

# Novelists' Ink

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

Volume 6, Number 10

October 1995

## My First Time

or

### An Anecdotal History of Authors' First Time Hitting the New York Times Bestseller List

Collected by CATHERINE COULTER

**T**here are certain moments in our lives that we will never ever forget until we pass on to the hereafter, moments so sharp they're like photographs that will never fade. Making the *New York Times* Bestseller List for the first time is one of them. It's right up there with actually holding your first novel for the very first time.

For me it was August 4, 1988 at about 7:30 a.m. when Hilary Ross, my editor at Penguin, called to tell me that *Moonspun Magic* had hit the *Times*. Click, the photo was snapped. I yelled, "Why are you doing this to me?" going on and on disbelieving until she managed to shout over me that it was true and she had witnesses. All in all, it was pretty decent entertainment for many of the folk at Penguin who were on the speaker phone listening in.

My husband and I celebrated with some very expensive champagne and sent another kind of champagne to Penguin to thank everyone. CC

**Nelson DeMille:** "There it was, a Thursday in March of 1987, and in this business that's sweepstakes morning. At about 9:15 a.m., the phone rang. It all came together. I, Nelson DeMille, had made the *New York Times* bestseller list for my novel *Word of Honor* in the number ten paperback position. I was an official *New York Times* best-selling author. I couldn't wait to tell someone, anyone. I decided to call my fiancée.

"The phone rang another ten times that morning as friends and colleagues called to congratulate me. I was on cloud nine. Better yet, I was on The List.

"All my books since have made the *Times* list in hardcover and paperback, but as with sex, nothing can compare with the First Time.

**Nora Roberts:** "The first book of mine to hit the *NY Times* was *Genuine Lies* in '91. This came after one of those basic tours from hell where I did like ten cities in ten days. The book didn't hit the first week or so on sale and my editor at Bantam wasn't too hopeful.

"Once I was home again I put it aside. You can't function and certainly can't write with the *Times* list preying on your mind.

"I got the call on Thursday morning when I was in the shower. I happen to have a phone in the bathroom, which we call the potty line. I answered it, dripping wet, and heard lots of screaming and excitement on the line.

"It was the best time I have had in my bathroom. I remember feeling thrilled and dazzled, but mostly relieved. Thank God that was done. Even if I never hit again, I could have NYTBSA engraved on my tombstone. I'm putting that in my will."

**Jack Higgins:** "Before writing *The Eagle Has Landed* I had something like 25 novels published under different names without ever doing anything remarkable.

"I decided that the time had come to do something drastic and came up with the idea of a German plot in 1945 in which German paratroopers disguised as Poles in the British forces would drop into England to kidnap or shoot Winston Churchill. The research took many, many months. My New York publishers were not happy, and the big man at Collins in London positively hated the idea. You've got a bunch of Nazis trying to kill Winston Churchill, he said. Where are your heroes? The public will never go for it. I tried to explain that I was interested NOT in the Nazis but in all the ordinary decent guys who found themselves on the wrong side but still had to do the job. Good guys fighting for a rotten cause. Nobody seemed to understand.

"I was depressed but carried

Science fiction writers Frank Herbert, Arthur C. Clarke, and Dr. Isaac Asimov got on the list shortly thereafter but, gals, I was there first!

— Anne McCaffrey

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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

# Getting Down to Business

**W**e have a jam-packed newsletter this month, so I have sworn a solemn oath not to ramble on. I want to thank all of you who wrote in support of the modest proposals I made in my last column. The response (at least to me) was uniformly positive and enthusiastic. Both of these ideas, and many others as well, will be on the agenda for the annual business meeting at the Denver conference.

May I please ask one very special favor?

Will you come to the business meeting? Registration for the conference has been impressive; I know a large percentage of you will be there. But I also know that many, if not most, of those who come to the conference do not come to the business meeting. There are many reasons—maybe you aren't planning to fly in until Friday, maybe you have lunch scheduled with an agent or editor or friend, maybe you already sent in your proxy, maybe you think it sounds boring. Whatever

your reason for missing the meeting might be, would you do me one extra-special favor and come anyway?

The truth is, past business meetings have not been particularly well attended, which leaves all the tough decisions in the hands of the same few people year after year. This time, I'd like to hear from you. This NINC board is seriously and actively committed to advancing this organization, and we have considered and discussed and debated more ideas than I can begin to write about. I want to put them on the agenda for the business meeting and see what you think about them. Your input could make all the difference.

This organization is at a crossroads. We have, I think, defined ourselves and our goals; now it's time to set our plans in motion. You should be a part of that.

The business meeting will be Thursday afternoon at 2:00 p.m. I hope to see you there.

— 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.*

### Bill's "Excellent Points"

I THINK BILL has brought up some excellent points in his President's Column in the August NINK. Would it be possible for his suggestions regarding the conference coordinator and President-Elect to be added to the agenda at the business meeting in Denver, so members could discuss them?

— JoAnn Ross

I WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS my support for the ideas for organizational improvement proposed in the President's Column of the September, 1995 newsletter.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Idea # One addressed the wisdom of hiring a Conference Planner for the annual NINC conferences. NINC President William Bernhardt pointed out the obvious benefits—increased conference attendance, reduced lodging/conference fees, additional dues paying members for the organization, and an infusion of dollars into the Treasury, which finances the goals of membership. It's time to test some new ways of doing things. We're professionals, so let's hire professionals.

Idea # Two proposed consideration of a new, non-voting officer—a President-Elect. This person would sit on the board during the calendar year as an observer and prior to assuming full voting responsibility as President. Although this addition to the Board of Directors would necessitate a by-laws change, i.e. a one year term limit for the serving President, the transitional downtime from one year to the next by a newly elected Board would be significantly reduced. As the Secretary to the Board of Directors in 1991, I can attest to the time it takes to simply figure out the lay of the land during the early months of Board participation as an elected officer. Reducing the downtime seems a worthy goal.

The proposal for a President-Elect has merit, as does the suggestion to hire a Conference Planner for future NINC conferences. I urge the membership to support these proposals. At the very least, voice your opinions. They count. *You count!*

One final comment: I'd like to express my appreciation for the thought-provoking, business-oriented tone of the NINC newsletter. I have no tolerance (I sound cranky!) for fluffy articles that do nothing to enhance my professional pursuits as a writer.

— Laura Taylor

I'VE BEEN DELUGED WITH COPIES of your Sept. newsletter featuring Bill Bernhardt's "Time Has Come" column and all his kudos about our Sisters in Crime Writer's Retreat and his "President Elect" idea two ... I'm qualified to speak to both.

Katherine Dooley, daughter of NINC member Marion Smith Collins, came to our rescue when our volunteer conference coordinator opted out. Katey took over handling the hotel, catering, rooms, staff, a/v, etc. and, when our original hotel canceled our contract just six weeks before the retreat due to remodeling, Katey found us a new hotel and negotiated contracts and all the other arrangements. She did all this with good humor and professionalism that was noted by both hotels. Katey handled all the billing and double checking of the master account (found a few errors to our advantage) and handled registration, questions by attendees, had the registration area well stocked with extra name badges, programs, etc....She also was able to get the printing done at a ridiculously cheap rate. By having Katey, all attendees and volunteers were able to enjoy the Retreat and Sisters in Crime knew

our financial bottom-line was being watched.

Since Katey was not a writer, she left the focus of the Retreat to basically three people—Bill Crider who booked our speakers, Carolyn Hart, and myself—we had toooo many ideas of what we wanted that seemed missing from other conferences. For our first effort, with a volunteer staff of seven people, I'd say we had a major success...you can read more about it in *Publishers Weekly* (Sept. 11, 1995 issue, ed.).

