

Novelists' Ink

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

Volume 9, Number 6

June 1998

TAMING THE DRAGON

By **DOREEN ROBERTS**

This software could be a lifesaver for people who cannot type at length for various reasons—writers with arthritis, severe back or neck pain, serious carpal tunnel problems, or people like me, who hunt and peck type with an abysmal rate of accuracy.

I talk to my computer. All right, I know most of us do. The difference is, when I talk to my computer it listens. What's more, it writes down everything I say, and it obeys my commands. I am, in fact, talking to my computer right now and it's faithfully taking down every word. That's right—no hands. No more carpal tunnel, no more aching back, no more stiff neck.

Skeptical? I don't blame you. So was I at first, but now I'm a believer and an enthusiastic advocate for continuous speech recognition software, or CSRS.

The technique has been on the drawing boards for many years, and although there are still drawbacks to the system, the technology has improved to the point where it is now feasible to write an entire book without using your keyboard.

There are two major brands on the market right now; ViaVoice by IBM, at \$130, and Dragon System's NaturallySpeaking; the Preferred edition, which is the latest update, at \$149. Both software programs come with a nifty microphone which is worn on the head while dictating.

There is at least one cheaper brand out there, offered on the Net, but I tend to believe that you get what you pay for, and at \$39 I'm inclined to leave that one alone. According to the salesman at my local computer store, NaturallySpeaking achieves somewhat greater accuracy and is the most popular. So I chose "The Dragon" for my venture into this new territory.

I would say that the most important requisite for success with the software is patience. Lots and lots of patience. The initial setup takes over an hour, and requires you to read aloud for about 40 minutes. This is necessary for you to train the program to recognize your voice.

No two people speak exactly alike, and the program has to allow for dialects, accents and personal idiosyncrasies in your speech. The program gives you choices from which to read in your initial setup, such as excerpts

from *3001: The Final Odyssey*, by Arthur C. Clarke and *Dave Barry in Cyberspace*. Once you've completed the initial training, it takes several more hours of dictation before the program fully recognizes your voice.

Training the Dragon takes time. At first I was constantly correcting words. I probably had more problems than most users, however, since I have a British accent. Believe it or not, after about a week of playing with the Dragon, it actually recognized my English pronunciation with uncanny accuracy.

The program has an extensive Help system, which is designed to help you learn and use the Dragon while you work. The Help menu can be accessed by various commands. "What can I say?" will give you a display of commands you can use in the current context. "Give me help" displays the topics, and if you state the topic it will give you advice on your selection. There is also a Quick Tour, which takes about six minutes to view and gives you clear instructions on the basics of using the program.

The tour also offers optional hands-on exercises to help you become comfortable with dictating. There are multimedia examples and demos provided throughout the Help system.

It is simple enough to edit your text. The software recognize commands, i.e.: "Go to end of line, page, paragraph, etc.," or "Move back/forward 20 words, move up/down three lines."

Continued on page 6 ▶ ▶ ▶

Also in this Issue:

President's Column—2 / NINK Notes—4 / Letters to the Editor—5 / Fast Track—8 / Tahoe Conference Update—9 / Setting Workable Goals—10 / Online—13 / East of the Hudson—14 / CENTER: 1998 Roster Update

Novelists, Inc.

FOUNDED IN 1989

Advisory Council

Rebecca Brandewyne†	Linda Barlow
Janice Young Brooks†	Georgia Bockoven
Jasmine Cresswell†	Evan Maxwell
Maggie Osborne†	William Bernhardt
Marianne Shock†	Victoria Thompson

† Founder

If you have questions regarding Novelists, Inc., please contact a member of the Board of Directors.

1998 Board of Directors

PRESIDENT Steven Womack
120 Highland Villa Drive
Nashville TN 37211-7321
Ph/Fax 615-315-8590
E-mail: dfblooz@aol.com

PRESIDENT-ELECT Julie Kistler
26 Gloucester Circle
Bloomington IL 61704-7604
Ph/Fax 309-663-8221
E-mail: julie@ice.net

SECRETARY Candace Schuler
3425 Henderson Circle
Santa Rosa CA 95403
Ph 707-523-4086
Fax 707-523-4286
E-mail: Schuler776@msn.com

TREASURER Phyllis DiFrancesco
27 Stonehenge Court
Burr Ridge IL 60521
Ph 630-325-1624
Fax 630-325-1625
E-mail: phyllisdifrancesco@prodigy.com

NEWSLETTER EDITOR LaRee Bryant
3817 Yellowstone Street
Irving TX 75062-7245
Ph 972-255-0316
Fax 972-256-2118
E-mail: LBryant316@aol.com

ADVISORY COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE
Janice Young Brooks
Box 1112
Mission KS 66222-0112
E-mail: cozybooks@aol.com

CENTRAL COORDINATOR Randy Russell
Novelists, Inc.
P.O. Box 1166
Mission KS 66222-0166
Ph/Fax 816-561-4524
(Call before faxing)

NINC/NINK correspondence
can also be sent to the e-mail address:
ninc1989@aol.com

Web site: <http://www.ninc.com>

Send Address Changes to Central Coordinator

Copyright ©1998 by Novelists, Inc. All rights reserved.
No part of this newsletter may be used or reproduced in
any manner without written permission.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

This Month
from the
President:

To risk or not to
risk...the writer's
dilemma

Whenever possible, I try to leave my own baggage behind when writing my monthly column for the NINC newsletter. This should be a forum where issues are addressed that affect or confront as many of us as possible, not just a single individual. This is not a place to rant and rave.

This month, I'm going to violate that canon to some extent because over the past week, I've had an experience that I believe many of us will face more and more. If you haven't faced it already, then it's certainly an occupational hazard in the future. As I describe this experience to you, I'll try to keep my cool, to remain as professional as possible.

Keep your head down, though; spit may fly.

First, a little background—with eight published novels under my belt, I am by NINC standards still a novice (the average number of books published by NINC members is now into double digits; something like sixteen, I believe). Still, I had hopes that even as a beginner my career would move forward. My goal has never been to hit the publishing lottery, but rather to grow my audience with each book. Financially, I hoped with each book to get a step closer to supporting myself totally as a novelist. As most writers know, money to a writer is only good for one thing: to buy more time to write.

After three books with a publisher famous for throwing books out there and letting them languish, I decided to sign on with someone else. I started a series of mysteries with another publisher four years ago. The first one received great reviews and, in fact, won a major mystery award. Finally, I thought, I'm on my way.

Much to my shock and surprise, however, great reviews and literary awards do not a decent advance make. I went back to contract and was greatly disappointed to receive an increase in my advance of precisely zero.

Being a good team player, however, I labored on. A second book was short-listed for a major award, but didn't win. Same with the third installment. Ultimately, the fourth book was short-listed for two awards without winning. Still, I thought, when every installment of a series either wins or gets nominated for a major mystery award, that ought to mean something.

Wrong, paperback breath. After going back to contract for my eighth book—the fifth in that series—I realized I was going nowhere. A writing career in today's competitive marketplace is a bit like being a shark: you move forward constantly or you die. What I had on my hands was a gravely ill shark.

So I walked. As much as I loved working with my editor—who by now had become my friend—I reasoned that it simply wasn't a good business decision to stay where I was. By that point, I had done a couple of television movies. Maybe, I thought, there were some possibilities there. I politely turned down my editor's offer for a fifth book.

To my surprise, as the fourth book was published, I began getting a different kind of news from my publisher. They'd taken my heretofore bland covers—the ones that screamed "Paperback category mystery—*ignore this book!*"—and replaced them with flashy neon glitz. Then my editor an-

nounced the publisher had decided to reissue my backlist with the redesigned covers. I went on the first signing tour I'd ever been on where someone else wrote the check. Then, after weeks of inquiries, my editor finally revealed that they had raised my first printing to 55,000, more than double anything I'd ever had before.

All this good news confused me. What was I to make of this? Is this a subtle overture to come back into the fold, I asked my agent. With typical agent aplomb, she answered: "I hate subtlety. I'll just ask."

