

Novelists' Ink

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

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Reviewing the Reviewers

When I'm in the right mood, I can find fault with anything. This mindset seems perfect for tackling the subject of reviews. A number of authors shared insights on this topic, but in keeping with *Publisher's Weekly*, they will be quoted anonymously.

We authors have to deal with a lot of disappointment during the course of our careers. For every sale, there's often a list of rejections from other publishers. Once a book is sold, you'd think and hope the rest would be easy. But from my experience, and from listening to other authors, the worst is yet to come. Reviews.

A good review isn't quite as wonderful as I would have thought. I got a five star review from *Affaire de Coeur* on my latest book, and my immediate reaction was, "She didn't hate it." When I told another author about a good review she'd received in *Romantic Times*, she said, "Dodged another bullet." That pretty much sums it up for me.

A bad review is a different story. Many authors have found a negative review can be devastating, even though evidence suggests a bad review in a genre-specific publication has little or no impact on sales. One romance author received a two star review in the romance fanzine, *Romantic Times*, and the book went on to be her first bestseller. Another critically acclaimed author received her first negative review on a book which went on to win Romance Writers of America's RITA award.

In contrast to author reaction to reviews, the readers I

interviewed shared a common response: "I don't want anyone telling me what to like." When I asked a high-traffic Waldenbooks bookseller how often people came to the store looking for a book they'd seen reviewed, the response was, "Never." Though another bookseller acknowledged that she occasionally recom-

mended books based on reviews, the occurrence was still minimal.

Readers seem less interested in someone else's opinion than in hearing an unbiased rundown of what a book, movie, or television program is about. Obviously, the consumers who made movies like *Star Wars* and *Ghost* into blockbusters, and books like *Bridges of Madison County* into major bestsellers, aren't listening to the critics. Plenty of critically acclaimed films as well as award winning literary novels have fallen unnoticed by the public.

However, reviewers feel strongly that reviews influence sales and careers. A good review can be used in promotion, and may be used by an agent to give a prospective editor an idea of the author's strengths. From a personal standpoint, it's a good feeling just to know someone "gets it."

Do reviews affect sales?

It depends upon whom you

ask. A positive review in the *New York Times* can boost interest in a book, which affects sales numbers. (Although not to the degree that a spot on *Oprah* can!) A mention in a magazine with a huge circulation like *People* would reach many readers. However, by the time an author is well-known enough to garner *People's* notice, that author generally has an audience already firmly established.

Evidence suggests that a bad review in *Publisher's Weekly* might be a good thing. Some books they have praised highly have a poor record of sales, whereas many they have panned went on to bestsellerdom. (More about that later.) One explanation is that their clear bias against popular fiction, romance in particular, indicates a lack of interest in what people are reading today.

Depending on the reviewer, (whose name we'll never know, because all *PW* reviews are anonymous), a book can be lauded for not being "a typical romance." Just guessing here, but people don't go into the (continued on page 4)

By
STOBIE PIEL

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

**This Month
from the
President:**

Audit redux

*Surviving a
bad patch*

We're Doing Another Audit! At our last meeting, the board voted to spend part of the money we received from the Author's Coalition on another lottery audit. Georgia Bockoven has agreed to chair the committee again, and we will soon be sending out entry forms. We'll also be publishing an article explaining audit clauses so potential entrants will know if their contracts make them eligible for the selection process. Watch this space for details.

A Bad Patch: A friend who's having some health problems responded to my recent expression of sympathy by saying that she's just going through "a bad patch" right now and expects to come through just fine. That made me think about how much I love the expression "a bad patch." It sounds so much better than "a crisis" or "a disaster." A "bad patch" is something that happens to everyone from time to time along life's journey. It's also something you can get through with a little patience and some time and effort.

Like many other NINC members, I've been experiencing a bad patch in my career. Nothing is going right. No one wants to buy my stuff. I was even feeling as if I couldn't come up with any good ideas. This from a person who once was afraid she wouldn't live long enough to write all the stories she had in her head. Suddenly, there were *no* stories in my head, or at least none that I felt strongly enough about to write down.

How could this have happened? Oh, I'd been careful. I had too many friends who'd suffered burnout to let it happen to me. I always took time between books to rest and refill the well. I had carefully constructed a life apart from writing with friends and activities that had nothing to do with my professional life. I was also contemptuous of those who were almost superstitious about the sanctity of the creative process. It was, after all, just a job, and I was in control.

Well, I'm not contemptuous anymore. I am now in awe of those writers who are not only continuing to write after ten or fifteen years, but who are writing well and successfully, who are writing wonderful new things and/or doing the same old things better than ever. Unfortunately, too many of us aren't.

I don't know why so many of us are going through the same bad patch at the same time. Maybe because so many of us started in this business at the same time, during the boom of the early '80s. Maybe it's a cyclical thing that writers go through every decade or so and since so many of us started at the same time, we're all hitting the downswing at the same time.

What's the answer? First, I'd say that if anything can keep you from writing, let it. Why put yourself through this torture if you can find satisfaction doing something else? Every year a few of our members make that decision and drop their NINC membership because they're no longer writing. Whenever I see their names, I'm shocked. While I might envy them their decisiveness, I could no more give up writing than I could give up breathing, and most of you probably feel the same way.

If you do, and if, like me, you're going through a "bad patch," then let me recommend a wonderful book to you, *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. Many other NINC members have recommended it, and it's gotten rave reviews from folks on NinLink, the NINC maillist. I'm only just starting, but already I can feel the effects. So if you're stuck in that bad patch and don't see any way out, give it a try. As hokey as it sounds, it could change your life.

— Victoria Thompson

Wanted: Authors

Writers are notoriously antagonistic to organizations. We do our work alone, we like to believe, just us and the words.

Sorry, friends, those days are behind us, now.

Novelists, Inc. has grown up. We are now one of the top writers' groups in the country. We have a standing membership of more than 500. We have taken our place on national coalitions, and we have put together a wide-ranging program of services to the creators of popular fiction.

But none of that happens by magic. Everything that this organization does, from the newsletter to the convention to the rest of it, requires voluntary effort.

Lots of voluntary effort. More effort every week.

That's where you, the individual members come in. The nominating committee is seeking potential candidates

for the 1998 board of directors and for the 1998 nominating committee. This year we are asking members who are interested in such offices to contact the nominating committee directly to express their willingness to serve.

This is not the time for false modesty, nor is it the place to try the "I'm-too-busy-chasing-my-career" stunt. Everybody is busy in this world. Everybody has a great many demands on their time and energy.

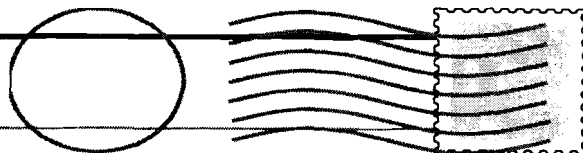
But if this organization means anything to us as a group, we have to be ready to support it as individuals.

Signal your interest to William Bernhardt, 6420 S. Richmond Ave., Tulsa OK 74135, Fax 918-492-2120, e-mail willbern@mindspring.com

Or contact other members of the nominating committee, which includes Lillian Stewart Carl, Carole Nelson Douglas, Julie Kistler, Robyn Carr, Emilie Richards McGee, Margaret Evans Porter, and Vicki Lewis Thompson.

— 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. Letters may be sent to the NINK editor via mail, fax, or e-mail. See masthead for addresses.

Clueless?

I'm not certain I understand Laura Resnick's conference report in the April issue. We're supposed to be distressed and outraged at the increased cost of getting all those publishers and editors together in one place? All to ourselves in one of the most expensive cities in the world where any editor who doesn't attend is only a cab ride—or a brisk walk—away?

We're expected to be moved to violence at the idea of our agents feeling obliged to take us out to lunch (or better yet, dinner), and assure us how *important* we are to them and what *dynamite* plans they have for our careers? Where those of us who live in places where the only seasons are hot or hotter might actually have an opportunity to see leaves turn color?

Obviously, I'm more clueless than I thought because I think this is a smoking deal.

I do, however, have one question. Has Laura double-

checked to make certain that we're actually getting water (let alone hot) in a New York City hotel room for \$169 a night?

— JoAnn Ross

Curious....