As for Bill's President-Elect idea—running any organization is a big job. Sisters in Crime wanted the continuity and succession of board members to be smooth, so we require anyone aspiring to the Presidency be on the Board in some capacity for at least three years. As President Elect, I've been privy to knowing what's been happening in all areas for the past year by our President Barbara D'Amato. And a "Bible" has been created to hand down as to why certain decisions were made in the past and the reason to hold to that decision. It's always nice not to have to reinvent the wheel every year with the changing of the guard—we just keep rolling that wheel further down the highway of writing and publishing.

Thanks for allowing me to respond.

— Elaine Raco Chase, Sisters in Crime International President

## By-laws Change: *If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It.*

I'm writing to oppose the proposed by-laws changes, both in regard to the Nominating Committee (reducing the minimum number of elected members and the number of members appointed from the Advisory Council) and the newsletter (charging the board with finding an editor rather than leaving this task to the Nominating Committee). My objections are based on my experiences as a member of the 1995 Nominating Committee, which worked smoothly and very well.

Novelists, Inc. is becoming larger, not smaller. We hope to grow more diverse, not less so. The goal of the Nominating Committee is to find the best available people to serve, and since none of us knows every other member, a larger committee can only help, not hurt.

After all, finding good people takes time and effort. We're all working writers, and fewer committee members would mean fewer people to share the burden. True, under the proposed change, the board can increase the number on the committee above six, but the board can do that already, to above nine. I believe nine is the wiser minimum.

As for the Advisory Council representation, the immediate past president, an A.C. member, has chaired the committee in recent years. Evan Maxwell, the 1995 chair, knew the current issues and problems, and also which members had volunteered recently and might be willing



# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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to continue to do so. Jasmine Cresswell, one of our founders and the second A.C. member, brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to our discussions. We're lucky we had both of them on board.

I know that the 1994 committee found having nine members unwieldy, but I believe the difficulty was with the process they used, not with the number itself. In the past, committee members made wish lists for each office, arguing over theoreticals ("Let's get Susan Elizabeth Phillips to be President.") People were approached according to their ranking on each list, so every time someone couldn't be reached or needed time to think, there was a delay. And if the committee got a series of refusals, it would find itself back at square one.

Because of these past problems, two of NINC's most experienced and knowledgeable members, Susan Elizabeth Phillips and Julie Kistler, were charged with finding a more workable way for the Nominating Committee to carry out its duties. After extensive conversations with previous committee members, they made two crucial recommendations: that the Nominating Committee start its work much earlier, and that it use an executive search process to determine who was available and willing to serve.

Our first contact from Evan was in March, and our first conference call was in late April, more than two months earlier than the year before. We began the call in the same way other committees had, by discussing various possibilities, but then Evan assigned each committee member to a specific office. Our mandate was broader than simply finding candidates for that particular office, however. We were to feel people out. Learn who would be willing to do what. If we found a person for some office other than our "own," we were to pass the information along to the appropriate committee member. In practice, individual committee members did a fair amount of discussing and consulting (one-on-one) with their colleagues.

By mid-June, then, when we had our second conference call, we were able to make our selections from people who would almost certainly say yes. I know Susan and Julie also recommended reducing the minimum number on the Nominating Committee to six, feeling that conference calls would be smoother, shorter, and less expensive that way, but the process they developed worked so beautifully that having a large committee wasn't a hindrance. Both calls were fairly short, perhaps seventy or eighty minutes, and both calls were orderly. When you are discussing real choices, then making a decision based on those choices, it's easy to keep your discussions polite and focused.

True, under this new process, some people who had expressed a willingness to serve weren't asked to. I suspect they were all relieved. And if there were hurt feel-

ings, there can be hurt feelings under the other process, too. This is a professional organization, not an ego-support group.

Finally, about the newsletter editor ... An elected newsletter editor brings more independence and diversity to the board than an appointed one would. Besides, board members have enough to do without assigning them yet another difficult responsibility. If the Nominating Committee starts early and searches broadly, it should be able to do the job better than a busy board could. And if the newsletter editorship should remain vacant despite the best efforts of the Nominating Committee to fill it, the board will always have the authority under our by-laws to appoint someone.

The bottom line? The present by-laws ain't broke. Let's not fix them.

— Deborah Gordon

## No Secrets to Success

I was very disappointed in Barbara Keiler's article on how prolific novelists keep going. I read it eagerly, searching for the "secret," convinced there surely must be one, only to find there wasn't. Then I remembered when I was unpublished and believed that if I could just meet some published authors, they would tell me the "secret" of how to get published! When I sold my first book, I realized I already knew the secret: Just Do It! Now I've lost another illusion. Instead of discovering there is something I can do to turn myself into a prolific writer, I have learned that certain writers are simply blessed (or cursed) with an indefinable something that compels them to turn out book after book after book. The rest of us can only continue as we are while we look on and marvel. As disappointed as I am, I really want to thank Barbara for de-mystifying the process and thereby taking the pressure off. What a relief!

— Victoria Thompson

## Promote for Less

I recently had postcards made for my newest release, and found a company to do them that offers prices considerably lower than any other place I've found. I wanted to pass on their address and phone number to Novelists, Inc. members:

Modern Postcard, 6354 Corte del Abeto, Suite E, Carlsbad CA 92009. Phone 800-959-8365, fax 619-431-1939.

They were great to deal with and the postcards came out beautifully. I found them through an ad in an art magazine; from their samples, it's apparent their usual work is for artists and galleries. 500 postcards cost \$95, 1000 were \$145.

Hope this is helpful to other members.

— Janice K. Johnson

# My First Time

(Continued from page 1)

on. When Holt read it in America they went crazy. They brought the book out first and in 1975 the miracle happened. Number One in ALL the American lists. The experience was repeated in the UK. It started a new departure in the war novel in which EVERYONE started writing about good Germans. I never looked back. It taught me one thing. NEVER, but never listen to publishers."

**Ann Maxwell:** "I picked up the phone one Wednesday night in 1992 and discovered Denis Farina of Avon on the other end. As it was really late for him to be working—about 11:00 p.m. in New York—I was puzzled. When Denis told me *Only You* had made the NYT list, I was floored.

"I didn't believe it. June and July were particularly savage months that year, with about 20+ previous NYT bestsellers contending for the 15 slots. I wasn't Avon's superlead; and my print run was hardly hearty.

"There is such a thing as luck.

"So Denis got to hold the line while Evan congratulated me. Actually, I think we hung up somewhere among the congratulations. At least I hope we did."

**Dick Francis:** "It's a terrible thing to say, I don't rightly remember how I heard that one of my novels was actually one of the *New York Times's* Best Seller List's chosen few. I believe it was *Whip Hand* and I also believe that someone told me about it. Consequently, I went out and bought the newspaper, and there it was for all to see.

"*Whip Hand* was, in fact, the last of my novels to be published by Harper & Row. I had severed my connection with said firm before the date of its publication. Having done this I suppose no member of the staff thought it worthwhile notifying me of the honor it duly received.

"Since joining G. P. Putnam's Sons, all of my novels have found their way onto the exalted list. And long may they continue to be so honored!"

**Kathryn Lynn Davis:** "It happened in January of 1990. I don't think I screamed aloud when I discovered that the paperback of *Too Deep for Tears* was #11 on the *New York Times* Bestseller list, but I did ask my agent to repeat the news several times, in case I'd heard wrong or was otherwise delusional.

"Just before Christmas my husband had bought a very expensive, very beautiful bottle of champagne 'just in case we have something or other to celebrate sometime soon.' He was trying to avoid being cursed by expressing the thought aloud. That night we opened that champagne with several of our close

friends. I still own the bottle and glance at it often, as a reminder of what my agent said when she finally got the good news through my dazed brain. 'No matter what happens from now on, you'll always be a *New York Times* best-selling author.' If I forget it, I look at my bottle with the silver crest and it helps me to remember, even though the bubbles have long since disappeared."