The result was that we all went back to the table. My editor explained that they couldn't bump my advances much, but they'd nudge them—for the first time—into five figures. Plus, he wanted a two-book contract. And while he couldn't put it in writing, of course, they'd see what they could do about putting me into hardcover and he felt certain that my press run would be at least on par with the fourth book, if not larger.

So I signed on for two more books. With great enthusiasm, I tore into the next project and finished what I felt was the funniest, hippest, most irreverent book of my career, and one of the best. Part of it was excerpted in an anthology. Things were looking up as I turned the manuscript in.

What followed was great silence. My editor told me he loved the manuscript, and in fact did less editing on it than any of the previous four. I took that as a good sign. But as the pub date drew nearer, I began to grow uneasy. My publisher had reevaluated its policy of touring authors, and I had in fact told my editor a year earlier that I thought touring authors was not the best way to spend one's money. I hoped, however, that they'd use an equivalent amount of resources to promote the book in another way. But for the first time in my five-book history with these folks, I heard nothing from the publicity department. Not word one....

I began pestering my editor to find out what the press run would be. Getting numbers out of a publisher these days is like getting a straight answer out of a politician. I persisted, however, and my editor agreed to let me know the press run as soon as he returned from a weekend conference.

Now I see why he was avoiding the question. In its infinite wisdom, after courting me to return to the fold, I was told via e-mail that the publisher had slashed my press run over fifty percent. I had gone from a press run of 55,000 to a run of 26,000.

I yelled, I screamed, I wrote the obligatory, three-page, single-spaced, polite-professional-but-unmistakable FY letter. My agent arranged a three-way conference call in an effort to find some way out of this mess. But nothing came of it. There were the usual excuses: the collapse of the ID market sent my—and many other authors'—returns soaring; the marketplace is competitive and shrinking; your numbers aren't that bad. Besides, we're happy to publish you at that level, even if that means its fiscally impossible for the book to ever earn out.

I explained what to me seemed like common sense;

that you don't sell more books by printing less of them. My book had already made the Ingram Books Mystery Best Seller List. But such a lousy print run would lose any momentum that could be gained by such good fortune. In effect, I told my editor, you shot yourself in the foot.

The only problem, I added, is that when the publisher shoots himself in the foot, it's the author that bleeds.

So, another one bites the dust. At the end of the conversation, I said to my editor: "God, this is a cruel business." His answer: "Yes, and getting crueler by the day."

I write this to you with a sense that my career as a mystery writer is over. I have one more book in that two-book contract, and I will meet that commitment. Eventually....

For now, it's time for me to redefine both myself as a writer and my career. It's starting over time, and that means writing something radically different. Perhaps it means a pseudonym, something I always swore I'd never do. In any case, it means pushing the envelope, taking some risks, and finding out what about this process can turn me on again and make it worthwhile to stay in this cruel and shitty business.

It's a writer's life, just as it's always been. As my agent said to me in the wake of this debacle, the quality of the writing has never been much of a factor in success. Maybe some good will come out of this, she reasoned. Maybe this is that kick-in-the-ass you've needed to break out into something bigger. I hope she's right.

Out of this past week I've learned, as the bumper sticker says, that every time I think I can't get more cynical, circumstances prove me wrong. I've learned something else out of this experience as well, something I already knew but needed to be reminded of occasionally. And that's that no one can survive this business alone. We all need each other. That's one more reason I'm grateful for all my friends who've listened to me bitch over this past week, and for NINC.

— Steven Womack

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

Chelley Kitzmiller, Tehachapi CA

New Members

Layle Giusto, St. Albans NY

Carolyn McSparren, Collierville TN

Timothy Taylor, Hendersonville TN

New York or Bust? That is the Question.

Our 1997 New York conference pulled in more people than any Novelists, Inc. conference before.

No surprise there. After all, our business is centered in New York, plus Laura Resnick and her cohorts pulled off some amazing feats, like creating a cover art show out of thin air, enticing more editors from different genres, etc.

And New York City itself has a certain appeal. You know—Broadway, Bloomingdale's, the Met...

And therein lies our problem.

It seems New York has gotten just a bit too popular—with conference goers, with foreign tourists willing to pay big bucks like they would in London or Paris or Tokyo, with American tourists just dying to see "The Lion King" or "Rent" for the fifteenth time—so popular, in fact, that the hotels of Manhattan may very well have priced themselves out of NINC's market.

When you read those last words, I know some of you will cry, "No, no, we love New York! We're willing to pay whatever it takes!"

Whatever it takes? Here's the scoop, folks.

After the 1997 conference, the Site Committee took due note of the fact that a lot of people wanted to go back to NYC right away. When it came time to recommend a site for 2000, we suggested New York. The Board agreed, and we sent out our info, asking for bids from hotels.

We expected it to be pricey—after all, it was pricey the last time.

But we didn't expect sky high, over the top, choke, gasp, wheeze, turn over your first-born *New York Times* bestseller pricey.

The bids we received from Midtown Manhattan hotels clustered around \$250 per night special conference rate for sleeping rooms, with the hotel I felt best suited our conference at \$269.

Choke, gasp, wheeze.

Even the lowest bids attached massive meeting room rental charges, in the neighborhood of \$1000-\$2500 per day. (In the past, hotels have been willing to

waive any charges for meeting room space, based on the number of sleeping rooms and the amount of catering we use.)

One New York hotel takes a different route, requiring a meeting package rate of \$182 per person (which covers the rooms for our workshops and a couple of coffee breaks but does not include a room to sleep in.)

That's about \$30,000 for meeting room space. Another asked for a \$53,000 up-front food-and-beverage guarantee.

Choke, gasp, wheeze.

With the hotels charging prices like these for meeting room space, with New York catering rates even higher than their room rates, with other sneaky costs for things like setting up chairs and plugging in cords, we would end up charging a conference fee upwards of \$350. And NINC would still probably lose money on the conference.

Remember, too, that everything in New York costs more. From a bagel and a cup of coffee to a ticket to a Broadway show, conference goers will have to keep shelling it out.

I should also note that these prices are for September dates—most, Labor Day weekend. We offered them the option of moving into September to try to keep prices down, since October is traditionally the most popular convention month and therefore, also the most expensive. To keep the conference within the October dates most of us prefer, you'll need to add \$25-\$50 to every figure above.

We could get a better deal if we're willing to try the Financial District rather than Midtown, and an even better deal if we're willing to wander into Brooklyn, Newark, Connecticut, Long Island...

So that's the question before you. Just how badly do you want to go to Midtown Manhattan? Just how much are you willing to pay? What do you think about Labor Day weekend?

I hope you'll read the information—and numbers—above, and then respond right away, so that we as an organization can get a conversation going here.

Do we want to wait a few more years, hoping that New York's popularity will peak and decline enough to help us get a foot in the door? Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead? New York or bust?

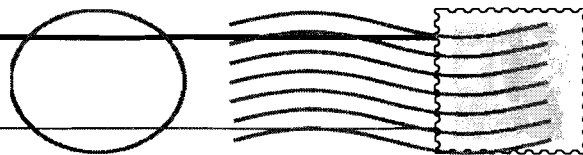
Tell us what you think, but don't delay—we need your answers NOW!

Pro or con, the responses we receive before June 15 will guide our decision.

You can e-mail me at julie@ice.net, fax me at 309-663-8221, or post a note on the NincLink. The sooner the better!

— Julie Kistler

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.

"Bunjee Jumping" Pumps Up Writers

In her March article "Literary Bunjee Jumping" Patricia Anthony mentions the adrenaline high as one reason to continue as an organic writer when that approach clashes with many business and mental health requirements of writing. True. I would add from my experience that trying to write any other way is a prescription for coming to a complete, screeching, guess-I'll-scrub-the-basement-walls-rather-than-write stop.

