

Novelists' Ink

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

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Surviving Trashing

By
MARJ KRUEGER

As they say, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is, your career can survive trashing by an editor. The bad news is, if you wait until it happens, it's a *lot* harder to recover, and some writers never do. So, *verbum sapiens*, a word to the wise: Start now. Today. As soon as you finish this article. Look over what you have done and are doing to protect your books and your career, and make every change necessary.

Or risk being trashed, with no backup and no way out.

What do I mean by trashing? Simple. You sell a book, and sometime between the letter of acceptance and the final print run when you hold your baby in your hand, the editor throws it back at you. Usually with some weasel worded, "It's not what we had in mind," "it doesn't fit our line," "it isn't what the proposal promised," "we're cutting back or closing your line" ... or, if it's oral and not being recorded, "It sucks sour lemons and I ain't gonna publish it."

So there you are, your mouth hanging open, your newest baby cruelly eviscerated and thrown out for the buzzards to pick over. What do you do?

Probably, as Betty Rollins said, First, you cry.

Then you try to recover. If you've read and followed the advice in this article, hard learned and hard earned, you go trotting to that editor in another house who's been drooling to have you for years, and say, "You want me, you have me."

The likeliest reasons for being turfed off are simple. They are cutting back on the list, and you are new; or your back list is short; or they put a lousy cover on your last magnum opus and it sold

like the pits; or maybe even, there's a new editor come on

board, and he has his own pets, and somebody has to go to make room, and—lucky you—you've been elected.

Maybe the powers plan to cancel your whole line. Or they've just bought another house and need to shrink their list. Or maybe it's your publisher who's been bought, and the combined list is too big, and your new overlords decide to make most of the writers from your company dead meat.

No matter why it happens, you will feel as if you could walk under an inchworm without ducking. You are worthless. Your writing is worthless. Nobody loves you, everybody hates you.

Maybe you'll go outside and eat that worm instead of walking under it.

Don't.

Take it from one who's been there.

Don't.

And don't make any decisions too fast. Let them stew. But don't you stew. You'll need all the intelligence, all the balance, all the control you can lay your hands on, because what you do next will affect your career for years. If not decades.

It's a lot easier if you've been preparing all along, Just In Case.

But first, let an old trashing hand tell you what *not* to do.

Yessirree, I am the expert. I have had, not one, not two, but *three* books returned after I'd sold them. Lucky me. It took the third one to do my career in properly.

Here's what I did, and what no other writer should if they like selling their writing.

Once upon a time, I thought I was in like Flynn. I had sold my first novel, coming out from Doubleday in hard-cover. It had resold foreign editions, book club, etc. By the time it had come out, I had sold not one, but two more novels, to two *other* publishers. Plus a second to Doubleday.

How could I miss?

Mistake one may have been

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

AUTHORS BAND TOGETHER: As we reported last month, HarperCollins had made some unreasonable demands on the 106 authors whose contracts they had cancelled in their move to economize. Thanks to efforts by Authors Guild, HC has backed down on these demands. HarperCollins will no longer seek repayment of advances on works that were not yet due at the time of the cancellation, and they will not seek repayment of advances on manuscripts they had deemed late. They even went so far as to promise to refund advances that had already been repaid by authors. Authors Guild thanks the authors who worked with them on obtaining these concessions from the publishers, which just goes to show what authors can accomplish when we band together.

ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY: Now another writers' organization is addressing another challenge from another publisher, in this case Science Fiction Writers of America and Bantam Books. It seems that Bantam, in order to keep their profit margins the same after signing an unfavorable contract with Lucas Films, has announced that they will now contract the *Star Wars* tie-in books to writers on a flat-fee basis rather than an advance and royalty basis. The flat fees for these books are far from miserly—\$40,000 for paperback and \$60,000 for hardcover/paperback—but still presumably less than the writers would/could make in royalties. Since many excellent writers (okay, let's admit it, *most* excellent writers) will never earn this much for a book under any kind of contract, the deal is bound to be attractive to many. What isn't so attractive is the precedent being set. If Bantam is allowed to make contracts like this, presumably at a great savings to them—at the very least in the bookkeeping department and more than likely in the amount of money they would have eventually paid the authors—other publishers will no doubt follow suit. What is to stop publishers of series lines, whose sales are fairly predictable, from contracting on a flat fee basis as well? Eventually, all publishers would follow suit for *all* books, pre-determining how many books an author will sell and setting the advance accordingly. The prospect of an industry where every writer does work for hire is a grim one for writers. We will be discussing this issue and others at our Annual National Conference during the NINC Business Sessions on Sunday morning. Please come and share your views.

ALTERNATIVE PUBLISHING: In these days of contracting markets, many writers are seeking new avenues of publication. These include Internet publishing and studio publishing, and the future will most likely bring others we haven't even dreamed of yet. NINC is now faced with the issue of whether to open our membership to include those who have succeeded in these new areas. Are their needs and interests the same as those of traditionally published authors? Should we expand our "tent" to include them? This is another issue which we will be placing before the membership during our Business Sessions at the Conference. We need to know what our members think about this and other challenges facing NINC. Come and let your voice be heard.

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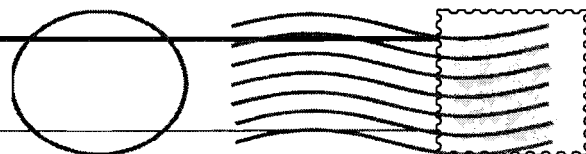
**This Month
from the
President:**
Information
you need on
NINC and
publishers'
antics, er, ethics

LAST CALL FOR THE CONFERENCE! If you're still wavering about whether or not to attend NINC's annual conference, don't hesitate another moment. We've planned the most exciting program in the history of NINC, and we expect to make an impact on the publishing community by our mere presence in NYC. Help swell our ranks!

DON'T FORGET TO VOTE! If you haven't sent in your ballot yet, please do so ASAP. We need as many votes as possible to give us a quorum so we can have a valid election at the conference.

— **Victoria Thompson**

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.

C-Span Breathes Life into Midlist Attitudes

It was Labor Day Weekend.

I, like the rest of the world, had been stunned by the news of the death of Princess Diana. But then the news went on and on and on, on every network, every front page, until I began to feel as sleazy as the tabloids and the—so-called—legitimate press. Where is David Brinkley when you need him?

I turned to the US Open. I live in Georgia and watching those people sweat in the midst of our own heat wave was just too much. Next I tried the Telethon, but I've been there, done that, and donated to muscular dystrophy. So I returned to my old favorite stand-by, C-SPAN. And to my delight I discovered that the entire weekend was devoted to "About Books!" In a small town like Calhoun, we don't have access to C-SPAN2, on which the program is normally aired. I was delighted.

The president of Random House (I once wrote a book for Ballantine and I was so proud!), Alberto Vitale, was being interviewed by Susan Swain, who clearly had done her homework before the interview. She asked the questions we would ask—where are we going as an industry, tell our audience about the problem with returns, explain to us what returns are, what will be the effect of the Internet on the publishing industry? And more.

Mr. Vitale gave the most positive responses, presented an optimistic but realistic picture, and made me feel better about writing than I've felt for months, no, longer—years! I now regret that I finagled my way out of my option book with Ballantine, which he called "one of our larger im-

prints." My agent had said the house was too small to pay me much money for my book, so a couple of years' research, and a year's writing went for a song. (Needless to say, she is no longer my agent.)

My book, a mid-list, sold quite a bit more than 50%, which Mr. Vitale said was about the break-even point, depending on the circumstances. He also said, if I remember correctly, that there will be a place for mid-list books. I have asked an editor to try to obtain a tape of the interview, which will (by the time this reaches you, read 'was') be shown in the published authors' suite at our annual Moonlight and Magnolias Conference in Atlanta on September 19–21.

I urge anyone who's sick of the negative, burned out, blocked, tired of listening to complaints; and anyone who wants to hope things will be right again for writers (Not the same—never that—but good, maybe better!), to try to obtain a copy of the tape.