**Linda Howard:** "I found out *Dream Man* was on the *New York Times* Bestseller list on Thursday morning, May 18, at 8:30 a.m., 1995. I had the mother of all infections, and the doctor had prescribed heavy duty drugs, one of which

had the charming side effect of 'psychotic episodes.' Anyway, there I was. Alone, deathly ill. (My husband wouldn't be home for three more days.) The phone rang, and it was Leslie Wainger, my editor at Silhouette. She didn't even say hello. She said, '*Dream Man* is on the *Times* list.'

"I'm definitely left-brained and a psychotic episode was a possibility. I didn't squeal or jump with joy. I asked, 'The *New York Times*?'"

"'No, the *Norfolk, Connecticut Times*,' Leslie replied with noticeable sarcasm.

"I got on the phone to spread the news. No one was home. No one. The bug man arrived to spray the house. He congratulated me, collected his check, and left. I had errands to run so I left. I was alone, driving around, all day long. To celebrate, I had my Explorer washed.

"When I finally got home, the answering machine was full of messages and the phone never stopped ringing for the next ten hours."

**John Grisham:** "*The Firm* was published on March 1, 1991, and eleven

days later I was sitting in my local bookstore, Square Books, sipping cappuccino and gossiping with Richard Howarth, the proprietor. Present also was the district sales representative for Doubleday, and we were having a pleasant visit discussing the early success of *The Firm*. The phone next to the coffee pot rang, and the cashier said it was for me. My wife, Renee, was calling to tell me that my editor in New York had just called with the wonderful news that *The Firm* would debut on the *New York Times* list, at #12, on March 17, 1991. A bottle of champagne was located somewhere from under the counter, and we had a wonderful celebration."

**Kathleen Woodiwiss:** "I do vividly recall when my second novel, *The Wolf and the Dove*, made it as a mass market paperback to number two spot on the *New York Times* Bestseller List in April, 1974 because of an argument that broke out between my then husband and his sister, both of whom had been tracking all the lists. My husband told her that Avon called to tell us I had made the *Times*. She said no. (She'd been tracking a different list.) Now, in the Woodiwiss family, when you're wrong, you're →

— Michael Palmer

# My First Time

(Continued from page 5)

going to be told flat-out by someone or another, and so my 'first time' was initiated in with a quarrel over who was right and who was wrong.

"Neither one gave ground that evening, and it was only after we bought the *NYT* that the argument was put to rest. I think."

**The Firm has a total of 12,449,000 copies in print as of right now, but not necessarily five minutes from now.**

**Jonathan Kellerman:** "My first book on The List was—remarkably—my first novel, *When the Bough Breaks*. My main reaction

was astonishment because *Bough* had not been bought or marketed as a 'big book.' Quite the contrary: my advance amounted to three bucks an hour.

"Also I'd worked for thirteen years without a penny of remuneration trying to break in—a failed writer with a very good day job. And my two previous psychology books were earning me 15-cent royalty checks, so I harbored no illusions about success as a writer. I did love writing, however, and in the finest tradition of obsessive-compulsiveness, just kept going. And going. The human battery-rabbit.

"The entire process of 'making the list' and staying there for a few weeks was surprising—to my publishers as well as to me—and surreal. Looking back, my only explanation is word-of-mouth. People picking the book up and telling their friends. *God bless the readers*. I vowed right then never to cheat them and I do my damndest to stick to that resolution.

**Jayne Ann Krentz:** "The year was 1990 and the book was *Surrender*. What stands out most clearly in my mind is the case of champagne that my agent, Steve Axelrod, sent to celebrate the occasion of my first appearance on the *NYT*. An entire case. No one had ever sent me an entire case of anything before in my life. Right away I figured out that hitting the *NYT* was a GOOD THING."

**LaVyrle Spencer:** "My editor, Damaris Rowland, called me that morning of March 5, 1987. I was wholly unprepared. I had no idea that *The Gamble* was already in stores or that it was possible to mount the number of sales necessary for the big list in less than a week.

"I remember shouting, 'Oh, my God,' and then I began bawling like a fool. I spent the morning calling everyone I knew. At noon I fulfilled a promise to sign books at the high school, so a school lunch room was my first celebration. Later that month I threw the biggest party of my life. The cake was decorated like the cover of *The Gamble*, with a cluster of violets that had won me my first appearance on the *Times* list at number 8.

"It was Damaris Rowland's first *Times* bestseller, too, and she recalls hanging up after telling me and running up and down the Berkley halls screaming the news. She said, 'It was a big deal, LaVyrle. It was a really big deal at Berkley.'"

**Iris Johansen:** "I realize that most people say the first *New York Times* is unexpected. This is true. No matter how often our

publishers assure us that this is the book to make it, the list remains an enigma, a beacon, a mirage. We hope, but we can't quite believe it will happen.

"That's why I slept very soundly on the night of reckoning—well, at least until 4:30 in the morning when the phone rang. It was Nita Taublib, my editor, jubilant, walking on air. She had not slept soundly. She'd called the *Times* at 11:00 o'clock, 1:30, and finally at 4:30 when she finally got the new list. *The Beloved Scoundrel* would appear on the *NYTBL* on January 30, 1994.

"She accused me of already knowing about the list because I was too calm. I wasn't calm, I was stunned. A bolt of lightning does that to you. I called the *Times* and heard it myself. The list 'you have to make' had been made.

"I didn't go back to sleep."

**Michael Palmer:** "Three weeks out, when *Natural Causes* wasn't on any lists any more, well after my publishers and I had given up hope, I got THE CALL from my editor. She left the message on my machine as I was visiting with my shrink at the time. 'Michael,' she said, 'you're not going to believe this, but....'

"I immediately recalled the riddle we were taught early on in medical school:

"Q: What do you call the student who graduates last in his class from The Medical College of East Podunk?"

"A: Doctor.

"I knew from the moment of that phone call on, regardless of whether or not I ever made the list again, I was going to be referred to by my publishers as 'Author of the *New York Times* Hardcover Bestseller *Natural Causes*'—even if my publishers ended up being the Medical College of East Podunk Press."

**Virginia Henley:** "The first time I made the *NYT* was January 1994 and the book was *Seduced*. When my editor from Dell called she said, 'Are you sitting down?' When I replied in the affirmative she told me I had made the *New York Times*. I shouted to my husband, 'Quick, get out the ladder!' In spite of bad bronchitis, I climbed to the roof and shouted the news to the world at the top of my voice. There is no feeling like it. I had to admit I felt omnipotent.

"When I was on for the second week, I went a little crazy and ran out and bought a house on the water with a swimming pool. When I wasn't on the third week I slid down to such a low, I almost had a nervous breakdown wondering how I was going to pay for the house I had just bought."

**Phillip Margolin:** "*Gone, But Not Forgotten* was published in October, 1993, and I went on tour on October 15. On Thursday, October 21, 1993, I was staying in the MacLowe Hotel in New York with my wife Doreen. After I got up, I took a shower. When I got out of the shower, Doreen told me that David Gemert, my editor at Doubleday, had phoned and wanted me to return the call as soon as possible. I dried off and called David back. He told me that *Gone, But Not Forgotten* was going to debut on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. I cannot remember my exact reaction after hanging up the phone, but it was probably something that was totally unsuave.

"When the list came out a week or so later, I remember

**Around the house it was—"Gee, that's great. What's for dinner?"**

**— Nora Roberts**

thinking that it looked like a spoof of the *Times* list. There was John Grisham, Stephen King, Danielle Steel and, as a joke, one of my friends had gotten a printer to insert my name. To tell the truth, it still feels that way every time I see one of my books on the list."

**Rebecca Brandewyne:** "The first time I made the NYT list was in 1984, for my fifth book, *And Gold Was Ours*. My publisher notified me it had made the list. It stayed on for three weeks. It

felt great, and I celebrated with a bottle of Dom Perignon.

**Johanna Lindsey has made the New York Times List with each new title for over 18 straight years.**

"None of this meant as much to me as when my very first book *No Gentle Love*

went all the way to #1 on the wholesale bestseller list. Headly stuff for a young, totally unknown author!"

