
Novelists' Ink

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

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Online

By **PATRICIA GARDNER EVANS**

Verily, I say unto you, sisters and brothers, if you're not online, you're on ice. If you're offline, you're out of line, out of luck, and soon out of print. Heed the gospels of GENie, AOL, Prodigy, and Delphi. Join the mighty congregation of Internet....

Those who do not exist in the firmament of cyberspace often find the proselytizing of those who do annoying. Sending a fax—faster, cheaper, and safer than e-mail—to a cybersavant and receiving a phone message back with the slight sneer of superiority and contemptuousness common to the newly converted, recommending that one get online to keep in quicker (?) touch, does not engender goodwill. Still, the most devout cyberphobes wonder from time to time if they aren't still wandering in the wilderness while everyone else has reached the promised land.

They haven't. An informal poll indicates that less than 25% of Novelists, Inc. members subscribe to a computer network, but that doesn't mean that those preaching the worth of going online are false prophets. At least 20 million Americans are cruising the Internet, with 300,000 more pulling onto this superhighway of superhighways every month. Five million more subscribe to just the big three of U.S. commercial online services networks alone.

In This Issue

PRESIDENT's Column	2
LETTERS to the Editor	4
Denver 1995 NINC Conference Preview	9
EAST of the Hudson	10

For membership & subscription
information, see page 3

That many millions can't be going in the wrong direction, can they?

No, but their direction may not be yours. Some healthy agnosticism is an advantage in determining whether it is or isn't, because, just as there are supposedly no atheists in foxholes, people seem to become true believers the first time they log on, losing objectivity. One NINC member cited as a benefit of online service the anthology she planned with other members which later sold to a publisher and a party organized for booksellers and distributors. In 1989, three NINC members planned and sold an anthology without the benefit of a computer network, and regional writing organizations have been organizing booksellers' parties by phone and "snail mail"—the U.S. Postal Service—for years. Obviously, being online made planning easier, but, just as obviously, that isn't enough to justify the expense.

So what does? E-mail is the most ubiquitous use. The ability to send letters, memos, or just short notes electronically saves days of time and frequently even money over snail mail and standard postage. Between faxing and e-mailing, the U.S. Postal Service estimates the volume of mail it handled last year was down by two billion pieces. Authors e-mail agents or editors asking them to call at their convenience, thus assuring that 1) the agent or editor has the necessary time to cover whatever the author wants to discuss and 2) the author doesn't pay for the call. Authors write back and forth to each other and family, a true "friends and family" network.

Letters, etc., can easily be downloaded and saved just like regular letters, forecasting the day when bundles of old love letters will be found on yellowing computer paper printed in Times New Roman. A side benefit of e-mail is the return of the art of letter writing as people now spend time offline crafting what they will send online instead of just picking up the phone and saying whatever comes into their heads. Even the revival of an old art form is not enough, though, to warrant online service since faxes serve the same purpose as

(continued on page 6)

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PRESIDENT's Column

Looking Toward The Long Run

I love being president of Novelists, Inc., although I continue to suspect that my election is part of an elaborate gag. Why on earth would anyone want me to be president? I can only assume that the Nominating Committee cruised through the Atlanta convention threatening to club people over the head unless they went along with the joke.

Still, it's an honor, and I'm going to try to do the best I can with it. Thus far, I've attempted to identify the issues that matter and to marshal the forces necessary to address them. Realistically, NINC is probably not going to bring the publishing industry to its knees in the next twelve months. We should not let that stop us, however, from doing what we can to improve the situation of professional writers. To that end, I'm delighted to announce that Debby Camp (possibly the first professional writer I ever met) has agreed to chair the Advocacy Committee. Phoebe Conn has agreed to serve on the committee, and others have offered to help out as time permits. With these people at the helm, I know some important work will be done.

Of course, addressing issues and inequities is not the sole purpose of this organization. NINC should also offer aid and assistance in a more immediate manner, and one of the principal ways NINC does this is via the newsletter. I have repeatedly obtained sound business advice directly relevant to my career from the NINC newsletter, and I hope the same is true for you, too. I'm a member of a lot of writer organizations, and in all honesty, NINC has the best newsletter in the biz, hands down.

Maintaining that level of excellence is not easy. Our newsletter

editor is a member and a volunteer, and the articles are all written by members or people who have been cajoled into writing by members. In short, the newsletter is only as good as the members contributing to it. If you have an idea for an article, or better yet, are willing to write an article, please contact the editor. We want to hear from you.

By the way, every submission does not have to be feature-length. There are shorter pieces we would be equally eager to receive. For instance, if you've got a good "war story," an extraordinary effort or unusual event in your publishing life, send it in. If you have a novel marketing or promotional idea that worked for you, send it in. If there is a writer-related issue you think is important but you haven't seen addressed, send a letter to the editor. Your submissions will be very welcome and much appreciated. After all, the greatest asset we have is each other.

Moving on...

Does it sometimes seem like you spend more time being a writer than you spend writing? Just thought I'd ask. Perhaps I'm ruminating in this manner because I'm in the throes of a new book, with all the attendant foofmferall, but it seems to me this "being a writer" jazz gets bigger and bigger each year. You know what I mean—travel, speaking gigs, book-signings, interviews, answering correspondence—and on and on and on. Mind you, I enjoy most of this stuff, but it takes a lot of time away from writing, and let's face it, the writing is what got us here. It's the work that we do, and the words we leave behind, that are of paramount importance. It has to be that way.

