



Popular Fiction: Why We Read It, Why We Write It

By ANN MAXWELL/ELIZABETH LOWELL
(NINC 99 keynote/luncheon address)

My life's work has been popular fiction. Writing alone and with Evan, I have published more than 60 books. They range from general fiction to historical and contemporary romances, from science fiction to mystery, from nonfiction to highly fictional thrillers.

Through the years, I've discovered that most publishers talk highly of literary fiction and make money on popular fiction; yet asking them to describe the difference between literary and popular fiction is like asking when white becomes gray becomes black.

Some people maintain that, by definition, literary fiction cannot be popular, because literary equals difficult and inaccessible. Rather like avant-garde art: if you can identify what it is, it ain't art.

Rather than argue such slippery issues as taste and fashion, I'll simply say that there are exceptions to every rule; that's how you recognize both the rule and the exceptions. As a rule, accessibility is one of the hallmarks of popular fiction.

In literary fiction, the author is often judged by critics on his or her grasp of the scope and nuance of the English language, and on the lack of predictability of the narrative itself. The amount of effort readers put into this fiction can be almost on a par with that of the authors themselves. In order for an author to be successful in literary fiction, positive reviews from important critics are absolutely vital. Indeed, in a very real sense, the critics are the only audience that matters, which explains why literary fiction often pays badly: critics get their books for free.

In popular fiction, the only critics who really matter are the readers who pay money to buy books of their own choice. Reviews are irrelevant to sales. Readers of popular fiction judge an author by his or her ability to make the com-

mon language uncommonly meaningful, and to make an often-told tale freshly exciting. The amount of effort a reader puts into this fiction is minimal. That, after all, is the whole point: to entertain readers rather than to exercise them.

Critics are human. They don't like being irrelevant. They dismiss popular fiction as "formulaic escapism that has nothing to do with reality." From this, I'm forced to conclude that critics view life (and literary fiction) as a kind of non-linear prison.

This would certainly explain why the underlying philosophy in much literary fiction is pessimistic: Marx, Freud, and Sartre are the Muses of modernism. Life is seen as fundamentally absurd. No matter how an individual strives, nothing significant will change. Or, in more accessible language, you can't win for losing.

The underlying philosophy of popular fiction is more optimistic: the human condition might indeed be deplorable, but individuals can make a positive difference in their own and others' lives. The Muses of popular fiction are Zoroaster and Jung, the philosophy more classical than modern. Popular fiction is a continuation of and an embroidery upon ancient myths and archetypes; popular fiction is good against evil, Prometheus against the uncaring gods, Persephone emerging from hell with the seeds of spring in her hands, Adam discovering Eve.

In a word, popular fiction is heroic and transcendent at a time when heroism and transcendence are out of intellectual favor.

Publishers, whose job is to make money by predicting the size of the market for a piece of fiction, are constantly trying to guess where a manuscript falls on the scale of white to gray to black. Publishers need to understand why readers read the books they do. Marketers give tests, conduct surveys, consult oracles, etc., and constantly rediscover a simple fact: people read fiction that reinforces their often-inarticulate beliefs about society,

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

I know it's a cliché, but it really does seem like just yesterday I was sitting at my desk, wondering how the heck I would fill 12 months of columns. In case you haven't guessed from reading my column this year, this is not a natural form for me.

In my writing life, I've done reference manuals, short stories, plays, more than 20 novels, newsletters, articles, interviews, reviews, legal briefs, and even advertising, and it seemed like I had something to say when I approached each of them. But make me write a column, where I'm actually supposed to sound thought-provoking and maybe sort of wise (heaven forbid!), and I sort of lose my grip.

So I hope you'll excuse a certain sense of euphoria as I put together this last column.

Sure, a big part of it is just relief, at being finished, at passing the baton to someone else. One of the smartest things our founders did was set up the election and appointment procedures the way they did. When January rolls around each year, new officers infuse NINC with new perspectives and enthusiasm. It's terrific.

In 2000, we are lucky enough to have Carla Neggers stepping in as President, and we simply couldn't have found a better choice. Carla is smart and funny, two of my favorite things, plus she is one of the most thoughtful and insightful people I've ever met when it comes to the publishing biz. She just knows a lot. And she seems to capture what we do, how we do it, and how we balance the business and personal sides of our lives better than anyone I know. I look forward to seeing where Carla takes us—it's bound to be a very interesting ride!


But another part of my good feeling about this year stems from the fact that I've had the pleasure of working with an extraordinarily gifted and committed Board. I can't thank Becky Barker, Carla Neggers, Debbie Gordon, Janice Brooks, and Terey daly Ramin enough for their effort and energy as we negotiated our way through NINC 99, the tenth anniversary edition of this wonderful organization.

Becky and Terey were both willing to step into vacated positions, and they were such a joy to work with. I can't believe our good fortune in recruiting them.

Carla and Debbie jumped in with both feet, undaunted and energetic, and gave us a professional edge we never would've had without them.

And Janice... Well, Janice has been our font of wisdom this year. One of the original five founders, NINC's first president, a sage advisor, our link to NINC's past and to its future, Janice contributes again and again and again. She leaves the Board after this year, having served her maximum three years as Advisory Council Representative, but her presence will still be felt as she continues her work with the Policy and Procedure Manual and the Novelists, Inc. database. Thank you, Janice!

With that kind of Board, I know you'll understand when I tell you it's been a fast-paced, action-packed year in terms of projects and achievements. We wanted to focus on creating an even better network of



*Julie's
farewell and
a reminder
for 2000*

communication, and we've certainly taken some concrete steps in that direction.

In case you're wondering whether this is the place where I do the run-down on this year's accomplishments, the answer is no. But you can see the Dues Renewal letter in the middle of this month's *Novelists Ink* for more details if you'd like. And if you want to turn there, fill in your Dues Renewal and Authors' Coalition forms, write your check, stamp your envelope, and then come back to me here at the President's Column, I'll wait. I hope it will convince you how important it is to all of us to renew, to keep *Novelists Ink* and the NincLink and www.ninc.com and our amazing networking system at your fingertips for another year. As Randy Russell once said [I hope he doesn't mind if I paraphrase here]—we're all in this together, paddling as fast as we can, and if we lose an oar, we all risk going down.

In the bizarre and confusing year that was 1999 in the publishing industry, I think Novelists, Inc. accomplished some very good things; offered an even better newsletter, an even better conference, an even better Link and Web site; kept growing and changing; and surprise—had some fun while we were about it!