There was so much in Patricia Anthony's article that made me feel right at home as the un-outlining, synopsis-after-the-book's-mostly-done, I'll-know-what-happens-when-it-happens writer that I am, that reading the statements "...Organic story-telling takes place in increments, during the writing of the novel itself. That's why our book must proceed sequentially; and why we can never write a chapter out of place." was a jolt. Uh-oh. I don't write in sequence either. (I had one editor who, when I would tell her I had 76 pages written on something, would finish in unison with me, "But not necessarily the first 76 pages.") Stories often start for me with a scene that ends up in the middle of the book. I write what I know when I know it, and that means a lot of hopping around.

My real worry is that, since I'm not an outliner, if I'm not allowed into the organic camp because I don't write sequentially, does that mean I have to jump without the bunjee cord?

— **Pat McLaughlin (Patricia McLinn)**

President Salutes Advocacy Chair

Like everybody seems to be these days, I'm so damn busy I often forget to stop and say things to people that I've intended to say for a long time. Just this once I'm going to do it.

Cathy Maxwell's column in the newsletter is something

I always look forward to reading. But the column, with the interview with Robin Lee Hatcher and Ann Maxwell, was especially powerful. It got straight to the heart of why organizations like NINC are supposed to exist. If we can't come together and exercise the power that we have as a group, rather than face the world and the industry alone, then we may as well fold up our tents and go home. Thanks for reminding us in such a positive and powerful way.

Cathy, I'm your fan. Thank you.

— **Steve Womack**

Thanks for Writers' Lonely Crusades

I always love my NINK newsletters, and consume them for lunch as soon as they arrive. Even so, the May issue was particularly good, from Laura Resnick's intriguing take on how to get into the mind and scabbard of a fantasy fighter to Evan Maxwell's ever alarming and amusing take on the publishing world.

But as a storyteller who responds to stories, I reacted most strongly to Cathy Maxwell's Gorilla Tactics column, where Robin Lee Hatcher and Ann Maxwell told their experiences of taking on the publishing giants. When I first heard of Robin Lee's class action suit against a publisher notorious for not releasing information, my reaction was "Way to go!" An audit seemed a perfectly logical and professional thing to do.

When I learned that Ann Maxwell was facing down the largest dragon, my reaction then was incredulous, like hers: "Why on earth can't an author receive her contractual rights?" (How young we were, how young.)

In the grapevine way of the writers' world I followed both actions, and applauded their success. But it wasn't until I read their stories in NINK that I fully appreciated what hard and lonely battles they fought. Worse, it saddens me that both felt so unsupported by their fellows.

I was left with a profound gratitude that both authors had the courage and will to fight, and win. We all benefit by their actions, and it is satisfying that both continue to enjoy the publishing success they deserve.

I also hope that the explosion of the Internet in the last couple of years means that in the future, writers who tackle difficult issues will not feel so alone. Authors have traditionally been treated like mushrooms—left in the dark and covered with manure—but the Net has changed that. Now we can reach out to our friends and colleagues and find support far more easily than ever in the past.

In the meantime, I want to offer my thanks to Robin Lee Hatcher and Ann Maxwell for facing the dragons, and providing us all with good examples.

— **Mary Jo Putney**

TAMING THE DRAGON

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Continued from page 1*

It will also “select” any word or phrase and correct it. You can replace words, lines, phrases, paragraphs, etc., simply by selecting the text and speaking the correct word or phrases.

If I tell it to click on a command button, it jumps to obey. If I don’t care for certain words or phrases I tell my computer to “Scratch that” and presto...the offending phrase disappears.

It recognizes the difference between such words as “there” and “their” because of the context. Therefore you get better accuracy if you speak in continuous sentences rather than a word or two at a time. It also recognizes numbers. There is no need to speak more slowly than usual, as long as you are careful to enunciate each word.

If the program doesn’t recognize a word after a couple of tries, you can tell it to “Correct that” and a new window appears with a correction box. You can then type in the correct word and tell the cursor to “Click Okay.” It will then return you to the original window with the corrected word in place.

With my English accent, I had trouble training the program to recognize my vowel sounds. I clicked on “Train Words” and entered the words that were giving me the most trouble, such as “command, ask, saw, etc.”

The program asked me to record the words, which are then edited into the keeper files, which contain your individual speech pattern. Each time you close out the program, you are prompted to save your speech files, since they change each time you correct a word.

Each time you load the Dragon, it takes a few moments to reload your speech files. The opening window offers handy little tips to help you improve your speed and accuracy, etc. It also informs you of different features of the program.

The Dragon is quite up-to-date on the latest computerese. For instance, if you say “smiley face” you get :), “frowny face” will give you :(, and “winky face” produces ;).

After using the program for four weeks, I no longer have accent problems. That’s right, the Dragon writes with a British accent. If I speak too quickly, however, or fail to enunciate properly, the program doesn’t always comprehend what I’ve said, producing some weird results. For instance, “I hope you had a great weekend,” becomes, “I habitat agate weakened.” That’s happening less and less now. In fact, I had to deliberately slur my words just now to fool it.

You have the opportunity to test your microphone whenever you feel it necessary to do so. I do this often, since the more correctly placed your microphone, the better your accuracy. While it’s possible to get fairly good

results with an “average voice quality,” for the best accuracy you should have above average. Repositioning the microphone will usually take care of this.

The program also suggests that you take the initial training again once you are comfortable with dictating. Again I recommend doing this. I found my accuracy level increased dramatically.

At the moment I’m dictating at around 100 words per minute. The literature included with the software claims that the program is capable of dictation at 160 wpm. Since I’m a hunt and peck typist, this is much faster than I would normally type.

The program is capable of 98 percent accuracy. *PC World* claims “The accuracy of the program was almost scary. It missed maybe two words per hundred.” Can you type that accurately? It’s certainly better than anything I can type. Much better. And, it spells every word correctly!

According to the literature, the average typist produces 50 net words per minute, which is determined by measuring average gross speed in wpm, and then subtracting errors. At this rate, a typist would produce a three-page, 900-word document in 18 minutes. Dictating at 140–160 wpm, a person produces a three-page, 900-word accurate document in less than six minutes. Imagine the time that would save over the length of a book. As *PC Week* reports, “A time saver...can turn almost anyone into a speed typist.”

The manual is amazingly slim, considering the complexity of the software, and it doesn’t take much time at all to understand the program. Most of your questions can be answered on screen, which I vastly prefer to having to wade through pages of text.

The Dragon has its own word processor, and will work with any word processing program. Simply tell it to “Copy all to clipboard,” open the window of your word processing program and tell The Dragon to “Paste that.”

You can teach the program up to 25,000 new words by spelling them out and adding them to your vocabulary. It does, however, contain all the words found in an American dictionary. It has a 30,000 word “active” vocabulary, which is what most people use in everyday speech. It also has a “backup” of 200,000 words, which are automatically zapped into the active vocabulary whenever they are needed.

The Dragon will “read” back what you have written either in your recorded voice, or in a charming computer voice with what sounds to me suspiciously like an Italian accent. This is great stuff if you are writing a speech and want to know how well it flows.

There are drawbacks, of course. After all, nothing on this earth is perfect. The most glaring one, I found, was the

need to “speak” all punctuation. For instance, if you were dictating a passage for a book, it might sound something like this:

Open quotes Jed question mark. He'd never settle down with a family period. He's got his mind too set on other things period, close quotes. New paragraph.

Tab key. Open quotes yeah comma I know period. The cap All cap Around cap Championship period. Close quotes. Cord yawned comma and stretched his arms above his head period. Open quotes Don't we all question mark close quotes. New paragraph.

Yes, I know. Written down like that it looks clumsy and awkward. But it's amazing how fast you get used to “thinking” punctuation. After a while I didn't have to think about it much at all. Notice how I capped All Around Championship. It's only necessary if it's not a well-known name. For instance, each word that begins a sentence is automatically capped, as are common proper nouns, such as geographical places, etc.