This, of course, is the difficulty of

getting people to volunteer for NINC, to write articles and serve on committees and such. Every one of us is facing a deadline, probably sooner than we would like. Every one of us has a personal life that has a nasty tendency to interfere with our writing. Maybe even a day job. Sometimes you feel as if you're being pulled in so many different directions you've become three different persons. At least.

Believe me, I understand the schizophrenia. Interviewers always ask how I can juggle a full-time law practice and being a writer. I smile and say that's easy; what's hard is being a lawyer, a writer, and a daddy. And that's true, and many of you know it. Toss in a few community commitments and a writer organization or two and you have an impossibly complicated life. Why do it?

Here's why: Because we're all in this together. As I said before, our greatest asset is one another. And each of us stands on the shoulders of those writers who came before us. If a writer makes a difference, then each writer thereafter stands a little taller.

If we are to make any advances on the issues that are important to us—uniform royalty statements, unsigned reviews, used-book stores, standardized contracts, electronic rights, and a host of others—it will be as a result of a concerted effort by a group, not an individual. No individual writer has the power—not Stephen King, not Michael Crichton, nobody. Only a group can do it. Only an organized committed group with a lot of clout.

Such efforts may take you away from your word processor for a little while. But we have to make the effort. We have to try. We have to look toward the long run, and in the long run, this will be to everyone's benefit.

Well, enough soapboxing. You get the idea, and I'm not telling you anything you don't already know.

One last thought...

Throughout 1994, Evan Maxwell and Marianne Shock represented NINC in the negotiations with the Authors Coalition, the organization that was formed to distribute funds received from foreign countries attributable to the photocopying of works by American authors. Evan and Marianne did more than just "represent" us; they actively and effectively pushed through positions that greatly benefitted NINC. We are now beginning to see the fruits of their labors. NINC has already received over eight thousand dollars from the Authors Coalition, and we expect that to rise to over twelve thousand in the next few months.

The question is: What do we do with the money?

To obtain a copy of the full minutes of the Board of Directors' meeting, send \$2 plus SASE to the P.O. Box. For an updated copy of the Bylaws, send \$2 plus SASE. For a copy of the Treasurer's Report, Send \$1 plus SASE to the P.O. Box.

Unquestionably, the money must be used to the benefit of our members—the writers who generated the income in the first place. But how? At our last meeting, the Board of Directors discussed possible uses for the money, but I'd like to hear from you. How would you like to see these funds used? How do you think we can best benefit the membership? How can we use these dollars to do the most for our writers? You're a creative bunch of people; I'll bet you can come up with some wonderful suggestions that have never occurred to us. So send them in, okay? Let us hear from you.

Well, I think that's enough for now. If I've struck a chord, or if there's an issue you'd like to see addressed in these pages, give me a call or drop me a line.

See you next month.

— William Bernhardt

Harlequin has established a frequent reader program designed to maintain high visibility for authors' books and increase retail sales. The program, called *Pages & Privileges*, will reward retail buyers of Harlequin/Silhouette books with hotel discounts, discount travel services, gifts, and a newsletter offering sneak previews of upcoming books. Presently scheduled to last a year, the campaign will be backed up by cover flashes and inserts in May books, along with promotional print and television advertising.

Anyone who has experience with media tie-in novels (*Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Quantum Leap*, etc.) or novelization of movie scripts and would be willing to contribute to an article on the topics, please contact Patty Gardner Evans, 14201 Skyline Rd. NE, Albuquerque NM 87123-2335. FAX: 505-296-9139

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.

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 Appreciates Board Responsiveness

Thanks to Vicki Thompson and the Board for taking this member's complaints (my January 1995 letter in *Novelists' Ink*) seriously enough to investigate the matter and make a report in the February issue of NINK.

— Laura Resnick

Writers' Quirks = Control

"Marching to Our Own Drums" in the February issue was a delightful and light-hearted article. But I think there's something deeper going on with writers (and especially romance writers) than just our odd little quirks.

Through the years, I've noted with surprise how many of the romance writers I've met have stories of dysfunctional childhoods, physical and sexual abuse, alcoholism, and/or abusive marriages, etc. It might be interesting to take an anonymous survey of our members to see if the incidence of such problems is above the norm of the population as a whole.

My sister is a professional actress. (We call ourselves the Collins sisters from Massachusetts!) Her husband is a psychiatrist. We've discussed this issue often through the years, with an eye to understanding what led us to our careers.

Our father was an unpredictable, controlling man, filled with terrifying rages. There was no physical abuse in our household, but the emotional toll was devastating. Our much-loved mother was totally dominated. Our only brother has spent most of his life in mental hospitals. It took us many years of introspection to escape the chains of the past.

In discussing our careers (come to late in life), we realized that we're both satisfying the same inner needs through our work. Totally helpless, and at the whims of one man during childhood, we're both obsessive list-makers and planners. We've chosen careers that give us *total control* over our own little spheres, subject less to the vagaries of "bosses" than many professions. We create our own fictional worlds, manipulate them, control them. (And yet, conversely, we're used to difficulties, and have managed our "outside" lives with more equanimity than many. We roll with the punches.)

There's another thing going on in what we do. We're

satisfying that much-discussed "inner child." We are recreating life as it should be, as we longed for it as children. We're providing happy endings—or at least neat closure to complex situations. We're exploring normal, caring relationships. We're drawing moral conclusions—the bad guys get theirs, the good guys triumph. It may not be reality, as we've known it. But it's unconsciously satisfying, and helps to lay the old ghosts to rest.

I'd be interested to see how many other writers out there share our views.

