a series character, you can alternate. In the next book, Rayanne's name will probably go first.

Look at how you both operate and ask: if the worst happens with the book, will we still be talking to each other? If the answer is yes, it will probably work out. The trouble is, sometimes we don't know the answer because we don't know the other person well enough to know how they will operate under strain of deadlines and rewrites.

Basically, what it comes down to is that you need to trust and respect your partner. Long-term collaborators are special people. You have to share not only the money, but the limelight. However, you can also share the expenses and the fun. It can be a fun and satisfying experience and one that you don't mind repeating occasionally.

Here are some things to consider:

Things to Know Before You Work With a Partner

1. *It's important that you both be professional and both know what is involved in writing a book—that may mean one rewrite, it may mean several.* Whatever the editor wants goes,

even if it means putting your own projects on hold to redo what you thought was already done.

2. *Communication lines need to be kept open at all times, and it's better if you and your partner-to-be are friends beforehand and have common interests to keep the friendship going, because it's going to help solve some of the disputes along the way.* Also, friends care more about each other's feelings and are more likely to compromise than are two acquaintances.

3. *Comparable skill and competence is crucial.* Sometimes there can be exceptions to the rule, but in cases where I've worked with amateurs, I've often been reduced to screaming, hair-pulling matches, whereas with other professional writers, we knew that "the play's the thing"—or, in this case, the story was foremost. As with Rayanne, when we were doing the Fanny Zindel series, *Red Sea, Dead Sea, Murderous Education*, and our newest, *Square Up for Murder*, if we could show how our point helped the character or story better than our partner's that person would win the argument.

If you are both at the same level of development, chances are you will complement each other in the story. Where the skills are unbalanced, feelings of resentment, impatience, and unequal contributions make for hard feelings.

4. *Have something of your own that you are dabbling with while doing the partnership so that you don't feel swallowed up.*

5. *Always have a detailed contract that covers not only shared work and shared costs—usually it's 50-50 for both—but also what happens if you are offered a sequel and one doesn't want to work on it; what happens if one dies; what happens with public relations; who pays for what; what happens if one doesn't want to finish the book; whether you cut your partner in on the profits if you decide to write a sequel and he doesn't; whose agent to use; and how final decisions are to be made if neither can agree.* The contract doesn't have to be in legalese. It just has to make the points in plain English.

The easiest thing to do about sequels, I found, is to say that anything arising out of the book will be negotiated separately, and that this contract is no guarantee that we will be working together again in the future.

Be as detailed as you can. I got stuck paying for all the promotion for *Deadly Doses*, since Anne stated that she hadn't previously agreed. She had, according to our contract, and I could have taken her to small claims court, but in the end I decided not to waste my time.

6. *Choose a third party that you both respect to help you settle differences—be it your agent, a marriage counselor, or another writer.*

7. *If you both have agents, consult with both so that neither feels left out.* Perhaps they can share the work on the project. If you have a contract with them, they might expect their 10-15% anyway.

8. *Be professional.* Stay calm. Nothing is forever—even the good ones.

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Norton to Open Retreat for Genre Writers

Jean M. Auel has been kind enough to forward information to us about High Halleck, a working retreat for writers of genre fiction now being built in Tennessee by Andre Norton. Andre has been working on this project for more than ten years. The architect's plans, now being finalized, include rooms for seminars and meetings, and plans are also being made for cottages.

"We wish to make this a center for research for all genre writers, with examples of early work in every field as well as reference material, videos, a gallery of fantasy art, and the like," Andre said. The collection is building so rapidly—it is already more than 10,000 volumes—that she cannot house it at present. It contains many rare and no-longer-attainable books, including nineteenth-century suspense and mysteries. Besides the materials from her own library, she has already received the reference library of the late Robert Adams and is negotiating for early Western material from another estate library. Indian materials have been promised by the Free Cherokee Nation, and Andre has also been building a video library. Another group has offered to add an audio library of speeches made at conventions and workshops by well known writers.