I hope to see many of you in Vancouver next year in Y2K.

Until then—here's to Novelists, Inc. in the new millennium!

— Julie Kistler

WE PAY FOR ARTICLES!

No, you won't be able to retire on the honorariums, but *NINK* pays its writers for articles and columns. We're always looking for exciting lead and second lead articles, opinions and editorials (no we don't pay for letters to the editor...<g>), and columns ranging from "Dispatches From the Front" to "Oh My Aching..." and "Taking the Pulse of..." to "Curmudgeon's Corner."

If you've got ideas or want to write a piece but can't think of what to write, you can contact me directly at the phone or e-mail listed inside the front cover, or fax them to me at 810/821-7070.

You can also send any "Breaking News" items directly to me. And thanks!

— Terey daly Ramin

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 [mashedforaddresses](http://mashedforaddresses.com).

Savannah Conference Named Best

It has been weeks since the NINC conference in Savannah. I've attended NINC conferences in New York and Lake Tahoe. Savannah has been the best. I praise

Victoria Thompson and all of the others on the conference committee for putting together a truly wonderful program. In every session, I gained at least one new tidbit of information.

This time last year, I wasn't sure if I would continue to write. The desire was there but nothing got on the page. I was so encouraged by the "leave your ego at home" and "spill your guts when asked a question" atmosphere that I actually wrote at the conference.

Finally, I got the chance to meet some wonderful members of this organization. I think I spoke with everyone or at least nodded to (Evan, that's southern for hello) all of the attendees.

The Novelists Inc. conference will always be on the must attend list for me.

P.S. The conference is also a wonderful way to earn extra cash. Just ask Carla Neggers ;)

— Carla Fredd

POPULAR FICTION: WHY....

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Continued from page 1*

life, and fate.

People who believe that life's problems can be solved through intelligence and effort are often attracted to crime fiction, which centers around the logical solution of various problems.

People who believe along with Shakespeare that there are more things on heaven and earth than we dream are attracted to science fiction of various kinds.

People who believe that a good relationship between a man and a woman can be the core of life are attracted to romances.

People who believe that absolute evil lurks just beneath the surface of the ordinary are attracted to horror. And so on.

Think about that the next time you hear someone dismiss what they (or usually other folks!) read as "escapism." Existentialists escape into their fictional world. We escape into ours. The fact that our world feels good and theirs feels bad doesn't mean theirs is always more valuable, much less more intelligent. I have known many intelligent people who need to be reminded of the possibility of joy; I have known no intelligent people who need to be reminded of the reality of despair.

Some things are worth escaping from. Despair is definitely one of them.

So much for escapism. What about the charge that popular fiction is formulaic?

The concept of formula has an interesting history as first a literary device and then a literary put-down. The Greeks divided literature into tragedy and comedy. A tragedy had a political, masculine theme and ended in death. A comedy had a social, often feminine theme and ended in marriage, the union of male and female from which all life comes. We have kept the scope of tragedy, of death and despair, but we have reduced the concept of comedy to a potty-mouthed nightclub act.

Perhaps that is why critics of popular fiction reserve their most priapic scorn for the stories called romances. Romances follow the ancient Greek formula for comedy: they celebrate life rather than anticipate death. In addition to being almost exclusively female in their audience and authorship, romances address timeless female concerns of union and regeneration. The demand for romances is feminine, deep, and, apparently, universal. Harlequin/Silhouette has an enormously profitable romance publishing empire in which the majority of the money is earned outside of the American market, in more countries and languages than I can name.

Even worse than their roots in ancient feminine concerns, romances irritate critics because they often have a subtext of mythic archetypes rather than modernist, smaller-than-life characters.

I have heard mystery authors complain that they don't get any respect from critics. As a mystery author, I agree. I have heard science fiction authors complain that they don't get any respect. As a science fiction author, I agree. But as a romance author, I have experienced amazing intellectual bigotry.

For example, mysteries, like romance, were once scorned as badly written, formulaic, lurid escapist fare best read in closets. Then, about 70 years ago, the idea of class warfare came into intellectual vogue. Mysteries, particularly American mysteries, came to be viewed as politically correct (and therefore) well-written metaphors of class warfare—the down-and-out detective bringing justice to the little guy in a society that cares only for privilege and wealth.

That's a pretty heavy load to lay on Lew Archer's modernist shoulders, but I suspect the male academic types were tired of getting their thrills reading by flashlight in a closet. The fact that mysteries at the time were written by men for men did not hurt the genre's status at all.

Yet many authors continued to write mysteries in which brains, bravery, and brawn mattered more than political commentary. These books were roundly disdained by critics...and avidly bought by readers. The division between mythic and politically correct mysteries still exists. You can usually tell which is which by the tone of the review.

Science fiction, like romance, was once scorned as badly written, formulaic, lurid escapist fare best read in closets. Then, in the 1950s, there was a rash of After-the-Bomb science fiction books. Either directly or indirectly, these books criticized the course of modern civilization. Their stories predicted disaster for the human race. Endlessly.

Voilà. The genre of science fiction became politically and intellectually correct, a well-written body of literature with a proper appreciation of man's raging greed, stupidity, and futility. Gone were the garish covers of little green men hauling busty blondes off to far corners of the galaxy for an eternity of slap and tickle. Gone were the heroic rescuers of said blondes. In their place were caring and despairing anti-heroes who tried and tried and tried to make things right, only to finally fail, going down the tubes with the suitable Existential whimper.

The critics loved it.

The fact that science fiction at that time was largely written by men for men did not hurt the genre's status one bit. The retrograde authors who continued to write rousing galactic adventures in which bravery, brains, and brawn saved the day were roundly disdained by critics...and avidly purchased by readers. Again, the tone of the reviews told you which was which.

Westerns were once scorned as badly written, formulaic, lurid escapist fare best read in closets. Westerns are still often viewed that way, despite valiant efforts on the part of a few academics to push politically correct westerns (anti-heroes, disease, cruelty, bigotry, degradation, despair, and death). The readers were not fooled. They avoided these academic westerns in droves. The heart of the West-

ern's appeal is larger-than-life; it is heroism; it is people who transcend their own problems and limitations and make a positive difference in their own time and life. That is what made Louis L'Amour one of the best-selling authors in the English language—or any other language, for that matter. That is what readers pay to read.

That is what critics disdain. Heroism. Transcendence.