There is also somewhat of a delay between the time you dictate and when it actually appears on the screen. The length of which, of course, will depend on the speed of your computer. There's a little dialogue box that appears below the text in the window, in which you can watch the Dragon struggling to recognize your dictation. If it doesn't understand what you've said it will sometimes throw you a couple of questions marks. I found this disconcerting at first. You can get rid of the box, but I prefer to keep it there so that I know at once if it's waiting for me to repeat something.

You can easily edit as you go along, but because of this delay period, I found it slowed me down. Now I'm at the point when I can happily dictate, and more or less ignore the screen. When I get tired of talking, I paste everything to my Word Perfect window, and edit from there.

I would advise you, however, to spend some time initially editing as you go, since this will revise your speech files and give you greater accuracy. Once you reach a level of accuracy that you're happy with, then you can edit accordingly.

I have to watch that I don't comment out loud. If the Dragon makes a mistake, I tend to mutter, “No, no, no,” which then appears in my text. A cough will sometimes translate as “the” and a sigh can be taken for “and.”

If I get particularly frustrated, as I often did at first, I tend to utter a mild cuss word. While the Dragon doesn't exactly shake a disapproving finger at you, it will transcribe what you say into more polite terms, which don't always make sense.

The microphone has been designed not to pick up background noises, however. My dog barks at the garbage men every week, but so far her loud and furious protests have not been transcribed to my document. If the phone should ring, or someone interrupts your dictation, you can turn the microphone off simply by telling it to “Go to sleep.” It will stay off until you command it to “Wake up!”

One of the drawbacks is that you will be creating out loud. I did find it a little intimidating at first. It was difficult to put my thoughts into spoken words, and I was con-

scious of the “dead time” between sentences. When I went back to typing, however, I realized that I'd always had dead time. I just hadn't noticed it so much before. So far I haven't attempted a love scene using The Dragon, but as one writer commented to me, that could raise some inhibitions.

I'm finding that I'm having to “retrain” myself. I went through a retraining period early in my writing career when I graduated from writing everything down longhand in a notebook to creating directly onto a typewriter. I did it again when I advanced to a computer for the first time. I see this as just one more step in the evolution toward the wave of the future.

I started out by dictating all my e-mail, then my notes on planned proposals. This article was composed almost entirely on the Dragon, and I have dictated several pages of my current work in progress.

Microsoft proclaims Dragon NaturallySpeaking as “The first truly accurate product for continuous speech recognition.” The program has received top awards, such as the Grand Winner of *Popular Science's* Best of What's New, *PC Computing Award* for Usability Achievement, *PC Magazine's* Technical Excellence Award and more than a dozen others. It has earned awards in Italy, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the Middle East, among others. *PC Computing* says, “If accuracy and usability matter most, choose Dragon NaturallySpeaking.”

Continuous speech recognition may not work for everyone. I suspect that success with the product will depend a great deal on the individual. Were I not alone in the house to dictate without any fear of being overheard, I might have second thoughts. Some people simply cannot dictate and create at the same time. There are some writers who find it impossible to create on anything other than a legal pad, and still others who would not trade their beat-up old typewriter for a computer for any reason.

The fabulous Dame Barbara Cartland dictates everything onto a tape recorder. I don't think that would work for me. This program goes one step better in that you can see your work in progress, and you don't have to type it up afterward.

On the other hand, this software could be a lifesaver for people who cannot type at length for various reasons—writers with arthritis, severe back or neck pain, serious carpal tunnel problems, or people like me, who hunt and peck type with an abysmal rate of accuracy.

If you should decide that the technique might be exactly what you are looking for, Dragon NaturallySpeaking can be purchased in most major computer stores. The phone number for Dragon Systems is (617) 965-5200. Their web site is at <http://www.naturalspeech.com>, where you can download a demo.

The IBM web site is at <http://www.ibm.com>. IBM also offers another program, Voice Type Simply Speaking Gold, but this software requires you to pronounce each word slowly and carefully, whereas the other two programs allow for natural speech.

Dragon Systems recommends a minimum



TAMING THE DRAGON

Continued from page 5

requirement of 133 MHz Pentium Processor. I'm using The Dragon with a Pentium 90 MHz processor, which accounts for the delay while dictating. While the software does work with 90 MHZ, I'm sure you'd have better results with a faster processor.

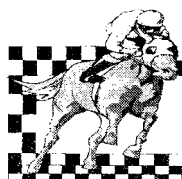
The program also requires Windows 95, 60MB of free space on the hard drive, and 32MB of RAM. Plus a CD-ROM drive for installation.

Should your spouse or significant other wish to use the Dragon, new users may be added at any time by naming the

new files and setting up the initial audio and training systems for that person.

This is only the beginning. With the speed at which technology improves, this version of the Dragon will most likely be obsolete in a year or two. For now, however, I'm happy with my new toy. It saves me time, frustration, and pain, and I have yet to discover another software program that can deliver on such an irresistible promise. **NINK**

Doreen Roberts grew up in wartime London and attributes her love of danger and suspense to the many hours she spent listening to Hitler's bombs dropping all around her. She has been published since 1987, when Silhouette Books bought the first manuscript she submitted, a romantic suspense entitled Gambler's Gold, for their Intimate Moments line. Eleven of her romance books have reached the Waldenbooks bestseller list, and she has received several nominations for Romantic Times Awards.



The Fast Track

Compiled by MARILYN PAPPANO

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: pappano@ionet.net. Internet surfers can find the list at: <http://www.usatoday.com>. Members who write under pseudonyms should notify Marilyn at any of the above "addresses" to assure their listing in "Fast Track."

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

Member	Title	April 2	April 9	April 16	April 23	April 30
Susan Andersen	<i>Baby I'm Yours</i> , Avon				134n	
Catherine Anderson	<i>Forever After</i> , Avon	53	80			
Julie Beard	<i>Romance of the Rose</i> , Berkley				166	105
Jo Beverley	<i>Lord of Midnight</i> , Topaz		98n	120		
Jayne Castle	<i>Orchid</i> , Pocket			33n	33	55
Catherine Coulter	<i>The Maze</i> , Jove	29	42	91	115	135
Norah Hess	<i>Willow</i> , Leisure		134n			
Tami Hoag	<i>A Thin Dark Line</i> , Bantam		10n	7	16	12
Linda Howard	<i>All That Glitters</i> , Mira				72n	70
Joan Johnston	<i>The Bodyguard</i> , Island	32	50	121		
Katherine Kingsley	<i>Call Down the Moon</i> , Dell			103n	93	112
Jayne Ann Krentz	<i>A Woman's Touch</i> , Mira	120				
Cait London	<i>The Seduction of Fiona Tallchief</i> , Silhouette	142n				
Elizabeth Lowell	<i>To The Ends of The Earth</i> , Avon			31n	22	29
Debbie Macomber	<i>Caroline's Child</i> , Harlequin	38n	39	85		
Debbie Macomber	<i>Montana</i> , Mira	41	56			
Ann Major, et al.	<i>Montana Mavericks Wedding</i> , Silhouette	49	66			
Teresa Medeiros	<i>Nobody's Darling</i> , Bantam		45n	42	75	117
Linda Lael Miller	<i>The Vow</i> , Pocket	103				
Pamela Morsi	<i>Sealed with a Kiss</i> , Avon			193	79	106
Mary Jo Putney	<i>The Rake</i> , Topaz	135				
Amanda Quick	<i>With This Ring</i> , Bantam		42n	68	133	138
Nora Roberts	<i>Public Secrets</i> , Bantam	18	22	43	48	47
Nora Roberts	<i>Homeport</i> , Bantam	39	49	66	95	113
Nora Roberts	<i>Lilah and Suzanna: The Calhoun Women</i> , Silhouette	97				
Nora Roberts	<i>Sanctuary</i> , Jove			6n	4	6
Meryl Sawyer	<i>Tempting Fate</i> , Zebra	267	77	134		
Bertrice Small	<i>Deceived</i> , Kensington		110n			
Joan Wolf	<i>The Gamble</i> , Warner Vision			122n	106	114

Get al.: written with other author(s) who aren't members of Novelists, Inc.