My granddaddy used to say, whether you're writing or speaking, either begin or end with a humorous anecdote. To vindicate myself to my husband, who wonders how I can sleep so much, I offer the following: During the same "About Books" weekend, Pete Hamill, when asked by Brian Lamb about his writing schedule, said he writes better in the morning. And, he takes a nap every day. That gives him Two Mornings. How's that for the title of a book, Mr. Vitale? My gratitude, and surely that of my fellow writers, to you for your optimism!

— **Marion Smith Collins**

Agent Expelled From AAR

The Board of Directors of the Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR), following the recommendation of the Association's Ethics Committee, has voted to expel Natasha Kern from membership in the Association. The Committee determined that Ms Kern violated the AAR's Canon of Ethics by making misleading and deceptive statements to a publisher in the course of an auction for a book by one of her clients.

Surviving Trashing

(Continued from page 1)

getting an agent. My advances weren't great, all my writer friends said I needed an agent to "negotiate" for me.

I got an agent.

When I was submitting manuscripts for myself, as soon as I finished a manuscript, I sent it somewhere for consideration. After all, I sold four that way.

My agent had other ideas. First, since my first sales were all SF/F, she told me not to write or submit in any other field. "Until you're established."

I was young and naive. I believed her.

(Helpful hint: If you want to write in more than one field/category, do so. If your agent says not to do that, or refuses to submit anything but the first field you sold in, find another agent, ASAP.)

Meanwhile, one of my sales was to a new house, and their contract was incredibly bad. My agent began negotiating better terms.

As I sent her completed novels—I was too new to merely sell by proposal—she'd put them on her desk. She had to copy edit them, you see, so they'd be as good as both of us together could produce. Sure enough, at intervals, a page or two of handwritten corrections would arrive.

But, oddly, she wasn't sending them out.

When asked why, I got "You need to establish yourself."

Naive me, I thought I established myself by selling novels and getting them in print.

(Helpful hint: If you want to write more than your current publisher wants to publish, you start submitting to another publisher, under another pen name if necessary. If your agent objects to this, find another agent.)

Meanwhile, publishers were playing Pacman, eating each other up. One of my publishers ate two smaller houses. My book, which had been scheduled, was two months too late. The editor pushed everything on her list after month X back, until she could integrate the lists from the two other houses into hers.

But my agent never sent them another proposal. Bad tactics, especially since the editor who bought my manuscript had played musical chairs and was at another house.

(Helpful hint: As soon as you can, get that option book proposal in their hands. A second contract will make it that much harder for them to turf you. Don't delay!)

My manuscript was now an orphan.

(Helpful hint: If an editor who bought anything of yours goes to another house, keep in contact. Give her all your good news as soon as it happens. You may need her later.)

The contract negotiations went on.

My publisher bought another house and my editor pushed my now orphaned novel back.

The one bit of good news was, at my original house where my first novel had come out, the new editor there

liked my second novel, but it was too long. We finally agreed there was a natural break about 25% into the manuscript, and if I wrote additional material, expanded subplots around the main one, I could make a very interesting separate book out of that 25%.

Publisher two was still negotiating the contract for my book there.

Publisher three was still pushing my first book there. Back to the Future.

Then publisher three *bought* publisher two. All uncontracted-for manuscripts were simply returned. Zap. My first sale undone.

(Helpful hint: If you don't like the contract, don't let negotiations drag forever. Watch your agent, since he'll be doing this. Figure out which changes are deal breakers, which you'd just like, and tell your agent. Sign that contract, and at least you'll have that much more protection.)

Of course, publisher three was still overloaded from all the houses they had bought. My agent recommended we suggest the novel written for publisher two, *after* the novel that publisher three had bought was closer to publication. It was still being delayed.

(Helpful hint: If you get a manuscript returned, submit it immediately to any other publisher you have contracts with. Don't sit around—sell that baby! *Don't* wait until "closer to publication" for another book or any other nonsense. Get that puppy out, preferably before the editor who trashed it has time to talk about it to other editors. If you're swinging in the wind, submit to every other possible publisher. Twist your agent's arm, make it a simultaneous submission. Just *sell it!*)

Then the death knell tolled, though I didn't realize it at the time. Although publisher three had accepted my manuscript completely, and paid the full advance, my new editor told me the price of paper had gone up and my orphan manuscript was too long.

(Helpful hint: Don't believe this nonsense. Shortly after all the furor and the shouting about my novel died, they decided that *two* novels they had bought from a friend of mine were too short to be published by themselves. So, they ran them together and published them as one *fat* book. Longer than my book, which they had wanted to "cut"? You betcha.)

But I was young and naive. My editor sent me a copy of my baby, red penciled with cuts, most of them, it seemed to me, made at random. I gave what must have been a sick laugh and suggested that, since I was most familiar with it, I do the cutting.

They agreed.

This was before I had a computer. In essence, I rewrote the novel. I could have written another novel with that time and effort. But I wanted one piece of help. I wanted my editor, or her assistant, whom I knew and trusted, to give the new version a careful reading, to be sure that no loose ends

were left, no plot threads snipped.

Nope, said they. Your baby. No way. Turn it in.

My agent suggested that, since the contractual time to publish it was well past, we should just withdraw it if they wouldn't co-operate.

(Helpful hint: think *very* carefully before withdrawing from a publishing contract. My contract said they had to publish as was; I should have made them stick to it. Odds are good they would have published it.)

Like a fool, I agreed to withdraw the book.

(Another helpful hint: Put a clause in the contract that they can't change or cut the manuscript without your written permission. If they want to, they'll probably ignore it, but it will stop the game of, Cut to our standards Or Else. Looking back on it, I suspect the new editor just wanted the manuscript gone, for whatever reason.)

They returned the ms.

I wrote another novel for my last remaining publisher.

I also, thinking it over, found a new agent.

Which was a good thing, because my first publisher closed the line I was selling to.

Luckily, my new agent had already sold a new book to another major publisher. So, despite having lost two sales and my first publisher, I was still in business.

Better than that, my latest advance was a juicy one and I was heading Up.

Only, about the time my first novel with them was being scheduled, my newest publisher decided to cut back their list. With me, they had no backlist to worry about, so...

It's a lot longer story than that, but in the end, that's what it boiled down to.

I made another mistake. The *official* reason was that the manuscript was unacceptable. Incredible. Before the list was cut, the first draft was wonderful, my editor told me over the phone she couldn't put it down, she read it in the subway.

Funny how the slightly more polished version turned into garbage.

I protested. I screamed. I appealed to my agent. I finally, outraged at the lies and injustice, hired a lawyer.

All that accomplished was a dent in my bank account and ... that I got bad-mouthed from hell to breakfast.

And another manuscript came back.

(Helpful hint: If your agent won't help when somebody returns your book, consider a new agent. *Never* drag a lawyer in, even if you have right on your side. Your editor will Talk, and that, as they say, is all she wrote.)

My publisher made a real concession to me. They didn't demand half the paid advance back immediately. They decided they would wait until I resold it. Of course, my chances of reselling a manuscript that was dumped *and* dumped on by the editor who had read it ranged from zilch to zip. But hey, I deserved a break.

Now, what could I and should I have been doing?

Writers who get hit by a returned manuscript and survive have one thing in common. They have other editors

who *want* their work. Now. And they started trying to find those editors *before* they got dumped.

When one of my fellow writers at my last house saw the handwriting on the wall, she waltzed over to a major editor at a rival house who'd wanted her for ages, and is happily putting out wonderful books.

When another writer friend of mine got her book returned when the upper ups closed our mutual line, she was already selling to other editors, in other fields. Not one other editor. Several other editors. Onward and upward. She tells me she thinks she has a home for the returned manuscript now. If she has time to rewrite it up to her current standards, of course.

Oker doker, how do you get that other editor interested?

If you've already published 20 books, the last six of which made the *USA Today* list, you probably don't need to worry. Short of the whole publisher going under (and it has happened), you're safe until you choose to move. Even if your publisher dies, you and your agent will be beating off slaving editors from other houses with a stick.

But suppose you're not up there. Suppose you've only got four or five books out. Or a dozen, and they've sold OK, but not superbly. You worry that there are writers out there with better track records who want the only slots available.

If you already have one or more eager editors lined up, who cares.

But how do you manage that?