**Steve Martini:** "*Compelling Evidence* was out in paperback in 1992. It didn't hit the list until it had been out four weeks, certainly a record in waiting. I had nearly given up but my editor said to be patient. When I didn't hear that Thursday, I knew it was over. What happened was that my editor thought that my publisher had called me and vice versa. I spent the entire week-end considering slashing my wrists. Then, early Monday morning, my agent called and said, 'Isn't it great?'"

"'Huh?' I asked. Then he told me the news. I'd hit the NYT list. I had gone from Thursday to Monday morning not knowing, feeling so low I could have passed for a slug.

"I'll tell you, it was like a prisoner getting a reprieve from the gas chamber. We had a big celebration and I didn't even mind paying for all my friends who came out to dinner."

**Linda Lael Miller:** "My first appearance on the *Times* list was in August of 1992, when *Daniel's Bride* came in at #9. One of my editors called me at six in the morning and said, 'If I were you, I'd have champagne for breakfast.'"

"And that was the beginning of a glorious day. The living room filled up with flowers and people called from all over to congratulate me. To celebrate, I bought myself three gold bracelets—one for each week I managed to stay on."

**Johanna Lindsey:**

**I told the editor and my publisher that I'd hit the Times, not the other way around. I enjoyed that little irony.**

— Kathryn Lynn Davis

"OK, first time was in 1977, my first book, *Captive Bride*. I was 25 years old and hardly knew what the NYT list was. I believe Avon called me when *Bride* made it. They were

incredibly excited about it. Paperbacks come and go and are never seen again, etc., so this was phenomenal stuff, and their excitement was catching. I was amazed, actually.

"I hadn't ever meant to write a book, that first book just happened, and I figured that was the only one I had in me—well, that's what I thought at the time—and for it to do so well, it was sort of like a Cinderella thing. I can't remember if I did anything in celebration. I probably just sat down and shook my head in wonder."

**Clive Cussler:** "I recall the first time I read my name up in lights on the *New York Times* Bestseller List very well. The book was *Raise the Titanic* and it jumped on in fourth place. The clouds parted, the sun burst through, there came the sounds of harp music, trumpets and a drum roll.

"My glee was short-lived. I then read an accompanying re-

view that said, 'If good books received roses and bad books skunks, Cussler's *Raise the Titanic* would receive four skunks.'

"Instead of a conquering hero, I felt like Tom the cat after Jerry the mouse hits him over the head with a big mallet. I slowly cracked and crumbled into dust."

**Anne McCaffrey:** "To my total astonishment, I achieved my goal of making the *New York Times* Best Seller list in August, 1978 with *The White Dragon*. As luck would have it, the book hit the August best seller list just when the *New York Times* was out on strike. I was sent tearsheets of the listing, but I never had a copy of those editions of the strike-dead papers. But no matter, I was the first unabashed writer of science fiction to make the list and the first woman science fiction writer.

"Getting on the Best Seller list is a double-edged victory; you're blissful at making it and scared stiff that this is the only book you'll ever write that does!"

**Sandra Brown:** "It was Wednesday, May 23, 1990. I called home from my car phone and spoke to my daughter who told me how her brother was, how school was, how everything at home was, how the dog was, etc. She elaborated. As an afterthought, she said, 'Oh, Mom, a man named Larry Kir-Kirsh-something called you, but he wouldn't leave a message.' Larry Kirschbaum, President and CEO of Warner Books, called me at home?"

"I drove to my husband's business, my palms so slick with sweat I could hardly steer.

I called Larry from Michael's desk. May 23rd was his birthday. He said this was the best present he could hope for. Michael, grinning like a possum, came in with a bouquet of eight long-stemmed red roses, as *Mirror Image* appeared at #8 on the list.

"Everything from that point is a blur. I was on the phone for about an hour and a half. It takes a while to tell the whole world.

"Two days later, Michael told me to dress formally for a special evening. He had chartered a Learjet to fly us and several friends to Houston for dinner.

"It was, quite literally, a fantasy come true."

**Editor's Note:** *There is a downside to making "the List" which most of those who have made it experience sooner rather than later and which, for fairly obvious reasons, isn't discussed openly. Number one—writing candidly about the disadvantages is impossible without seeming to be whining and the resultant "Who does he think he's kidding?" reaction from those who haven't made it yet. Number two—candid discussion risks real antagonism from a publisher because making the list usually results in escalating pressure from the publisher to produce more/better/faster to increase profits. Pressure is a corrosive result of success in virtually all professions. Perhaps someday a study will be done of anonymous NYT best-sellers that asks just one question: When have you been happiest as a writer—before or after you made "the List?"*

**Members:** 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.

**All critics should be forced to eat what they cook. (18th Century)**



# The Art of the Tax Form

IT APPEARS THAT NOVELISTS as a group are like most U.S. taxpayers when it comes to dealing efficiently

with their income and the taxes due on that income, namely confused. Although your individual financial situations are going to vary widely, I will try to explain a few issues as they might pertain to self-employed writers.

## Home Office Deduction

One of the rules that allows a taxpayer to claim a business deduction for a portion of a dwelling unit is that the home office is the *principal place of business* for any particular business. Thus, if an individual conducted more than one business from the home, each business would have to meet this criterion separately. The next rule is that the home office be used *exclusively, on a regular basis*, in connection with a particular business. This means that you may not use a room for both business and personal purposes, and you may not claim a deduction for occasional use. Although it is best to have an entire room set aside for a home office, the Tax Court has found that a portion of a room set aside exclusively for business on a regular basis satisfies the Internal Revenue Code term "a portion of the dwelling unit." If you qualify for a home office deduction, your deductible expenses are determined by the percentage of business square feet in relation to total square feet of the dwelling unit. You may obtain more information on this topic from IRS Publication 587.

## Incorporation

I would generally not advise an author to incorporate as a tax-saving measure unless that person was willing to transfer the savings to a lawyer and CPA or was adept at double entry bookkeeping and preparation of state and federal payroll tax reports, state corporation commission reports, and corporate income tax returns. The primary deduction available to a corporation that is not available to a self-employed individual is the health insurance deduction, but I would advise you to compare the cost of incorporating against any tax savings. I would also advise you to understand the tax implications of incorporation and liquidation. If your income from writing is marginal and you are concerned about your business being treated as a hobby by the IRS, my *feeling* is that you are not substantially more protected from a factual standpoint by incorporating, but a loss for a corporation is less likely to be audited than a loss for an individual. In twenty years of practice, however, I have never seen the hobby loss issue raised except for "enjoyable" businesses such as hot air ballooning.

## Estimated Taxes

The general rule is that you must make estimated tax payments if you expect to owe \$500 or more with your income tax return, you do not expect to have income tax withheld equal to 90% of the tax owed with your tax return, or your withholding will not equal 100% of your

By ALEXANDRA STEEN, C.P.A.  
Small-Business Consultant and Tax Practitioner

prior year tax liability. What these estimated tax rules mean is that if you do not comply, you will owe penalties

on the amount of your underpayment. The amount of your underpayment is not calculated merely on an annual basis, however, so that you should pay only after you have earned the income. This means you do not have to pay estimated income taxes on the IRS quarterly schedule if you have not earned any income that quarter. Writers sometimes believe they must pay a set amount each quarter—an amount often based on the previous year's income—whether they earned the income requiring that amount of payment that quarter or not. They will even borrow to pay estimated taxes on money they have not earned that quarter, may not earn even the next quarter or that year at all. And the IRS does not pay interest on overpayments. You should also pay *only* on your *estimated net taxable income*, not on your gross royalty check. Estimated net taxable income means gross taxable income from all sources, less business deductions, IRA or SEP deductions, the self-employed health insurance deduction, itemized or standard deductions, and personal exemptions. Additionally, self-employed individuals must pay self-employment tax (FICA). This is your social security payment, and, as a self-employed individual, you pay both the "employee" half and the "employer" half, plus a fraction of a percent more as an "administrative" fee. When you work for someone else, you pay only the "employee" half. Estimated tax payment dates are April 15 for income earned through March 31, June 15 for income earned through May 31, September 15 for income earned through August 31, and January 15 of the following year for income earned through December 31.