— Sylvia Baumgarten
(w/a Lousia Rawlings & Sylvia Halliday)

Changing NINC Traditions Lamented

To Teresa Medeiros's letter in the February 1995 issue of NINK, may I add the following? Rousing cheers and much loud and vulgar whistling and stamping of the feet. Right on, sister! You put into words many of my own thoughts and did it better than I ever could!

When I first joined NINC, I was thrilled that such an organization had finally come into being. As a member of that much-maligned genre, *romance*, I thought that it was high time that we had our own *professional* organization, an organization which would deal primarily with the many specific problems and general difficulties that romance writers face every day. To my dismay, with every year that goes by, NINC changes, distancing itself more and more from its frankly *romance* roots...and every year I question whether I still want to belong to NINC.

Besides actively recruiting members outside of the *romance* genre, some of the most obvious changes, to my eye, have been in the monthly newsletter. For many of us, I suspect the newsletter is NINC. Am I alone, or does anybody else miss the private pages, the Devil's Advocate, and This Worked for Me? Sending the newsletter to all and sundry may have spread the cost around a little bit, but personally, I'd be willing to pay more and have it private once again. Er, as private as possible—there will always be those who cannot keep their mouths shut. Unfortunately.

NINC is justifiably proud of its low attrition rate, but I wonder how many members are like myself, not exactly overjoyed with the direction the organization is going, and feeling as if they had been the victim of a bait and switch scheme? I feel I joined one organization and now find myself belonging to another. That low attrition rate might very well change as more and more of us leave, looking for an organization with many of NINC's wonderful qualities (and NINC *does* have many great things going for it), but an organization which is geared more to their specific needs—romance!

— Shirlee Busbee

On Increasing NINC Membership

I've read the letters/comments pushing for more diversified membership, worrying about the weight of so many romance authors limiting our perspective, etc. To cut to the chase, though, we all seem to agree that we need

LETTERS to the Editor

to grow/add more members.

I'm the writing host on PT—People Together—which is one of the computer BBs out there. On our particular board, the group is *not* separated by genre, so we have writers sharing info from all fields. Although our BB may be unique that way, I'd guess many NINC members have access to computer networks.

If you'd print a small blurb about NINC—the cost, the requirements for membership, address, maybe a short policy statement about NINC's goals—I'd be glad to post it on PT. (And would guess that others would volunteer to post on their networks.) Yes, I know who we are—I've been a member almost from the start!—but I don't have this info written down anywhere, just have no reason to. If there were a short blurb posted regularly, it would be easy for people to copy it and pass the word through Internet and the BBs.

— Alison Hart

Charter SF/F Member Urges Diversity

With all best wishes, sister, here's how it looks from my viewpoint: NINC and its officers didn't mean any denigration of females or romance writers when they urged broadening our base of support. They've tried to make us as varied a group as possible since the beginning, that's why they encouraged me—a writer of SF/F—to become a charter member, and why I'm able to write this letter.

According to *PW*, romance is about half the novels sold, but that leaves the rest. A lot of which is written by males. (Of course, a lot isn't.) A glance in the directory shows that at least 95% of our members are female, and at least 90% are romance writers. To become a group representing "writers of popular fiction" we have to continue and strengthen the search for other genre (and gender) writers our leaders have wanted from the beginning.

Like it or not, facts, as they say, is facts. Powerful fact: the bigger your numbers, the bigger your clout. The broader based your group, the stronger your clout. Finally and most important, two-gender groups have more clout than one-gender groups of either gender.

Ergo, the more (and the more different) the merrier. (As Tiny Tim says, God bless us, every one!)

Besides, the breechclout boyos can teach us some lessons in the rules of warfare. They wrote them, after all.

One: Don't attack your own side. (If you think they're straying, gently bring them back in line.)

Two: Don't attack potential allies from the other side.

I have been trashed by experts. They don't come more MCP than engineers and scientists, especially engineers and scientists back in the dark ages, when femlib was just beginning. I was there, helping breech those sacred precincts. (FYI, my degree is in physics, my experience in nuclear physics.) Ain't fun. But you sure learn the hard

way about denigration and attacks.

And what isn't meant to hurt. Nobody here in NINC but us, and we ain't the enemy.

This scarred survivor of the gender wars has one final piece of advice: Save your ammo for the real barricades, and don't waste it on your allies.

Possible dreams.

— Marj Krueger

Best-Seller Lists Valuable

Our single title authors owe a big "thank you" to JoAnn Ross for agreeing to coordinate a monthly list of members who appear on regional best-seller lists. For any of you who might have missed the announcements, JoAnn has asked members who have access to newspaper best-seller lists that function independently of the *Publishers Weekly* or *New York Times* lists to watch for the appearance of books by NINC members.

This is important! Life does exist outside New York City. During the past year, I notified a fellow NINC member of her appearance on the prestigious *Chicago Tribune* list. She let her publishing house know and was able to generate a great deal of in-house excitement as well as effect a change in the house's publishing plan for her.

Please. Let's be each other's eyes and ears. If your newspaper carries an independent best-seller list, watch for appearances by fellow NINC members and then FAX JoAnn with the information at 602-863-6812 or E-mail her at JoAnnRoss@aol.com.

Thanks again, JoAnn, for performing this valuable service.

— Susan Elizabeth Phillips

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 NINC issue, these authors shall be accepted as members of NINC:

New Applicants

Patricia A. McCandless, St. Louis MO

Susan M. Anderson, Smethport PA

New Members

JoAnn A. Grote, Winston-Salem NC

Online

(Continued from page 1)

individual e-mail and don't require anything beyond a less-than-\$300 machine or \$100 computer add-on.