It's easy if you like to brag about yourself, flaunt your triumphs. You go to every convention and writers conference and even book signing you can manage. You get on panels, sign books, and every chance you get, you tell other people, editors, agents, whoever, about every triumph you can dredge up. High sell through, good reviews, award nomination, reprintings. You make very sure other editors know who you are, and know you have a good record.

You go to parties at the cons, and you talk to every other professional you can. Any one of them might help in a pinch. Even another struggling writer might know of a slot at another house when you're just been beheaded and thrown in the lime pit.

Everything you do to improve your track record will also make you attractive to other editors. (And, a second good consequence, will make you one of the last instead of one of the first cut.)

So you fight for every chance you get to go on radio or the tube.

Every time a book of yours is published, or a short story, or novella in a collection, you write to your hometown newspaper *and* every town you've ever lived in, and tell them all about it. It might surprise you how many will give you a write up, and those write ups sell books.

In a pinch, you can volunteer for charity auctions, or to be an officer or do other chores for your novelists group, or you can even correspond with various editors. You heard their panel at X, and want to discuss ... or whatever.

If you stay at a house long enough, you may have an editor Elsewhere who likes you naturally. Editors don't always stay at the same house—they get offered pro- >>>

Surviving Trashing

(Continued from page 5)

motions, the grass is greener elsewhere, whatever.

Every editor who's worked with you and moved is a potential editor for you in the future. Don't let him forget you. Keep in touch. Seek her out at conventions, ask how she likes the new place.

All this, of course, is do what I say, not what I do. Because I am one of those who is miserable at conventions.

So what can the shy ones do?

Some of the same things; it just takes longer. Keep in touch with that editor who left. Volunteer to organize that charity auction, even if you can't go yourself. Write letters to the appropriate professional publications, genre zines, or fanzines. Maybe an editor will comment back. Make every effort to form strong relationships with as many professionals as possible. Perhaps a writer friend can help you into another house. Perhaps an editor will. Perhaps a new agent will help.

Even if you can't resell the baby that was returned, keep it in mind. Maybe you will tomorrow, or next year, or next decade.

Whatever. Don't stop trying. Don't stop writing. *Never* stop submitting.

Above all, don't stop praying.

If you are lucky enough not to be in that leaky boat today, Prepare, brethren and sistren, *prepare*.

Because someday some editor may ram an iceberg through your dream Titanic.

Meanwhile, write on, and remember:

Possible dreams. **NINK**

Under the pen name Jayge Carr, Marj Krueger has had four novels published—all SF. She has also published dozens of short stories under the same pen name, most hard SF in magazines such as Omni and Analog, but some soft SF or fantasy in other magazines or original anthologies. She hopes to do even better under the new pen names she is now writing under. Look in bookstores for Catfantastic IV, Zodiac Fantastic, and Women of Wonder: The Contemporary Years, to find current examples of her "Jayge Carr" work. Marj is also an Assistant Editor for NINK.

Will that Submission Be Your Last?

by Ethan Ellenberg, literary agent

Is it ever a mistake to make a submission? I think so. I decided to write this short piece after recently refusing to make a submission for a client.

I don't think I need to do any extensive scene-setting here. We're in a tough business, which has recently gotten tougher. Not only has the level of competition generally risen in all genres, but a lot of factors unrelated to the quality of individual books further muddies the waters. The working novelist isn't tying-in to a successful network television series or being chased by paparazzi on gondolas in Venice. Your work must open the door.

I can't get the beauty contest image out of my head. Every time you show your work to an editor you are displaying yourself. If it's an editor familiar with your work, you are competing against your past work. If it's a new face, this is your best chance—first exposure. It may also be your last. For the most part, you only get one real shot. After that new editor reads whatever you've put before them, some deep, perhaps indelible impression is going to be made. It may be loser, it may be winner, it may be really interesting writer who doesn't quite have it all together in this piece.

Being branded a winner is great. That editor may buy you now, or always have an eye out for you and read future submissions with great interest. Being branded a loser is real bad. The editor will sniff at even a good piece, convinced that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, somewhere this book will go bad and isn't worth the time

or effort—if that editor reads you at all in the future. Being branded a really interesting writer, etc. is almost as good as winner. But writers need to convert their work into sales. Really interesting writers with flawed pieces don't get bought.

The moral is pretty simple. I strongly recommend against writers showing inferior work. This isn't major league baseball. You don't get 400 at-bats a year. And this goes for nearly everyone. Successful, top-selling writers shouldn't show inferior work, journeymen writers absolutely can't afford to. On a certain level you are a beauty contest contestant and you can't afford to let them see your dressing room. You are trying to gain someone's confidence, it's an ongoing struggle, and you can't afford to weaken that confident, capable image you've built. Even when you take a leap and try something completely different (which I'm comfortable with and recommend sometimes), that piece, too, must have enough quality to command respect.

One thing that happens to writers whose careers are in trouble is that they start making submissions—a lot of submissions, including material that shouldn't be shown or is being shown too often or is going to the same person too much or to the wrong people. I understand the temptation, but resist it. You're not digging your way out of that pit, just making it deeper. It's a difficult judgment, I agree. I think it's one of the important functions a good agent provides. I don't like saying no to a client. It puts me in con-

flict with them. I can feel their disappointment. I get probed. Am I the problem? I mean, here you are with no sale for x months and the agent refuses to submit the piece? I mean, the agent isn't even the buyer. Shouldn't I at least be rejected by the publisher?

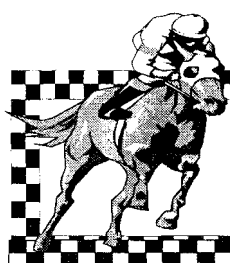
I would always err on the side of submission. I agree work should be shown and the publisher is the buyer, but my taste and judgment are being depended on, counted on to not only enrich the client, but to protect what they've got as well. It's an important function, a trust, and a spate of weak submissions can take a troubled career and end it, or further seriously impair it. I think saying no is an important function and agents who don't are doing serious damage to their clients.

Let me add a few thoughts about what to do when your agent refuses to make that submission. I've been happily

surprised a number of times with much better work that I have submitted. Sometimes writers know what they have isn't good and they're trying to sneak it past you. This agent rejection may kick you back on your heels. It's dismaying and painful, but it may be just what's needed.

It may be time to do your homework, read a lot of books and get a better sense of what you can bring into your own work. It may be time to take a full evaluation of your virtues and flaws as a writer.

It may be time to try something completely different. It may be time to get back in touch with why you got into this crazy game in the first place. In short, it may be a good thing. I'm sure you've all heard this cliché before, but it's a cliché for a reason, it holds a kernel of truth in it. *Success is not the path to success, failure is the path to success*—just make sure to make the most of your failures. **NINC**



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	August 3	August 10	August 17	August 24
Helen Bianchin	<i>An Ideal Marriage?</i> , Harlequin			148n	113
Sandra Brown	<i>Exclusive</i> , Warner Vision	46	62	90	
Sandra Brown	<i>Fat Tuesday</i> , Warner	57	80	94	90
Sandra Brown	<i>Above and Beyond</i> , Mira		106n	30	30
Elaine Coffman	<i>Someone Like You</i> , Fawcett Columbine		130n		
Catherine Coulter	<i>The Maze</i> , Putnam	81	129		
Diane Mott Davidson	<i>The Main Corpse</i> , Bantam	44	81	112	138
Jude Deveraux	<i>Legend</i> , Pocket			34n	19
Christina Dodd	<i>A Well Pleasured Lady</i> , Avon	77			
Julie Garwood	<i>One Red Rose</i> , Pocket	13	48	98	
Julie Garwood	<i>One White Rose</i> , Pocket	75	122		
Julie Garwood	<i>One Pink Rose</i> , Pocket	114	147		
Tess Gerritsen	<i>Harvest</i> , Pocket	78	117	99	95
Tess Gerritsen	<i>Life Support</i> , Pocket			186n	136
Tami Hoag	<i>Dark Paradise</i> , Bantam		25n	14	18
Joan Hohl	<i>Ever After</i> , Zebra	61			
Joan Johnston	<i>The Virgin Groom: Hawk's Way</i> , Silhouette	88			
Betina Krahn	<i>The Mermaid</i> , Bantam		58n	59	100
Nora Roberts	<i>Finding the Dream</i> , Jove	8	26	52	68
Barbara Dawson Smith	<i>Once Upon a Scandal</i> , St. Martin's Press		95n	111	



I'm going to start off this month with a small rant,

ONLINE

inspired by a batch of posts on NinLink and the ensuing discussion. Remember all of the advice and encouragement I shared last month on putting up your own Web page? Some publishers are muddying the water with restrictive "agreements" they're asking their authors to sign with respect to Websites. Some Harlequin and Bantam authors have been told they need permission to use scans of their covers on their own sites (paid for by the author, mind you!), or to post excerpts of upcoming books for promotional purposes. Worse, these publishers have asked some authors to link to, or at least mention, the publishers' own sites on the authors' pages. What makes this so disturbing is that both of these publishers have clauses in their standard contracts stipulating book-club (2-3%) royalty rates for sales from their Websites! When questioned, both publishers have said that Internet sales are "negligible" right now—but that was once true of book club sales, as well.