High Halleck will have living quarters for four to six writers at a time, open to writers of both juvenile and adult fiction. Writers must apply to a board and show a contract or partial manuscript to demonstrate that they are working on a project. The retreat is not intended for beginners in the field, but rather for those who are actively, professionally engaged in writing.

The center's wooded plateau of 70 acres is in Putnam County, TN, near the towns of Monterey, Crossville, and Cookeville. The latter, a university town, is just 20 minutes away via a main highway. Except for one family home, the valley has never been settled. In the center of the Cherokees' sacred lands, it was once their main trail to the Ohio River. A Cherokee writer is on the board of High Halleck, and the board has promised the chiefs that the center will allow no disturbance or excavation of the part of the land that was held sacred.

More than 75% of fiction published in this country falls within the bounds of "genre" writing, Andre reminds us, and never before has there been a retreat where its writers can work in peace and privacy. Besides collecting the library, Andre has bought the land and is paying for the road into it. Now she needs private donations to complete the center's building. The board is seeking grants, but needs individual donations as well. The organization is tax exempt, so all donations are deductible.

"Even small sums add up," Andre says, "and provide seed money for large bequests. Thus we wish to spread the word as far and as fast as possible."

Donations or requests for more information may be sent to Andre Norton, 1600 Spruce St., Winter Park FL 32789 or to Irene R. Harrison, 27 Jarvis Road, Manchester CT 06040. Please make checks payable to Andre Norton's Writers Retreat—High Halleck. All donations will be acknowledged with a receipt signed by Andre Norton.

CB

Atlanta Conference Reports

Career Building in Category Romance

My first-timer "sit back and see how this conference works" approach didn't work with Novelists, Inc. Thank you very much, Carla Neggers. In preparation for my role as moderator of the Night Owl Session, "Career Building in Category Romance," I interviewed two editors and a number of authors. (Moderators are instructed to be prepared with topics in case the discussion lags.) I placed topics on individual index cards with notations. I read articles; I highlighted moderator instructions. Then I attended Julie Tetel's session to see how an experienced moderator handles the group, which she did with ease and without the help of index cards. Julie expertly changed the topics, translated and summarized. However, as I checked my watch for the requested 15-minute segments, Julie didn't seem concerned, yet she performed beautifully. We chose different routes to do the job before us, which parallels the individually tailored ways to build a category career. What works, works per individual. With 50-book experts like JoAnn Ross in the discussion, the session was productive. The following are pro

and con discussions and advice in Career Building in Category Romance:

1. *Use of Pseudonyms:* Advice ran from preferred use of your name to using the pseudonym for privacy, or for indicating an author's different writing styles. Discussion concerned making strong requests when and if desiring use of own name. The previously interviewed editors from H/S said pseudonyms were based on a case by case decision and from the related experiences, this was true.

2. *Writing for Several Lines:* A strong recommendation was to concentrate on one line at first and to build an audience. Using pseudonyms and writing for different lines could diffuse sales. It could take longer to be known because of "spreading herself thin." When accomplished at writing for different lines, writing for the editor as well as readership is important. Writing successfully for two lines is "job stability." If making a "crossover," advertise heavily.

3. *Themes:* This references daddy, baby, etc. themes, or story lines that an individual author has built. While repetitive

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Atlanta Conference Reports

(Continued from page 7)

themes sell well for some writers, others prefer to broaden their scope. Exploring keeps some writers fresh. Readers sometimes prefer and are comfortable with same-theme authors. When building a career, keep the focus on traditional romance time periods, saving the untraditional until career peaks.

4. *Covers:* The design of the eye-catching cover is imperative; the size of the title, the author's name and back blurbs are extremely important.

5. *How important are reviews?* Reviews reflect personal tastes, one person's opinion. Reviews do not equate to sales; it is important that the writer remember the previous when s/he is "shot through the heart." Review systems and policies were discussed. One author stated that there are courses on how to review professionally.

6. *Promotion:* Promotion can help in intangible ways, i.e. bringing your work to the attention of other editors, to call attention to career shifts. Grass roots promotion is a successful tool to draw publishers' attention.