Most NINC members are using online services for far more than e-mail. Even those who must pay long-distance access charges utilize the bulletin board sections that include the forums and discussions organized around a specific topic. Especially popular are published author roundtables and "chats," the new-style telephone party lines, as JoAnn Ross calls them.

Those who have local access nodes for their particular service do far more. Alison Hart's usage is representative of most writers: in addition to e-mail and discussion with other writers, she takes advantage of extensive research facilities, follows industry and market news and book discussions. Hart monitors a "readers board" that gives direct access to readers—no writers—and finds that hearing their likes and dislikes in books is invaluable. She also values direct access to professionals in whatever subject she is researching, people across the country whose brains she wouldn't be able to pick any other way.

Some writers do significant self-promotion online. Susan Wiggs and several others even use their GENie Romance Exchange network of writers to produce an offline quarterly, featuring their upcoming books and author profiles, that is sent to distributors and bookstores. This offline project makes sense since only a small percentage of booksellers and distributors are online.

So many other services are offered online, with more added every day, that no one can catalog all of them, but several mentioned were booking airline tickets, finding out the current news from AP, checking to see how your stock portfolio is doing and where to invest that next huge royalty check (pause for general laughter), and job listings for your grown kids—especially if they're still living at home.

So how do you enter the pearly gates of this online Eden—and, more important, what is the price of admission?

In the beginning...

Many members first went online with Prodigy several years ago when it was one of the earliest and largest commercial computer networks. Prodigy is still one of the big three with over a million subscribers; but most of the NINC members who started with it have moved on, largely because of price increases. Another criticism is that while censorship policies prohibited open discussions, the set-up of the network isolated writers by genre and "bashers" were free to roam the board. Hecklers were frequent on the romance topics.

Prodigy is one of the easiest for new users to access, but it is excessively time-consuming to download anything and to move around from one area to another—time you

pay for. As of the end of December (date of all rates quoted for all online services), basic service was \$9.95/month for five hours of online time, \$2.95/each additional hour, "premium" services extra. For \$14.95/month, some premium fees are waived.

CompuServe is another of the big three with about 1.5 to 2 million members. NINC members report that they use CompuServe more for business: i.e., mutual fund and stock information, weather, the Dialog research feature. The Independent Writer section of the Work Forum on the bulletin board side is a favorite, however. CompuServe is not considered difficult to access or navigate, and it has almost twice as many things to do online as the other services, but it can get expensive since many of the most interesting are not included in the basic charge. One plan of \$8.95/month gives unlimited connect time to basic services, with surcharge costs based on the speed of your fax/modem, which is a nicety; slower modems increase the time it takes to download and access, so those under 9600 baud pay \$4.80/hour, those above \$9.60/hour. An alternate plan costs \$2.50/month, but hourly fees of \$12.80/hour or \$22.80/hour apply, plus surcharges for premium services.

The third member of the big three is America Online, a network that is becoming more popular every day with NINC members. Others concurred with Deb Siegenthal's opinion that AOL is the most user-friendly, with little or no instruction needed to start finding what you want. To make it even easier is a feature "members helping members." This is a bulletin board in the free area—an area in which you can spend as much time as you want without charge—where anyone can ask questions about the network and how to compose mail offline, download shareware (free or low-cost software), etc. and get answers. The tech people, says JoAnn Ross, are "wonderfully patient and never make you feel like an idiot when you call for help."

Members use the financial services, order catalogs from K-Mart and other retailers, and check out the White House press briefings, along with participating in chats, giving writers' workshops, and using the message boards. One writer issues a welcome to new writer-subscribers that illustrates the general tone of the published writer group, describing them as "hand-holders, joke-tellers, arbiters of the correct way to hang toilet paper," not interested in arguing abortion or gays in the military, nor in discussing writers or writers groups other than to give support or information, and definitely not interested in bringing up anything controversial just to see how high others will jump—in other words, fun and relaxation.

Not everyone is happy with this arrangement. Several times when she tried to bring up a serious issue, one member got a gentle handslap. Private message boards would allow for more serious discussion, and the lack of

them is another criticism of AOL. To talk with published writers only, one now has to scroll through reams of names on the e-mail list to get to the message, and posting a message for only certain people is similarly time-consuming and unwieldy. Another problem is that it can be difficult to sign on during peak-use hours. Costs are \$8.95/month for five hours of online time, \$2.95/each additional hour.

The greatest number of NINC members is on GENie. The general research, business, financial, etc. services and electronic shopping malls offered on other networks are offered on GENie, but the attraction is the strong writer base. Writers' forums exist for poetry, westerns, magazines, erotica, Young Adult, to name a few. Science fiction writers have several, and romance/women's fiction writers have a romance exchange—RomEx—with approximately 600 passersby and active participants. In addition to roundtables, workshops, and open discussions, RomEx offers private conference "rooms" with access limited to designated participants for truly private conversations, collaborations, critiques, etc.

As fervent as its disciples are, however, GENie has equally fervent unbelievers, all former subscribers. Some of the dissatisfaction centers around computer networks' own particular brand of hellfire known as "flaming." Flaming encompasses obnoxious behavior from initiating arguments just to stir up trouble to insults and harassment, generally aimed at those of differing opinions. "I'm not into flame wars," one former GENie author said of her experience on the science fiction forums where flaming is reputedly heaviest. Flaming, at least milder kinds, is subjective, though; what may be one person's incendiary argument is another's "live chat."