Tahoe '98

Putting It Together

Putting a conference together is a lot like fiddling with the rabbit ears on your Aunt Mabel's old TV until the snowy blur finally resolves into a focused picture. Some days, it's a snap. Other days, it takes hard work, luck, and the controlled touch of a professional safecracker.

This month, all that fiddling has resulted in our acquisition of an exciting guest speaker for the 1998 NINC Annual Conference. Alan Kaufman is an intellectual property attorney with the New York firm of Frankfurt, Garbus, Klein & Selz. Prior to this, however, he spent nearly 20 years at Penguin Books USA as General Counsel, Secretary, and, eventually, Senior Vice President. As chief legal officer for one of the world's largest English language publishers, he acquired extensive experience in contracts, licensing, corporate acquisitions and mergers, litigation management, copyright, libel and trademark law, labor and employment law, and electronics law. He was also responsible for all the company's material negotiations, including author, co-publishing, distribution, licensing and printing agreements.

So put your thinking caps on, boys and girls, and dig out all those Questions You Were Afraid No One Would Know How To Answer. With Alan Kaufman around, we can be assured that The Answer Man Cometh.

In the meantime, here's a sampling of what Elane Osborn has gathered on research possibilities in the Tahoe/Reno area, for those of us who plan to come early or stay late:

RENO has several research sources clustered downtown. The Nevada Historical Society, run by a friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable staff, is filled with photographs bringing to life the history of the area. Fleischmann Planetarium is nearby, as well as the University of Nevada-Reno library, which holds a wealth of research material on the West in general and the local area in particular.

At the other end of town, the National Automobile Museum contains more than 200 antique and classic cars, displayed in street scenes that include clothes and accessories from the early 1900's to the present. A few blocks from there, the Tahoe Gaming Academy offers a two-hour "dealer class" for ten dollars, a great source for anyone wanting the behind-the-scenes scoop on casino gambling.

VIRGINIA CITY is billed as a "thriving ghost town," retaining much of its 1800's feel. Places like the Bucket Of Blood Saloon offer a semblance of what life was like for the miners, storekeepers, gamblers and ladies of the evening who flocked to the Comstock Lode, drawn by the lure of silver. Visit the Fourth Ward School and The Way It Was Museum for historical information, and take the Chollar Mine tour to learn what miners endured in their efforts to gouge silver out of the earth.

CARSON CITY has a large selection of Victorian mansions in its restored Historical District. The Nevada State Museum boasts displays of local history, including a replica of the Carson City Mint, clothing from the late 1800s, Native American baskets, and a reconstructed mine shaft. And the Stewart Indian Museum is a must for those interested in Native American life and history.

Thanks, Elane! As you can see, there's plenty in this region for a hard-working novelist to do. And for those of us who aren't planning to work *nearly* so hard, next month I'll include a list of facilities and services offered by the Hyatt, the better to pamper us during our stay!

— Judy Myers, 1998 Conference Coordinator



NINC 1998 CONFERENCE FACTS

DATES: Thursday, October 15 through
Sunday, October 18

PLACE: Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort, North
Shore, Incline Village, Nevada
Phone: 702-832-1234

ROOMS: Single/Double:	\$125
1-Bedroom Tower Suite:	\$250
2-Bedroom Tower Suite:	\$375
1-Bedroom Cottage Suite:	\$325
2-Bedroom Cottage Suite:	\$425

GUEST SPEAKER: Catherine Coulter

REGISTRATION: Available in July

PRICE: To Be Announced

QUESTIONS?

CONTACT: Conference Coordinator—Judy Myers

E-Mail: NTNX79A@PRODIGY.COM

Phone: 916-721-6863

(Monday thru Saturday, 1-7 p.m. PST)

Setting Workable Goals: An Art Worth Perfecting

By ROSALYN ALSOBROOK

Goals. Just how important are they? Recently, when a casual conversation with a couple of fellow authors turned into a discussion about making and meeting various writing goals, my sage offering was to claim that I personally did not bother with setting a lot of writing goals. I even went so far as to comment that the only goal I ever had was to finish whatever book I was working on at that particular moment. We chuckled over how simple that made life and, discounting the importance of such matters, I didn't give the idea any more thought.

At least not right away.

It wasn't until days later that this goal issue started really to nag at me and I soon realized I'd lied both to my friends and to myself. After all, a writer does not become an author with 29 novels published without setting—and meeting—some pretty important goals along the way. Realizing that, and eager to evaluate this concept further, I sat down and listed some of the more important writing goals I've had through the years. Next, I tried to recall just how I went about accomplishing them.

Before long, I had quite a list of goals I'd made—and met—without really realizing it. The number not only surprised me, it started me thinking about how important having a goal can be to writers, even an unstated goal as elementary as my first goal, which was simply “to write a book.” That's because I was far too naive during the early stages of my career (1979) to realize that getting a publisher to buy the thing after I finished it could possibly present a problem. The discovery that the big-time publisher I'd picked was not very eager to buy the work I sent to them caused me to have to set a second goal, *selling the book*. It turned out this part of the process needed a game plan all its own. Who would have guessed?

Selling that first book then led me directly to my third goal: writing and selling another book—and the cycle continued. But not all my writing goals have been connected to the actual writing of my books. Some goals were aimed more at freeing up my time so I could write, or to gain my writing the respect I knew it deserved.

The first such goal, for me, was to make my husband take my writing seriously and not view it as just another passing hobby. I had to find a way to convince him I was serious this time—that this was something I hoped to do full time, something that could earn a living if it played out right.

Problem is, I did such a good job of convincing him, now there are times he takes my writing more seriously than I do. Nowadays I'm likely to hear comments like:

“Don't you have a deadline coming up?” Or “It's *after* nine o'clock, shouldn't you be in your office writing by now?”

The lesson there is that sometimes meeting a goal gets you far more than you bargained for.

After setting my husband straight, my next goal was to try to convince my children to take my writing seriously. If I couldn't force them to take my writing seriously, I at least wanted them to take my writing *time* seriously. Although those were not easy goals to accomplish, eventually my sons figured out that if they bugged me with questions when I was writing, the answer was usually the opposite of what they wanted to hear.

I also forced my boys to become more self sufficient so they would not need so much of my writing time. This turned out to be a benefit for us all. I now have a 26-year-old son who can: do his own laundry, cook his own meals, sweep his own floors, sew on his own buttons, and hide his own dishes in his own dishwasher. And I have a 20-year-old who can even turn off his own television.

After training my family accordingly, I then set my sights on teaching my relatives, friends, and sons' teachers to accept the fact that writing is a full time career. When I am writing I *am* working. My writing time is *important*. The simple word “no” helped incredibly to accomplish this goal.

Soon, my goals turned toward having enough writing space. A small corner of the bedroom was no longer enough. I needed an office. So, with that in mind, I earmarked half of my next two royalty checks to remodeling our garage into an office for me, then I conned my husband into doing the work. Ah, yet another important writer's goal accomplished—and without even realizing that's what I'd done.

By that point, I had to wonder what would have happened had I made myself more aware of my goals all along. Would I have met these needs a lot sooner had I pinpointed them and focused on them from the start? Probably. Which makes me want to kick myself for not being more goal oriented from the beginning.

Consider yourself and your own writing goals.

Are you a person who carefully maps out her goals and then goes after them a few at a time? Or are you a little more like I was, making goals without realizing them, then intuitively attaining them? What kind of goals do you tend to establish? Do you set difficult goals or easy goals? Or some of each?

For a lot of you, your current goal is probably little more than what my first goal was: you simply want to finish the blasted book or proposal, or whatever, and be done with it. Or maybe your goal is a little broader and is to finish and *sell* the blasted thing. Seems simple enough for a goal.

Even so, for some of you meeting that particular goal is darned tough, what with life's many problems and that evil little monster called "procrastination" always getting in your way. If that's the case, it's time to take a fresh look at your particular goal, or how you view that goal. Setting "workable" goals is an art all its own.