If anything, authors should arguably request *higher* than the standard royalty rate on Web sales, since the publishers have far fewer costs associated with those sales. (Judith Bowen posted this novel idea on the Link, and I most heartily agree with her!) Several people pointed out that we've set precedent over the years by using excerpts and covers in other promotional material, and the publishers never minded a bit—after all, it was free advertising for them. The same is true of author Web pages. So if you have one (or are in the process of creating one), perhaps it would be wisest *not* to approach your publisher about permissions. Once you do, they'll be forced to come up with some kind of policy—and why give them ideas? Let them come to you. As one savvy soul pointed out, it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission. ;>

On a more positive note, Bookstacks (<http://www.book.com>) is reportedly offering a 10% kickback on books sold there via links from our Websites (similar to what Amazon.com has been doing). And with more and more online distributors popping up (check out <http://cbsd.com/cbsd> for example), publishing with very small presses or even self publishing may become a more and more lucrative alternative to playing with the big boys.

NinLink is rolling along, and getting better and better, IMHO. (That's an online acronym for "In My Humble Opinion.") I have yet to see there any of the pettiness or unprofessionalism that has tainted every other author list I've ever been on (and I've been on a lot of them!). We discuss everything from late-breaking pub-

lishing news to stress reduction for writers, and everyone benefits.

Over the past month, topics have included copyright on the Internet, writers' unions (again), the pros and cons of selling on synopsis, the pros and cons of critique groups, and how to remove wallpaper. <g> Penny Williamson shared a brilliant post on the importance of retaining foreign rights (any chance of a stand-alone article, Penny?) and several people offered tips on avoiding/reducing carpal tunnel symptoms. (Using a trackball instead of a mouse seems to help a lot of folks.) Reports have started to come in on the effectiveness of St. John's Wort for battling depression (mostly favorable) and the potential of glucosamine/chondroitin sulfate supplements as outlined in *The Arthritis Cure* by Jason Theodasakis has been discussed. Other recommended books included *Fearless Creating* and *Staying Sane in the Arts*, both by Eric Maisel. Under "music to write by," a few people suggested *The Wilderness Collection* by Narada.

If you're still unlinked, you can join us by sending an e-mail request:

To: **Majordomo@ninc.com**

Subject: Subscribe Your Name (as it appears on the NINC roster)

Body: subscribe NinLink-Digest Your-E-mail-Address

Once subscribed, post messages To: **NinLink@ninc.com**

NOTE: If you're on the Link and change your e-mail address, you need to *unsubscribe* with your old address (same as above, except with the word "Unsubscribe") and then resubscribe with the new one. Otherwise NinLinks bounce all over the place, causing headaches for our long-suffering administrators.

I hope to see many of you at the conference this month (where I'll be using some of the great stuff on burnout from NinLink in the Night Owl session). If I don't see you there, I'll see you online!

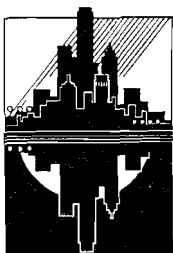
— **Brenda Hiatt Barber :**)



INTRODUCING...

New Members

Joyce Adams, O'Fallon MO
Julie Beard, Wentzville MO
Victoria Leigh Erbschloe (*Victoria Leigh*), Monument CO
Carmen Green, Lawrenceville GA
Kristin Hannah, Seattle WA
Christiane Heggan, Medford NJ
Jaye W. Manus (*Sheryl Lynn*), Colorado Springs, CO
Nancy McArthur, Berea OH
Glenna McReynolds, Fort Collins CO
Donna Valentino, McDonald PA



DOs AND DON'Ts

DON'T DITHER:

If you still want extra tickets for the Art Show

reception, contact me *now*. The catering arrangements must be made in advance, so we won't accept walk-ins. Here is the list of professional cover artists who intend to exhibit and sell at the first-ever NINC Art Show:

Franco Accornero / Jill Bauman
Daniel Buckley / Deborah Chabrian
Ronald Chironna / Elizabeth Finney
Marc Fishman / Victor Gadino
Cheryl Griesbach & Stanley Martucci
Tom Hallman / Steve Hickman
Greg Hildebrandt / Tim Hildebrandt
Jael / Bruce A. Jensen / Lissanne Lake
Victoria & Julius Lisi
Jeff A. Menges / Cliff Miller
John Palencar / Peter Peebles / Pino
Bob Sabin / Michael Whelan
Stephen Youll / Ron Walotsky
And NINC member Bertice Small's private collection.

DON'T FRIGHTEN THE NATIVES:

A few more New York types have committed to NINC since we printed the registration brochure. So please be nice to:

AGENT:

Jake Elwell, Wieser & Wieser, Inc.

EDITORS:

Barry Neville, Berkley Publishing Group
Chris Keeslar, Dorchester Publishing

DON'T SLEEP IN THE STREET:

The NINC block of conference-rate rooms at the Marriott is sold out on Wednesday night. By the time you read this, it's likely that all conference-rate rooms will be sold out for all nights. (The hotel gave numerous false alarms in August and turned people away when there were rooms available, but this time it's apparently for real. While I'm on the subject, I strongly recommend that you get your Marriott room reservation confirmed *in writing* and bring it to New York with you.) If you're a johnny-come-lately, you can either book a full-price room at the Marriott (yes, it's expensive, but they

don't really make you give them your firstborn male child; that's just a rumor), or you can reserve a room at another hotel. Contact me for our shortlist of alternatives.

DO BRING A BOOK:

Andrea Senchy is neither a NINC member nor an author, and she didn't know me from Adam when I first called and begged her for help seven months ago. She has donated so very much of her time, expertise, skill, and contacts to help us plan and execute the art show that we owe her more than I can possibly explain while staying within my allotted word-count. So I'd like you (yes, *you*) to bring a copy of your recent book(s) to the conference, inscribed to Andrea. I'll have a big colorful bag sitting at Registration where you can deposit the books on Thursday and Friday. Considering how much Andrea has done for us, I want her to leave NINC (where she'll supervise the art show) with something unique which will show her how much we appreciate her help and support.

DO SAY, "THANKS, JAYNE, YOU'RE A MENSCH."

Longtime NINC member and special guest speaker Jayne Ann Krentz has donated her entire NINC speaking fee to the art show. We're only charging art show reception attendees enough to pay for the outrageously priced catering, but there are other expenses. Jayne's donation is being used to provide security for the art, and to rent and transport the art show equipment; just imagine how hard it would be to admire the paintings if we couldn't hang them up! So when you see Jayne, you might want to thank her for her generous support of the art show.

DON'T EVER EXPECT ME TO DO THIS AGAIN:

I'm leaving for New York a few days early, so you won't be able to

pester... er, contact me at home after October 12. I will check into the hotel October 15. When you get to the Marriott, conference registration will be in the Whitney Room (which will also be the Press Room), starting at 9:00 a.m. Thursday morning. If anyone's around on Wednesday, I could use some help stuffing registration folders and bags.

See you in New York!