7. *Frequency:* At the beginning of a career, it is important to "get as much as possible out there." One interviewed editor of short category stated that 2-3 books a year build careers, while another preferred a remarkable, memorable book.

Frequency, writing continuing good books, and developing editor rapport were the only unanimous agreements in the topics. One interviewed editor stated that when she sees a special talent, she may invite that writer into special projects. To get a new line off to a running start, typically solid authors are initially invited.

A non-official, running survey of the authors attending the session placed their expertise at 20 books or more. I believe that since category is a romance basic, involves a high percentage of authors, and is changing, that this session should be repeated perhaps every three years. If the moderator interviews popular category editors prior to the session, he/she may be able to inform the group of instant, new markets.

— Lois Kleinsasser

The Mainstreaming of Romance

The "mainstreaming of romance" is a topic designed to defy neat conclusions, and discussion during this night owl session was accordingly open and free-ranging. We tossed around perspectives on the term "mainstream" which seemed to fall into two imperfectly intersecting categories: a) the term could refer to a novel/ist that has gained a wide enough audience to hit any (or all) of the bestseller lists; or b) the term could refer to a type of story that has moved outside of a strict genre definition, thereby giving us a distinction between "classic romance" (one that upholds the distinctive and positive values that give the genre its particular glow) and "mainstream romance" where the love story is a strong element but not the only focus of the story.

In the night owl session, it was clear that both "classic romances" and "mainstream (type b) romances" have made the bestseller lists. What was not as clear to us was the degree of audience cross-over. We know that there is a loyal romance-reading audience who wants the romance and nothing but, and we know that there is a general audience who buys by author and who, in increasing numbers, seems to be (literally and figuratively) buying into romance. What we don't know is the process by which the new readers are finding us, and given these evolving audience dynamics, the most interesting and practical question of the session became: In what section of the bookstore do we want our books to be shelved? The loyal readers know to look in the section labeled "romance," but does that label keep out some/many of our potential readers, the ones who are finding and liking the bestselling romances, either "classic" or "mainstream," and are wanting more? Although various suggestions were made, several of the romance authors present who had experienced being shelved in "fiction" were strongly convinced that they wanted their books to be shelved in "romance."

— Julie Tetel Andresen

The Check is in the Mail

The editors insist that it really does take 30 days or longer to process a check, and they finally explained why. The editor must sign a form requesting payment which must then be signed by her boss. The form then goes to the accounting department, which may well be in another city, and must then pass through the hands of several other people for approval before the check can be cut. If any one of these people neglects to sign on the appropriate line, the whole process grinds to a halt, and the mistake will not be caught until the author calls weeks later wondering where her money is. The accounting departments of publishing houses have been notoriously slow because they are always the last to be computerized, the reasoning being why should the publisher spend money on something that will help him pay out money faster? That is changing now, since most companies are finally computerized. However, the process still must be started by humans and human error will continue to be a problem. The editors all agreed that authors should never be shy about calling their editors when they feel a check is late because that is often the only way they discover the problem. Authors also advised getting to know the people who send out the checks so you can contact them directly.

Also, agents explained why they must hold publishers' checks "until they clear." The agents said that their banks will not make the funds available to them for several days at least, so they must wait to write checks to their authors until the bank releases the funds.

— Victoria Thompson

Trusting Your Creative Process

This Night Owl Session wasn't about searching for right or wrong answers; rather, it was a forum for sharing helpful suggestions and ideas. If one unifying theme emerged from the workshop, it was that every writer has to figure out what's best for her- or himself.

The group divided into "head" writers and "heart" writers, with a few schizo folks admitting that they swung both ways. "Head" writers outline their novels completely before they write, and they stick to their outlines. One writer said she maps out her book's chapters, specifying the major points—scenes, insights, whatever—that need to be dealt with in each chapter. Authors mentioned several books that have helped them in this organizational work, among them *The Weekend Novelist*, *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* and *How to Write a Damn Good Novel II*. One author cited a film-making course which offered instruction on story structure that could be successfully applied to fiction writing.