Romances were once scorned as badly written, formulaic, lurid escapist fare best read in closets. They still are. I suspect they always will be. Their appeal is to the transcendent, not to the political. Their characters, through love, transcend the ordinary and partake of the extraordinary.

That, not bulging muscles or magic weapons, is the essence of heroic myth: humans touching transcendence.

It is an important point that is often misunderstood. The essence of myth is that it is a bridge from the ordinary to the extraordinary. As Joseph Campbell said many times, through myth we all touch, if only for a few moments, something larger than ourselves, something transcendent.

Unfortunately, transcendence has been out of intellectual favor for several generations.

Thus the war between optimism and pessimism rages on, and popular culture is its battlefield. Universities and newspapers are heavily stocked with people who believe that pessimism is the only intelligent philosophy of life; therefore, optimists are dumb as rocks.

How many times have you read a review that disdains a book because it has a constructive resolution of the central conflict—also known as a happy ending? The same reviewer will then praise another book for its relentless portrayal of the bleakness of everyday life.

This is propaganda, not criticism. What the critics are actually talking about is their own intellectual bias, their own chosen myth: pessimism. They aren't offering an intelligent analysis of an author's ability to construct and execute a novel.

Contrary to what the critics tell us, popular fiction is not a swamp of barely literate escapism. Popular fiction is composed of ancient myths newly reborn, telling and retelling a simple truth: ordinary people can do extraordinary things. Jack can plant a beanstalk that will provide endless food; a Tom Clancy character can successfully unravel a conspiracy that threatens the lives of millions. A knight can slay a dragon; a Stephen King character can defeat the massed forces of evil. Cinderella can attract the prince through her own innate decency rather than through family connections; a Nora Roberts heroine can, through her own strength, rise above a savagely unhappy past and bring happiness to herself and others.

The next time you hear a work of popular fiction being scorned as foolish, formulaic, or badly written, ask yourself if it is truly badly written, foolish, and formulaic, or is it simply speaking to a transcendent tradition that emphasizes ancient hope rather than modernist despair?

In our society, popular fiction is story after story told around urban campfires, stories that point out that life is not a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing. There is more to life than defeat and despair. Life is

full of possibilities. Victory is one of them. Joy is another.

And that's why people read popular fiction. To be reminded that life is worth the pain.

Now...why do we write popular fiction?

Masochism is the first answer that springs to mind. Forget the intellectual. This is personal. I don't know about you, but for me, making the common language perform uncommonly well is the hardest kind of work.

Have you ever sat down to write, come up with a handful of mismatched words, and asked yourself: Why am I indulging in this private and solitary form of self-abuse?

People who don't write think they know the answer. If you ask them, they'll tell you that writers have a diamond-studded, gold-plated E-ticket ride through life. That's why writers write.

When you, a writer, express shock at that answer, non-writers rush to assure you that writers have it made. It's true, they insist. They're sure of it.

After this happens for the fifth or fifteenth time, you begin to understand the picture non-writers have of popular fiction writers. It goes about as follows:

The novelist lives in a place at the top of the hill or in a high-rise, depending on whether the address is West Coast or East Coast. The writer's home can only be described in terms of excess and envy: spacious, gracious, lavish, and lush, with hot and cold running fountains, Olympic swimming pools, a French chef, a personal trainer, a ten-acre personal library, and a masseuse for those odd moments when the creative urge seizes you and ties your back in itty-bitty knots.

Is that why we started writing? To have a huge house and a staff to pamper us?

Nope. Not this writer, or any other writer I know.

Then why?

Again, the non-writers are eager to tell you why you write. It's because the writer's life positively bursts with glamour and exciting telephone calls. Movie moguls call to offer lunch at Spago or Four Seasons. During lunch, million-dollar options on the author's next book will be dangled between dishes prepared by internationally famous chefs.

No sooner does the author agree to do lunch on both coasts than the phone is ringing again. It's the agent calling to say that the publisher's royalty check is right on time, and you have a 90 percent sell-through, and a bottom line well into six figures.

The next call the writer receives is from an editor bubbling about how the manuscript arrived yesterday, and she read it immediately, and is so in love with it that she wouldn't change an incredibly perfect word. In fact, she is putting all 1,000 pages right into production, and the second half of the advance will be sent by messenger that very day, and the art department is panting to have a conference with the writer about the cover.

And the good news is that the author's next book will be a mega-super-lead title, with an advance hardback printing of 1,000,000 copies and a paperback auction that is adding zeros faster than the Russian debt.

Through all the wealth and praise, the



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author smiles graciously and radiates serenity. There is no pressure, no worry, nothing more demanding than finding a taxi in Manhattan or a parking place in LA.

As for work hours—writers make their own, of course. Not that writers work all that much. After all, anyone can write. All you need is a pencil and paper, right?

Yeah. Right.

Let's begin with the average writer's work environment. The writer's home is usually on the bottom of the hill or the high-rise, and can be located in any state in the union. The house is at least one bedroom too small. The closest thing to a fountain occurred the last time that the hot-water hose on the washing machine broke. As for swimming pools—well, the dog does laps every time you wash him in the tub.

The only chef is on cable TV. Your personal trainer self-destructed when the VCR ate your "Buns of Steel" workout tape. As for a live-in masseuse, sure, the last time your lover's back hurt, you rubbed it.

Well, on to the vast library. The library in the average writer's home is a pile of cardboard cartons crammed full of mostly paperback books. The other kind is too expensive to do more than drool over. This library is stored in the garage or the basement or the garden shed. It's not that you don't want the books in the house, but there's no more room in the hall closet—your typing chair, typewriter, and typing table are already locked in mortal combat with the vacuum cleaner and the cat box your kids never remember to empty.

Okay, so the average writer's work environment lacks a certain glamour. But what about all the rest—the lunches and the VIPs, the attentive agents, and the editorial gushing?

In the real world of writing, movie moguls don't know you from spilled popcorn. Your lunches are made of leftovers that are better suited to mold culture than to high cuisine. The only deals you get offered are from door-to-door salesmen schlepping magazines, religions, and miracle driveway cleaners.

Agents? What about them? They're real, aren't they?

Yeah, babe. They're as real as it gets.

If you have an agent, it seems that it's been so long since you connected that you can barely remember the agent's name, much less what you talked about. As for royalty statements being on time, yes, that sometimes happens, usually when the bottom line of the statement begins with a minus sign.

How about editors? Don't they call?

Sure. They call to tell you that they've been working overtime on an important book, so it will be at least a month before they'll get round to flipping through the manuscript you sent in two months ago.