— **Laura Resnick**
Conference Coordinator

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

New Applicants

Nora DeLoach, Decatur GA
Gin Ellis (*Lyn Ellis*), Atlanta GA
Teresa Hill (*Sally Tyler Hayes*), Greenville SC
Margaret E. Hubbard (*Lynn Emery*), Baton Rouge LA
Catherine Hudgins (*Kate Thomas*), San Antonio TX
Martha Johnson, Bloomsburg PA
Jill Jones, Black Mountain NC
Sarah Lovett, Santa Fe NM
Harold A. Lowry (*Leigh Greenwood*), Charlotte NC
Jenny Lykins, Germantown TN
Ardath Mayhar (*Frances Hurst, John Killdeer, Frank Cannon*), Chireno TX
Jan L. Nowasky (*Lorraine Heath*), Plano TX
Debbi Quattrone (*Debbi Rawlins*), Durham NC
Francine Rivers, Windsor CA
Susan D. Runde (*Christine Scott*), Ballwin MO
Kathleen Sage, Teutopolis IL
Sharon Sala (*Dinah McCall*), Shawnee OK
Sharon Schulze, Oakville CT
Ann Howard White, Demorest GA
Terri Lynn Wilhelm (*Terri Lynn, Terri Lindsey*), Casselberry FL
Geraldyn Dawson Williams (*Geraldyn Dawson*), Ft. Worth TX

New Members

See Facing Page, lower right

Ethnicity and Culture in Popular Fiction or, Writing for the Melting Pot

By
TEREY daly RAMIN

*This is a story about differences, about language
and old sayings, about traditions that change
and others that stick like mucilage, or cling like wet cement
hardening into concrete, about a woman taking
into her a foreign lover in a rented carriage
she yields herself, smiling and moving
in silence, her lover's mouth and eyes rounded ovals.*
from the poem "For Rose Aubrey," Joyce Ferman Wells
(used by permission of the author)

I have to admit to dawdling over the start of this article, tossing out more openings and tangents than I've kept. The deeper I got into the subject of ethnicity, the more I thought "Gee, what have I gotten myself into here, maybe I should just turn this into a doctoral thesis." Ethnicity is a massive subject and choosing a focus is no easy matter. What do I want to say about culture in popular fiction? Certainly this is not a lecture. Nor is it a thesis. Okay, so it's a commentary, a collection of thoughts from writers whose craft focuses as much or more upon character as it does upon plot; writers whose characters are woven of ethnic tapestries and whose stories and plots would change dramatically if the characters were shaped of different clay or patterned from different cloth.

My desk is a litter of ethnic work: non-fiction books (*Alien Nation*, *Post Ethnic America*, *The Universal Myth*, *High Tide In Tucson*); "novels" (*!YO!*, *The Bean Trees*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Forbidden Fires*, *Indian Killer*, *Mutant Message Down Under*, *Growing Up Latino*). I say "novels" because they're not considered genre fiction and are not marketed as genre fiction.

By far the largest stack of books is popular or commercial fiction by Emilie Richards, Kathleen Eagle, Ruth Wind, Angela Benson, Bette Ford, Carolina Garcia-Aguilera, Terri Windling, Terris McMahan Grimes, Barbara Keiler, Marilyn Pappano, Jane Toombs, Jane Archer, Evelyn Vaughn, Annette Mahon, Eileen M. Wilks, Iola Fuller, Laurell K. Hamilton, Tony Hillerman, James Lee Burke, Joan Shapiro, James Elroy, Barbara Neely, Rosemary Edghill, Barbara Hambly, Joseph Hansen, Janet Evanovich...and the list goes on. All of these works are rich with ethnic characters—whether that ethnicity comes from race or by virtue of the fact that the characters are gay, Catholic, Wiccan, or live in New Jersey.

"...Apart from race, however, there is the lovely, warm phrase, 'My people.' It means something different to each person who is moved to use it. It refers to culture, to the assembly of people who together form a particular sort of ethnic identity. Ethnicity is formed of history and time and foods eaten and grooming habits and religious rituals and a thousand other things, most of them based on survival in one way or another. ... Language shapes us, and places

shape us, and for those who use our mother tongue, we are still shaped by the places that formed our ancestors." — Barbara Samuel

When I mentioned to my family that I was writing an article on ethnicity in popular fiction, my husband immediately went to the computer and printed off an article he'd found on MSNBC about Reggie Montgomery, the first black clown with Ringling Bros. Unlike other clowns, Montgomery didn't have to audition for the circus; he was recruited in the 1960s for the same reason publishers are now wising up and recruiting ethnic fiction from ethnic writers—dollars. With the rise of the civil rights movement and the growing number of African Americans buying tickets to the shows, Barnum & Bailey's producers had to rethink their strategies. They decided the shows needed some color with which their new customers could identify. Montgomery fit their needs to a T.

The same is true of many romance (and some other genre) publishers these days: color and ethnicity are in—at least sort of. Silhouette, Pinnacle/Arabesque, Genesis/Indigo, Avalon, and now Genesis/Cross Cultural (Asian and Hispanic, as well as multi-racial) are actively seeking ethnic romance, both contemporary and historical. Although to date most "ethnic" romance has been defined as African American, Genesis Press will soon bring out ethnic/cross cultural nonfiction and non-romance fiction because the market is there/here. In the words of Angela Benson, "Publishers have started to buy these books because they've figured out that they don't need majority readers to buy them in order for [the publisher] to make money. Publishers are going after the dollars in the minority communities...."

When I asked for writers to respond to my questions on the acceptability and uses of ethnicity and culture in popular fiction, those who answered (with the exception of Jane Archer, who wrote two dark fantasy novels under the name Nina Romberg) primarily write romance / relationship books for both series and mainstream houses. Which means that the primary focus of this article will be from the romance perspective. I did ask these writers to comment to the degree they felt possible on the use of ethnicity and culture in other genre fiction. Again, with the exception of Jane Archer, who has written fantasy, much of the consensus concerning fantasy was that there wasn't much ethnicity involved—from the occasional readers' standpoint.

Naturally, when my fourteen year old daughter (a will-be, not wannabe, fantasy writer whose goal is to finish her first novel by the age of fifteen) heard me discussing with friends the apparent lack of ethnicity in fantasy and science fiction, she was quick to jump into the discussion and point out that, in her not so humble opinion, there's "lots of ethnicity in fantasy." Then she dumped a pile of books into my

lap, all of which use primarily eastern races, ethnicities, religions and philosophies. And every time I've mentioned going off to do some work on this article she's reminded me "don't forget fantasy uses Eastern thought a lot, Mom." Okay, Brynna, here's your contribution. Thank you!

I've also recently found a great number of fantasies using Native American mythology, among others. And Jane Archer's *Shadow Walkers*, which features Miriam Webster, a Caddo-Comanche Medicine Woman, as its lead, is back in print and being considered for a TV movie.

My husband (a long time SF reader—Resnick, where are you when I need you?) observes that (in his opinion) science fiction tends to stick to the science part of the equation and, in a sense, homogenize its characters into a post-ethnic universe where skills matter over color, religion, national origin, planetary species, or whether or not the character is an android. Eileen M. Wilks suggests that most SF is rock-the-boat writing; most romance is affirming-ourselves writing. "For that reason," she says, "sci fi protagonists are often offbeat, even misfits, people we may even be a little shocked to find ourselves identifying with...[because] characters of different backgrounds ...are going to feel less disturbing [to us] when we're reading in a genre where we expect to be a bit disturbed."

As for romance fiction... Barbara Keiler feels that "romance fiction is by nature somewhat conservative...because we sell in great quantities, editors—or not even the editors, because they are generally open-minded but they live in fear for their jobs—seek the lowest common denominator."

Annette Mahon, who writes for Avalon and uses Hawaiian settings and characters because she was born and raised there, thinks romance "...is the perfect place to explore ethnic relationships...the 'average' person as heroine, the 'forbidden' hero. Even someone who might never want to date someone with a heritage very different from her own might want to read about it, imagine it." Her primary concern over writing ethnic romances has been with copy editors who edited out pidgin English and left a character with his speech "changed in such a way I felt it left him sounding uneducated instead of speaking what is really a local language...[because] the copy editors are so worried that they are going to offend someone, they do these changes, little realizing that the offense comes from their own changes."

On the up side, Mahon's editor told her that the fact her latest heroine is a bit overweight was a selling point.