Other poor fits between writer and network cited were the incestuousness that can occur when a forum is limited to only one genre, the pressure to join causes or windmill tilt, the seeming concentration of control of discussion and opinion by a handful of writers, and too much self-promotion. The network is not considered user-friendly by many, and there is general dissatisfaction with GENie's complex pricing system and sometimes sloppy book-keeping—always in the company's favor. The basic charge is \$9.95/month with two hours of free basic time, \$3/each additional non-prime hour, \$9.50/hour from 8 a.m.-6 p.m. weekdays and \$6/hour for faster modems. One can earn free time for doing a workshop, and GENie charges by the second, not the minute, a savings.

A bigger problem looms for GENie users, though. Because of a drop in subscribership from 400,000 in 1993 to less than half that in 1994, GENie management is seriously considering breaking the network up into smaller separate services that would focus on games, e-mail, and private online service for companies and organizations. AT&T, which is soon to enter the online competition, may buy up some of GENie's networks. Bill Gates is also getting ready to launch a Microsoft online network, and, given his penchant for monopolies, GENie may not be the only one losing subscribers soon.

Two other networks rate mention. One member

reported that Delphi, a medium-sized network, has a fairly strong coterie of writers. It is comparably priced and, while it isn't considered user-friendly or easy for beginners to navigate, it offers the major advantage of greater Internet access. People Together is a very small network that doesn't offer much beyond writer and reader forums and basic services, but those wanting a congenial, supportive group made up of writers from variety of genres and fields will feel very much at home here. Pricing is in line with reduced services.

Last, for purposes of this article, but probably *most*, not least, is the Internet. Begun decades ago as a network primarily for scientists, it has gone global and everyman. Access is generally gained through one of the other online networks, and Delphi is the only major one offering near-complete access. The others offer gateways to the most popular features, such as e-mail and discussion groups. The "free" tag often associated with Internet is a misnomer. Some services are free, like e-mail, but discussion groups can range from \$6 to \$9.60/hour. Internet has 20 million users and, as Jo Beverly says, "everything is there somewhere," including a place to discuss your last alien abduction with fellow abductees around the world.

The research access to libraries, data banks, and experts in just about anything is past human comprehension. Imagine perusing the Smithsonian's photo archive, checking out the entire Library of Congress card catalog, finding out the current temperature in Casablanca, or taking in the new post-modernist exhibit at the Louvre. You can do this—provided you have a wide-open gateway into the Internet. The one receiving the most hype right now is the World Wide Web, Web for short. By installing an addition to your computer, you can supposedly dial a local-access Internet number—if there is one in your area—then point and click your way through the Web to find what you want. Using the Web is said to be as easy and fun to use as Windows; however, if you have a habit of falling out of Windows, some of the "fun and ease" may be missing. That's why an online connection through Delphi, AOL, etc. is recommended. You may not have full access, but do you really need to know what Kuwaitis think of Barney the Dinosaur?

Tithing

Time and money are so tightly wrapped together when using online services that they are hard to separate. Nearly every second you spend online is costing you real dollars and cents in cash and figurative dollars and cents in time. The average monthly real-money tithe among NINC members runs from \$25-\$60. Several members noted that going online caused a decrease in their telephone bills, offsetting part of the cost. Saving can be realized by composing letters, etc. offline, then going online to post them and by downloading files and any mail you have in your electronic mailbox, then going offline to read them. JoAnn Ross reports she can download 25 letters in 1.46 minutes. Software is generally ➔

Online

(Continued from page 7)

necessary to do this, but it's not terribly expensive or may even be free.

With contract deadlines hanging over us, every second spent on online business has a dollar-and-cents value, too. The length of time people admitted to spending online was fifteen minutes to three hours a day. The shorter lengths of time, at least, did not add in the time spent offline reading mail and composing responses and postings, which easily adds another hour. Every member polled agreed that addiction can be a problem, especially for newcomers, rather like our parents staying up until two in the morning watching old grade Z movies when they first got a television. Real-time conferencing or live chats can be especially addictive, but several members advised indulging the first month. Part of the novelty will wear off and the size of your first online bill will probably take care of the rest of your excesses.

Nearly everyone found that the cost of online participation in terms of real money and time were generally enough of a control that they didn't need to look around for Onliners Anonymous. One writer brought up the point that everyone has some problem with addiction because writers tend to have addictive personalities in the first place, or why else "would we keep doing what we do, in spite of ridiculous odds and the almost inevitable setbacks." (We won't bring sanity or intelligence into the discussion.)

If you decide to join an online congregation, what do you need for the collection plate—besides time and money? A computer with a 386 or higher processor is nearly mandatory and a fax/modem is mandatory. A fast modem is about \$100 and supposedly installable without a degree in computer engineering. A nice but not necessary catechism is *The Elements of E-Mail Style*, deliberately patterned after the Strunk and White manual most of us use. The e-mail version will tell you that <g> means joke or sarcasm, very useful to know since the danger of being misinterpreted is ever present and can lead to the dreaded flaming. If you should get flamed anyway, Angell and Heslop advise "acknowledging the person's need to flame."

Some of the networks have their own manual you can download, and several on- and offline manuals exist for the Internet, also useful to have since many veteran Internet users resent "newbies" and waste no opportunity to incinerate them in humiliating flame if they make a mistake or ask a "silly" question. The *Newbie Newz* is a free electronic newsletter that can help make you flame-retardant, as is *Zen and the Art of Internet*, available in bookstores.

The best help, however, most agree, is having someone experienced, preferably on several networks, to guide you. No matter what anyone tells you, Marj Krueger

says, "first timing on a network is a bear." Take advantage of free offers to sample various networks, sign on for a cheap trial, then decide what fits your pocketbook and more aesthetic needs.