"Heart" writers need organization, too—maybe even more than "head" writers. Many "heart" writers who admitted to outlining (usually for contract reasons) also admitted that they ignored their outlines once they got started on their novels. Writing for them is more an organic and intuitive process. "Heart" authors prefer to let their story move in its own direction on its own power, rather than imposing authorial control on the work. This can be an exciting way to write, but carries obvious risks.

Whether a "head" writer or a "heart" writer, virtually everyone in the room relied on various strategies to keep the juices flowing during sluggish periods. Among the more useful ones:

- * *Keep a calendar* or log of your daily output. Several writers said that having to write down in a calendar how many pages they produced that day forces them to produce the pages. A similar technique involves setting a specific word-count goal when you sit down in the morning, and not allowing yourself to leave your desk until that quota has been reached.

- * *Use deadlines as a motivator.* If you have a distant deadline and want to get a book done ahead of time, invent an artificial deadline. (E.g., "" have to finish chapter three before the Novelists, Inc. conference.")

- * *Change the colors* on your monitor, or use different colors of paper for your hard copy.

- * *If you are restless* and simply can't seem to stay in your chair, set a timer for, say, forty-five minutes. Remain at your computer until the timer rings. You may then get up for a while, but after a short break you must set the timer for another forty-five minutes and get back to your desk. (Knowing you'll be allowed to get up after forty-five minutes may help you to keep your butt planted in your chair for those forty-five minutes.)

- * *Schedule at least one* out-of-the-house errand a day. This will help you remember you're a human being, living a real life in the real world.

- * *If one scene isn't working*, leave it and write another scene. No law says you have to write a book in chronological order. If you jump around, you may not complete the scene you're struggling with, but you won't have wasted a day accomplishing nothing.

- * *If you're stuck*, try to figure out why. It may be something in your book that is fixable. (E.g., a character trait you established early in the book is now causing problems.) Or it may be something totally divorced from your book. (E.g., you're worried about that funny rattle coming from your car's engine.) Once you know what's causing the problem, you'll be better able to deal with it.

- * *Write a "fun" book* on the side. Allot some time every day for a writing project you're doing only for your own satisfaction and not to fulfill a contract.

- * *End your day's writing in the middle* of a chapter or scene. This way you can jump-start the next day's writing by reading what you wrote the day before and then moving forward. It's easier than starting from scratch each day.

- * *Give yourself permission* to screw up. If you've spent an entire day spinning your wheels, writing garbage or not writing at all, let it go. Shrug it off. You'll do better tomorrow.

— Barbara Keiler

Agent Discussion

The agent discussion amid Novelists, Inc. members centered around perennial questions authors have about the folks they pay to sell their work. Many remembered the not-so-distant past when almost all agents charged a ten percent commission. Some recalled the days when series romance houses paid five percent on book club sales, rather than the current standard two percent; at the time, very few agents stepped forward to contest the change.

Some NINC members are asking, "What are we getting for giving agents a bigger share of authors' earnings?" Are we getting better service, better terms, better money?

Members also debated the nature of the author/agent/publisher relationship. Anyone will tell you that the author is the employer, but the fact that the money comes from the publishers takes some discretionary power away from the author.

Writers generally agreed that it's a mistake to expect an agent to be all things. The author/agent relationship varies widely among NINC members and their agents. Most agents were flexible in their roles; most seemed amenable to payments being split by the publisher; almost all would accept modifications in the agency contract. Authors need to learn what questions to ask and what contract terms to require in order to govern their relationship with an agent.

NINC members expressed concern that agents do not have a system in place for policing themselves. The session concluded with a discussion of the protocol of hiring, firing, and changing agents.

— Susan Wiggs

Remember!

Renewal notices went out in November.
Don't forget to pay your dues!

INTERVIEW with the editor

By ANN La FARGE

As One Dinosaur Said to the Other...