If you are having trouble finishing that book, chances are you could handle the goal better, and be more productive, if you focused on a more short-term goal. Perhaps your main goal should be more like that of my good friend, Jean Haught, before she became so ill. Her goal was to write so many pages a day, five days a week. Simple as that. After she had those pages written, she was free to write another page or simply quit and do something else. Just as long as she finished her self-required pages. That's all that mattered, until lo and behold, eventually she had a completed book.

But what if you think daily goals won't work for you? Then try setting *weekly* goals. Instead of your goal being five pages a day for five days a week, you should set your goal at 25 pages a week. That way, you can skip a day if you have to and make up for it the next day. Or, if you know in advance you won't be able to do anything on Wednesday, you could write like crazy on Tuesday and not feel so bad about having to skip a day.

A word of caution with these shorter-term goals. Set your pace according to you and according to what sort of hand life is dealing you at the moment. Some people are trouble-free and prolific, and can easily write 20 pages of rough copy a day. Others have major problems going on in their lives and struggle to get two pages done. Keep in mind: different people have different paces in different situations.

It's not how many pages you can do in a day or a week, it is the fact that you finish those you've required yourself to do. The most important part of your writing goal should be to write. Writers write. If writing is your job, even if only part time, you should treat it like a job and plant yourself in front of that computer of yours—or typewriter—on a regular basis.

But what if you do sit yourself down every day and get right to work and still you can't finish because you've turned into one of those writers who keeps revising the first two, three, six chapters over and over again. If that's the case, try changing the general wording of your goal just a tad. Maybe it would be better to have a first goal of finishing a "rough draft." Let the next goal be polishing it to perfection. Pinpointing the goal that should fall before the polishing stage might be all you need to get back on track.

Or, perhaps your current goals are no longer targeted toward getting the job done because you've written enough books to be able to look well beyond the task itself. Perhaps your goals now target the quality of your work and your biggest concern is making sure your next book is better than the last. Or, could it be you've written a dozen or so books during whatever spare time you've salvaged, and your latest goal is to become a full-time writer? Or, is your current goal to take on an agent to handle the business end of things?

The fact is, no matter where you are in your writing career there is always room for new and improved goals.

In a column I read several years ago in the West Houston RWA Chapter newsletter titled "Happily Ever After" written by Silhouette author Heather MacAllister, Heather sagely urged writers to set three goals for the coming year.

1. Have a "pie in the sky" sort of goal. Something that is almost impossible, it's gonna take a miracle, but please, oh, please God, let the miracle happen to me type of goal.
2. Set a goal that can be reasonably achieved with lots of hard work. An example of this would be, if it's taken you almost two years to write the first half of your book, you could set a goal to finish the second half this year. Or if you wrote one book last year, this year the goal would be to write one and a half books.
3. Set a goal that is so easy to accomplish, you would be really embarrassed if anyone knew about it. In fact, if you keep breathing, it practically accomplishes itself.

With Heather's system, you have a fair chance of success for at least two-thirds of your goals yet still have something worthwhile to be working toward. And that's the funny thing about goals, once you've accomplished one, there is always another goal lying in wait.

But that still doesn't tell you what your three goals should be, does it? And, really, what goals you have should be directly related to what stage you are in your writing. A beginning author who has one book published and is working on her first option book would not have the same type goal as a multi-published author trying to move out of category into single title.

Polling some of my online writer friends found that the most important goal for a beginning author should be to educate herself on the business aspects of writing while making sure her work stays up to standards. An author with several books published should already have a pretty good idea of the business end. Her goal would probably lean more toward improving the quality of her work to stay published.

Today, multi-published authors need to keep stretching their horizons and should continue challenging themselves with each succeeding book. If you are such an author, consider setting several such improvement goals. Decide what aspects of your writing you want to improve as you embark on each new book, whether it is to make your plot more complex or to avoid so much passive voice.

Mega-published authors growing bored with what they write might consider setting a goal that might make writing fun again. If you're bored with your writing, try a different sub-genre. If all you've ever written are light, romantic comedies, try writing a suspense. If all you've ever written are short contemporaries, try a long historical. Variety is indeed the spice of life.

As when setting our goals, how we obtain these writing goals is as individual as we are. For some writers, it helps them reach their goals if they perform what is sometimes referred to as "affirmative visualization." Tell ▶▶▶▶

SETTING WORKABLE GOALS

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Continued from page 11*

yourself that you are a great writer, then close your eyes and imagine yourself having reached whatever goals you have. Also, avoid using future tense or any negative words when reaffirming yourself or determining your goals. Keep in mind: "I will find the time to write today" is much better than "I'll try not to let my kids interrupt my work today."

After forcing yourself to see your work in a more affirmative light, it is time to make the rest of the world view your work that way. If you are going to make it in today's publishing arena, you must convince the whole world you mean business. That is not an easy goal to accomplish. Like my own husband at first, too many people view writing as a hobby. Whether the product be books, short stories, or magazine articles, those folks can't see writing as a legitimate way to earn a living. In fact, the only people you might not have to convince that writing is important are other authors just as serious about writing as you are.

So, how do you convince non-writers that you are serious about your writing and that it is a very important part of your life? How do you keep someone who thinks that because a writer is home that person is available to them from subtly sabotaging your career? The non-writers are the ones who will call you at all hours of the day wanting to chat because they're bored, or they stop by at all hours to ask for some *little* time-consuming favor.

You are doomed if you don't set these people straight. Explain to them that writing is a business. It is a career. When you are writing you *are* working. If they don't comprehend, then quit answering your door all together. Same goes with your telephone. There is no law that says you have to answer your door or your telephone just because you are home.

If necessary, post your writing/business hours where they can be easily seen. Write your hours in bold, angry letters and pin it to your door with a bloody dagger if you have to, but get the message across. You have working hours. They'd better abide by them.

The occasional-type writers are almost as bad as the non-writers at sabotaging your writing goals. Although less likely to infringe on your writing time, there are those who think that as long as what they have to discuss with you is writing-related you won't mind. As with the non-writers, the occasional writer will have to be told to call during specified (non-writing) hours. Tell them that you really do need to get back to the year 1888 and sneak your heroine out of that rickety old house before it burns to the ground.

Also, it is the occasional writer who will ask for the free-

bies needed to boost them quickly toward their own goals, such as "when you get some free time would you read and critique my entire manuscript of only 987 pages and tell me how wonderful it is?" or "Would you give your editor (or agent) a quick telephone call and put in a good word for me? I've got something wonderful here I'd like to send them."

As for the first question, unless for some reason you feel inclined to critique that work, explain that your time—even your so-called free time—is valuable and that you would have to charge a fee equivalent to what you would make had you spent that time writing. As for the second question, explain that your editor or agent won't care who recommends a writer, it's the work that sells the book.

As with the non-writer, if the occasional writer can't be made to see that you obviously view writing differently than he or she does, then quit answering the door or the telephone. Quit giving them the means to enter your life and undermine your goals.

After you've cleared the way for writing by getting everyone to respect you and your writing time, what should your next goals be? Only you can answer that. Only you know what is truly important to you.

There is something to be said for listing your goals on paper. It sets them more firmly in your mind. Besides, if you don't take the time to know what your goals are, how will you ever know when you've been successful? Keep in mind, by setting and meeting goals, you give yourself reasons to celebrate—an important step in the goal setting process. If you want to keep writing, there must be rewards along the way. Achieving small goals on a regular basis will help keep the writing process positive—even when the rejections are raging fast and furious.

Also setting goals, especially short term goals, *and meeting them*, helps keep you on track. It's kind of like following the dots, only instead of dots you are following your goals. As soon as you reach one goal, you head automatically for the next.

Writing is a long-term proposition. You must initially be driven by the love of doing such work, because most days, that's all you have. But along with that very real love of writing must come some feeling of accomplishment and the best way I know to have that feeling of accomplishment is to establish a good, strong set of writing goals—then go after them. **NINK**

Rosalyn Alsobrook is the author of 29 books. Her latest release is Tomorrow's Treasures from St. Martin's Press. Check out her web site at [http://home.earthlink.net/~ralsobrook/TOMORROW'S_TREASURES/St. Martin's Press/12-97](http://home.earthlink.net/~ralsobrook/TOMORROW'S_TREASURES/St.Martin's_Press/12-97).