You express polite, restrained disappointment and wait four more weeks to have editorial orchids messengered to your door, along with an acceptance check.

Eight weeks later your editor writes you a letter telling you why chapter eight should be chapter 30, and chapter seven was the true beginning of the book, and she hates the hero and the heroine is boring, and the book has to be cut by 50 percent and set in Tahiti rather than Kansas, but it's nothing that can't be fixed with a bit of fine tuning.

Ah, the sweet smell of...fertilizer.

As for the second half of your advance arriving anytime soon, it's due on acceptance of the book, remember?

Even after the book is rewritten by you, reread by your editor, and finally accepted, it still takes about 11 weeks for the check to work its way out of the publisher's and agent's bureaucracy and into your checking account.

And that, dear author, is why your phone is ringing: your checking account is overdrawn. Also you just advertised a barely used tennis racket in the local swapmeet weekly. You love tennis but can't take the time to enjoy it any more, because you're busy rewriting a book so that you can be paid six months later than you had expected to be paid and four months later than your creditors demanded to be paid.

Did I mention children? Of course not. Writers don't have children, do they? Or spouses, or homes to clean, or pets or root canals or anything but the kind of life that would make an Arab prince weep with envy. Fame, riches, praise, freedom—that's why writers write.

Right?

For your sake, I hope not. Too often there is little glamour and less money in store for the overwhelming majority of writers. The last time I read statistics on the subject, the average fiction writer made less than \$5,000 per year, and less than 400 novelists in the U.S. made their living entirely from the proceeds of their writing.

Considering the size of the average advance, it's no surprise that nearly all writers have another source of income, whether it be a full-time job, a spouse, or both.

Then why do we write, if not for fame and wealth and glory?

Ask a hundred writers and you'll get a hundred answers. The most common are: I'm my own boss when I write. I can do what I want.

It's true, as far as it goes. A writer can only write his or her own story, not the one his editor or agent thought would be nice. Of course, there's a downside to that, as your editor and agent take turns pointing out every time they see a new manuscript from you.

As a writer, I can choose my own work hours, is another answer.

Yes indeed. You can choose your own work hours—any 70 hours of any week if you write full time. Otherwise it's any 30 hours of any week after your regular job and family duties have been taken care of. This schedule does not include surprise rewrites, autographings, and unraveling plot lines.

So much for choosing a light work load.

Another reason often given by writers when cornered on the subject of why they write is that it's a chance to become rich and famous.

If you believe that, buy lottery tickets. Not only are the

hours better, so are the odds.

There are many other answers, but after you've been around other writers and heard them relax and talk to one another, you begin to realize that all those nice, rational, socially understandable answers writers have given as to why they write are so much b.s.

Writers, whether literary or popular, write because they must.

You can't help yourself. You see stories everywhere, in every situation, and you can't wait to tell those stories. In order to write, you'll surrender tennis, bridge, golf, gardening, skiing, and aerobics.

Even that won't be enough. The more you write, the more you have to write. Over time, your friends begin to ask, "Whatever became of old whatshername?" there will be blank stares all around and then murmurs of surprise when people realize they haven't heard from you for months.

It's not that writers are anti-social. We're very social creatures. We just require rather special friendships; people have to be willing to be ignored for months on end, then called in for a surprise "I've finished the book!" celebration.

Writers' friends have to understand that success is always just around the corner, even if that corner has eluded an author for two, four, or 14 years. Writers' friends have to believe that each new book the writer works on is the best ever. Writers' friends have to appreciate aimless phone calls from authors at odd hours, usually when the author is plotting a book. Writers' friends have to understand the fury that comes when the power goes out and words vanish from the computer screen, never to be retrieved again.

(Hey, what's the problem? You made 'em up once, you can make 'em up again, right?)

Writers' friends have to believe that each line an author writes is perfect and irreplaceable...and can be cut or re-worked whenever the author feels like it.

Is it any wonder that writers' friends are usually other writers? That's why conferences such as this one are vital to writers. It gives us a chance to meet people who are just as crazy as we are!

So look at the person sitting on your right and your left and know that you aren't alone: everyone around you understands what it is to be rejected repeatedly and still believe that success as a writer is just a matter of time. You don't have to explain your deepest urges and fears to the people here; as writers of popular fiction, they share every one of them.

In truth, this is a gathering of Optimists Anonymous. Our best kept secret is that the very act of writing, of creation, is an act of faith.

Writing announces our belief in the possibilities of human nature and life itself.

Writers are more resilient than critics. We have to be. A true pessimist wouldn't be able to finish a book.

That's why so many writers choose to write popular fiction, fiction which celebrates life and living. At some level, writers of popular fiction sense the inarticulate unspoken hunger of other people for the mythic, the transcendent,

the hopeful.

So we go to our tablets and typewriters and computers and sweat until we create new stories from timeless myths. Then we give those stories back to the lives which hunger for them.

That is why we write popular fiction.

For what we can give rather than what we can get.

Thank you for inviting me to share in your optimism, your determination and your celebration of life. **NINK**

In Memory:

We lost the following writers—colleagues, friends, cohorts, and sisters—in 1999. They will be missed more than mere words can express.

NINC Member:

Carol Backus: It never failed that the first smiling face I recognized at every writers' conference I attended was Carol's. Given that I dread large crowds and nameless faces, Carol was a one-person welcoming committee whose cheery greeting always brightened my gloom. Even during the worst of times, I never heard her say a bad word. I'll miss Carol more than I can possibly say, and I'll lift a hand in greeting to her each time I walk through the door of another conference.

— Patricia Rice

Carol Backus was a true friend with a giving nature and a valiant spirit. Quick to laugh with a friend over life's humorous moments, she was as quick to embrace and console during life's difficult or sad moments. As a sister author, she would celebrate victories of all sizes with aspiring, beginning, and seasoned writers. And she would be properly outraged at the slings and arrows any of her friends personally suffered in the publishing business. Even in the midst of her own writing, she would help others whenever she could. She was a consummate professional, a gifted writer, an extraordinary woman, and friend. She is deeply missed by so many of us whose lives were enhanced by her presence.