Senior Editor Patrick LoBrutto and I were the first to get to the office. Before the phones started to ring, before the guy from the mailroom could pile ten more jiffy bags on our desks, before the Publicity Department could stop by to ask for “just a little more information on that author,” we’d decided to have a peaceful interview, Pat LoBrutto and I. But first....

“About those proposals I asked you to read,” he said, slinging himself into my guest chair and tapping his pencil against his copy of the proposal. “You like ‘em?”

“One of them,” I replied (no need to bother with the amenities, stuff like “Good morning”).

“The first, of course?” Pat asked.

“The second.”

“That one? I hated it.”

“I hated the first.”

“But nothing happened in the second.”

“Too much happened in the first.”

“How can too much...”

“Let’s get a third reading,” I suggested. “Let’s see...”

“How about X...”

“How about Y?”

We settled on Z.

Typical. Pat and I agreed, once again, to disagree. And as a footnote to that conversation, Editor Z couldn’t decide which one she liked best, so she decided she didn’t like either one. Of such is the kingdom of fiction.

“So,” I began, settling back and tapping my own pencil against a blank sheet of paper. “How did it all begin?”

PAT: Slowly. After college, I went on to grad school at Hunter. In urban planning.

ANN: A useful trade. But...

PAT: But I got a job in the mailroom at Ace Books for the summer, and sort of...stayed on. They started letting me do proofreading, and I was good at that.

ANN: And then?

PAT: (sigh) I worked for the Urban Planning Board. My boss, a man of about forty, had a completely empty desk, a completely empty head, and a briefcase with nothing in it but his lunch. He couldn’t wait to retire. He didn’t seem to notice that he already had.

ANN: Meanwhile, you’re still proofreading on the side?

PT: It got better. They began giving me manuscripts to read, freelance. Getting paid to read! I read science fiction and fantasy for Ace—then Gothics, too. Midstream, I switched my major to the history of American religion. I studied revivalism, I read about all youse Protestants. It was like science fiction and fantasy.

ANN: Gee, thanks. So, you’re out of grad school. You need a job. What does a feller do with a degree in revivalism?

PAT: Survives it, somehow. You never know when it

might come in handy. No, I took my first real job in publishing as Evelyn Grippo’s assistant at Ace. She invented Gothics, you know.

ANN: I thought Charlotte Brontë did. Who were some of this lady’s authors?

PAT: Susan Howatch, Dorothy Eden. But I didn’t confine myself to Gothics. I edited puzzle books, nurse romances, more sci-fi, Westerns. And I alphabetized the library.

ANN: A wise move. So now you’re getting to be a hotshot? We’re in what, 1971?

PAT: ’72. A real editor. And I stayed there till 1977.

ANN: That was the heyday of science fiction, wasn’t it? How has the genre changed over the years?

PAT: It got status. Science fiction books began to appear on bestseller lists. Grownups were reading it, not just kids. Science fiction was becoming more science than fiction. We had men on the moon. The audience was growing up, and they stuck with the genre. Better writers came along. And, as the world we live in began to fall apart, the rules we grew up with went out the porthole. The world of the supernatural seemed...more normal. Safer.

ANN: Give me an example.

PAT: The movie of “The Omen,” where the Devil goes to Washington, DC. Milt Kamen asked, in his review, “What could the Devil do in Washington that hasn’t already been done there?”

ANN: I wonder what he’d say today.

PAT: Remember what Mark Twain said? “Man did not evolve from the apes; that’s the direction in which he’s headed.” I think of that often.

ANN: Let’s not get sidetracked. What did you do after 1977?

PAT: I went to Doubleday to edit science fiction. Stayed there till ’89. I also edited Westerns

ANN: So you went from paperback to hardcover publishing. What was the biggest change?

PAT: (leaning back and assuming a reflective pose) I could do the books I wanted to do. Doubleday Science Fiction and Westerns sold to libraries—pre-sold, that is, with no returns—so there was no need to worry about numbers, about the market. The books were pre-sold to a subscription list. It worked.

ANN: Who were some of your authors?

PAT: Bradbury, Asimov, Walter Tevis. Elmer Kelton—he’s the best writer of Westerns in the U.S.