*This is a story about parents and their deepest fears,
and of daughters who leave their houses at sixteen,
who know what they want of life, know their fate
when bleeding ceases, when bile rises up.
She cleans a chicken for the pot, holds its neck aloft,
says, "Ah, these men," a wicked gleam in her eye
for her dark-haired granddaughter, "vive la difference."
[from "For Rose Aubrey," Joyce Ferman Wells]*

In his book *Post Ethnic America*, David A. Hollinger quotes Ishmael Reed as observing of Arthur Haley's *Roots*:

"If Alex Haley had traced his father's bloodline, he would have traveled twelve generations back to, not Gambia, but *Ireland*." [Emphasis Hollinger's] In other words, to paraphrase Hollinger, Haley made the choice to identify with Africa, cementing his solidarity with people who most shared his social identity by denying, or erasing, another.

The author of the poem I'm quoting throughout this article is a long time friend of mine. She is older than I, but up until the last six months or so she firmly believed she was what her parents told her she was: White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, completely without ethnicity of race, religion, music, or food. When people asked her what her family's "ethnic food" was she responded with a bewildered, "Hot dogs." Then she took a writing class that unexpectedly turned out to deal with poetry. One of the assignments was to define her ethnicity in poetry form. Naturally she informed her instructor she couldn't comply as she had no ethnicity. Her instructor suggested she must, indeed, have some ethnic past and that Joyce "think about it for awhile."

When Joyce did think about it, and explored the family history, photographs, etc., long dead memories began to surface: of the "lost" Asian granddaughter no one speaks about; of the Irish heritage that was hidden and denied to the point that names were changed and a Catholic family became Presbyterian; of the German heritage similarly denied because Germans were not popular; of the Native American and Mediterranean links that were simply labeled "don't ask, don't tell."

The roots of this article began online with romance writers querying several of the lists I subscribe to about how acceptable not only ethnic heroes, but especially ethnic heroines were to other writers' publishers. The discussions evolved to include sales performances for ethnically mixed books, cover art for same, dissatisfaction with the publishers unwillingness to allow writers to write ethnic heroines.

In some instances, however, publishers that do not specialize in ethnic fiction (unless the story involves African Americans and both protagonists are African American) did specifically request ethnic heroines from writers, then marketed the books poorly. (To put this in some sort of perspective, a number of years ago, when romance publishers first began to use covers that did not feature the heroine and hero, marketing didn't know how to classify them and bookstores didn't know where to shelve them.) They were also afraid that, er, "non-ethnic" writers would get it wrong.

Still, as Barbara Samuel says far more eloquently than I, "...why not ethnic heroines?...If we can tackle males of other cultures, why not females? It seems more likely that women of all cultures have more in common than males and females of the same culture. [And] it feels faintly insulting to always make it the man who is ethnic, not the woman. If I give my Hispanic friend a book with a Hispanic hero and a white heroine, it feels like I'm offering my fantasy, not hers. Why not that great guy and an ethnic heroine? What about getting away from white characters all together?..."

Lewis Menand wrote in the *New Yorker* after listening to a public debate over whether white actors can play black characters and vice versa that, "...The theatre isn't >>>

Writing for the Melting Pot

(Continued from page 11)

about truth and authenticity. It's about pretending....For truth and authenticity, we have to go to the subway." The same is true for writers: we pretend, we imagine...then we go the subway and observe to make sure we get it right.

Writers want to explore characters in all their cultural and historical richness, but across the board, editors' primary concerns seem to be believability and a desire for "lightness" as opposed to historical accuracy—and, of course, dollars. Believability translates to something to the effect of "if you're not white, black, red, brown, Irish, Catholic, Jewish, Traditional American, Mexican, etc. you don't know enough to write about it." Yet most romance writers are not men and we write from the point of view of men all the time. And those romance writers who are men writing from the point of view of women don't seem to have much difficulty making a woman's point of view identifiable to their readers. Which means it's less writing what you know as writing what you want to know, allowing research to become the experience, as Stephen Crane did when he wrote *The Red Badge Of Courage*.

This is a story about quilting goods, pieces she bought at the ten cent store, pastels, pinks and lavenders she cut into squares in her room and sewed stitch after stitch in flickering gas light, lips open and moving, unlike those of her husband whose lips closed tighter and tighter, whose eyes grew thinner and thinner as the woman's body blossomed. The man cursed in the dark room at the first cry, pressed his son, newly wiped yet fragrant still of blood and birth, to his chest and said, "Mein Gott, what have we here?"
[from "For Rose Aubrey," Joyce Ferman Wells]

Writing from both ethnic experience and researched ethnic experience is what most of the writers interviewed for this article have done. Barbara Samuel wrote a medieval historical for Harper titled *Bed Of Spices*. In it the heroine is German, the hero Jewish. The story builds to the plague-crazed slaughter of the Jews of Strassburg in 1349. As her alter ego Ruth Wind, she's written several books filled with ethnic characters for Silhouette Special Editions, including one with a Jewish/Arab hero whose brother is mixed up in the Arab/Israeli conflicts. In another book she explores alcoholism with a Navajo hero who is a recovering alcoholic and a first generation Irish-American heroine daughter of an alcoholic — in both instances alcohol is a community scourge and Samuel says, "dealing with the fall-out is exhausting, but her message was one of hope: people can and do survive, overcome."

Angela Benson (Pinnacle Arabesque and Silhouette Special Edition) speaks of being surprised by people who ask "why I chose to write black characters. I am a black woman and...it never occurred to me to use anything other

than black characters. But they do ask and I'm still surprised." She reports that, though she receives mail from both majority and minority readers, "...the great majority of my mail and the great majority of my readership is black women. Their responses range from 'I've read romance all my life. It's about time we have some with blacks on the cover' to 'I don't read romance, but I bought your book because it had black people on the cover.' Both groups of readers enjoy seeing themselves and their experiences on the cover and within the pages of the book."

Barbara Keiler (Harlequin Superromance) was invited to write a Chicana heroine by an editor who was tired of "whitebread" characters. She's also written a "hero named Patrick Levine, who explained that he was half Irish, half Jewish—and what it boiled down to was, he lost his temper a lot and then felt guilty about it afterward." She feels she can "include ethnic characters because my writing is known for depth of character...[my editors] give me lots of freedom...I honestly think they'd accept pretty much anything, as long as the characters were believable and likable." She also says she "never met a WASP until I went to college. I guess that's why I like writing ethnic characters. They seem somehow more real to me."

Garda Parker, who has written nine historical and contemporary books for Zebra, speaks of writing one of her To Love Agains (To Love Again was a contemporary romance series, now defunct, for women 45+) titled *Love At Last* wherein several Eastern school teachers head out to a ranch in Wyoming for an adventure vacation. The hero is half Northern Cheyenne and half Crow. A secondary romance Parker "had not planned on materialized. Two women. One of them...a Caucasian teacher and the other the hero's half-sister, also N. Cheyenne." Before she even consulted her editor, Parker called N. Cheyenne friends to find out how they felt about homosexuality. "The N. Cheyenne said they had no problem with it at all, that it was a 'white man's thing,' and that they have traditionally felt that those people were on a different level. Sometimes they were consulted on spiritual things." She goes on to qualify that this attitude may have been an older idea rather than the way it is these days, but this is what she was told, so she left the secondary romance in. Parker's editor found the subplot "surprising," but left it in. *PW* reviewed the book favorably (in the days before they did much romance), commenting that the work began predictably, but that the lesbian secondary romance "gave the book more depth." Author and publisher were very excited.

Then the mail came in. Primarily from people calling themselves "Christians," telling Parker she wrote trash and should give up writing forever. "One wrote the word 'trash' on my book cover, tore it up and mailed it to me. Not only did they 'get' me for the lesbian relationship, but also for the hero and heroine....On the other hand, I heard from one Lesbian schoolteacher from NYC who came out to me in her

letter, and thanked me for writing a 'mainstream' book in which she could find characters to identify with. She said she felt 'included in a mainstream women's fiction piece for the first time ever...'

All four of Yvonne Jocks' books written for the now defunct Silhouette Shadows line (under her pen name Evelyn Vaughn) contain Wiccan heroines. One heroine is of mixed race in an interracial relationship, for which Jocks found herself "doing all sorts of research to try to avoid 'getting it wrong.'" She chose to write alternative religion Wiccan characters because she'd "seen very few books showing Wiccans in a good light..." She feels "Popular fiction is popular fiction because it doesn't try too hard to challenge common beliefs and values....I think there's a certain point at which a realistic portrayal of a character's emotional uncertainties about, say, an interracial relationship, might make the reader too uncomfortable to want to pursue the story...So we tend to write about characters who are fairly comfortable about their own race and that of others..."