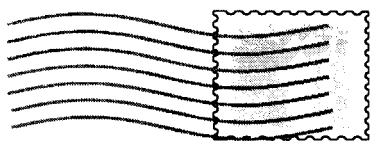
How I write—great idea for a new column. I was fascinated by Barbara's account. When I first began writing, I read many books on the subject, and usually when the author got done telling about their personal lives and how they wrote, I quit reading the book. I love to know about other writers' lives. I also cannot help as I drive an urban street at night peering into houses where the curtains are wide, or perusing the contents of other shoppers' baskets in the grocery store. What can I say? I'm curious. And either I'm thinking: Oh, God, thank you that I'm not the only crazy person, or Hey, maybe I could profit from that habit. Keep the revelations coming.

— Curtiss Ann Matlock

Goosebumps....

Carole Nelson Douglas's cover article about the *USA Today* Bestseller List is wonderfully informative and useful and I appreciate her writing it. However, the references to R. L. Stine, "author" of the phenomenal Goosebumps series for children, make me and presumably other authors out here writing in the trenches slightly ill. Well, okay, more than slightly.

Folks, R. L. Stine does NOT write all those bestsellers. I know for a fact that some are written by our very own NINC members who had to sign contracts restricting them from claiming authorship. And as for R. L. Stine's part in male domination of the *USA Today* Bestseller List? >>>



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

(Continued from page 3)

Forget it. Some of the writers who are paid to write for Stine under the Goosebumps label and using his name as a pseudonym are women. Yeah, WOMEN.

I don't blame them for writing Goosebumps books. If he asked me and if I happened to have time in my writing schedule, I'd do it too. (Hey, R. L.—you can contact me through my agent: Ellen Levine.)

Why must I let this cat out of the bag? Well, I didn't sign any contract stating that I wouldn't. And as I said, all this hoopla, including Stine's appearing on TV and, with a straight face, purporting to write more books a year than is superhumanly possible, makes me ill. In fact, it gives me, um, goosebumps.

— **Pamela Browning**

Macaluso Memorial Fund

I'm certain everyone in the romance community has undoubtedly already heard the news of fellow NINC member Pamela Macaluso's death. For those who don't know, Pam, her two teenage sons, and husband were found dead in their home on March 31. All were shot; police believe her husband committed the triple-murder suicide.

In an attempt to have some good come out of this tragedy, a fund has been started to donate to Literacy in Pam's name. Contribution checks should be made out to CFRW—Pam Macaluso Fund and sent to Mary Jane Carroll, 1233 Audubon Place, Orlando FL 32804.

— **JoAnn Ross**

Reviewing the Reviewers

(Continued from page 1)

romance section of a bookstore looking for a dark walk through a literary writer's mind.

Publisher's Weekly is aimed at the book publishing industry and reviews all genres. According to Associate Editor Jonathan Bing, *Publisher's Weekly's* targeted readership consists of "one-third booksellers, as well as publishers, critics and Hollywood film scouts." (He didn't give me evidence to support this claim, however. Hollywood checks *PW* before the NYT list?)

Publishers submit approximately twenty thousand books a year, and *Publisher's Weekly* reviews five thousand of those. Though mainly focused on hard-cover titles, reviewers also select among first-time authors and midlist titles in paperback.

Bing says that *Publisher's Weekly* reviews have a profound impact on sales, because *PW* comes out "a whole month" before publication dates. When I mentioned that distributors place orders six months in advance, he replied, "I wouldn't know about that."

Bing said that many stores restock based on reviews. I asked several booksellers if they ordered according to reviews, and the answer was a unanimous "No." If a book sells well, they reorder. If a book receives glowing reviews and sits on the shelf... Well... It sits on the shelf.

Publisher's Weekly has been accused of holding a notable bias against genre fiction, especially romance and SF/F. Some time ago, a nine-month study revealed that 75% of the romance reviews were negative. Even the wording of positive reviews tended to be demeaning to the genre, such as "not the typical trashy romance novel."

When challenged with the study results at a NINC conference a few years ago, Editor-in-Chief Nora Rawlinson led an effort to bring in more knowledgeable genre reviewers, and most authors report an improvement, with reviews that reflect an understanding of the genre, and fewer vitriolic attacks on

"those books." Recently, however, the trend seems to be edging back down, with unpredictable bad reviews of well-respected authors. Often, these negative views take on surprisingly personal slants—from unnamed reviewers.

Publisher's Weekly's own response to the question of anonymous reviews has varied, including a claim that anonymity "protects the reviewers to assure honest criticism." Jonathan Bing told me that there is no need to reveal the reviewers' names because *PW* reviews are "written to house style," and that *PW* "stands behind its reviewers." (This is a touchy subject, but I can't help thinking they're standing behind people who are already hidden behind a curtain.)

Bing says that *Publisher's Weekly* reviews are typified by "balance, intelligence, strong critical stand, attention to the market, and sensitivity to the book's goals." Some reviews may be re-written if it doesn't "do the book justice," either by being too harsh, or not utilizing enough "critical spine." A definition of "critical spine" was not forthcoming.

The subject of unsigned reviews has led to a great deal of speculation. Jonathan Bing assured me that their genre reviewers are "veterans" of genre-specific magazines. But what if those reviewers were fired from other publications? What if one of these experts is a struggling published author embittered toward authors who are receiving intensive publisher support? Both these scenarios have been put forth to explain unfavorable reviews.

Publisher's Weekly could end the speculation that dampens their credibility with authors by disclosing the names and qualifications of their reviewers. Other magazines I have interviewed all felt that part of their service to readers was getting to know specific reviewers and their tastes, *PW* might also benefit from this viewpoint.

However, since *Publisher's Weekly* doesn't depend on mass market authors for advertisement, nor does their audience consist of popular fiction fans, change seems unlikely.

The book sections of major newspa-

pers across the country tend to cover lead hardcover titles, yet conspicuously avoid genre fiction, especially romance. Hardcover fiction is reviewed far more often than paperbacks. Though the readership of popular fiction far outnumbers that of literary fiction, the emphasis is heavily directed toward literary fiction, even though most newspapers serve the general public, not an elite university audience. The percentage of reviews does not reflect the popularity of individual genres, since romance, which represents nearly 50% of mass market, is reviewed least often.

The elitist mentality of many newspapers may explain the bias, but authors are working to change perceptions of genre fiction. Newspapers seem to feel the readership for genre fiction, especially romance and science fiction/fantasy, is more limited than it actually is. Sometimes, just alerting them to the size of our readership is enough to inspire new reviews. However, the strong prejudice is a definite hurdle to overcome.

Romance author Kathleen Eagle does a review column called "Popular Fiction" for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, which has a circulation of 600,000. The column runs every three weeks on the Sunday *Book Page*, where she reviews two books from a wide range of genre fiction, including romance, historical novels, women's fiction, romantic suspense, and Westerns.

Eagle met the *Book Page* editor of the *Tribune* at a workshop in Minneapolis where they were both speakers. When he mentioned not reading "escapist fiction," he was reminded that they had covered science fiction, mystery, and adventure. He offered Eagle a "window of opportunity," and was willing to add a genre column if Eagle would do the reviews.

Despite her own busy career, Eagle seized the opportunity. She says, "It's been fun. My reviews are generally positive, although I will mention what I perceive to be a flaw. If I've chosen a book for review, it's because I think readers might want to take a look at it."

Eagle adds that "more newspapers are adding pop fiction to their review pages because they're beginning to recognize that it's what people read. I think we ought to approach more newspapers. We can say: The *Minneapolis Strib* does it; the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* does it; the *Toronto Star*, etc. Libraries are paying attention. Book-sellers are paying attention. Yes, it's worthwhile. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't do it because it does take time."

Rosemary Herbert reviews mystery for *The Boston Herald*, and has published several nonfiction books with Oxford Press, including *Fatal Art of Entertainment* and *Interviews with Mystery Writers*. Herbert has written about crime and mystery writing for twenty-five years, and has done reviews for *Library Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and for the *New York Times Book Review*.

Herbert acknowledges having personal preferences, but chooses to review a book with the question, "is it good of its kind?" She tries to include authors local to New England as well as to include midlist mysteries along with the more

heavily promoted books. Though mainly covering hardcover releases, Herbert will review a paperback original from time to time. She reviews mysteries that vary from legal or police procedurals, to cozy historical mysteries, to an occasional spy fiction, if the detective element is strong.