ANN: Better than Louis L’Amour?

PAT: Pishtush. Elmer is by far the better writer. Elmer himself pointed out that all Louis L’Amour’s heroes are 6’2” and capable; Elmer’s were 5’7” and nervous.

ANN: That’s the only distinction?

PAT: No, and here’s the big one: Louis L’Amour wrote about the mythic West. Elmer writes about the *real* West. His

The Time It Never Rained is the best Western ever written.

ANN: Then why...

PAT: Listen to the last line of that book: "He turned his back on everything he had lost and they walked together through the cold rain."

ANN: Oh. Now I see. Perfectly. Well...Then what?

PAT: I left in 1989 and started to freelance, writing and editing. I worked in advertising. I worked at K-Mart, in the sporting goods department, selling guns.

ANN: Guns?

PAT: And I wrote. I wrote Westerns, poetry, fantasy, adult Westerns. Under a pseudonym of course.

ANN: I should hope so. I suppose you call those Mythic Westerns with Sex? Tell me, what *is* the appeal of that genre? Is it like women reading bodice rippers?

PAT: Not really. Sex and violence can never be as popular as love and...stability.

ANN: We'll let that one pass. Were you happy as a freelancer?

PAT: Yes, but it was an unstable life. I hated advertising, though that was where the dough was. They think they're one of the arts. But they're not.

ANN: No kidding. So what did you do then? Jobs were not easy to get in the late eighties.

PAT: I worked as a consultant for M. Evans—bought all their Westerns, won a Spur Award for them every year...

ANN: And then Zebra got lucky. You joined us. How do you like it here?

PAT: I love the fact that it's non-corporate. It's like a family. A bit dysfunctional, perhaps, like all families, but we're all like brothers and sisters. Step-brothers and sisters, maybe. Good family.

ANN: So, bro, if you owned Zebra—I guess we have to say if you owned Kensington Publishing—how would you change things?

PAT: I'd publish fewer romance, more cutting edge fiction. More mainstream stuff. More special sales books. And I'd work on cost-cutting strategies through computerization, find new ways of taking chances, on distribution. I feel that category publishing is in real danger. Categories—horror, western, romance—are having a harder and harder time holding onto their rack space. Booksellers only want to sell the big names.

ANN: What about the readers? Don't they want to continue reading their favorites?

PAT: Ah, the readers. Do we care? We talk about the buyers, we talk about the accounts, we talk about the chains. How often do we talk about the readers? What we need to do—I don't mean "we publishing," I mean "we *people*"—is to educate readers to choose books more carefully. Not to follow the herd.

ANN: How?

PAT: Exposure. Somehow, kids have to learn early to want to reap benefits from work rather than from bread and circuses.

ANN: Is there hope that that will happen?

PAT: Do you want to live without art...or hope?

ANN: Nope. But what advice do you give a writer today in order to accomplish this goal?

PAT: Write what you want to read.

ANN: And what if that writer's rejoinder is "But will it sell?"

PAT: (after a long and thoughtful pause) Anybody who writes just for money is a bigger *putz* than I am.

ANN: An unpopular sentiment, I'm afraid. Someone else said that recently, but using a different word than "putz"...

PAT: You did, in case you've forgotten. Look, money's nice, acceptance is nice, fame is nice, but the place where real writing comes from doesn't have anything to do with money. You know that. I know that.

ANN: Is that why they call us dinosaurs?

PAT: 'Fraid so. But there are worse things.

ANN: Whether or not you survive that subversive attitude for a few more years...where do you want to end up?

PAT: That's easy. In Siena. Being a professional writer.

I jotted that down, then closed my eyes for a moment and remembered what Siena looked like. Pink roofs. A sky so blue it hurt. Cobblestones. A wonderful place to write. "Good luck, brother," I said. "You'll need it."

I looked up to find editor Z standing in the doorway. "I sort of changed my mind," she said. "I read those proposals again and I like..."

"The first?" Pat asked, standing and moving toward the door.