The subject of estimated taxes is difficult because we vary so much in terms of financial sophistication, self-discipline, and personal circumstances. The estimated tax penalties are based on the prime rate, and are generally less than interest on a bank loan and more than can be earned on savings. Ideally, we want our money to earn interest and do not want to send money to the IRS until we face penalties. This usually works if there is plenty of money in the bank and our personal circumstances are not such that we need to borrow money anyway. If a loan is inevitable, you should consider postponing the loan for as long as possible. The best way to avoid this situation, painful as it may be, is to pay Uncle Sam his share as soon as you cash a royalty/advance check.

If tax due is not paid by April 15—even if you have an extension of time to file—in addition to the penalty for underpayment of estimated tax, you will also be liable for a penalty for late payment and interest on the unpaid balance. The hard truth is that the tax is eventually going to be due, but the bright side is that it need not be paid until earned, and there is some flexibility as to how it is paid.



For more information, consult IRS Publication 505.

## Pension Plan and IRA Contributions

One tremendous advantage to being self-employed is the ability to establish a personalized pension plan. There are many plan varieties, including those that require the services of an actuary and those that can be set up easily and cheaply by a banker or broker. Depending on your tax bracket, contributions to a pension plan can reduce your tax liability by 15-39.6% of the amount contributed. The terms for these self-employed plans are "SEP" or Keogh (pronounced keeo). The contribution limitation for the more common plans is 25% of net business income or \$30,000, whichever is less. Because the contribution is based on a reciprocal mathematical formula, I would suggest that you get help until you become comfortable with the math. In addition to the self-employed pension plan, you may make a contribution to an IRA, unless you or your spouse is employed and subject to limitations, and realize additional tax savings.

## Miscellaneous IRS Publications

The following publications present IRS interpretations of the law, and make no attempt to alert taxpayers to differing court decisions:

- Publication 17 Your Federal Income Tax
- Publication 334 Tax Guide for Small Business
- Publication 463 Travel, Entertainment, and Gift Expenses
- Publication 533 Self-Employment Tax
- Publication 534 Depreciation
- Publication 552 Recordkeeping for Individuals
- Publication 560 Retirement Plans for the Self-Employed
- Publication 910 Guide to Free Tax Services
- Publication 917 Business Use of a Car

*Editor's Note: I asked Sandy to elaborate a bit on the self-employment—Social Security—tax and she responded, "I was afraid that you would ask me about the self-employment tax rate. You might just want to say that the tax is 15.3% of net business (self-employment) income, but the real truth is the following: Multiply your net earnings from self-employment by 92.35%. If the result is less than \$400, you do not owe any self-employment tax. If the result is more than \$400, but less than \$61,200 when combined with wage income, multiply the result by 15.3%. If the result is more than \$61,200 when combined with wage income, subtract the FICA wage income (box 3 of form W-2) from \$61,200. Multiply the lesser of self-employment income or the remainder from the preceding step by 12.4%. Finally, multiply your self-employment income by 2.9%. As you can see, there is going to be a distinction between those who write full-time, and those who are employed."*

*This is why most of us are glad there are accountants who understand the IRS and its incomprehensible rules and formulas. Sandy has very generously volunteered to answer questions generated by her article. Send your questions in care of the NINC e-mail address or the newsletter fax number or USPS address.*

## POINT/COUNTERPOINT

*Each month features a new POINT. Agreements and disagreements—the Counterpoint—will be published two months later to allow everyone time to respond. POINTs are always published anonymously to allow members to bring up controversial issues related to the writing industry without concern. Send the POINT you want to bring up for discussion and your response to this month's POINT to the editor.*

### POINT

Are doors closed when you move houses? I've heard nightmare stories, and my own backlist is being dumped at the house I just left. My agent never did get some sales figures

promised. Some house-hoppers/career-movers say there is no going back. This means that you may have boxed yourself in if things don't work out at the new house. I want to believe that good relations can be maintained—or re-established—with an old house so they wouldn't want to miss an opportunity if I turn out something in another genre they might like. What do other authors have to say? Have they gone back to an old house with other projects/genres and successfully marketed to them? Can you "go home" again?

## 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

Harold Adams, Minnetonka MN  
Dora M. Brown (Dana Kindsey), Dallas TX  
Carol P. Budd, San Ramon CA  
Linda Buechting (Kelly Adams, Kelly Jamison), Quincy IL  
Sandra Detrixhe (Cassandra Austin), Concordia KS  
Jen Heaton (Caroline Cross), Kirkland WA  
Deanna Marliss (Diana Mars), Glenview IL  
Ralph McInerney, Notre Dame, IN  
Marilyn Meredith (E. M. Meredith), Springville CA  
Tara Lee Reames (Tara Taylor Quinn), Scottsdale AZ  
Marian H. Rogers (Marian J.A. Jackson), New York NY  
Denise Dietz Wiley (Denise Dietz), Colorado Springs CO

### New Members

Susan Crosby, Lodi CA  
Ronn Kaiser (R. J. Kaiser, Janice Kaiser), Fair Oaks CA  
Angela Benson, Decatur GA  
Connie Brockway, Edina MN  
Candace Schuler (Candace Spencer, Jeanette Darwin),  
Eden Prairie MN  
Barbara Samuel (Ruth Wind), Pueblo CO  
Mary Frances Stark (Francie Stark, Eve Byron), Aurora CA

## A BOOK BY ITS COVER

# II: "Green Books Don't Sell"

By LAURA RESNICK

**M**y editor Denise Little recently told me that my cover suggestion (mine! my idea!) will grace the cover of my next romance novel. The illustration will depict a Peruvian scarlet macaw, wings gracefully spread, flying over a tropical jungle. Tasteful, attractive, different, and ... my idea!

However, while celebrating this news, I heard that, according to conventional wisdom in publishing, "green books don't sell."

Guess what color tropical jungles are?

Was I wrong to make such an effort to influence what would appear on my book's cover? In a moment of weakness, I wondered if writers are—as was suggested to me recently—really incapable of contributing productively to the cover process? I clung feebly to the belief that "conventional wisdom" is an oxymoron, *especially* in publishing, and I hoped for the best.

Fortunately, Tor editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden pointed out to me that *The Firm* had a green cover, and it sure didn't seem to hurt John Grisham's sales; indeed, the book was his first major hit. So I have continued to celebrate my upcoming cover—particularly since my publisher and I also agree on which artist should paint it.

Patrick Nielsen Hayden also points out, "Leaving aside silly (and usually disprovable) 'rules' like that, any art director with real professional training can talk at some length about general theory of composition and what usually works to get people's attention. That's what they learn at places like Parsons or Cooper Union."

They can talk about it, that is, if you can get them on the phone. Most of them are very busy. Gene Mydlowski, Art Director at Harper Paperbacks, puts out some thirty covers every month with his small team (two staff members and one newly hired secretary). Mydlowski got his BFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, a school, he says, for people who wanted an actual *job* in art. Like a lot of people in publishing (almost everyone except writers, it seems) he wound up working for his first publisher simply because there was a job available. Irene Gallo, Art Director at Tor Books, says that her department is even smaller and consequently assigns a lot of work to freelancers. NAL's and Bantam's art departments are bigger, but they have to produce more covers. Some publishers have two art departments: one for cover art and the other for promotion, advertising, and publicity. The latter would be responsible for brochures and promotional packages, among other things.

The process by which art directors put a cover on your book varies not only from publisher to publisher,

but also from book to book within each publisher's list. The process generally begins with the cover conference, which can take place as early as one year before the book's publication. The book's packaging, remember, must be ready to enthuse sales representatives and buyers well before the book's actual appearance on the stands.