Though Herbert says that many of her reviews are positive because "there's a lot of good work out there," she reports honestly when a book seems weak, or not up to the author's usual standards. In a longer review, she balances the criticism with comments on strengths which could have been emphasized.

The *Boston Herald's* readership is broad, reaching everyone from truck drivers on a coffee break to housewives, to professionals riding the train. Genre-specific magazines are devoted to die-hard fans. Both science fiction/fantasy authors and reviewers say reviews have more impact for their genre than for other mass market fiction. According to Andrew Porter, the editor/publisher of *Science Fiction Chronicle*, "Reviews are very important."

Porter's reasoning? "The science fiction field has, in the past, supported several magazines which are solely reviews."

Locus runs lots of reviews by reviewers who are straightforward about their personal preferences. Knowing reviewers' tastes allows readers to make their own decisions. Authors report a bias toward straight science fiction over fantasy, as well as a reviewer tendency to focus on the specifically science fiction angle over other literary and story-telling elements.

Science fiction has an abundance of magazines which include reviews of new books: *Science Fiction Age*, *Analog*, *Starlog*, *Asimov's*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and others. Horror is supported by *Cemetery Dance*. The *Washington Post* features reviews by freelance editors of SF/F in their Sunday book section. *Tangent* is devoted entirely to reviews, covering magazine stories as well as books. Because short stories can grow into full-length novels, reader reaction is important.

SF/F has a committed, coordinated core of fans. Perhaps as many as ten thousand fans who put on conventions, vote on Hugos, and generate a powerful word-of-mouth force. Both *Locus* and *Science Fiction Chronicle* list the conventions, which occur almost every weekend somewhere. Dealers at the conventions stock their tables with books reviewed favorably in either of the two magazines.

The dedication to inner core fans is reflected in other genre-specific magazines, too. Carol Stacy, publisher of *Romantic Times*, emphasized that RT's reviewers put their readership above such factors as "editorial direction," or an author "stretching the boundaries." In Stacy's view, "reviewers keep the industry in check." She suggested that an author receiving a negative review "get on the phone with the reviewer" and find out exactly what the reviewer didn't like.

Romantic Times' readership consists of the romance genre's die-hard fans. Though the percentage of the genre's overall readership considered "die-hard" is small, Stacy feels the true fans of romance reflect the taste of > > >

Reviewing the Reviewers

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the overall readership. However, some authors have said that *RT* reflects only the fringe of the romance market, which tends to follow *RT*'s conception of the industry.

According to Stacy, distributors pay attention to ratings, which she says can affect print run and restock numbers. However, since distributors place orders six months before pub dates, the effect on sales would seem to be minimal, influencing small, independent booksellers, and used booksellers who don't have a standing order with publishers.

Several authors have complained about their reviews, saying the plot outline was inaccurate, the time period was wrong, even that the hero or heroine's name was misspelled. Since *Romantic Times*' reviewers each read between ten and twenty books a month, the concern is that books might be skimmed, with the result that easy-to-read books might be favored with good ratings.

Stacy emphasized that the widely circulated rumor that reviews are influenced by author advertisements is both "hurtful to her reviewers and blatantly false." She points out that it's impossible for the reviewers to know in advance who is advertising. She reminded me that an RWA study group found no correlation to reviews and ads.

A magazine fast growing in popularity with readers and writers is *The Literary Times*, which reviews any romance novel or novella, including all sub-genres. Publisher Diane Potwin says, "From what I've seen in over ten years of this business, reviewers have a great deal of impact on what readers buy." Readers know that buying a book based on the cover or back blurb is "a pot luck thing."

Understanding that what is best for one reader may be disappointing to another, *The Literary Times* reviews are not rated. Instead, reviews are formatted with a synopsis of the story, followed by a few lines from the reviewer telling not only about the content of the book, i.e., several graphic love scenes, rape scene, explicit language, etc., but how the author handled the content and how the book was laid out. Several authors, however, complained that the reviews gave away too much of their books, to the extent of spoiling the ending and revealing major plot twists.

Like science fiction and fantasy, romance supports several magazines, some covering only reviews. Many authors use quotes from publications like *Affaire de Coeur*, *A Little Romance*, *The Paperback Forum*, *Heartland Critiques*, and *Rendezvous*. Harriet Klausner of *Affaire de Coeur*, said to be the "most quoted reviewer in romance," also reviews mystery and mainstream fiction. Klausner's reviews can also be found online at *Painted Rock*. (<http://www.paintedrock.com/>)

Soda Creek Press publishes two direct-mail book catalogs that feature reviews. *Manderley*, begun in 1992, serves romance readers, and *Mysteries By Mail* handles the mys-

tery genre. *Manderley* covers the historical, contemporary, romantic suspense, and Regency sub-genres, as well as women's fiction and lifestyle books. *Mysteries by Mail* covers historical mysteries, "Sherlockiana," British mysteries, police and legal procedurals, as well as suspense and thrillers.

According to their home page, "All authors or titles in the *Manderley* as well as *Mysteries By Mail* are insightfully reviewed and the customer's satisfaction is unconditionally guaranteed." (As an aside, all their catalogs are printed on recycled paper, and they use soy-based inks. Everything down to the packing material is environmentally conscious. They've also planted more than 40,000 trees on Soda Creek Ranch in the past seven years.) *Gothic Journal* is a bridge between mystery and romance, reviewing novels that contain elements of romance, life-threatening suspense, and a puzzle or mystery. Editor Kristi Lyn Glass says that *Gothic Journal* reviewers don't rate books, because ratings lead readers to overlook books that may be of great interest to them. The reviewers explain what a book is about, offer information about its level of sexuality, balance of romance to suspense, amount and quality of setting detail, presence or absence of gothic elements, effectiveness of character development, plot structure, pacing, etc.

The review tries to provide "quotable quotes" if the book's quality warrants them, for the author/publisher to use in promotional efforts. However, constructive negative feedback is also provided. If a reviewer doesn't like a book, he or she will suggest the type of audience that will appreciate it.

The mystery genre supports several publications which carry reviews, including *The Armchair Detective*, *The Drood Review*, *Hardboiled Detective*, *Murder Most Cozy*, and *Murderous Intent*. Margo Power, the editor of *Murderous Intent*, explained that though *Murderous Intent* doesn't use reviews, they have the Minisynopsis Corner which contains minis of new novels.

Power says, "As to reviews, I'm not in favor of them because most often they only reflect the view of one reader. If a book is good, a good review is fine, but if it's honestly bad, even a bad review gives it free advertising it shouldn't have."

Mystery Scene reviews a variety of books, both fiction and nonfiction. The editor of *Mystery Scene*, Ed Gorman, spoke in a forthright manner about the importance of reviews, for mystery as well as other genres. Though he believes a good review can help a book's performance, he doesn't see evidence that a bad review hurts. If an author receives consistently negative reviews, sales may suffer because of lack of popular appeal.

Gorman's own book was released in England to critical acclaim, but when published in the USA, met with reviewers who didn't appreciate the book's humor. He received fan letters from readers who greatly enjoyed his humor, which he says "took away the sting." *Publisher's Weekly*

"savaged" a book which sold extremely well, outselling an earlier book which had received stellar reviews. In view of his own experience, Gorman believes the impact of reviews is minimal.

Gorman gave an example of a positive review's effect. Until Eudora Welty reviewed crime writer Ross McDonald on the front page of the *New York Times*, McDonald wasn't a major figure in publishing. After the high-profile, positive review, his career took off.

At a certain level of success, an author can expect to become the target of blistering reviews, as Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Tom Clancy can attest. Stephen King was once referred to as "the pied piper of the illiterate generation." Despite his booming career, such reviews were still troubling to King. When critics savaged King's book, *Christine*, Gorman remembers that King almost "gave off" writing for a year. (If you're bothered by negative reviews, you're in good company!)

At *Mystery Scene*, Gorman allows no personal attacks on authors. He says "the book should be the star of the review, not the reviewer." Though not offering all raves in his magazine, Gorman considers his purpose to be "recommending books to read." Too many reviews are about the reviewer's feelings and image. As Gorman says, "If they could write, they'd be home writing."