Jocks also feels, "the alternative religion issue is very different from race, because whereas a reader might be an agnostic with a developing interest in becoming Wiccan, she's not likely to be a Caucasian with a developing interest in becoming Oriental. I believe...in the religious arena, romances and women's fiction are a safe place for a reader to explore an alternative idea without having to take that big leap of walking into the Occult Section of the bookstore and deciding which of the nonfiction books on Wicca will be good reading and which ones will have that...yuckiness about them..."

Always, these authors say, ethnicity and culture are a fact of life for their characters rather than an issue, or a choice the writer makes. Eileen Wilks, who writes for Silhouette Desire and Intimate Moments, thinks "about ethnicity when I'm thinking about hair color, schooling, and other aspects of my characters backgrounds....on a symbolic level, having a hero who is ethnically different from the heroine and from the majority of the readers fits the symbolism of most romances, in which the 'outsider' (man) is brought into the home (woman) and civilized or domesticated." She also feels "Realism is welcome in romance. Reality sometimes isn't." And Emilie Richards writes, "I try to use characters that will best get the job done. Sometimes race is a factor and sometimes it isn't....but I like my characters to resemble people in the real world from which they spring."

Emilie Richards' recent experiences writing ethnic and cultural fiction are, perhaps, unique among the authors I was able to interview. Her books, *Iron Lace* and *Rising Tides*, revolve around an interracial relationship at the turn of the century and all the ramifications for future generations. They were originally conceived as one book, "as a real immersion in the culture of Louisiana. I found the ethnic/racial mix of the state to be one of its real strengths, and I wanted to accurately reflect that rich heritage. I was tired of segregated family sagas with walk-on parts for African-Americans. In real life—particularly in the South—

people of different cultures do not live separate lives. They interact, they mix on every level, they affect each other in profound ways, and I wanted my book to reflect that. I never sat down to write about racial issues. I sat down to write about Louisiana....

"Somewhere in the beginning of the story it occurred to me that I might be writing a book that no one would want to buy because of prejudice. I was also concerned that I was trying to speak for a variety of races/cultures, none of which were my own. I second-guessed myself, agonized over every word my characters spoke, and very nearly decided against writing the book. Then one day I realized that I wasn't speaking for races or cultures, but I was speaking for the people inhabiting that book...so when I got past the idea that I was writing a book about race and culture and realized I was writing a book about characters who sprang from somewhere inside me, I lost my fear..."

But, of course, the book was a thousand page, mainstream family saga and, as we all know, saga is a four-letter word.

The book sold to MIRA several years after Richards wrote the original manuscript. It was broken down into two books and when Richards proposed rewriting the manuscripts from the point of view of a young black man, nobody blinked. In-house discussions revolved around marketing the books, how much of the plot would be revealed in the cover copy. "Mira decided to make it clear that race [would] figure into the plot and put together cover copy that hinted at some of the revelations in the book while keeping the major plot points a mystery."

She's received interesting comments since *Iron Lace* was released. Some readers found the story disturbing—which Richards considers a compliment because "After all, if someone is disturbed, that means they're thinking about what you've done." The positive comments she cherishes most are from African-American readers who feel that she dealt knowledgeably with prejudice and some of their own life experiences.

*She thinks of men living with new wives, of his living in Royal Oak
with the new wife she's never seen, knows from the name Jenny,
no dark recesses of sin color her fair skin, no murky Mediterranean
or Mohawk midnights darken their days,
their rides in the Reo, top down,
heads reflecting sun to sun. In a Grosse Pointe garret, she slides a
needle through yielding cloth,
dreams of Belle Isle carriages, gambling
casinos, native sons as dark as soil. Each noble stitch confirms
differences of city and farm,
dark and light, poverty, wealth,
language, food.
She dreams until once again she rises
to answer the servants' bell*

[from "For Rose Aubrey," Joyce Ferman Wells]

So, if these popular fiction authors are finding a market for fiction that is not entirely "whitebread," what's stopping us from flinging the doors wide? Richards puts it >>>

Melting Pot

(Continued from page 13)

this way: "We still have cultural taboos in this country, and one of them is the marginal acceptability of love affairs between different races and cultures. Readers who will accept a multi-racial cast of characters may not accept the idea of romances between those characters. So stories that skirt this particular issue may be more acceptable to readers....Traditional romance readers tend to be conservative in their value systems, but on the other hand, they are interested in social issues that affect their lives. As an author you can't please everyone, and as long as you realize that as you move forward in a story and try to please yourself, you will bring some share of your readership right along with you." The other authors agree.

"In terms of using ethnicity in popular fiction, I think it's way overdue," writes Barbara Samuel. "For most of American history our characters have fallen into two groups: they were either written to be 'everyman,' like some twisted version of suburbia, or ethnic characters were included, but without honesty....Only in the very recent past have we come to a point where we might actually be able to use ethnic characters according to our tastes and interests in a multi-cultural canvas that would accurately reflect American lives in all their variation....I also believe the way we learn to manage it in popular fiction will eventually decide the question of what is going to happen to us in the long run. We also show the rest of the world, who are only just now grappling with these problems, what works and does not, like the rebellious older sister who has to break all the rules first.

"There is so much richness available to popular fiction writers in terms of characterization when we can include characters of the broad canvas of American ethnicity. It's like going from a box of eight crayons to the supersize box of 120. So many choices! So many subtle shades! So many glorious combinations!

"But to do it well, we have to be very, very sensitive to the gradations of tone. Blue is not just blue, although the purest form of it does exist and is perfectly valid. But there is also Prussian blue, and Persian blue, and violet blue, and blue green...and they all have a different vibration on the page...."

Yvonne Jocks has a suggestion for how writers might go about shading their pages: "...it seems to me," Jocks says, "that in this emotionally loaded [romance] genre in particular, the best rule of thumb for writing interracial as well as alternative-religion stories is to keep a large dose of compassion / tolerance for the reader, especially the reader who may disagree with you.

"Almost all bigotry and bias comes from a certain level of fear, even if it's as simple as discomfort around the unfamiliar....I'm talking about your uncle or next-door neighbor who suddenly floors you

with what, to him, is a simple comment about [whatever].... That person (the uncle / neighbor) most likely thinks he's being pragmatic, not racist....

"You might get a lot farther with an uncertain reader by taking small and easy steps than by showing your heroine facing down a bunch of torch-waving...stereotypes."

When this conversation began online, it began in the negative: why can't we do, why won't they let me do...? But really, writing with the big crayon box at our elbows is what most of us do all the time—especially those of us whose genre writing must concentrate on character and relationships.

Ethnicity is a point of view, the way we individually or collectively (within a family group) see things. It's anything that's part of our characters or, conversely, foreign to them. It is angry, loud, jovial; filled with insider jokes, stereotypes, hexes, curses, and traditions. Mostly, it is who we are, how we define ourselves—whatever characteristics we put into the populations of our books. And slowly, slowly, these marvelous women—writers of romance, the largest selling mass market genre—are shaping characters whose race, faith, or sexual orientation can be as much a part of them as any other characteristic; characters who reach out and touch, maybe even change, a reader's point of view.

"Ethnicity has as great or as small a place in [genre fiction] as the vision of the author allows. Ethnicity is just part of a good story, and it flows from the plot, character strengths, and flaws—just like any other factor an author considers when developing a story." —Emilie Richards McGee

In terms of ethnic writing, our only limitations are those we put on ourselves. So go ahead. Write it.

Gently. *NINK*

My thanks to the writers who participated in, or provided input for, this article: Lynn Emery, Barbara Samuel, Barbara Keiler, Angela Benson, Jane Toombs, Yvonne Jocks, Emilie Richards McGee, Garda Parker, Annette Mahon, Kathleen Eagle, Jane Archer, Eileen M. Wilks, Joyce Ware, Joyce Ferman Wells, Joyce Marlow.