— Garda Parker

Non-member writers:

Nancy Richards-Akers

Joan Shapiro: one of the best and brightest people I've ever known in my life. I was fortunate in the extreme to be able to call her friend. — Terey

Send contributions to: Joan Shapiro Memorial Fund, LAUBACH LITERACY, P.O.Box 131, Syracuse NY 13210. Make checks payable to Laubach Literacy; either write Joan Shapiro Memorial Fund on the memo line or attach a note explaining the donation is for the Joan Shapiro Memorial Fund. To donate via credit card, call: 1-888-528-2224

ASJA Contracts Watch Reports

On Changing Contract Terms

Here's a Heads-Up from *The American Society of Journalists and Authors Contracts Watch Special Edition*:

ATTENTION: Have you been sent a new, more onerous contract by a publication to which you already have been contributing on a free-lance basis? If so, please let us know. All responses will be strictly confidential. We need the information to track the current state of contracts. And—we make no guarantees—we might be able to assist you and other writers who received your publisher's contracts.

On Sept. 24, freelance writers first mouthed, then shouted a phrase to which they were not accustomed. It goes like this: We won. What we won is the right to right to remain solvent—at least in theory. The spark for this unlikely cry was the Second U.S. Court of Appeals decision in the *Tasini et al Vs N.Y. Times et al* case.

A little over a month has passed, and, during this quieter interval, "Contracts Watch" looks at the Tasini decision as objectively as possible. Along the way we will share some new thoughts about how to bring more rewards to writers and publishers by bringing a sane, constructive model to the relationship. So let's put on our rubber gloves and dive in.

The Appeals Court asserted two basic principles: 1. Online and database uses of articles that originally appeared in print may not be considered part of the first rights but are instead additional uses.

2. Additional uses of an article are not permitted without a contract signed by both parties that specifically grant the additional usages.

These are not just pleasant ideas. They are vital to the very concept of copyright. When Congress first passed a copyright law, it wasn't because the U.S. Government happened to be celebrating "Be Kind to Authors" week.

It was because science, art, and industry need much and constant creative expression in order to flourish. A nation with little science, art, and industry is poor spiritually and materially. So copyright, as well as patents and trademarks—collectively known as intellectual property—became the vehicle through which the expression of ideas is rewarded. As with other types of property, most notably real estate, intellectual property can be rented or sold. The value to the owner of copyrightable material comes from the many different opportunities to rent it out (a/k/a license its usage).

We know what the ruling means and what it is based on. We just don't know the extent to which it affects the past and future.

According to the recent ruling, all freelance articles published since the Copyright Act of 1976 went into effect and used in online and CD-ROM databases without the permission of their creators have been pirated (our word, not the court's). The law took effect Jan. 1, 1978 and no doubt thousands and thousands of articles have been infringed. The authors of these articles should be entitled to compensation for these usages. What that compensation actually turns out to be remains to be seen.

Here's what we know.

The Tasini case was not a class action suit. Nor was it a suit brought by the National Writers Union (NWU) against all or many publishers. Rather, six particular writers, including NWU president Jonathan Tasini, sued particular publishers and database corporations. The case was first heard in a lower court and the writers lost. The Sept. 24 decision came from an appeals court that reversed the original decision and

sent the case back to the lower court for the purpose of determining damages. The lower court judge who first heard the case has moved on to another court. The case will be assigned to a new judge who will study all pertinent material and render a decision about damages.

The degree of severity or leniency is anyone's guess. Damages for each article may well exceed the original article fees, be equivalent, a percentage of the fee, or simply a token sum. Whatever the figure and whatever the formula, the decision surely will guide other decisions arising out of all the other thousands of articles that have been infringed.

We also know that right now writers are checking to see if publishers have used their works without permission. Other writers who already have done the due diligence are taking steps to collect compensation for articles that have been infringed. As indicated above, publishers and writers are awaiting the court's final Tasini damages formula with great interest. It may open the door to an exchange of millions of dollars. Or it may not. Both individual writers and publishers may find themselves turning to crystal balls. One-by-one, each has to decide whether it's smarter to settle these non-Tasini-case claims before or after the court renders its damages decision.

Clouding the news is the understanding that some publishers may take a crippling economic hit. On the one hand, it is hard to conjure even a single teardrop for publishers who made multiple uses of material while paying for only one usage. This is especially true since efforts to steer them away from this willful path took the form of reasoning, advising, cajoling, even warning for at least these past five years. On the other hand, writers generally do not win when publishers go out of business. The opportunity to dry up sources of

income and simultaneously reduce competition among users of our work is not the healthiest way to make our careers and businesses flourish.

The move toward compensation to authors for past usages is one Tasini case aftermath. We also are seeing that too many publishers and other users of content are responding to the decision by introducing severe contracts that specifically deprive contributors of additional compensation for additional uses. To be fair to the propagators of newly introduced "all-rights" and "work-made-for-hire" contracts, it should be noted that many of their peers introduced such noxious documents even when the Tasini case was in its infancy. It was obvious early on that, regardless of which way the decision might go, the "prudent" course was to explicitly appropriate rights without the hindrance of having to pay for them.

This wholesale appropriation of intellectual property rights is neither fair nor necessary. And it's stupid.

When talented, skillful, authoritative, professional writers encounter deteriorating work conditions and diminished career prospects, they move on. We have anecdotal evidence that freelance magazine writers have grown tired of the corrosive professional landscape of recent years. They have packed up their talents and skills and migrated to more rewarding territories —books, film, broadcast and cable television, corporate work, new media, and the new entrepreneurial possibilities afforded by emerging technologies. Chasing away the most reliable providers of content is a dumb way to grow a business that relies on content.

This is not to say that all or perhaps even a majority of writers will move on. Those who, for whatever reason, remain active contributors to magazines will find themselves working harder for fewer incentives. They will look for ways to honorably fulfill their assignments while minimizing risk factors and maximizing turnaround time. As rewards stagnate, editor/writer negotiations and relationships will become even more acrimonious or publishers and writers

can put aside distracting poisonous differences, find common ground and work together effectively to identify and enjoy mutually advantageous opportunities.

Yes, it depends on good will. Yes, it is possible. Here's how.

The Appellate Court's Tasini decision offers all of us in the publishing industry a perfect opportunity to stop, take a deep breath, and reexamine our contractual impasse. One sensible thought is worth considering. Although the conflict has centered on the bundle of rights attached to each article, writers and publishers actually are driven in negotiations to protect an entirely different, unspoken issue. In reality (if we may use that term) intellectual property rights are a symbol. As with the American flag, attempts to control that symbol evoke a powerful, visceral response.

What then are the real issues? Publishers want and need the ability to be competitive in this thrill-ride marketplace. Publishers want and need the ability to make deals with a maximum of flexibility and a minimum of red tape. Writers want and need fair compensation for our work. Writers want and need the ability to earn appropriate compensation for additional uses of our work, regardless of who or what the licensee is.