Gorman told me an enjoyable story about John Simon, a high brow critic, whose claim to fame was being "cold-cocked" by Norman Mailer. Simon was one of the first to use blatant personal attacks, which served his own fame-seeking interest. The level of his attacks involved such "witticisms" as comparing Barbra Streisand to an anteater, and saying Liza Minnelli looked like a cross between a chipmunk and a pig. Liza Minnelli's husband dumped pasta on Simon's head, and flattened him. According to Ed Gorman, "they all get what they deserve eventually."

Personal attacks are a hazard authors face, which seem to reflect more about the reviewer than about the book reviewed or the author. While comments such as "characterization was light," "I didn't care for this novel as much as the author's previous release," or criticisms on the plot, originality, and level of suspense fit into a well-done review, personal attacks serve no purpose other than "entertainment." (Hey, there are people who watch *Real Life Disasters!* and *Jenny Jones*, too.)

A new venue for any self-declared "expert" to launch reviews "their way" is online pages, which are easily set up. One online page seems to specialize in personal attacks, taking particular delight in savaging well-known authors. During a brief visit to the site, I read commentary like, "they don't get worse than this—don't waste your money," "[this author] traded-in creativity for money," "...alienating fans with this drivel," and "I had to peel this one off the wall to

throw it away."

While the reviewers claim this kind of commentary is "honest" and "telling it like it is," I found the heavy sarcasm and the frequency of mocking an author's writing style questionable and offensive.

Ed Gorman of *Mystery Scene* summed it up by saying, "Why waste space telling people what not to read?"

Very few authors say that a bad review has substantially damaged their careers, or even hurt the book that received it. The real damage comes when authors find the criticism so paralyzing to their confidence that their ability to write suffers.

Prominent, lead authors seem just as bothered by a bad review as first-time authors, although they continually prove their mettle by going on to write the next book, and the next after that. I interviewed a bestselling author who recently made the leap from writing genre fiction to hard-cover mainstream fiction. Her book is currently being made into a movie. Her success has been phenomenal—the stuff of which dreams are made!

The book received almost universal praise, but among those reviews came one scathing, brutal, and personal panning from *Publisher's Weekly*. The reviewer said the book would appeal to, in effect, only a moron, and slanted comments in an insulting, personal manner. The author later learned who the reviewer was, and that the reviewer had indeed harbored animosity toward her, and had expressed it in public after hearing about the fabulous book deal.

Publisher's Weekly's concern for protecting its reviewers may have taken a wrong turn. Anonymity allows bitter people to behave this way without repercussions.

The story has a happy ending. The author picked herself up from the blistering review and launched into the second book of her enviable contract. Sales of the first book were stellar, and encouraged the publisher to offer another contract for "a substantial seven figure sum."

We all know reviews are "one person's opinion," but bad reviews still hurt, especially when they include personal attacks. We know we have to suffer through it and go on to the next book. Whether or not bad reviews have any impact on sales, they can shake confidence to the point of virtually paralyzing the ability to write.

That is the real danger, and it is the one thing an author can control. We can't control mean-spirited reviewers, or even influence thoughtful reviewers who happen to have divergent opinions from our own. But we *can* learn to deal with our reactions. (And if I find out how, I'll let you know.)

A negative review is only as damaging as we allow it to be. Reviewers naturally consider themselves and their job important. To pursue our own "job," we must remember to keep their importance in perspective. **NINK**

Stobie Piel writes historical, futuristic, and time travel romances for Pinnacle, Kensington, and Leisure Books. She has two novels coming out in the spring of '97, (Molly in the Middle and A Brighter Dawn), followed by two anthologies, (Scottish Magic and Trick or Treat). She is a founding member of Maine's first RWA chapter, and recently joined NINC.

Writing May Be Hazardous To Your Health

A disclaimer first: I am not a doctor, nor do I play one on television. The purpose of this article is not to offer medical advice, but rather to focus attention on stress and how it affects professional writers.

My own experience with a stress-related health problem was a headache that lasted three solid months. It started the day an editor asked for a four hundred page book based on my very vague ten page synopsis. It vanished the day I mailed her the finished manuscript. As it turns out, deadlines are a leading cause of stress for many writers.

Eileen Dreyer uses the term "deadline psychosis" to describe what can happen at any point in the book when the writing isn't working. "I can't concentrate, I don't get anything done," she writes. "I wander aimlessly about the house and tend to blow up at tiny little things. Definitely a stressful time for all."

Another writer remarks, "Being late with books makes me absolutely crazy. I live on iced tea and graham crackers, work fourteen hours a day and have nightmares that my editor is going to come to my house and demand to be given the manuscript."

This same writer provided me with a frightening example of what can happen under the stress of a deadline. For several weeks she'd been experiencing terrible pressure in her chest and ignoring it. Faced with a fast-approaching due date and an incomplete book, she told herself she couldn't take time from her writing to see a doctor. One morning she collapsed in front of her computer with all the symptoms of a heart attack. She looked in a book to check the symptoms, then called her husband. She finally called 911 from the floor, just before passing out. While dialing, she says she felt really stupid. Instead of "Please God, let me live," she was thinking, "You are such an idiot."

After she spent a night in the hospital, heart problems were ruled out, but her doctor advised her to reduce stress, be careful of her diet, and give up coffee. With medication (for ulcers, among other things) she was able to write again, though slowly, and got the book in reasonably close to deadline. "As writers," she told me, "we are very good at putting ourselves into another world. I can block out everything, including (and especially) pain."

This is not an isolated example. More than one writer I talked to has ignored pain, putting off going to a doctor until, in one case (later diagnosed as a gall bladder attack), her husband noticed that she was "green and sweating" and insisted. Another NINC member feels that "those of us who are married to our machines for hours on end, who

By
KATHY LYNN EMERSON

live on coffee and whatever else we can grab in a hurry, and who hardly ever break for exercise, are not only ignoring possible health problems, but creating them."

Writers have active imaginations. We'd be hard pressed to make a living otherwise. Sometimes that means we imagine symptoms. Psychosomatic illnesses do occur in intensely creative people and writers are probably more susceptible than many to the power of suggestion. How do you tell if a problem is real or imagined? Consult a doctor. Maybe more than one if you are a female over forty and the first doctor says "it's all in your head" without running any tests.

An article in the December 1996 *Health* quotes research from the heart rehabilitation clinic at Duke University indicating that "high responders," those who experience emotions intensely, are at greater risk of heart problems. During stressful situations, the bodies of high responders are likely to over-react and put out excessive levels of "fight-or-flight hormones." The frequent production of these hormones leads to chronic indigestion and insomnia and puts strain on the heart. Anyone who has a pessimistic, negative outlook on life and tends to take the blame for things that are beyond anyone's control, may also be at risk. Symptoms of severe stress can include the urge to run and hide, a tendency to cry easily, fatigue, and chest pain.

For one NINC member, approaching the end of the book is a stressful period not because of the deadline but because of the coming lack of deadline. Finishing means "entering a miserable void for heaven knows how long."

In addition to deadlines and lack of deadlines, with the latter including the issue of making enough money to support one's self and/or one's family, the major stress producers among writers seem to be waiting to hear from editors, being prevented from writing—whether by family obligations, another job, or health problems—and contemplating the many areas of the writing business over which the writer has no control.

Ironically, businesspeople who suffer from stress are often told to start writing as an antidote. They are advised to get in touch with their inner selves by keeping journals and trying a little creative writing. It may work, as long as what they produce is kept safe from other eyes. It even works for writers, if a journal or work diary helps make its writer aware of patterns. Keeping a record of the times when we feel anxious or depressed or frightened and attempting to explain why may be very beneficial.

Unfortunately, the kind of writing we ordinarily do only produces more stress, no matter how successful we

may be at it. Once we start submitting for publication, other people are free to voice their opinions of our work. Fear of rejection is stressful, rejection even more so. And when the work is accepted, new stresses appear, from deadlines to clashes with copy editors to reviews.

We all know stress is hazardous to the health. Unfortunately, many of us buy into the fantasy that by working at home and setting our own hours we are somehow escaping its effects. Not true. For years studies have warned that if one person experiences too many life-changing events in any given year (marriage, change of job, moving, death of a loved one, birth of a child) then the risk of stress-related health problems increases dramatically. Writers change jobs every time they sell a book. We give birth every time we finish one.