Serpents in Eden

The online Edens don't have just one serpent, they have several, but, like real ones, common sense can help you avoid them. Think before you hit the SEND button, and always keep in mind that anything you say online, unless it is on a private message board, is there for anyone—editors, readers, people you've never met—to read and possibly misinterpret. Lurkers—electronic peeping Toms—monitor bulletin boards without revealing their presence, so never assume, because you know who has logged on to talk, that is your entire audience.

Gossip is rampant, some of it bordering on or crossing over the line to libel. Check out a rumor before passing it on. The networks right now are like Dodge City before Marshall Dillon rode into town. Most users are polite and harmless, but not all of them. Members advise giving out no names or addresses on open boards. If you do, the least you can expect is a dramatic increase in advertising junk mail.

Remember the insidious worms of isolation and loneliness and the saving grace of perspective. There are few professions as lonely and isolated as that of writing. We want feedback, desperately sometimes, but we get so little of it. Learning online readers' likes and dislikes is useful, but those readers are only a fraction of your audience and not a scientific polling sample by any standard.

For writers who live in a rural area, online is a lifeline to the tiny minority who does what we do, to burnout avoidance, to sanity, to simple human contact; but it is easy, as Jo Beverly says, to get too much input, to succumb to the temptation to compare one's career with others, and end up feeling worse than before you signed on. Apply the grace of perspective again. Every career has ups and downs, and, human nature being what it is, you aren't as likely to hear about the downs nearly as often as the ups. Keep in mind, also, that only a small percentage of writers are yet online so your view of writing, publishing, and life in general can get very narrow and skewed. You also don't have to take any more input than you want. OFF switches are marvelous things.

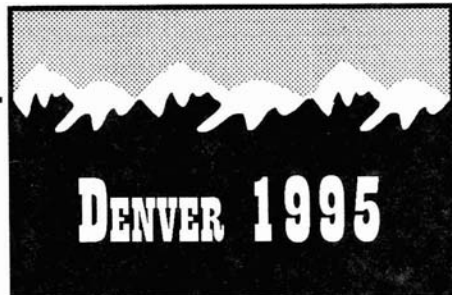
Making contact online is marvelously convenient, too. Alison Hart climbs on a bulletin board at five in the morning or when she wants a coffee break at nine or when she's just beat from a long writing stretch at midnight. Sitting in your office, nice and comfy in your jammies or sweats—or, for some of us, jammy-sweats—you can talk to a dozen people at once without having to take a shower, change clothes, comb your hair, and get in your car and

drive someplace. You can get too relaxed and too comfortable and say things you shouldn't because you're not really in your office or your living room or in bed; you're travelling all across the country or maybe around the world. And sometimes do take a shower, change clothes, comb your hair, and get in your car and drive someplace to remind yourself that real life is not lived in cyberspace.

Technology frequently doesn't make our lives better, only busier. Most writers live with enough stress that they hardly need any more. Computer networks, like all technology, are only a tool, and like most other techno-

logical advancements, offer convenience but demand a price in time, money, and emotion. The self-discipline that keeps you writing when you'd rather go out and load toxic waste for a living can also make sure that online technology maintains its proper place as only a tool, not the master with you its slave. **NINK**

(My thanks to the NINC members who contributed their experiences, among them Jo Beverly, Alison Hart, Marj Krueger, Cathie Linz, JoAnn Ross, Deb Siegenthal, and Susan Wiggs.)



NINC Conference Update

By PATRICIA WERNER

Mark your calendars for October 12-15, 1995, for our 6th Annual Novelists, Inc. Conference at the Warwick Hotel in Denver, Colorado. Back by popular demand will be Night Owl Sessions (informal discussions, topics suggested by members and posted ahead of time), Author Discussion Groups (informal, round table discussion groups moderated by NINC members), Professional Discussion Groups (candid discussions between authors and publishing-industry professionals), and Special Presentations (by outside speakers/specialists on topics of interest to novelists). It's not too late to send us your ideas for discussion groups.

Book signings will be arranged with the Rocky Mountain Book Festival, which runs concurrently with the NINC conference and which will also offer a full schedule of varied programs on every aspect of writing and publishing. Many publishers' reps will be in town for the Festival. Also convening in town that weekend will be the Western History Association Conference and the Women Writing the West organization.

Denver International Airport is now open! The baggage system works, even if some of the floors quake because the high-speed monorail baggage system vibrates.

Please send your ideas for sessions and discussion groups to Kay Bergstrom, 1666 Clermont, Denver CO 80220-1153. See you in October. **NINK**

EAST of the Hudson

By EVAN MAXWELL

Lord Harlequin's Response

In our last episode, a sister organization, the Authors Guild, had just raised a pertinent question: Harlequin's multi-million-dollar movie deal with CBS and a Canadian production company called Alliance.

Little did anyone know Harlequin would be so sensitive on the matter.

In a letter to authors dated a few days after the Guild Bulletin appeared, two Harlequin executives fired back a two-page, single-spaced broadside that seemed intended to answer all questions and silence all critics forevermore.

The letter was signed by Candy Lee, V.P. Editorial and Retail Marketing, who is a decent and forthright person, but it appeared to have been written by Bernie Stevenson, who is a lawyer. Its principal contention is that Harlequin has not optioned its entire backlist as was suggested by the Guild. Instead, film rights to four specific books were sold.

The letter went to great lengths to make the point that all other backlist books are still available for film development, but the two executives did indicate that the books are somewhat encumbered.