It's easy to see how rights have become a metaphor for these separate and deeply felt needs. It also should be easy to see that we can assemble an assortment of terms that sufficiently honor the separate needs of publishers and writers. A writer feels no joy in turning down a good, rewarding assignment. A publisher feels no joy in losing access to a professional, reliable writer. We do have some contract terms in mind and we feel they can mutually benefit publishers

and writers. We look forward to sharing them with you in the future. But we suspect it might be more constructive and certainly more interesting to encourage everyone in the publishing community to consider terms that can respect the different needs. We ask everybody—writers, publishers, editors, corporations, organizations—to think about where we are, where we can go together, and what terms will take us there. Let's have some public dialog about new and workable contract concepts. The results of such energy can only be exciting, powerful and rewarding.

YOU CAN RECEIVE each issue of ASJA Contracts Watch by e-mail automatically (and at no charge). Only official dispatches: no feedback, no flooded mailbox. Send the following message:

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BEFORE YOU SIGN, check out that magazine or newspaper and its parent company in ASJA Contracts Watch. A complete, searchable archive is available on the World Wide Web. Find it—with other valuable information and tips on freelance contracts, rights, and copyright—at the Web address below.

TO ASJA MEMBERS AND OTHERS who send contracts, information, and scuttlebutt in strict confidence: Thanks. Inquiries from all are welcome.

Contracts Committee, ASJA

1501 Broadway, New York, NY 10036, Phone 212-997-0947; fax 212-768-7414; e-mail **contracts@asja.org**

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

Kathy Marks (*Catherine Judd*), Tempe AZ

Mary Ann Mitchell, Mountain View CA

Gloria Alvarez, New Orleans, LA

New Member

Olivia Rupprecht (*Mallory Rush*), Tallahassee FL



ONLINE...

This column is my last for 1999 so I thought I'd begin by revealing that my New Year's Resolution for the new millennium is to master Time Management. I've carefully reviewed the past few years, and while I've accomplished quite a bit, I also realize that I could do a lot more if I could get a better handle on my time.

Rather than wait until it was time to put my resolution into practice, I've already begun exercising some time management suggestions that I've gleaned from *Speed Cleaning*, *Simplify Your Life*, and *Time Management for Dummies*. While the first two books are extremely informative and helpful in other areas of my life, *Time Management for Dummies* contains a wonderful chapter on e-mail.

E-MAIL TIME SAVING TIPS

I don't think anyone can argue that e-mail has become an important part of our lives. It keeps us in touch with our friends and our business associates. My contact with my agent and my editor is almost exclusively through e-mail these days. Their schedules are as busy as mine is. A phone call from me might disrupt their routine. An e-mail allows them the luxury of getting to my question or my information and responding at their convenience.

E-mail also allows us to stay in touch with our readers and our fellow writers. Listserves abound, and if you weren't on enough before I took over this column, I've given you several more to subscribe to.

Unfortunately, what often happens is that we forget the whole concept behind using e-mail: E-mail is fast, but it should also be short and to the point. It should be easy to read. The first sentence should convey your most important information.

The subject line is frequently under-used. It should be like the opening hook to your story. It should grab the reader's attention, but it should concisely identify the information contained within the letter.

1. Dated material: If a response is needed by a certain date, the date should be reflected in the subject line. When writers are on deadline, they tend to skim mail with the thought that "I'll get back to it later." Sometimes later is too late.

2. Reply needed: If the e-mail requires a reply, indicate that information in the subject line.

3. Topics: Particularly if you are sending a message to a listserve, give enough information that someone on deadline can determine if he needs to read your post now or if it can wait.

If you find yourself spending a great deal of time responding to e-mail, consider these tips:

1. Set aside a specific time of day to go through your

e-mail. We feel an urgency to reply because e-mail is such a fast medium. But we don't have to respond immediately. I check my e-mail twice a day. I have my computer set to pick up my e-mail for offline reading at 4:30 in the morning before I leave for work and at 3:00 in the afternoon when I get home.

2. We also feel a need to respond to every post. Sometimes someone is simply giving us information. If a response isn't needed, don't respond. If someone on a list asks a question and you don't know the answer, you don't have to respond. I'm subscribed to a research listserve, and I found myself researching the answer to any question that came from someone asking about Texas since that's usually the setting of my stories. I suddenly realized that I was spending too much of my time doing someone else's research. Now if a question comes across and I know the answer without researching, I provide it. If I don't know the answer, I don't research it.

3. If you find yourself suddenly receiving e-mail from a listserve that you don't remember subscribing to, ask to be removed. I find this unsolicited subscribing happening more often lately. No one is supposed to subscribe you to a listserve without your permission.

4. If you are subscribed to a listserve and find yourself deleting more mail than you read, consider unsubscribing. Deleting mail takes time. You'd be surprised how much.

5. If your e-mail provider allows you to download your e-mail for offline reading, be sure that you delete your mail once it's read. Keep only the letters that contain critical information. Deleting is an area in which I need to practice what I preach. My offline e-mail box has three years worth of letters in it. I did a test for a week and read my e-mail online, responding as needed and printing only essential correspondence. At the end of the week, I had four printed messages even though I spend over an hour a day replying to e-mail.

Once you've achieved control over your e-mail, you'll have more time to browse the Internet.

SCREENWRITERS

Terey recommends ScreenTalk Online at www.screentalk.org. It's an amazing site with a lot of good information. You can subscribe to the e-zine for \$25.95 per year, but if your budget can't handle that cost, you can go to the Web site and browse through the list of articles. At least one is available for free reading, although it may hook you into subscribing.

Terey also shares with us 120pages2go!, a listserve which is "Strictly and undividedly for the beginning screenwriter. The 'newbie.' The 'wannabee.'" It welcomes subscribers to ask any question on all aspects of writing screenplays: "Format? How many pages in a screenplay? What type of writing software is there?" This haven allows you to meet fellow newbies. Join at www.onelist.com/community/120pages2go or send an e-mail to 120pages2go-subscribe@onelist.com.

RESEARCH

For historical writers, Terey discovered the Bureau of Land Management site at www.glorerecords.blm.gov/. "This site currently provides live database and image access to more than two million Federal land title records for the Eastern Public Land States, issued between 1820 and 1908. Databases for Western Federal land conveyance records and Western conveyance records will eventually be added to the site."