I questioned a number of NINC members about health problems. Their answers revealed two things. First, several conditions are fairly common among writers. Second, stress makes any ailment worse.

Many writers have trouble escaping the day's work. We can't stop thinking about a plot or a character or some business aspect of writing and this "mind that won't shut off" can lead to insomnia. The occasional nightmare crops up, too. With either, lack of rest then makes for a slow start on the next day. Being overtired may even make writing impossible.

For most people, allergies are a minor irritant, but others can be severely affected. Tightening in the chest, difficulty breathing, and a tendency to wheeze when an allergy attack is really bad, make it impossible to concentrate on work. Result: more stress.

Among skin allergies there is one directly related to writing—a reaction to certain types of paper, especially newsprint. Postal workers also suffer from this problem, which causes the tips of the fingers to itch and can make typing difficult. Frustration over this makes the itching worse and a vicious cycle ensues. The only cure is to avoid the papers that cause this condition or wear gloves when handling them.

Another vicious cycle exists for those suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder. Constant guilt, the result of the tendency of ADDers to procrastinate, is a stress factor. Stress then increases the inability to concentrate.

Many writers suffer from migraines, the causes of which are imperfectly understood. For one writer, a beta blocker reduces the severity if not the frequency of the headaches. After that, she can control the headache with pain pills and can usually manage to continue to work, though the migraines do make her sensitive to light. While proper medication does help, so does learning how to identify pain so it can be treated early enough to stop the migraine, and cutting down on the number of hours on the laptop, and identifying foods that are migraine triggers.

Pain is stressful. Stress may be a factor in causing migraines and other types of headaches. Another vicious cycle. With migraines, there is the added stress of knowing the headache is coming and wondering how many hours or

days it is going to last and knowing that there isn't going to be any way to write during the attack. Migraine sufferers often try to do as much work as they can before becoming completely incapacitated, when what they really should be doing early on is lying down in a dark room.

Do you chew gum while you write? In one NINC member's case, massive headaches were becoming a serious problem. She never had them while she was chewing (she was told later that her muscles were too numb then) and therefore didn't make the connection, but when her dentist suggested she stop chewing gum altogether, the headaches vanished. Grinding teeth together can also cause headaches, another problem a dentist can help correct. See a dentist, too, if you have a tendency to clamp your teeth or clench your jaw when you are stressed or irritated.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) affects people in varying degrees during the winter months when there are fewer hours of daylight. Mild cases often go undiagnosed. People simply think they are "under the weather" or lack ambition. The addition of light to the workspace can make a tremendous difference. For one writer, changing from a long florescent bulb to a powerful professional shop light bulb that fit the same fixture made "all the difference in the world."

In a more serious instance of SAD, one NINC member was "spending twenty hours a day in a lightless basement, crying a lot, and trying to figure out why I felt so bad that I lost all ability to deliver a book on time." With medication and a light box, this writer was finally able to finish the last 150 pages of her overdue manuscript.

Sometimes depression and creativity go hand in hand. A Ninc member who suffers from clinical depression feels she was fortunate that an understanding physician recognized the symptoms. She says: "I wanted to write, but I was afraid every time I sat down to do it. I needed to write, but instead I'd spend hours playing Solitaire and crying half the night." Medication helped in her case, but "stress-busting" techniques were also part of the treatment.

A clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester offers an eight week course in stress reduction. It advocates, among other things, finding forty-five minutes a day, six days a week to meditate. Some enrollees, however, discovered that trying to find time to meditate produced more stress.

Exercise is a proven stress reducer. Forms of exercise suggested by NINC members as being particularly effective include walking, running, jogging, swimming, using treadmills and exercise bikes, and working in the garden.

Talking, whether you want to call it conversation, venting, or whining, appears to be an especially productive way for writers to fight stress. By keeping in touch with others who also do this crazy thing for a living, the lone writer realizes he/she isn't the only one in any particular stressful situation. Why not throw a "whine and cheese" party with writer friends and do a little venting? Whether on line or on the phone or in person, sharing problems with someone who understands helps relieve stress.

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Health Hazard

(Continued from page 9)

Even when there is no one else there, venting can be effective. One writer I talked to advocated a short period to grieve over a setback, so that feelings don't build up into an overreaction. Another suggested swearing out loud, very loud, a version of the primal scream, to relieve tension.

Comfort food, especially chocolate, is a stress reliever for some writers. For others, giving up certain foods and beverages, chocolate and coffee in particular, is an important step toward reducing stress.

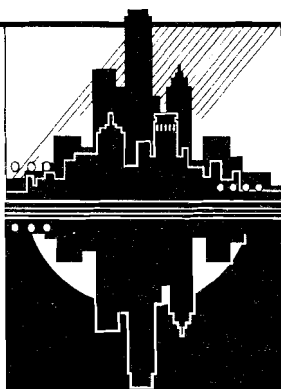
Suggestions from NINC members on other ways to relax range from soaking in a bubble bath to getting a massage (you can recruit your significant other for this) to cooking and baking from scratch. Listening to music while writing helps some. So does doing mindless, non-creative things,

listening to relaxation tapes, getting out on a boat and anchoring in a quiet cove for the weekend, sitting on a beach—in general engaging in any activity completely unrelated to the latest writing project . . . and not feeling guilty about it.

The most useful weapon against stress, however, may be one which is readily available to us all—humor. Try to have a sense of humor about yourself and what happens to you. There usually is a funny side to this absurd business we're in. To fight pessimism, depression, and stress, read books or magazines that make you laugh. One writer advises reading the tabloids! Watch movies that make you laugh. Spend time with people who make you laugh. As is so often the case, a cliché is true: "Laughter is the best medicine." **NINK**

Kathy Lynn Emerson's sixteenth published book, the first in a mystery series featuring a sixteenth century gentlewoman as sleuth, is Face Down in the Marrow-Bone Pie.

"Lady Appleton" would recommend a soothing infusion of chamomile for stress.



The honor roll of the 1998 NINC Conference Volunteers is still incomplete, since I have yet to find victims for every dirty job (many are called, but few give in to my nagging). Nonetheless, let me now introduce you to some of this year's plucky combatants. (This way you can all start pestering *them* instead of just *me*.)

In the far corner, weighing in with a full-time writing career and possibly the most demanding conference job of all (apart from *mine*, need I even add?) is Pat "The Bruiser" Kay, who's in charge of this year's program. (And the crowd goes wild!) Any and all suggestions for discussion groups, speakers, and Night Owl sessions should be directed to this gutsy fighter who has so far shown a lot of promise this season. You can write the Bruiser at 1523 Ainsdale Drive, Houston TX 77077; or phone her at 281-558-7075;

Those Who Are About to Die Salute You!

or e-mail her at P.KAY@GENie.com.

In the near corner is NINC newcomer Dirty Deb Stover with a job I wouldn't even wish on my mother-in-law (if I had one): Editor/Agent Liaison. If you know an editor or agent who needs liaising, contact Dirty Deb at P.O. Box 1196, Monument, CO, 80132; phone 719-481-3046; e-mail D.Stover@GENie.com.

Next, please put your hands together for "Killer" Sandra Kitt, who is bravely chairing NINC's first-ever art show. If there's a professional cover artist you'd like to see included in the show, tell the Killer (91 Payson Avenue #3L, NY NY 10034; 212-569-8076; SANKITT@AMNH.ORG).

This season we see another NINC newcomer on the hit list, "Jumpin'" Jennifer Crusie (129 Mithoff Street, Columbus, OH, 43206; 614-449-9534; JENNIFERCUSIE@POBOXES.COM). This fearless femme will be authoring NINC's original guidebook to the Big Apple; if you've got any favorite places or fun times to recommend in New York, please tell Jumpin' Jenny.

Becky "The Beast" Barker will be

handling roommate coordination. If you're willing to divulge your gender (hey, not everyone in the world is) and need help finding a roommate for this year's conference, give the Beast a nudge (6800 State Route 323, Mt. Sterling, OH, 43143; 614-869-2477).