"If an author or agent brings an offer for a movie deal to Harlequin, (the deal) has to be matched by the Alliance production company or the book is free to be made into a movie by any other interested party," Harlequin said.

COMMENT: Hollywood is a small town and this "matching" provision may have the effect of scaring off other potential producers. Few producers would be inclined to pursue a property if they know another producer can take the book away from them by matching the option offer.

On the other hand, at least one agent I know did a recent deal for a Harlequin backlist title with a producer other than Alliance, so it can be done.

In addition, the Harlequin letter said the Alliance-Harlequin deal specified that rights would be obtained at the rate of 2% of the production budget of any television film.

COMMENT: My Hollywood agent says that's not an outrageous departure from the norms of the industry, but it is on the light side. Besides, you must remember that under the terms of the standard Harlequin contract, the writer would only receive half that 2%, since Harlequin shares equally in the sale of movie rights.

ADDED COMMENT: Harlequin didn't directly address the biggest issue in the deal, which is that the Toronto corporation is in a potential conflict of interest, since it is both a principal in the film production deal and a beneficiary of rights. In other words, they have cut a deal with themselves.

The Authors Guild had stated in its bulletin that CBS paid \$1 million for the entire Harlequin backlist, but Lee and Stevenson vehemently denied that was the case. They

maintained that the \$1 million was CBS's portion of a co-production deal with Alliance and Harlequin. Therefore, they said, writers whose books weren't directly optioned will not benefit from the deal.

The rest of the letter was a remarkably harsh and, in at least one regard, inaccurate attack on the Guild for suggesting Harlequin would ever do its authors dirty. The Guild is a grown-up group, fully able to respond as it sees fit, but one thing is evident: Harlequin hates to have anyone think badly of it.

FINAL COMMENT: Harlequin is probably acting as ethically as corporations ever do in their dealings with authors. That doesn't mean, though, that their protestations of innocence must be taken at face value.

All publishers have interests in common with authors. They have other, more selfish, interests, as well. Claims of altruism should be taken with plenty of salt and the real terms and conditions of all contracts should be examined by writers as carefully as they are examined by corporate lawyers.

Oh, My Aching Eyes

Do you have plans for a grand-multi-generational saga with a cast of thousands and a dozen intricate subplots to explore, or a Clancy thriller that would probably weigh in at a thousand manuscript pages, a big, fat read of the sort that used to be so popular and so much fun to write?

If you have such plans, you may want to put them on hold and start writing short, like Robert James Waller. It seems that the cost of paper, which accounts for one third of the cost of manufacturing a book, is about to go through the roof.

Novelists, Inc. member JoAnn Ross passes along a clip from the *New York Times* that suggests books on the fall and spring lists will have thinner margins, smaller type, and, eventually, higher prices. The reason is that paper producers are trying to recoup years of losses by sharply boosting the cost of uncoated paper. The *Times* says that through 1994, paper costs had been just over \$600 a ton. Then, late in the year, the price jumped to \$730 a ton.

That's nothing like 1989, when the price of uncoated paper topped out at \$859 a ton, but it's still a bean-counter's nightmare.

As a result of the new paper costs, margins will shrink, type will get smaller, and words will become more dense on the page. All books became harder to read. Paperbacks, already no treat for the eyes of an aging population, may be caught in a harder bind.

Sounds like a good time to invest in the bifocal business.

Gratuitous Nastiness

From *Publishers Weekly*, a note with some backstory. *Kirkus Reviews*, among the more acid review services in literature, has launched an effort to clean up its act.

Richard Marek, vice president and editorial director, said he is trying to do away with "the occasional smart-alecky tone and gratuitous nastiness" in some of the service's reviews.

Among other things, that process apparently involved the removal of one Peggy Kaganoff, who had been editor-in-chief at *Kirkus* for about a year.

Some of you may remember that Kaganoff was "Paperback Forecasts" editor at *Publishers Weekly*, where she was generally thought to be responsible for the sharp and unfair treatment of genre fiction, particularly romance fiction.

I guess our romance writers weren't paranoid, after all.

Schizophrenia

Speaking of *Publishers Weekly*, in response to a complaint from a reader, the editors recently explained their failure to include romance novels in their roundup of the year's best books thusly:

"... It seemed counterproductive to include mass market romances (although there were worthy candidates) because their short shelf life meant that none of them would be available to librarians or booksellers.... As for hardcover, many publishers categorize hardcover romances as mainstream fiction. We found them so insistent on this distinction that they would rather not have the books listed at all than to have them called romances."

COMMENT: The first point is flat wrong. Particularly with the advent of chains and superstores, strong romance titles have a longer and longer shelf life. I've seen Johanna Lindsey novels that run on for more than fifteen printings.

If *PW* meant numbered or category books, their assertion might be true, but we all know that there's a great deal more to romance than numbered books. In fact, those books have become secondary to noncategory books.

As for the second assertion, I'd like to know which publishers are so ashamed to call their books "romances" that they'd rather not be named in a list of the year's best. That's the kind of abnegation that ought to be properly rewarded.

True, I know both publishers and authors who claim to have passed "beyond" the genre into "mainstream fiction." But considering the shape of the mainstream, I'd rather paddle in the "backwater," if that's what romance really is.

Tinseltown Report

The *New York Times* reported last month that there is a sudden new hunger in Hollywood for literary material on which to base films.

Part of the buzz comes from big sales of special properties like "The Horse Whisperer," which went in an outright sale, no option, for \$3 million long before publication, probably even before completion.

The other hot sale was a thriller called "Vertical Run," about an executive who is pursued around an office building by his murderous boss and co-workers. Sounds to me like a story about publishing but it was pitched around Hollywood as "Speed" with Stairways."