Encyclopaedia Britannica has gone online. The 32-volume set has been placed on the Internet for free-of-charge access. You can find it at www.britannica.com. However, at the time this article is being written, due to high volume usage, the site is experiencing some unforeseen technical difficulties, but they hope to be up to full capacity soon.

OTHER SITES OF INTEREST

Terey recommends a fun and useful site for those of us with family scattered across the country. MyFamily.com at www.Myfamily.com/front.asp allows you to easily create a Web site for your family members. It allows you to connect to a chatroom and keep a calendar of events such as birthdays and anniversaries so you never forget the ones you love.

The Official US Time site at www.time.gov is linked to two atomic clocks to provide times for U.S. time zones only. Links are provided for times outside the United States as well as online exhibits for time-related topics like calendars, clocks, and Daylight Saving Time.

The Microsoft Y2K site at www.microsoft.com/y2k provides information on making your computer Y2K compliant and avoiding any disasters as the New Year approaches. It also offers information on hoaxes and scams that should be ignored or avoided.

A Writer's Choice is an interesting literary journal at members.spree.com/writer. The online newsletter contains interesting and useful articles for all genres, including "Common Pitfalls In Writing Fiction," "How To Quote Others," and "Reasons For Rejections" all written by Leslie Blanchard.

Word count is often discussed among writers—some insist you can use your word processor's word count feature, others convinced that the old formula of ten words per line, 25 lines per page is still the preferred method. For an interesting explanation of word count, visit *What is a Word* at www.sfw.org/writing/wordcount.htm.

If you are not subscribed to NINCLINK and wish to be, send an e-mail:

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Subject: Your-Ninc-Membership-Name (as it appears in the roster)

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If you have sites to share that you think would be of interest to Novelists, Inc. members, please e-mail me.

— **Lorraine Heath** (LorraineHe@aol.com)



BREAKING NEWS

CONGRATULATIONS!...to NINK's own Marilyn Pappano, whose novel *Season of Miracles* has been made into a Hallmark Hall of Fame special to be broadcast December 12. All right, Marilyn!

Congratulations also go to new member Dawn Reno who has been nominated for a "Pushcart Prize for one of my essays published in a small magazine called *Futures*." For those of you not familiar with the prize, it's given to the best pieces (poetry, fiction, essays) published by the small presses every year—sort of an Emmy for those who publish for the sheer joy of writing rather than the money. The nominees are judged by a panel of well-known writers and editors. The collected winners are published in an anthology. We're rooting for you, Dawn!

EDITORIAL DANCE...Associate Editor Jennifer Nauss is leaving Silhouette for Kansas as of November 12. Margaret Marbury is going on maternity leave in a few weeks.

FYI... Users posting messages to the Yahoo message boards might want to be careful about what they say, and about whom they say it. Electronic Privacy Information Center attorneys say Yahoo has decided to release information about its anonymous users in light of a subpoena—apparently without so much as a protest.

Writer's Contest...In celebration of the publication of *The Making of a Bestseller: From Author to Reader* by Arthur T. Vanderbilt, II, Vanderbilt-books.com is sponsoring a contest open to all writers, published and unpublished. Prizes: First: \$200; Second: \$150.00; Third: \$100.00 Visit the Web site at <http://vanderbiltbooks.com> for full details. The contest commenced November 15 and concludes on December 15, 1999.

And Finally...A correction that I forgot to include in last month's newsletter. Founding member Maggie Osborne was formerly an RWA president, not a NINC president.



1999 NINC Conference Wrap-Up Reports, Part 1

Reported by Olivia Rupprecht, intrepid reporter at large
[Ed's note: and Lord help us, you have a treat in store for you here! Read and enjoy...]

When assuming the duties of reporter for the Savannah conference, I thought the task would be easy—cut and dried, just take notes and regurgitate them for the NINC newsletter. Brother, was I wrong! Attention spans were so limited that I'm convinced most of us must suffer from ADD. That's not a bad thing when opinions and ideas are flying like shrapnel. It's not a bad thing at all when "Revolution" by the Beatles could be one of our anthems.

That said, I'll do my best to present what went on in each session that made small progress as a singular unit, but covered a great deal of ground as we writers stood united in our quest to sell our books without selling our souls. Not an easy task, was the collective opinion, when a mercurial business can be either ally or nemesis depending on...who knows? Here's a stab at it:

Night Owl Session 1: Mystery.

Moderator: Janice Brooks.

This was a salty group that had almost as much fun discussing Gomer Pyle, plumbers with fanny cracks showing, and William Shatner in a bathing suit as they did the ins and outs, ups and downs of this cloak-and-dagger genre. Several participants shared their success stories of making the transition from penning romance to crafting whodunit tales that usually work best when continuing characters snag a piece of the action in a market that's greatly driven by series books.

Nancy Yost was mentioned as an excellent agent for mystery writers.

Though it's a difficult genre to break into (what venue of publishing isn't?), there is room for good, experienced writers—especially if a publisher is a developing a new series. Without credentials, however, writing an entire book on spec might be a good way of proving one's abilities; should a contract be forthcoming, a pseudonym is usually necessary if a writer has an established rep in another arena of fiction. Avid mystery fans aren't reading for sensual or romantic content but thrive on trying to solve a seemingly unsolvable puzzle which is all the more satisfying when served up with a sleuth they can cheer for again and again (think Angela Lansbury in "Murder, She Wrote").

Most new kids on this side of the publishing block can expect small print runs and small checks, but big dividends in support from their fellow mystery writers.

If this group was any indicator, newbies can take that much to the bank.

Night Owl Session II: Pop Culture.

Moderator: Terey daly Ramin

Any new tattoos or body parts pierced lately? Do you get into having your energies aligned by a Reiki master, consult the tarot, or practice Wicca? Can't get enough of watching Buffy kick butt as she slays various enemies in need of an orthodontist?

If you answered "yes" to any or all, this was a not-to-be-missed meeting of inquiring minds. The participants didn't mind speaking theirs when it came to discussing publishers who would rather hang on to tried-and-true formulas than explore brave new worlds that are ripe for public reading consumption. i.e., it doesn't take a crystal ball to see what's hot on the tube these days and we'd be smart to parlay such yens onto the page.