Terey daly Ramin, who writes as Terese Ramin, is the author of six novels for Silhouette, with her seventh in the works. Her most recent book is An Unexpected Addition, the story of an ethnically diverse family, their llamas, and the parents who forget to practice what they preach. She is also the mother of two tremendously opinionated teenagers who get none of their opinions from her. "What," she says with an innocent grin, "me have opinions? Nah...."

Send No Money Now...

It will soon be time to renew—or join—the NINC group *Publishers Weekly* subscription. The group rate quoted for 1998 is \$139/year. While this is \$30 less than an individual subscription—and the \$30 savings pays half your NINC dues—I'm unhappy with the percentage of increase and am negotiating to lower it. You'll know next month if I was successful, so be sure to check next month's *NINK*.

—Patty Gardner Evans



EAST OF THE HUDSON

It's Only a Foot Wound

Just when I think I understand this crazy book world of ours, along comes an event that proves me wrong. Take, for instance, the little flap that has brewed up between independent booksellers and the *New York Times* Bestseller List.

I've always thought that the indies and the *NYT* are on the same wavelength. After all, they both like the same literary kinds of fiction and they both disdain the kind of popular fiction that most of us in this organization write. But last month, the seeming alliance came apart when several West Coast independents and bookseller organizations flew into a rage over what they perceived as collaboration between the *Times* and Barnes & Noble, the book superstore.

It seems that the *NYT* and B&N have entered into an agreement whereby online *NYT* reviews would be hot-linked to an order form on the B&N homepage. (For those of you still in the 20th century, that means that the *Times* reviews which appear on the Internet would contain a highlighted icon. If a reader wanted to order the book, he or she could, with one mouse click, summon up an order form from the Barnes & Noble online fulfillment service.)

That electronic connection seemed to imply editorial approval of the superstore chain by the *Times*. At least that's the way the independents saw the matter. Their response? Several of them launched a campaign to persuade all indies to withhold their sales figures from the *Times*.

That's right, friends. The Northern California and Oregon independent bookseller organizations urged their members to boycott the weekly compilation of the *NYT Book Review's* bestseller lists.

"You are being asked to collaborate in your own destruction by giving sales information that will only benefit chain store sales," complained a letter from Robert Maull and Roberta Tichenor of the Oregon group.

"It makes no sense for me to report a book that's selling well in my store, a book we've discovered and hand-sold," Hut Landon, executive director of the Northern California group, told *Publishers Weekly*, "If eight to ten of us independents report it, the book will become a bestseller and people will buy it at a 30 percent discount in the chains. Why would I want to give a chain my bestsellers." (Italics are mine.)

Now, I always knew the *Times* lists gave heavy importance to sales in independent stores. If that were not the case, Harlequin titles would show up on the list more often than they currently do.

But not even in my wildest nightmares did I believe sales reports from eight or ten independent bookstores across the country could propel a title onto the *Times* list. (True, I still believe, and will continue to believe until the *Times* gives me reason to do otherwise, that they weight the sales of a few urban bookstores the *Times* selects. But I don't

think that the hundreds of indies who report voluntarily are so powerful that a handful can skew the numbers.)

The *Times* was clearly stung by the suggestion it is a cultural Quisling collaborating with the mass-market Nazis of Barnes & Noble. In a letter from *Book Review* editor Charles (Chip) McGrath, the *Times* admitted a fondness for Len Riggo, the head of Barnes & Noble. But the Chipster categorically denied that the superstore wolf had ever gotten his hand above the newspaper's knee.

"The deal between the *Times* and Barnes & Noble does not constitute an editorial endorsement," McGrath stated solemnly.

And to prove his chastity, or at least his willingness to sleep around, McGrath offered to post a nationwide directory of bookstores and a directory of independent bookseller homepages on the *Times'* Website.

Such magnanimity did not level the playing field enough for the indies. As of this writing, a number of them are continuing to withhold their personally discovered literary hot picks from the *Times*, thereby diluting their already tenuous hold on the cultural steering wheel of American literature. According to *PW*, there are even signs the boycott is spreading eastward from the Pacific.

This whole flap is an extension of the cultural conflict that has brewed in America since I started pontificating on the subject three or four years ago. Change has taken place, no doubt. The *Times'* lists have come a little closer to reflecting real sales and independent booksellers have lost a significant amount of influence over the cultural agenda of the country.

For better and worse—and I can make a case either way—the book business of the 1980s is no more. Books have become mass-market "product." Literary power in the country is in the hands of corporate executives—publishers and booksellers—who market books the same way they market disposable diapers and widgets.

For once, I find myself in spiritual agreement with the indies: They love books, even if they may not always love the same books I do.

But I don't think their boycott will change one single blessed thing. Their campaign reminds me of a cartoon I once saw. It depicted a little mouse standing bravely and extending a middle finger of greeting at a big old owl that was swooping down to devour it.

One Last Act of Defiance, the cartoon was called. It celebrated the value of a soul-satisfying, but ultimately futile gesture.

Tectonic Action

If I were still a practicing journalist, I think I would pitch editors on a story of a company that seems to embody the changes and turmoil in publishing today. The >>>



EAST OF THE HUDSON

(Continued from page 15)

subject would be titled "HarperCollins: The Summer of Its Discontent."

A couple of months ago, Harper, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, took a lot of flak among writers for canceling more than 100 contracts, mostly on the basis of tardiness.

Anthea Disney, Harper CEO, said the move was dictated by a need to streamline the company's operation. "It's a way of trying to make sense out of the business, she said. "In all honesty, I don't want to publish books that we won't get behind and publish well."

Harper did agree to pay out the contracts of the canceled books, and in certain regards, Disney was voicing the sentiments of a great many publishers intent on trimming their lists.

But there was nothing predictable about the next step for HarperCollins. In late August, News Corp. announced it was taking a \$270 million writedown on the publishing arm of the company. I'm no accountant, but as I understand it, a writedown amounts to a revaluing of assets and liabilities to more accurately reflect economic reality. In other words, HarperCollins admitted that it was worth a shade of a quarter-billion dollars less, on paper, than it had been before the writedown.

Lots of folks in New York took that to be a signal that Murdoch was preparing to peddle the publishing house, but Disney and others categorically deny that possibility. The Harper CEO, who used to run *TV Guide*, called the writedown "a gift from News to HarperCollins. We can start from scratch in building the company."

Maybe, maybe not. Corporate executives have lied to the world about such things often enough. Only time will tell about Harper's future. Maybe the company is on the block, or maybe Murdoch intends to rebuild it into a major player on the world publishing scene. (Let experience be your guide as you place your bet on the outcome.)

One side note to the *contretemps* is worth pointing out. Even while trying to look gracious in its dealings with the writers it dumped, Harper managed to trip all over itself. The publisher noted in its press releases that the writers would be paid any outstanding advances on the canceled books. Sounds equitable, right?

Then the Authors Guild stumbled across the rest of the story. The Harper lawyers had drafted up releases that the writers had to sign to collect the rest of the money owed them. These releases included a promise to repay Harper, should the canceled manuscripts be sold elsewhere.

The corporate types even wanted the authors to report back twice a year with details about their efforts to resell the books.

It took a couple of days for Harper to analyze the smelly, slippery substance they had stepped in, but reason did finally prevail, thanks to the Guild. The corporation agreed to drop its demands for repayment and even indicated it would refund money to any writers who had been foolish enough to accede to the requirements of the release.

That, friends, is why we all need to stay in touch, among ourselves and with other author organizations. If we don't compare notes and communicate honestly, the corporate nit-pickers and bean-counters will eat our flesh for breakfast and use our bones to prop up their bottom lines.

In the past, I've avoided writing about HarperCollins because I have had my own ups and downs with the firm. I won't discuss my own experience, except to say that I am never surprised by the actions of corporations. But in an odd way, I feel almost as sorry for the people on the inside of that dragon as I do for the ones who have only been braised by his breath. More than ten percent of Harper's world-wide work force was fired this summer, and the rest must be turning blue from holding their breath, waiting to be kicked out into the traffic on 53rd Street.

I'll bet even Anthea Disney sleeps lightly at night. In her heart of hearts, I doubt that she really believes she will be any better at picking sure-fire bestsellers, and only best-sellers, than any of her predecessors were.

— Evan Maxwell

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