Meanwhile, Lisa Ann "Don't Call Me Ethel" Verge is organizing an off-site field trip or two for NINC this year; if you've got any suggestions, then look her up in the damn roster—that's what it's for.

Other volunteers this year include Robyn "Crash" Carr, Terrible Vicki Lewis Thompson, Kathy "The Crusher" Chwedyk, Capturin' Carla Neggers, and Catherine "Craven Maven" Coulter—all of them involved in top secret operations of which NINC will deny any knowledge should their activities ever come to light.

Meanwhile, if anyone else out there wants to volunteer, I'm still at the same Bat time, same Bat channel:

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ONLINE

When I first started this column not quite a year ago, the plan was to educate NINC mem-

bers about the online world and what it could do for them. What a difference a year makes! Looking through the new NINC roster, I find that well over half our 581 members have e-mail addresses, and most of those are on our list-serv. Now people are getting instant answers to their online questions *online*, so my focus here has shifted to synthesizing some of the best online stuff for your hard-copy consumption (in case you hadn't noticed).

We've talked about the usual wide range of writerly stuff, from revisions, to horror writers scaring themselves, to the impact of reviews. Some topics really deserve their own articles: non-book factors (such as looks or personality) that affect an author's success; who's *really* responsible for a book's sell-through; how we organize our writing spaces and time; how we plot and write ("planners" vs "plungers").

A discussion on music to write by led to the discovery of a line of classical CDs collected by "mood." Put out by Philips Classics, you may find them at the big discount warehouses or you can peruse their catalog online at <http://www.philclas.polygram.nl/>

Talking about how we name our characters brought up a couple of highly recommended books for the purpose: *The Melting Pot of Baby Names* by Connie Lockhard Ellefson and *English Surnames, Their Sources and Significance* by Charles Wareing Bardsley. This last one was published in the late 1800s, but you'll be pleased to know there's an online source for such hard-to-find gems at <http://www.bibliofind.com>.

The writing-styles discussion evolved into a fun one on personality types. If you want to figure out your own (or your characters'), check out <http://keirseey.com> for an online personality test (essentially a scaled-down version of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator).

An earlier discussion of writing software led me to ask for reviews of said products from people who'd used them. Anne Holmberg downloaded both Collaborator and Writer's Blocks to try, and ended up ordering Writer's Blocks. She's a "plunger" when it comes to plotting (see above) and had tried various methods to help her keep track of scenes and story ideas. Anne found Writers Blocks a very basic program that allows one to create "blocks" of text to describe a scene, then order those blocks into columns (chapters) and move them around at will as scenes shift or new scenes are added. The blocks can be color-coded to aid in tracking what's going on.

After using it for a month or so, here's what she thinks: "The program is simple to learn for anyone familiar with Windows programs, doesn't take a lot of memory, and isn't too expensive (I paid \$119 from the Computer Store online) . . . I like the program and find it's helpful, *but* it's still

got a lot of glitches and limitations . . . Should you buy Writer's Blocks? I'd say no, not now. Wait for the upgraded version before you jump."

Cait Logan/Cait London (Lois Kleinsasser) tried and discarded both Writers Blocks and Dramatica Pro before trying Collaborator III. She says, "The demo is really not effective until you request the electronic 'key' to unlock the full program. So for those depending on the demo, it's just not sufficient to describe this great program. I like the questions it asks, i.e. what are the strengths of the antagonists? The synopsis in three sentences is tough. But a review of the questions, whether you complete the blanks or not, is a think-maker. . . I'm impressed by this program for the \$s and much less impressed by Dramatica Pro, a pricier, fancier version, but much too much confining."

Jennifer Crusie seems to concur. She says, "I use Collaborator to help me focus a book once the first draft is finished. It asks a million nit-picky questions until I want to scream and throw something, but it's the ones I can't answer that make the next rewrite better. I hate the damn thing because it's like the quiz at the end of the book, but I use it every time and I'm always glad I did."

A couple of updates to previous NINC columns that I gleaned online: for repetitive stress pain, one NinLinker found a wrist pincushion, worn inverted (with the cushion on the inside of the wrist) works wonders.

And Lawrence Watt-Evans says a third major pirate site has turned up on the Web—Grim Commander's Fright Library. It's at <http://www.lglobal.com/~command> in case anyone wants to see if their own material has been lifted.

There's a new research listserv that may interest many of you, from the owners of Painted Rock. To subscribe, send a message to: prock-research-on@mail-list.com. As an example of the neat stuff I've picked up there, here are a couple of Web sites for antique maps: Heritage Antique Map Museum, at <http://www.carto.com> and the Bodleian Library Map Room (Great Britain) at <http://rsl.ox.ac.uk/nnj/mapcase.htm>

Finally, in case you still aren't on the NinLink listserv, the subscription instructions have changed. To subscribe now, send a message:

TO: MAJORDOMO @ninc.com

Subject: subscribe Your-Membership-Name

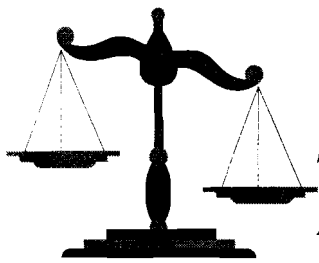
Message: subscribe NinLink Your-Email-Address

Once subscribed, post messages To: NinLink@ninc.com (Alysse says not to worry if the "reply" key uses NinLink@inetw.net for its TO: ninc.com & inetw.com are interchangeable for SENDING messages.) Easier to remember, eh?

That's it for this month. Remember to send any online news, great Web sites, etc. to me at brendahb@aol.com or fax me at 317-849-4771 (it was misprinted in the roster). See you online!

— **Brenda Hiatt Barber :**)





Advocacy Committee: *Show Us the Money*

Advocacy: My publisher is growing slower and slower about sending out statements, money and contracts!

Question: Why does it take so long to process payments or contracts once a book is approved? Is it unrealistic to accept as fact: "Publisher shall render to the Author semiannual statements of account for net sales and Author's share of licensing proceeds within ninety (90) days of the end of each royalty accounting period and Publisher agrees to accompany such statements with checks in payment of the amounts due therein?" Or am I being naive?

From Evan Fogelman, literary agent, licensed attorney, AAR Liaison to the RWA, and RWA advocacy advisor:

You are not naive, but you should be realistic about the power of the parties in this relationship.

The fact is that most publishers can get away with the technical breach of some specific contractual terms because authors want to have their books published regardless. For example, if your publisher accounts to you in 112 days instead of the contractually mandated 90 days, then will you claim breach of contract and threaten to sue? Most authors would not. It is hard enough to find a publisher to begin with, so few writers have the leverage to alienate their one forum. This is why I often say the best strategy is to always have more than one publisher interested in your work—it gives you negotiating power.

I am not forgiving those increasing occasions when publishers do not live up to their ends of the bargain. And I agree with your assertion that publishers seem to be getting slower and slower. The consolidation and multi-media conglomeration of publishers provide an explanation for tardiness. And so do the number of authors who wait until the deadline has passed before expressing any dissatisfaction. Many authors would be better served by acknowledging that slow payments are problematic from the beginning, so start requesting money early. Over the longer term, all agents and authors will have to address the situation because only group leverage can usually affect bureaucratically bad habits.

From Ruth Cohen, literary agent and former directing editor for a publisher:

I agree that not all publishers are scrupulous about getting checks to all their authors on time. In fact, no day goes by in my agency without a telephone call to a contract administrator, a royalty director, or an editor to track down, inquire about, request again, and emphatically nag somebody about getting money that is overdue.

As a directing editor of a publishing house in my past life, I know that the payment process that was originally devised to include safeguards as well as efficient procedures

is now frequently stalled because the person who has to sign off on the payment voucher or who actually has to sign the check is "out of the office," "only does it once a week," or is "bogged

down but will get to it on Friday."

There may be ways to combat this perennial problem, but some require a combative stance that authors are shy of assuming. You might try to add incentives in your contract to define a material breach of the contract which covers a late advance or royalty payment, but I don't know if any publisher will agree to that request. You can ask your editor to try to pry the check loose. You should certainly expect your agent to use pressure on your behalf.