Hollywood's interest in books seemed to surprise the *Times* and elicited this explanation from an anonymous studio executive:

"Books are required to have beginnings, middles, and endings and there is something quite wonderful about having the characters defined."

COMMENT: Such astute analysis leaves me speechless.

Nice Fangs, Marty

All of literary London was atwitter last month over the Martin Amis affair. Amis, a fairly well-known author of so-called "serious" fiction, suddenly demanded a Catherine Coulter-sized advance for his new novel.

Turns out Amis was no fool. HarperCollins met his price, although they required a book of short stories in addition as part of the deal.

What had the tongues wagging, though, was the nastiness that the Amis ploy brought out in some of his British colleagues, several of whom attributed the Amis ploy to a kind of mid-life crisis. As evidence, they cited his sudden divorce, his acquisition of a new, younger girlfriend, and his lavish dental expenses, which were said to amount to \$30,000 for an entire new set of crowns.

A.S. Byatt, author of that famed literary romance, *Possession*, threatened to leave her publisher if he bought the Amis package. Said the shrill Ms. Byatt:

"I always earn out my advances and I don't see why I should subsidize his greed, simply because he has a divorce to pay for and has just had all his teeth redone."

And I thought that it was just American writers who were jealous and savage.

Bad Reviews

Just in case you thought you have been savaged, how's this for a collection of quotes, all from one review.

The author "has fed his hackneyed romance recipe back into the computer and come up with his worst book yet, a truly atrocious ballad about a part-time cowboy and a one-time topless dancer that gives new meaning to the words sappy, sexist, mannered, and clichéd."

Wait, there's more. "Such spectacularly awful—not to mention offensive—writing permeates (the book.).... It must surely rank as one of the most dreadful novels to come along in a long time."

The opinions expressed are those of Michiko Kakutani, regular reviewer for the *New York Times*.

The book? *Border Music* by Robert James Waller.

In case you thought reviewers had clout, it should be noted that *Border Music* opened at #3 on the best-seller list at Ms. Kakutani's newspaper.

All of us have our own feelings about Waller. Envy, pity, rage, confusion. I've experienced each of those, myself, sometimes in a span of ten seconds. But he's a genuine hit, and like most genuine hits, he seldom gets much respect from critics.

I've seen only one review that tried to seriously—well, semi-seriously—explain the Madison County Effect. Ironically, that review also appeared in the *NYT*, but in the Sunday book section, not in the daily columns. ➔

EAST of the Hudson

(Continued from page 11)

In it, author Robert Plunket said of Waller:

"He's given us a hitherto undiscovered genre. I call it Old Adult, as opposed to Young Adult. Young Adult books are, of course, aimed at the anxious adolescent, feeling alone in the world, who needs some validation and reassurance. Old Adult books perform exactly the same function for people in middle age, those of us who feel that life has passed us by, that nobody appreciates us, that we're trapped by the results of choices we made long ago—by things like children, marriage, small towns, Wal-Mart.

"Not so," says Mr. Waller. "You're a good person. Your suffering isn't depressing—it's romantic. And to prove it, I'm going to reward you with some really good sex for once in your life."

Sly tone aside, that's not a bad characterization of any genre fiction. Popular fiction confirms our basic assumptions about life, love, and the order of the universe. Waller works, whether you like him or not, because he confirmed some basic emotions in a way that touched the hearts and minds of millions of people. He did what a great many of us try to do, and that's worth remembering.

On the other hand, Ms. Kakutani did get off the single most entertaining line in the battle of the two *NYT* reviews. She attacks the hero of *Border Music*, Texan Jack Carmine, for something as simple as driving a battered Chevy short-bed.

Waller is guilty, she says, of trying to make us believe that "tooling around the West in an old pickup truck and spending an occasional night in a motel with a strange woman were somehow equivalent to being Lawrence of Arabia or Dr. Livingston."

Any book that rouses such passion from Michiko Kakutani can't be all bad.

Loveswept Is Not Swept Away

In response to what she called "the millionth such

rumor since 1990," Bantam editor Beth deGuzman says the romance line is still alive and about to celebrate its twelfth birthday.

DeGuzman did admit that the line of contemporaries is being "selective" about acquiring new manuscripts, since it already has "a very strong group of authors," but new buys are being made, she said.

COMMENT: The issues of downsizing or folding book lines are always difficult for corporate publishers and for writers, alike. Lines are always being reviewed, shuffled, and changed. Sometimes they are put on hiatus for revamping; sometimes they never come back from hiatus.

From the publisher's point of view, premature announcements that a line has been killed might erode commercial support at the retail level while the last few months of books are still in the pipeline. It's not in the best interests of the publisher to see that happen.

On the other hand, writers of all kinds of commercial fiction have to keep options open in times like these. We work on the same long lead time that publishers do, usually without the benefit of day-to-day information. That's why organizations like this one exist, and that's why our existence sometimes makes publishers uneasy.

From twenty years of experience, the wisest course always seems to remain flexible. Corporate decisions are being made every day. Sometimes those decisions won't be announced for weeks or months, but they may well collapse a market that authors were counting on to send their kids to college.

It's just another example of the ways that interests diverge in this tough old world of ours. If you find any more such examples, send them along to PO Box 187, Anacortes WA 98221, fax 206-293-1835. **NINK**

(By the way, the opinions expressed in this column are my own and do not necessarily represent the official policies and positions of Novelists, Inc. Hell, my wife doesn't even agree with half of this stuff.)

Publishing Services by Sandy Huseby

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