If you're on the NINCLINK listserv, you already know the big news for this month—we've changed servers and software! That means new sign-up instructions (see the end of this column) for anyone subscribing or resubscribing to the link. There were enough problems with the old server and software that the Board recommended a change, and I hope by now we'll already be seeing an improvement. (If not, I'm sure you'll tell me about it!) Here's hoping this means an end to bounced, missing, or duplicate digests!

The NINCLINK has the potential to be the best networking tool we NINC members have, if we'll just make use of it. Every time someone runs across a new, author-unfriendly contract clause or manages to negotiate an improvement, posting it there means at least 230 NINC members (and their friends) can put that information to speedy use. Ditto when someone hears of a shady agent, a great promotional opportunity, or any other industry news that might affect our careers, either positively or negatively.

In the past, much of publishers' power over authors stemmed from the fact that authors work in relative isolation, with no collective voice. Online networking has begun to put a dent in that power, as more and more authors "plug in." I went back to read my first regular ONLINE column, from July '96. At that time, we had 42 people subscribed to NINCLINK, and we were pretty proud of that. Now, less than two years later, that number has multiplied five-fold, and is still growing. Of course, to take full advantage of this new medium, we have to be willing to share useful information, and some authors are more willing than others—as you might expect. In next month's column, I'll address the issue of confidentiality (and lack thereof) in online communications.

As always, I have a few useful web sites to share, gleaned from NINCLINK and other sources. For a good overview of copyright law, check out www.lawgirl.com, maintained by an entertainment attorney specializing in copyright, music, and new media. There's even a bulletin board there where she answers ques-

tions—definitely a good source for writers. Another source, www.onelook.com, operates like a massive online dictionary (actually, a few hundred dictionaries). The dictionaries are divided by subject and include business, medical, computer/Internet, religion, sports, science, slang, and technological classifications, among other things. You can search for a word in all dictionaries or in a specific subset. Quite impressive! Less comprehensive but still useful is www.english.demon.co.uk which includes a catalogue of Anglo-Saxon books which can be ordered from the site. *Word Craft* by Stephen Pollington was particularly recommended by at least one historical author on NINCLINK.

As always, the online discussions have been wide ranging and fascinating. Over the past month, we've talked about misunderstandings as plot devices (and other plotting pet peeves), complex vs simple characters, agent experiences good and bad, happy vs "satisfying" endings, the best and worst writing advice we've ever received, and have griped at length about the good old US Postal Service. (You can e-mail those gripes at www.usps.gov, by the way!)



Now for those new subscription instructions! Keep this handy, so you don't accidentally refer to the old ones. To subscribe to NINCLINK now, send an e-mail:

To: **LISTSERV@PEACH.EASE.LSOFT.COM**
 Subject: Your-NINC-Membership-Name (as it appears in the roster)
 Body: SUBSCRIBE NINCLINK Your-First-Name
 Your-Last-Name



Fine-tuning, such as digest format, archives, etc. will be included as we clarify the instructions and options (and of course you'll get them immediately if you're on either the old or new listserv).

Don't forget to send your great web sites or other useful online news to me at BrendaHB@aol.com. See you online!

— **Brenda Hiatt Barber** :)

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

Missing *NINK*?

Missing an issue of *NINK*? Didn't receive your subscription copy? Contact the Central Coordinator, Randy Russell, for replacement [not the editor].

Novelists, Inc., P.O. Box 1166
 Mission KS 66222-0166



EAST OF THE HUDSON

CLUELESS, PART ONE

Maybe I'm schizophrenic, and maybe I'm not. Sometimes I look at what's happening in publishing with malicious glee and sometimes I just get this hollow feeling under my belt buckle. Take, for instance, the *Publishers Weekly* annual feature called "The Red and the Black." It's a roundup of the year's flops, all laid out like victims of a horrifying plane crash except that nobody has enough body bags. I already knew most of these were turkeys, but to sit down and read the casualty list, all at once, is sobering.

Take for instance, Marcia Clark's version of the O.J. trial: A \$4.5 million advance, a planned one million-copy first printing that was cut in half before publication, a huge and fruitless promotion budget, and an admission by its publishers, Viking, that the book was too little, too late.

Or take Rob Weisbach Books' (Morrow) Whoopi Goldberg book called *Book*, which drew a \$6 million advance and netted 300,000 copies. No way that advance will be recouped. Or Paul Reiser's *Babyhood*, from the same publisher, which drew a \$5 million advance and flopped, or Paula Barbieri's O.J. book that won its author \$3 million and sold 107,000 copies.

The rest of the piece parses failures of multi-million dollar gambles on self-help, new age, Kennedy, and country-western bio books, plus disappointing showings by mostly-new authors of thrillers and angel novels, shark stories, and devil redos like *Son of Rosemary*.

All these books went out with great expectations and high hopes, and maybe that's where a big part of the problem lies—in the height of the hopes. The article is replete with admissions that these books sold by the hundreds of thousands of copies. Many of the authors doubled their previous sales, even tripled them.

Yet those selfsame authors are now labeled as failures because they failed to reach bloated sales goals that were set by corporate bean-counters.

Some of these books were such "failures" that the authors' next works are already tainted. No, not tainted, they are already contaminated. Take, for instance, *Meg*, by Steve Alten. Doubleday was so disappointed with the results of the mammoth shark tale that it rejected Alten's sequel and junked his career.

There's a lesson for any writer who ever thought that his or her troubles would be over if they could just land that mythical two-book, \$2 million contract.

The stunning truth that comes from reading about publishing trends is that our business is fueled by expectations that have risen so high they are almost doomed in advance. Publishers act like drunken sailors, tossing lottery-sized wads of cash at hot projects or supposedly bankable authors. Then they whine like sick children when the results

are tallied at the end of the year.

The whole matter is distressing, mainly because it suggests the proponents of Chaos Theory are correct. Lots of creative energy and raw capital were expended in publishing last year, yet it would appear that at least half the books at the top of publishers' lists were failures.

No wonder Prozac has become the drug of choice east of the Hudson.

CLUELESS, PART TWO

Perhaps the only thing funnier, or sadder, than the failures of last year are the methods by which publishers are trying to hedge the outsized bets they are making on this year's books. A recent issue of the *New York Times Magazine* offered two pieces of evidence, back to back, to support that conclusion.

The first evidence came from a critic I have often ridiculed for her modernism and elitism, Michiko Kakutani. Granted, she won a Pulitzer Prize this year, but I still think she's a snob. On the other hand, even snobs are right once in a while and Michiko was right when she tore into the contemporary trend of using focus groups and public opinion polls to make cultural choices.

At least I *think* she's right. Make that *hope* she's right.

Then again, maybe I hope she's wrong. Anyway, here's what she said:

Attacking what she calls "art created by consensus," she noted that two Russian artists have queried a thousand Americans about their tastes in "color, form and style, and concluded that the most wanted painting in the country is a bluish landscape populated by George Washington, a family of tourists, and a pair of frolicking deer. The canvas is the size of a dishwasher and looks like something that might adorn the walls of a third-rate motel."

Now, I don't think Michiko would know a third-rate motel if she saw one, but I agree that art is not a democratic process. She rightly disparages the market research that goes into Hollywood film-making and that has begun to infect other forms of popular culture.

For instance, she notes that newspapers are starting to ask readers about "coverage priorities" and Broadway producers have begun to calibrate the reactions of test audiences to characters, plot twists, and points of view.

She even reported what was news to me, that some popular authors have spent their own money to run their works past focus groups. She claims that Andrew Greeley tested ad and promotion campaigns and that James Patterson, *NYT* best-seller, even changed the ending of one of his thrillers, *Cat & Mouse*, in response to reader feedback.