It is my experience that currently all writers—established as well as new authors—are suffering payment delays and frustrations. Money is expensive to borrow, and cash flow problems exist in the largest and the smallest publishers. In my most infuriated state of impatience with payment people I have been known to snap, "I bet you get your check on time." And although that may relieve my state of irritation, it is not a remark I recommend.

The business of publishing is complex; expectations on both sides are frequently obscured by cold economic facts. I have found that an adversarial role damages more often than it improves a situation. Nevertheless, when delays in the payout system extend beyond reasonable tolerance, it is your responsibility to take the initiative to get what is due—and to keep your membership in organizations which question and which can bring about improved procedural changes.

From Ethan Ellenberg, former Associate Contracts Manager for Bantam and Contracts Manager for Berkley prior to opening his own literary agency:

There are a number of reasons for the length of time it takes to receive contracts and payments from publishers—some mundane, some more sinister. Let me review some of the basics.

First, there's the question of what lateness means. Lateness to an author may be a reasonable amount of time to a publisher. You are on different sides of the same check—one paying out, one being paid. I've complained to the publishers about the length of time a contract or payment takes only to be told that ten to twelve weeks, or longer, is about as good as it gets for them.

That said, let's look at the contract rendering process. After an editor makes a deal, she needs approvals before that deal can be sent to the contracts department for processing. With vacations, business trips, and busy executives concerned with many items of company business, the approval process can be lengthy.

Oversight factors into all company payments as well. Your manuscript payment is no more or less important to a publisher than the bill for a piece of cover art or the utility payment . . . and so everything is subject to the almost universal accounting department procedures: One person

reviews the payment authorization, another drafts the approval and enters it into a computer generated check run, the check comes out of the check run (sometimes only done twice a month at small publishers), then it is checked again, etc.

Publishers operate with small budgets relative to the amount of books they publish, and few contract or royalty departments are over-manned. Your contract or royalty statement is one of hundreds or thousands to be completed by a small staff. I've called contracts departments to learn that they literally had thirty to forty contracts to draft before they could draft my client's. That equaled out to at least a two week wait.

To sum up this part of my answer, some of the slowness is simply the way the publishers conduct business. There's no real bad intent here other than there simply aren't compelling business reasons for them to get contracts and payments out quickly.

That said, let me examine some of the sinister elements here. All businesses are concerned with cash flow, a concept different from common sense notions of profit and loss. Cash flow specifically means the amount of money the company actually has in its accounts on any given business day.

When publishers are owned by major media companies carrying billions of dollars in debt, cash flow becomes the critical measure of a business's ability to perform and continue. Viacom, the parent of Simon & Schuster, for example, owes various creditors something like ten billion dollars. How can a company that owes ten billion dollars be considered a sound business? Because it can service that debt. It can safely make payment on that debt because it has the cash flow to do so. The company constantly receives enough money to both continue to operate and pay back its debt.

If cash flow is a measure of a publishing company's health, then the large amount of money publishers pay out twice a year at royalty time becomes a dangerous bulge of debt. Imagine having a balloon mortgage that ballooned twice a year no matter what. That should give you an idea of your publisher's financial problems around royalty time. Of course, those royalties should be sitting in the bank. They are due on books sold and paid for, but it's a real coulda, shoulda, woulda situation. The money isn't always there and even if it is, it's still hard to part with.

There are other aspects of the royalty payment situation that can create problems for an author. Royalty clerks are not rewarded for overpaying royalties. A publisher can legitimately claim that because returns continue indefinitely they have the right to be cautious. That's true. But it is a question of balance. If a publisher consistently underestimates what is really due, then authors are routinely being underpaid. Every book and author is different, real sales figures are hard to come by, the system is clearly capable of tremendous abuse, even when true intent—by which I mean executives instruct the royalty department to underpay—is not present.

Finally, it needs to be said that I have heard from people I trust that sometimes royalty departments have been told to go back and reduce the next semi-annual burden. I'm not

going to name names here and I'm not writing this to invite a war of words with any publisher. I've also found a number of publishers slowing down payments and stretching them out as part of the terms of payment in forthcoming contracts. This is plain for anyone to see. Publishers are focusing on cash flow. It's the financial reality we're living with.

To conclude, the tardiness of payments and contracts is the result of the way publishers work and the lack of adequate staff to handle the volume of work. It's also influenced by the publishers' increasing focus on cash flow and their not so covert desire to hang on to "their" ("your") money as long as possible. **NINK**

We thank Evan Fogelman, the Fogelman Literary Agency, Ruth Cohen, Ruth Cohen, Inc., and Ethan Ellenberg, the Ethan Ellenberg Literary Agency, for their insight.

If you have a question you wish the Advocacy Column to address, forward it to Cathy Maxwell, 14216 Chimney House Rd., Midlothian VA 23112 or e-mail C.Maxwell6@genie.com.

INTRODUCING...

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

New Applicants

Paulette Brewster (*Melody Morgan*), Swanton OH
Wendy Brennan (*Emma Darcy*), Wyee, New South Wales, Aust.
Suzanne Brockmann, Wayland MA
Pamela Burford, Baldwin NY
Theonne de Kretser (*Stephanie Laurens*), Caulfield South, Victoria, Aust.
Anne Eames, Waterford MI
Jean Hager, Tulsa OK
Linda Francis Lee, Chapel Hill NC
Julianne Moore (*Julie McBride*), New York NY

Returning Members

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EAST OF THE HUDSON

Attention, Literati

I thought I had finally arrived. I thought the world had finally recognized my true brilliance. I thought— Well, never mind what I thought. I just know I was surprised when I received an e-mail the other day addressed “Attention, Literati.”

From the *New York Times*, no less. After all the nasty things I’ve said about that institution. Wow. I must have slipped into the Twilight Zone along with Vic Morrow and Rod Serling.

Imagine my disappointment when I read further and discovered that the e-mail, which began “Dear Subscriber,” was a generic message announcing the *Times*’ new online Books section.

The e-mail announcement contained some news that ought to hearten all writers, everywhere. By fiat, the *Times* has just doubled our chances of literary fame by doubling the number of books called bestsellers.

That’s right. Twice the number of hardbacks, twice the paperbacks, twice the self-help books, twice the chance to attain celebrity. With one stroke of the policy pen, the *Times* has broadened its reach and become more inclusive.

Or maybe the *Times* has merely diluted its already waning influence without realizing it. Only time will tell about that, but let’s examine what has happened.

At the moment, the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* section stills lists 15 bestsellers in each of the major publishing categories. Okay, maybe 16 or even 17, in the case of ties at the bottom of the list, but the number is still discreetly elitist.

But if you go to the *Times*’ homepage on the Internet, the list has expanded to 30 titles in each category. Sure, there’s a thin line drawn after Number 15 in each of the categories, with the second portion of the list designated as “books that are also selling well.”

But that kind of distinction is elusive, to say the least, particularly when the *Times* promotes its new online book coverage with a statement that the homepage “tracks expanded *New York Times* bestseller lists featuring the top 30 fiction and nonfiction titles.”

In other words, the line between, say, Number 15 and Number 16, or for that matter between Number 15 and Number 30, is almost invisible, even in the minds that run the *Times*.

And if the distinction is fuzzy at the *Times*, you can imagine how it appears to the publishers. Those folks are going to demurely trumpet their book as “Almost a *New York Times* Bestseller?” Or “Merely a Second-Tier *New York Times* Bestseller?”

Yeah, right. And Bill Clinton didn’t inhale, either.

I suspect that the *Times* was forced to expand its definition of “bestseller” to counter the sudden and surprising pro-

liferation of lists from other publications. The *Times* primacy in the field has been increasingly challenged, particularly by *USA Today*, which tracks 50 titles on its published list and 100 more titles online. The *Times*’ new formulation roughly matches those numbers.

But in the process, the *Times* has reduced the exclusivity of the term “NYT Bestseller.” I’m all in favor of that. I have said since I started writing this column that the Bestseller concept is an artificial and dangerous one, particularly when the designation is a term of art, not a scientific certainty.

Which leads me to my next point....

Oooops

Agent Steve Axelrod, who technically lives east of the Hudson but who is a good guy nonetheless, faxed me the other Sunday morning with a “Correction” notice he spotted in his *New York Times*.