Who is involved in the cover conference? "Too many people, really," says one art director. The art department, marketing people, sales reps, editors, and copywriters may all be present, all contributing their expertise (which sometimes is expertise, and which other times might be the subjective opinion of a 23-year-old newcomer who's heard that green books don't sell). And, as explained in the previous article in this series, the more important the book is to the publisher, the more people will be involved in the cover process.

Irene Gallo, a graduate of Cooper Union Art School, where she studied fine art and design, says that the process is much less formal at Tor Books than at most other publishers. Cover discussions and decisions are frequently left up to her and the book's editor. Indeed, when Tor first started publishing books, editors tended to function as their own art directors, and the official art director's job was mainly traffic management. "Due to the strong convention culture of the science fiction and fantasy world," Gallo says, "editors tend to know all the artists, and many writers and artists know each other. So Tor editors were often able to choose an artist they thought would be good for a particular project. They might also ask the author, 'Who would you like to illustrate the cover?' And then they'd try to get that artist for the book."

**T**he science fiction and fantasy genre has long recognized its artists, and they are as much a part of the community as the writers are. Any sizable sf/f convention will include an art show and art auction among its attractions, where both cover art and original artwork are displayed and sold. It's a rare sf/f convention that does not have an artist among its guests of honor, as well as a number of other artists attending. Artist panels, as well as author panels, are a featured aspect of almost any sf/f convention program, and three of the thirteen annual Hugo Awards are in art categories. This recognition of artists in a field where they have used their talent to give visual images to fantastic concepts is not only well-deserved, but it also beats the hell out of making body-builders and models the featured guests of a book convention. But I digress.

Tor Books has grown and expanded since those early days when editors had so much control over bookcovers,

and Gallo is truly an art director rather than a traffic manager. Even at Tor, however, when dealing with a “big” book, one where a lot of money is at stake, marketing people, the sales force, and the publisher himself all become involved in decisions made about the cover and packaging.

Harper’s Gene Mydlowski explains what sort of things are discussed at a cover conference. “I want to know the relevant details of the book: type of book, author, audience, and subject matter. The meeting defines the peripheral elements and helps us develop a strategy.” He adds that covers, while always important, are *most* important for a new or unknown author; in that case, it is the cover which sells the book. At the other end of the spectrum, famous authors’ *names* will be the most important feature of the cover—names like Grisham, Clancy, Steel, and King.

After the meeting, the art department chooses a specific type of cover: graphics, illustration, painting, photo, etc. Based on these decisions, and keeping the budget in mind, Mydlowski starts making assignments: artist, photographer, models, designer, etc. Cover “art” refers to the illustration or depiction; usually a painting, it’s always done by a freelance artist. “Design” refers to the things which many of us, unfortunately, scarcely even notice, even though they are often as important as the art to the cover’s appearance and appeal. “Design” encompasses many features: lettering, typography, graphics, copy, layout, spine, stepback, die-cutting, and so on. These are all usually implemented by in-house designers at most major publishing houses, though freelance designers may be hired for specialized detail work. Therefore, a cover which is all graphics and type can usually be completely done by in-house staff.

Selecting an artist depends on the book and the budget. A publisher seldom uses high-priced artists on mid-list books. So, despite the occasional rumors one hears, it’s highly unlikely that your cover artist gets paid more than you do; and if he does, that may well mean that although you got a low advance, your publisher believes enough in your book to hire a great illustrator. In that case, you should be pleased; remember, the cover is extremely important to your success.

The budget, of course, will not be the only factor. What type of book is this? What’s appropriate for the cover? Not only do artists specialize in terms of genre, but they also become known for certain specializations *within* that genre. And by the way, most artists are no more happy about being asked to do the same thing over and over again than any writer is. In “A Short History of SF Art in Paperback” (*SF Chronicle* March/April 1995), science fiction cover artist Vincent Di Fate writes: “Trained as a figure painter, I had grandiose visions of creating huge, complex surreal canvases, but was brought up short when my first few dozen assignments were to paint spaceships. I hadn’t a clue as to how to do such a thing and it took me years to get good at it, but when I finally did become proficient at hardware, I was rewarded by hardly ever being allowed to paint anything else.”

(A later article in this *NINK* series will focus specifically on cover artists: who they are, what they make, how they work.)

While the terms “artist” and “illustrator” are used pretty interchangeably here, “illustrator” is probably the more accurate word for a cover artist. His job, after all, is to portray the essential story idea. It could be represented by something as simple as a couple of lovers embracing/ or the illustrator might have to find a way to portray something as complex as a social crisis on an imaginary alien world.

**N**ot only do illustrators specialize in vastly different areas, they also work at very different paces. Some can have a cover painting ready in just a few days; others may take a month to complete a painting. If an illustrator is in very great demand—as with Michael Whelan, for example, winner of over a dozen Hugo awards as Best Professional Artist in science fiction and fantasy—the art director may have to wait six months for the cover painting, due to the artist’s busy schedule.

The illustrator usually sends sketches to the art director once he’s developed his concept for the painting. He may have done so independently, or he may have received very specific instructions from the art department. At this point, the art director might suggest revisions. The editor will often be asked to approve the sketches, too. The bigger the book, of course, the more people whose approval must be solicited for these sketches. While one art director interviewed emphasizes how valuable he finds the input of sales and marketing people, others point out that too much second-guessing waters down the concept. “Objections and suggestions can range from the ridiculous to the sublime,” one of them says. The publisher, editor, and marketing director may all have more input than the art director—the person who is actually trained in composition and design.

Happily, although sales feedback and marketing trends do play a big role in publishers’ decisions about book covers, most art directors give no credence to sweeping generalizations such as “green books don’t sell.” And, after tracking sales records for thousands of books during her career as a buyer with B. Dalton/Barnes & Noble, editor Denise Little has formulated only *one* generalization: women consumers seem to respond positively to horses on a book cover. Unfortunately, after two years in charge of her own imprint at Zebra Books, Little has yet to acquire a book for which horses would be an appropriate cover illustration.

The original cover painting for the book is the property of the cover artist. He sells the publisher rights to reproduce the work within whatever limitations have been agreed upon. Vincent Di Fate writes in *SF Chronicle*, September 1990: “thus a painting can be created, for instance, to illustrate the cover of a mass market soft-cover edition of a particular book intended for distribution and sale in North America ... All other rights not specifically transferred or restricted by the agreement between artist and client, remain with the artist and can be made ➔

# Green Books

(Continued from page 11)

available for sale." Most art directors mention that occasionally a painting arrives at their office which isn't right for the book for which it was intended; however, as long as it's good work, they can usually find a book which it suits better. Denise Little, however, admits that some paintings won't work for *anything*; she has vetoed several such paintings. In these case, Zebra eats the cost. In the long run, the publisher figures this costs them less than releasing the book with a cover they believe will kill its sales.

**T**he art department actually works with an engraver's reproduction, rather than the original cover painting—which the publisher returns to the artist. The publisher is usually billed for any damage which may be incurred due to their careless handling. (Author's Note: A May/June 1994 *RWR* interview with romance cover artist John Solie states that the publisher never sees the original painting. Since everyone interviewed for this *NINK* series confirms that the publisher *does* see the original painting, the *RWR* interview may merely reflect the unique way series romance operates, a subject outside the boundaries of these articles.)

Once the cover illustration is completed and approved, the cover goes into design. Irene Gallo says this shouldn't just refer to how type goes on the cover, but rather to how the entire package is conceptualized. She's interested in seeing covers become more design-conscious, so that the art and design appear as a whole piece, rather than as a painting with some unrelated lettering slapped into the blank space. When asked for an example of a particularly good marriage of art and design, she mentions the recent sf/f novel *Gun With Occasional Music* by new writer Jonathan Lethem (artwork by Michael Koelsch). The cover, by the way, received a 1995 Hugo nomination (winner to be announced in August 1995) for Best Original Artwork.