It seems to have worked. Patterson's book went to No. 2 on the *NYT* list.

Michiko has something that I lack: a free-swinging disdain for her audience. The result of the trend is what she calls “a culture-wide embrace of that old advertising slogan ‘The customer is always right’—even when that customer has no expertise, no knowledge, and no taste.”

I am enough of a democrat that I bridle at such elitism. I don’t need self-ordained priests and priestesses to tell me what I should like, or intermediaries who disdain any literary work accessible by my next-door neighbor.

On the other hand, I agree with her that writers have to follow their own leanings, for better or worse, even if it takes them down the path of anonymity. Which is why my blood ran cold when I turned a couple of pages in the Sunday magazine and found a remarkably detailed description of the methods by which a new thriller, *The Eleventh Plague*, came to be in your bookstores this month.

The title of the piece was “How to Manufacture a Best-Seller,” and in it Michael Maren detailed the birthing of a bio-medical thriller concocted (you can’t call the process “writing”) by a novelist, a medical researcher, and a book packager, all three of whom shared the given name John.

Baldwin, the novelist, had a couple of marginally successful books in the last decade but was earning his living as a cabinet-maker when he met Marr, an epidemiologist. Inspired by Robin Cook, Richard Preston, and others, the two Johns put together a story about a terrorist who tries to destroy the world with biological agents. The villain patterned his attacks on the plague that destroyed ancient Egypt, hence the title, and the resulting novel was good enough to attract the attention of a third John, Boswell, a packager who had given the book business such deathless products as *O.J.’s Legal Pad*, *French for Cats*, and Leslie Nielsen’s *Bad Golf My Way*.

Boswell took the project to market, to market, like the fabled fat pig in 1996, and all hell broke loose. Nobody in New York saw it as great literature but many saw it as a block-buster with synergy potential. (Synergy is what happens when the movie arm of an entertainment conglomerate falls in love with a piece of high-concept and persuades the conglomerate’s book arm to take hold, too.)

Interest was so high among the bigs that one editor to whom the project was submitted actually hid a copy of the manuscript that had languished on his desk for a week.

“If I had given that manuscript to my boss a week earlier, I would have been yelled at for wasting her time,” the editor told magazine writer Maren. “Now suddenly I’m about to get into trouble for not showing her a hot property. There’s a fine line between garbage and gold, here. And that line is fear.”

The project finally went to Diane Reverand, one of the most powerful editors in New York, who at that point was a big cheese at that cheesiest of publishing palaces, HarperCollins. Pricetag: a million bucks.

Then, of course, the book had to be written, this time by a book doctor named Carolyn Fireside, who was paid \$100,000 for what would be called a “polish” in Hollywood. Fireside, who says she has done this sort of work for at least 20 other major books, retooled scenes, added a plot device which allowed the reader to get inside the head of the vil-

lain, and generally spruced the project up.

The result? I don’t know, but I can guess. “Meat-grinder thriller” comes to mind. “Sausage novel” is another term. The book is due in the stores soon, and I’ll probably skim through it, just for the sake of education.

As for the authors, they cashed out handsomely, although I’ll bet by the time they are finished with the process, they will feel as though they earned every nickel of the million bucks or more they have split.

And as for their careers, that is a big question mark. Maren reported that they had already submitted the first draft of the second book in their contract with HarperCollins. “Sources at HarperCollins report the publisher is ‘nervous’ about what they have sent in,” Maren wrote. But not to worry, he continued. “The publisher can always hire someone to fix (those problems).”

Or, more likely, Rupert Murdoch’s minions at the publisher can do what Doubleday did to Steve Alten, the author of *Meg*, who had that two-book, \$2 million contract at Doubleday—they dumped him.

As I was saying about high-stakes publishing, when you’re talking megabooks, you’re talking about a process that has more to do with corporations, bureaucracies, and ass-covering than anything that I associate with writing.

Maybe I’ll try poetry. That’s nice and pure, isn’t it?

Don’t answer that.

A LITERARY WRITER I LIKE

I haven’t read any of Mary Lee Settle’s books but I like her, even if she does aspire to the *Litrary* while I count myself among the commercial hacks.

In the Winter number of the *Authors Guild Bulletin*, Ms. Settle made peace with all of us with a heartfelt piece I recommend. In it, she began:

“I am, God help me, what is called a ‘good’ writer.” By that, she means she has never aspired to popularity, at least not on the scale that bestseller status implies. At the age of 79, she has spent her working life writing books that counted on long shelf-life and careful support from the publisher, “serious” works of the sort that would probably be classified as “midlist.”

And she has seen her market disappear.

“I suggest that we serious writers are deeply responsible for some of this,” she admits. “The convenient split between the good and the popular is the product of literary snobbery, academic laziness, and publication practice using the tax on the backlist as an excuse.”

I take her last remark to be a reference to tax laws which penalize publishers who keep backlist titles in warehouse supply by taxing those copies as though they would all be sold someday. Twenty years ago, that was the excuse publishers gave for destroying copies of books that didn’t move in backlist.

Nowadays, they don’t even bother to offer an excuse. A book just goes “OP” within a year of publication.

Ms. Settle’s piece recounts a long life of writing books that were deliberately pitched at an elite audience, the kind of reader who “will forego the rent for a good book.” The memoir makes the point that publishing





EAST OF THE HUDSON

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Continued from page 15*

trends have pushed a great many writers, both "serious" and "commercial," into the dustbin. It is a reminder that there is a difference between "writing" and "being successfully published."

After years of trying to get her memoirs published in New York, Ms. Settle turned them over to an academic publisher at the University of South Carolina. She has also abandoned the agonizing process of trying to write into a market she does not understand. "I have abandoned the farce that commercial publishing has become," she writes.

"As for toeing the bottom line, I will do what I have always done: See that all the lines of all my pages are as truthful and as well-written as I can make them.

"That is, and always has been, my job."

Very old-fashioned but worthy of note. Worthy, period.

GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

I noticed with great glee the NYT headline: "Authors Guild Tries to Block Proposed Merger of 2 Publishers."

Great, I thought, a powerful and well financed writers' group is trying to upset the Bertelsmann amalgamation of Random House with Bantam Doubleday Dell. At last, someone who cares about the impact on us working writers.

Well, yes, but only with a caveat, the kind of caveat that irritates the hell out of me.

The story under the headline reported that the Guild has filed a formal complaint with the Federal Trade Commission contending that the BDD/Random deal would create a hybrid that will control 36 percent of the U.S. consumer trade book market.

That figure is far higher than previous estimates I had

seen, including Bertelsmann's own estimate which suggested its market share would amount to 11 percent of the market.

In the last few paragraphs of the story, the reporter began to reconcile the two estimates — and suddenly my approval of the Guild action turned a little sour.

In order to state a cause for action that would meet Federal Trade Commission criteria for action, the Guild had to carefully define the book market the new company would control.

"The Guild's chief concern about market concentration involves trade books," the *Times* reported. "It is these books that are chosen for book reviews and prestigious prizes..."

To spotlight this category of publishing, the Guild eliminated mass market paperbacks from the mix, as though they were somehow a lesser (and inferior) form of the published word.

By doing so, the Guild redefined the "important" book business turning a \$10 billion market into a \$4.38 billion market. The new company would, indeed, control more than one-third of that smaller market.

I have been a member of the Guild for years, and I think I understand why they chose to shove romance, science fiction, and mystery titles out of the nest. The organization's complaint against Bertelsmann is on thin ice, legally. The Guild needed to state, or overstate, its case even to be heard.

But in the process, the Guild seemed to exclude genre books from respectability, and that is a problem. If that's the price of objecting to the Bertelsmann deal, maybe I'll have to reconsider my position.

— *Evan Maxwell*

Novelists' Ink

Novelists, Inc.

An organization for writers of popular fiction

P.O. Box 1166

Mission KS 66222-0166

Publishing Services by Sandy Huseby

FIRST CLASS MAIL
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
FARGO ND
PERMIT #281