Since I live so far out at the end of the grid that my Sunday paper comes on Monday, the fax was most welcome. It announced that the *Times* list that appeared March 17 contained two significant errors. Those errors had been made “because of a wholesaler’s reporting error,” the notice averred.

That single wholesaler’s errors must have been real lulus, because they managed to skew the results of the weekly compilation wildly. Books that were listed as Numbers 9 and 10 on the mass market compilation should not have appeared at all and books below them on the list should have appeared two positions higher than they did.

Good news, I’m sure, for the books that moved up. Bad news, I’m sure, for the two books that appeared erroneously. (Lots of writers have contract clauses that pay bonuses for weekly appearances on the *New York Times* list. I wonder if either of those writers now have to return such bonuses to their publishers.)

The correction was news of a more mixed sort for the community of publishers and writers. It was the first time anyone I know could remember that the *Times* had actually admitted a mistake in its list, even though their results are very often at odds with the results of other bestseller compilations.

A writer I know has regularly compared the performances of novels on the major best seller lists available in print or online. She spotted the anomaly when the March 17 NYT list first became available, ten days before it was published, and she continued to wonder about the placement of the two books until the *Times*’ correction appeared. The two didn’t appear to be performing nearly as well on *USA Today*’s list and on the lists put together by the major chain stores as they had on the *Times*. Now we know why.

What was interesting was that the disparities involving those two books were no greater than disparities she had

noticed in the charted performance of other books. Until the paper corrected itself in print, she had just written the disparity off as another anomaly in the inexact process of cultural charting called Bestsellerdom.

Now that the correction has run, however, you have to ask yourself how many of the other disparities that have been recorded in the past several years are just disparities and how many are reporting errors.

I can't answer that question. I can only suggest that we all ought to recognize bestseller lists for what they are: human artifacts of an inexact science and not the sole measure of success available in a screwball business called publishing.

Short Takes

CYBERSCOUTING — *Publishers Weekly* reports what appears to be a first: Simon & Schuster editor Laurie Chittenden, 26, has bought a manuscript for six figures from a writer she met while hosting a chat session on America Online's Book Central site.

The author, another 20-something child of the new generation named Franklin White, caught Chittenden's eye with his screen name, Stelow, drawn from a song they both happened to like, and one thing led to another. Next thing we know, the kids have gotten together for a two-book deal, one of which will be White's first novel, *Fed Up With The Fanny*.

I have no idea what that title means but I know I kind of like changes of the sort that this news represents. If the Internet becomes a way to communicate directly with editors, breaking down the traditional methods of publishing, I'm all for it.

DIVERSITY — Did anyone else notice that four of the five nominees for the Best Picture Oscar were made outside the normal, cumbersome, bureaucratic Hollywood system that is dominated by a handful of major studios?

And did anyone see any hopeful application of that principle to the publishing business, where the Six Sisters seem more and more intent on pushing mega-bestsellers and excising other books from their lists?

Anybody who's been in the middle of a publisher's list, or at the bottom, in the past few years has felt the pinch of downsizing. It's no less agonizing in publishing than it is anywhere else in American society. Someday, the situation may turn around, as it appears to have done in Hollywood, where independent producers scored big in this year's Academy Awards.

Then again, maybe Alberto Vitale is right. Maybe there are just too many books being published and the solution is to cut back and print only bestsellers.

SAME SONG, NEW VERSE — A recent panel discussion of publishing and bookselling became yet one more familiar donnybrook, according to *Publishers Weekly*.

The loudest voice on the panel seemed to be Andreas Brown, owner of the Gotham Book Mart in midtown Manhattan. He suggested that independent bookstores needed a Fair Play Committee, much like the one that was formed

to support Cuba back during the days of the Cold War. It was a colorful, if politically charged way of making his point, but then Brown really found his stroke.

First, he attacked a fellow panelist, Barnes & Noble superstore boss Len Riggio, implying that Riggio was the devil incarnate. Then the bookseller took off after Victor Navasky, the panel's moderator, who once had the temerity to admit that he found it easier to do business with Barnes & Noble than with many independent booksellers.

Finally, Brown lit into Alberto Vitale, the Random House boss who was in the audience. Brown said that the Little Big Man, as he is known in New York, was "insensitive."

Can any of us writers imagine someone calling Alberto Vitale insensitive.

I didn't think so.

ONLINE, AGAIN — Amazon.com, the big Internet book-seller, has just announced that it will double the number of titles it offers, to 2.5 million. The Seattle-based firm will also offer more than 500 titles at 40 percent below publisher's suggested retail price.

The guessing in the business is that Amazon is feeling the pressure from Barnes & Noble, which is opening a web site on America Online, and from Borders, which is planning a similar move.

The source of this report, the *New York Times* business section, also noted that Simon & Schuster is opening a web site to peddle 350,000 different books, CD-ROMs and other products. S&S expects to do \$15 million in sales the first year.

ONLINE'S DOWNSIDE — Last year, San Francisco's library system opened New Main, a luxurious headquarters that was wildly acclaimed for its daring architecture and dazzling technology.

Only one problem. Amidst all those computers, video machines and such, there wasn't much room for books. In fact, as the public found out over the next few months, the glorious repository of the written word had gone so far over budget that the system had to quit buying new books altogether.

Worse, New Main's stacks turned out not to contain many of the books that were recorded in its automated card catalog. In fact, the library was so hard-pressed for space in the new edifice that it discarded 100,000 volumes. Since city law forbids reselling of old books, many of the books ended up in a landfill before saner heads prevailed and they were given away to people who valued them.

Georgia Bockoven, who forwarded a clipping that chronicled the silliness, had no comment on a library that throws away books to make room for videos.

On second thought, maybe no comment is needed.

BFO OF THE WEEK — "Not even God can make a best-seller out of a book that doesn't have a marketing budget."

— Anne Larsen of *Kirkus Reviews*,
quoted by Frank Rich, *NY Times*

— *Evan Maxwell*



The Fast Track

Compiled by MARILYN PAPPANO

NINC Members on the USA Today List

The Fast Track is a monthly report on Novelists, Inc. members on the USA Today top 150 bestseller list. (A letter "n" after the position indicates that the title is new on the list that week.)

Members should send **Marilyn Pappano** a postcard alerting her to upcoming books, especially those in multi-author anthologies, which are often listed by last names only. Marilyn's phone/fax number is 918-227-1608, fax 918-227-1601 or online: pappanor@gorilla.net. Internet surfers can find the list at: <http://www.usatoday.com> (Et al.: written with other author(s) who aren't members of NINC)

Member	Title	March 5	March 12	March 19	March 26
Catherine Anderson	<i>Simply Love</i> , Avon			97n	75
Leanne Banks	<i>The Five-Minute Bride</i> , Silhouette	130n			
Sandra Brown	<i>Love's Encore</i> , Warner	57	74	116	
Stella Cameron	<i>Guilty Pleasures</i> , Zebra				89n
Catherine Coulter	<i>The Wild Baron</i> , Jove			7n	10
Justine Davis	<i>The Wrangler's Bride</i> , Silhouette		150n	65	
Julie Garwood	<i>The Wedding</i> , Pocket			17n	16
Tami Hoag	<i>A Thin Dark Line</i> , Bantam		63n	55	63
Tami Hoag	<i>Guilty As Sin</i> , Bantam	11	24	36	47
Tami Hoag	<i>Night Sins</i> , Bantam	65	161	148	149
Linda Howard	<i>Son of the Morning</i> , Pocket	50	85		
Joan Johnston	<i>After The Kiss</i> , Dell	52	69		
Katherine Kingsley	<i>Once Upon A Dream</i> , Dell				96n
Laura Kinsale	<i>My Sweet Folly</i> , Berkley	140			
Jayne Ann Krentz	<i>Lady's Choice</i> , Mira	94			
Debbie Macomber	<i>This Matter of Marriage</i> , Mira		157n	32	49
Susan Mallery	<i>Surrender in Silk</i> , Silhouette	115n			
Nora Roberts	<i>The Stanislaski Sisters</i> , Silhouette		188n	34	61
Nora Roberts	<i>Sanctuary</i> , Putnam				22n
Pamela Toth	<i>Buchanan's Return</i> , Silhouette			115n	
Sherryl Woods	<i>Danielle's Daddy Factor</i> , Silhouette			127n	

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