Costly extras such as gold foil, embossing, and other attention-getting devices, Gallo says, "can be assumed by the book's position in the list. The higher up the list the book is, the more stuff it can get on the cover. And, of course, the more books printed, the cheaper the per-unit cost for those extras." However, even a gamble on a new book can be taken if the publisher expects a good return on his investment. Remember first-time author Mickie Madden's *Everlastin'*, mentioned in Article I: "Cover Karma"? Editor Denise Little stresses that her conviction that the book would fulfill the excitement created by the cover was essential for Zebra to risk creating such expensive packaging for it.

Sometimes the size of the advance dictates how com-

mitted the publisher is to getting attention for your book. Sometimes the excitement comes from your editor. "I deal with *everybody's* books," Irene Gallo points out, "whereas the editor only deals with those of his own writers." Hence, she often relies on the editor to tell her which books are special and need (or deserve) a special cover. The editor's excitement generates Gallo's excitement.

Once the cover is out there, for all the world to see, what feedback does the art director get? Book critics don't review covers, after all. Hugos are awarded to illustrators. So what recognition is given to the art director?

Sales seem to be the primary feedback upon which art directors rely. Occasionally, there's a rare, consistent, across-the-boards response where a book virtually flies off the stands—or simply dies without a whimper. "Otherwise," Mydlowski says, "there are so many variables, the cover may be just another variable." Gallo also mentions "call reports," wherein the sales force indicates how buyers are responding to the covers. In addition, *Print Magazine* offers awards; but many publishing professionals are too busy (or uninterested) to enter their work.

Of course, feedback can also come from authors. "Everyone would like to please the author and hopes the author likes the work," Gallo says. Gene Mydlowski, editor Denise Little, and various art directors all echo this.

But how much actual input do they want you to have? There is no single answer, since that varies tremendously. Rather than just sending roses (or suicide threats) to your publisher's art director after the cover has already been printed, what can you do to influence the cover process? Should you contribute your opinions, or simply stay out of the art department's way? How can you best protect your interests?

These and other intriguing questions will be explored in the next article in this series, "But I Wrote the Damn Thing."

## ***NINK* Needs:**

About a year ago, anyone who had bought back a book was asked to contact the editor. Several did, but not enough to do a well-rounded piece. So the call is going out again: If you have bought back a book in the past year or so and would be willing to discuss the process, anonymously or otherwise, please contact the editor.

Also, anyone who has experience publishing with both large and small presses is needed for an article on that topic. As usual, contact the editor.



## EAST OF THE HUDSON

### Respect: Getting Some

Aretha was right. All anybody wants is "R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

Respect is always in short supply, but Romance, the genre that people usually love to hate, got several big and well-deserved gold stars recently.

Perhaps the most gratifying appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* June 28 under the headline "Romances, Long Denied Reviews, Get Some Respect."

The *Journal* piece by Ellen Graham, a departure from previous dismissive coverage of the genre, provides lots of basic information that the average American reader might have missed.

For instance, the merchandise manager of Borders Group Inc. admitted in print that "romance is a bigger business for us than mysteries." Any romance writer knows that, but apparently it's coming as big news to the rest of the book world.

Besides the *Journal* piece, there have been strong and positive pieces on romance authors and their craft in several library journals, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other papers. The *Atlanta Journal* has begun a regular romance review column as well. Two of our members, Jayne Ann Krentz and Cathie Linz, have been important in generating positive coverage and both are to be commended.

All the media attention supports the same basic thesis: Romance is a legitimate expression of popular culture, no less important than mystery, science fiction, westerns, or the rest. That message is getting across, but I propose one additional step to reinforce the trend.

Chip McGrath (his real name is Charles, but everybody in New York uses the nickname) is the new editor of the *New York Times Book Review*. In keeping with long-time policy, he says the *Review* will continue to ignore romances because of space constraints. "You have to draw the line somewhere," McGrath says, and besides, "these books seem to find their audience quite happily."

The Old Chiperoo's comments are both specious and unresponsive, not to mention condescending. The *Review* gives regular space and sympathetic reviews to mysteries and science fiction, both of which are mass-market genres. Even political mysteries, otherwise known as "thrillers," get regular coverage. Yet romances, which outsell all the other genres combined, seem to be beneath the Chipster's dignity.

IMHO (that's Internetspeak for "in my humble opinion"), no journalistic review organ should consider itself well-rounded unless it pays attention to romance. Such attention need not be fawning, but it should be sympathetic to the basic tenets (cq) of the genre.

So, I'd like to suggest we all sit down and write letters

to Chip McGrath, asking for coverage of the romance genre along with other popular fiction novels. Perhaps we could send copies to his bosses at the *New York Times*.

Joseph Lelyveld is the executive editor of the paper and Gene Roberts is the managing editor. All these guys can be reached at 229 W. 43rd St., New York NY 10036.

I wouldn't pretend to suggest a text for the letters. You folks are all writers, so use your imaginations.

Consider this our mutual contribution to the democratizing of American culture.

### Book Stores and Super Stores

The Consumer Research Study on Book Purchasing, as reported in *Publishers Weekly*, reports that chain bookstores' share of market has increased four percent, from 23% in 1993 to 27% in 1994.

During the same period, market share for independent booksellers shrank from 24% to 19%. Most other outlets showed little change.

In other words, the chains are the future, whether any of us like it or not.

In a letter to the editor, NINC member Pat Rice took me to task and offered a defense of independent bookstores. She dislikes the impersonality of superstores and she likes the way independents know both their clientele and their stock.

I understand Pat's points. I like booksellers who are informed and helpful, too. My complaint is with the independent bookseller who sets him- or herself up as a gatekeeper. I am particularly irritable with the independent who won't carry romances because such books are beneath the dignity of his/her classy bookstore.

Many independents know and love the genres, but the biggest and most influential independent bookstores in the country disdain or denigrate the kinds of books many NINC members write. Ask any salesman for a mass-market paperback house whether he has better luck at Waldenbooks or at the Tattered Cover, Shakespeare & Co., Elliot Bay Books, and any other of the huge independent bookstores so beloved by the *New York Times*.

I think you know what the answer will be.

Two other interesting statistics did come out of the market-share study: Warehouse clubs now account for six percent of all national book sales. That percentage figure would undoubtedly be higher for best-seller titles since those are the kinds of books warehouse clubs usually stock.

In addition, used bookstores account for four per cent of all book business in the country, according to the study.

None of us who write books for a living can afford to ignore or antagonize any bookseller, chain, or indepen-



# EAST OF THE HUDSON

(Continued from page 13)

dent. I even chat up the teamster who stocks the racks at the Texaco station where I buy gas. But a four percent swing in market share is considerable. Love it or hate it, it's a signpost to the future of book selling.

## Tangle-Tongue of the Typewriter

Martin Amis, he of the shiny new teeth, has contributed a real gem of thoughtful language torture. In a review of Elmore Leonard's *Riding the Rap* in the *NYT Book Review* section, Marty said:

"Elmore Leonard is a literary genius who writes readable thrillers. He belongs, then, not to the mainstream but to the genres (before he wrote thrillers, he wrote westerns). Whereas genre fiction, on the whole, heavily relies on plot, mainstream fiction, famously, has only a dozen plots to recombine (boy meets girl, good beats bad, and so on). But Mr. Leonard has only one plot. All his thrillers are *Pardoner's Tales*, in which death roams the land—usually Miami and Detroit—disguised as money."

Wait a minute, Marty! I thought genre fiction was the literary form that featured limited plots and hackneyed stories. "Boy meets girl?" That's the plot of every romance that's ever been written. Detective solves mystery, ditto.

On second reading, I decided I had missed several nuances in the passage. I've never seen one quite like it. So many sentences that needed retooling. So many parentheses that needed editing out. So many thoughts that needed to be challenged.

On the other hand, there's something going on in there. I like Elmore Leonard a lot and after reading the Amis review, I understand better how good the bard of Motown Mayhem really is.