"Actually, the second," she said, looking from one of us to the other. "But you know far more than I..."

"Do we?" we asked in unison.

"Well, you've been around so long..."

Pat and I looked at each other. "What noise did a dinosaur make?" I asked. "Woof...meow...moo...baaa."

"Pishtush," Pat said.

"Pishtush," we echoed. And as Editor Z dropped the proposal on the desk and left the room, Patrick LoBrutto winked at me and I winked back.

Plus ça change, dearies, plus c'est la même chose. **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

Nancy Cohen, Plantation FL

Diana Fox, Cairo GA

Kate Freiman, Toronto, Ont.

Lori Handeland, Theinsville WI

Arlene S. Hodapp, Pawpaw MI

Sharry C. Michels, Lloydminster, Sask.

Patricia Wynn Ricks, Austin TX

Deb Stover, Colorado Springs CO

New Members

Jaclyn Reding, Chandler AZ

***NINK* Notes**

Research Tips Needed

Victoria Thompson is putting together an article on research to which she'd like you to contribute. Send your favorite tips, shortcuts, sources, books, services, etc., to her at 653 56th Street, Altoona PA 16602, or fax to (814) 946-4744. Phone (814) 942-2268. She needs the materials by February 15. Thanks for your help.

Member Participation Opportunity

Do you have a terrific idea for a newspaper article? Better yet, would you like to write it? We want to print what interests you. Lead articles will be about 2,000 words long (8

doublespaced pages) this year, and second articles will be half to three quarters that length.

If you want to help out, send your ideas to Claire Bocardo, 3312 Sherrye Dr., Plano TX 75074-4671 or call her at (214) 423-4350. Fax messages to the same number.

Thanks!

CB

For a one-year subscription to *Novelists' INK*, send your request and \$50.00 to Novelists, Inc., P.O. Box 1166, Mission KS 66222-1166.

For membership information and application, send your request to the P.O. Box.

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.

Backus, Carol w/a Suzanne Barclay: *Lion's Heart*, Harlequin
Historicals

Beaver, Beverly w/a Beverly Barton: *The Outcast*, Silhouette
Intimate Moments Romantic Traditions

Cameron, Stella: *Pure Delights*, Zebra

Campbell, Marilyn: *Pretty Maids in a Row* (mass market edition),
Onyx

Chekani, Loretta: *Lord of Scoundrels*, Avon Romantic Treasure

Crane, Karen w/a Karen Toller Whittenburg: *Nanny Angel*,
Harlequin American

Crenshaw, Nadine: *Viking Gold*, Zebra

Eagle, Kathleen: *Reason to Believe*, Avon Books

Eberhardt, Anna w/a Tiffany White, *Sleepless in St. Louis*,
Harlequin My Valentine anthology

Evans, Patricia Gardner: *Flashpoint*, Silhouette By Request
Stranded! (reissue)

Johnson, Janice Kay: *Her Sister's Baby*, Harlequin Superromance

Landis, Jill Marie: *After All*, Berkley/Jove

Lind, Judi: *Veil of Fear*, Harlequin Intrigue

Macias, Susan w/a Susan Mallery: *The Best Bride*, Silhouette
Special Edition

Matlock, Curtiss Ann: *White Gold*, Harlequin Historical

Muelhbauser, Pam w/a Pamela Bauer: *Mr. Romance*, Harlequin My
Valentine anthology

Riker, Leigh: *Oh, Susannah*, HarperMonogram

Ross, JoAnn: *Legacy of Lies*, MIRA Books

Ross, JoAnn: *Duskfire*, MIRA Books (reissue)

Scott, Theresa: *Hunters of the Ice Age: Broken Promises*,
Leisure

Small, Lass: *A Nuisance*, Silhouette Desire Man of the Month

Thompson, Victoria: *Winds of Fortune* Zebra

Witmer-Gow, Karyn w/a Elizabeth Grayson: *Bride of the
Wilderness*, Berkley Books

Zirkelbach, Thelma w/a Lorna Michaels: *The Reluctant Hunk*,
Harlequin Temptation

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