By inference, I think I like Amis a little better, too, even though he's a slippery devil to read. He made me rethink a distinction I thought I once understood.

## Raw Intelligence on Life EOH

This column is a modest attempt to explain life as it is lived east of the Hudson River, in the aging borough of Manhattan. We creators of "provincial" and popular fiction need such intelligence, just as Americans needed intelligence from behind the Iron Curtain during the late spate of strained feelings with the Soviet Union.

I usually try to digest the raw material that comes through my machine for the sake of brevity, but sometimes

I get a great glop of material that is hard to abbreviate. That's when I recommend that you track the entire piece down yourself. Such is the case in "Picks, Pans, and Fragile Egos: The inside story of how the *Times* decides which books are fit to print" (*Civilization Magazine*, July-August, 1995).

The article, forwarded to me by President Bill (no, not Clinton, Bernhardt), was penned by Rebecca Pepper Sinkler, until recently the editor of the *NYT Book Review*. In all my days of reading periodicals, I have never seen a more arch, self-congratulatory discussion of the literary incest that passes as *belles lettres* in America today.

Sinkler attempts to describe the process by which the *Review* selects books, assigns reviewers, and, in general, shape the literary life of the most diverse and fractious country in the world. In this discussion, she spreads blanket generalizations, drops names, and reveals blind spots enough to shock even the most provincial of us.

With the kind of tunnel vision that sometimes develops at the other end of the Holland, Sinkler talks about how enjoyable it was to "contribute to the intellectual discussion of important issues, to discover new talent, to eviscerate loathsome books—in the words of Ludwig Bemelmans's immortal *Madeline*, we 'smiled at the good and frowned at the bad.'"

The rudimentary grammarian in me says that sentence is not only arch and condescending but also technically flawed. However, far be it from me to criticize a critic. Anyway, kids, the woman wrote it with a straight face.

Well, maybe a superior little smirk did tug at the corners of her thin and pursed lips, but what the hell....

To hear Ms. Sinkler tell it to the readers of *Civilization*, the *NYT* has enormous problems in only one area. It has to be excruciatingly careful not to assign reviews to bosom buddies or sworn enemies of the authors who are chosen for attention.

"...If the potential reviewer's ex-wife has been sleeping with the author recently, it wouldn't be a great assignment, either," she says of the game.

In other words, we are talking about a literary world so small that everyone may well be in bed with everyone else. Or vice versa.

Sinkler describes the same kind of insouciant inbreeding in her charming anecdotes about how writers were offended by reviews. For instance, one day, Joseph Lelyveld, executive editor of the *NYT*, ushered his pal Norman Mailer into Sinkler's office. Mailer, it seemed, had been wounded by a bad review of his most recent book.

Lelyveld was there, Sinkler assures us, not to pimp for Mailer but to referee. There ensued a civilized discussion

among equals, the result of which was that Sinkler, tough nut that she is, agreed to give Mailer a full page to rebut the offensive review of his book.

But, Sinkler assures us, the *Times* came out ahead on the exchange because she got 1,600 free words out of the most expensive writer in America.

Inbred, inbred, inbred. Some of these folks have become so narrow between the eyes that you couldn't bisect their skulls with a sharp ax.

There I go, frothing again. I'm sorry. I'll take my medication and try to do better.

I would leave you with one final image, though. Sinkler talks at the end of the piece about a form letter she used to send to authors who complained about not getting space. The letter read:

"The sad truth is that there are far more good books than space in which to review them."

In retrospect, she says, that was a lie. "There was some stretching of the truth in that form letter...In the clear light of day, I don't think that a lot of good books got neglected by the *Times* during my tenure, nor likely will they under my successor, Charles McGrath."

At least she didn't call him "Chip."

On second thought, maybe we should scrap the idea of a letter campaign to encourage the *Times* to review romance. We and they will never be on the same wavelength.

Hell, there are times when I wonder if we are in the same universe.

— Evan Maxwell

## Industry Update

In a recent issue of *Publisher's Weekly*, a misconception held by a significant number of writers re the ABA anti-trust lawsuit filed against five publishers was corrected. The ABA suit was not brought against any warehouse clubs nor is the suit about independent vs. chain booksellers. The ABA feels independent and chain booksellers alike are "systematically and illegally disfavored" in the deals the five publishers named in the action offer to warehouse clubs. The central question of the suit is: Why do the five sell their books at "substantially lower prices" to warehouse clubs than to bookstores?

## "Wasn't She Great?"

Michael Korda, in the August 14th *New Yorker*, reminded all of us popular fiction novelists of the debt we owe to Jacqueline Susann. Whatever one might have thought of her work—and millions loved it—she and her husband were the first to demonstrate that books can be merchandised—a lesson, Korda observes, that a lot of publishers have yet to learn. She also "reinvented that mainstay of publishing the romance novel." That reinvention benefited far more than romance novelists, however, because she showed everyone in book publishing that what most readers want above all else "is, quite simply, a good story," one that allows them to escape their own lives for a while. That might be the best definition anyone has come up with yet for popular fiction: a good story.

## Conference Session on "Guide to Agents"

The committee to revise and update the 1993 NINC *Guide to Agents* has scheduled a session at the October conference to solicit members' views on how the survey should be revised, and what, other than the survey results themselves, should be included in the booklet we publish.

1. Problems arose with the clarity and fairness of some survey questions. We'll discuss revisions, additions, and deletions.

2. Some members have asked for information about their fellow members' experiences with past agents. We'll talk about how best to address this need.

3. The survey booklet might be an appropriate place for articles on the author/agent relationship (such as a description of what services an agent should perform) and sample forms (a model agency contract, for example, or a model letter to terminate the author/agent relationship). We welcome your thoughts and suggestions.

The session is currently scheduled for Thursday evening. (The place and exact time will be posted on the conference bulletin board.) I plan to open the entire meeting to everyone at the conference unless I hear that our members wish some portion of it to be "for writers only." If you can't attend, please fax me (916-448-1090) or mail me (1240 Noonan Drive, Sacramento CA 95822) your suggestions and concerns.

— Deborah Gordon, Chair





## Conference Update

The Warwick Hotel, the conference hotel, is sold out. If you haven't made your reservation, call Kay Bergstrom, 303-322-0749. If you had reserved a room to yourself but have since decided you would like a roommate, Kay will be very happy. Call her and she will give you one.

Plans for the two booksignings are firming up. The Media Play signing is concrete; the Book Festival signing is still spinning around in the mixer. Because response was so great for both, hours have been extended. Media Play hours are below; the Festival hours will likely be noon to three on Saturday. Signing space at the Festival is at a premium so if anyone has a second signing arranged at the Festival and doesn't mind skipping the Saturday NINC signing, please let me know. Instructions for the Book Festival signing will be in the conference registration packet. The schedule and directions for the Thursday Media Play signing are below.

### Media Play Signing Information

The downtown Media Play is located at 702 16th Street, the corner of 16th and California. At most, this is a five-minute walk from the Warwick hotel. Go out the front door of the Warwick and turn left. At the first corner, turn right and continue down 17th Street to Broadway. Cross Broadway and you'll be walking down Court Place. One block later, you will be at 16th Street. Turn right and walk to California Street and Media Play or board one of the free buses that run continuously and ride the short distance.

There will be three signing sessions, and the simplest way to divide the group was alphabetically. If you write under a pseudonym, that decided your placement since that is how readers know you. Those of you who write under several pseudonyms will see your names below.

11:00-11:45 AM — Last names beginning with **A** through **F** including Dixie Browning/Bronwyn Williams

12:00-12:45 PM — Last names beginning with **G** through **O** including Maggie Osborne/Margaret St. George

1:00- 1:45 PM — Last names beginning with **P** through **Z**

If you have a conflict, please let me know ASAP. Cathy Roland, the promotions manager at Media Play, asks that everyone come 10 minutes early to get situated. Don't forget your name tents and any hand-outs.

— **Patty Gardner Evans**

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