While "Dawson's Creek" and other nighttime soaps bore mention, this particular group had a real thing for the supernatural. Witches, vampire slayers, and angels were the thrust of interest. And little wonder since all agreed the young adult market has taken note of what appears to be more than a trend and is cashing in big time. Romance fiction that caters to adults, however, appears resistant to jumping on the bandwagon and tapping into an audience that relates more to current culture than tradition. While concerns of dating books are somewhat valid, a very good question was raised:

If Sabrina [the Teenage Witch] and Buffy [the Vampire Slayer] can reach out to the mainstream with the ageless themes of good vs. evil, why can't we? And if editors and/or agents are resistant to an author going in such a direction, what's a writer to do? Once more the idea of writing an entire book on spec to convince any naysayers of a story's salability was the hands-down suggestion.

Hats went off to the now defunct Silhouette Shadows. Timing being everything when it comes to mass media, this line was before its time. In later conversations with Isabelle Swift and Leslie Wainger, they're on the same page with this and had some good news. Not great, but good. Reprints of selected titles will reintroduce the Shadows line to a limited market. No promises, but they're interested in how these books will perform. If response is significantly positive, then things that go bump in the night might yet give Buffy a run for her garlic—not to mention public share of a potentially lucrative market.

Night Owl Session III: Does Size Really Matter?

Moderator: Jane Bonander

Does size really matter? The individuals attending this session knew firsthand what we all know, firsthand or not: When it comes to print runs and distribution, size doesn't

just matter, it matters a helluva lot.

Unfortunately, such things are pretty much out of the author's hands. And it's doubly frustrating when, despite good numbers on previous releases, print runs are lowered due to the current practice of basing them on order-ins. So what's the prescribed elixir when one's beloved book is afflicted with such a terrible malady?

A good agent helps, offered one participant. Someone needs to push to raise the run and get the book noticed; an agent is possibly the best one to act as intermediary in a potentially touchy situation like this.

Another writer suggested a change in publishers might be the way to go. Although Kensington is known to pay small advances, they are a high volume publisher with impressive distribution and have the ability to bump an author's numbers up.

In the end, all agreed that the material is crucial and a wonderful book can generate the excitement necessary to get it out to the public in a substantial way. Should the publisher be supportive but the print runs remain small, there comes a point where the issue must be directly addressed with the powers-that-be. If this is the hill to die on then an author must be prepared to risk everything.

Or as one esteemed member of the group put it: "To get where you want to be, give up where you are."

— Friday, October 8 —

Up, Up and Away! Moderator: Linda Howard

Linda kicked this lively session off with her own take on publicity: It's the result of a career, not the cause of it. She went on to assert that word-of-mouth was the best advertisement of all and it's the readers who identify special authors and books.

Considering the source, few would dispute such statements, but a sprinkling of attendees swore by going the opposite track. Their *modus operandi* was to hire a personal publicist, promote yourself out the kazoo to both publisher and reader, then watch your sales fly and your star rise (oh, and writing a good book to promote certainly helps).

MIRA was singled out as doing an impressive job of promoting their authors.

For authors without the benefit of a publisher who wants to promote them, e-mail mailing lists and Web sites were cited as being effective, efficient, and affordable tools of the self-promotion trade.

Yet another writer declared such expenditures of energy and money were wasted if an author was inconsistent, that having a plan and well-defined goals needed to be in place first.

In conclusion, the only thing everyone could agree on was that we all have a method to our madness and no one has any guarantees whether or not their approach will work. Too many variables are at play in a writer's career and, in the end, all we really have is The Book.

The Creative Mystique. Moderator: Carla Neggers

"Most of us haven't a clue what we're doing and how we're doing it."

Whew, what a relief to hear another writer actually speak those words. Indeed, there were many words of wisdom, insights, and thought-provoking comments as writers explored the mysteries of our craft. A carefully plotted career path for some, an almost spiritual calling for others, everyone pooled their resources and dished out an assortment of gems to consider:

▼ We create through the process of abandonment and concentration.

▼ It's a power struggle. Our mastery over the medium vs. the medium's mastery over us.

▼ If all the stuff's in the pot but it's not soup yet, give yourself permission to walk away while the creative juices thicken.

▼ Anxiety focuses the mind. Some people work best under pressure; it produces an adrenaline rush.

▼ Having fun, being relaxed helps the flow and playing with a project prevents burnout.

▼ We have to separate public creativity (I want to sell) from private creativity (this one's for me, I don't care if it sells or not) and reconcile the two.

▼ Healthy attitudes contribute to success.

▼ Quality of life and quality of work – if this is the focus in our lives then the other stuff (control issues) usually take care of themselves and we don't drive ourselves crazy.

▼ "The muse is a wild horse. It has to be harnessed yet allowed to roam free at times." (analogy attributed to Jo Beverley)

▼ "Be ready when your luck comes along." (Phyllis Whitney)

▼ Practice containment. Don't spout off before an idea is ready since it diffuses the energy.

▼ When our passions match public passions, this synergy equals success.

▼ Writing is more like acting. Being in the moment. What happens right here and now because it all comes down to you and the blank page.

▼ The market is out of our control and yet we control the product. That's why the market gets stagnant when writers self-censor. To go forward, we have to let go and get back to our creative roots.

▼ Reinventing oneself by leaving behind what no longer works and taking a chance on something new is sometimes essential to not only grow but survive. It takes a leap of faith over panic.

Winding up this absolutely wonderful session, one member was called upon to share her story of triumph over a sudden and utter inability to write, about how she had to walk away from the profession she had come to measure her self-worth by. It was a frightening sojourn, yet this individual emerged with self-knowledge and a creative rebirth.

It was a courageous and moving story that lingered in the mind once talk of the creative

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'99 Conference Wrap-Up

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Continued from page 13*

mystique segued nicely into...

Leaps of Faith. Moderator: Jayne Ann Krentz

Glory be and hallelujah! Jayne Ann at the pulpit and an avid congregation turned this session into the novelists' equivalent of a tent revival. The sermon of the day could have been titled "Can This Career Be Saved?" Inspiring testimonials of trials-by-fire edified those feeling lost in the desert and gave hope they, too, might reach the promised land awaiting writers with guts, grit, and good sense.

Yes, brothers and sisters, salvation-by-reinvention was the recurring theme here for those whose heads hurt from trying to break through a glass ceiling, who are fighting claustrophobia in a corner, and/or paralysis with their backs pressed against a rigid wall. Oh, but the risks involved to strike out in a new direction! Publishers have a vested interest in keeping us where we've been successful so we must stray with care.

One way to do this, suggested a sagacious scribe, is to WRITE THE WHOLE BOOK and prove it's worthy of print. Yet what is a humble wordsmith to do if their current publisher is too blind to see? Seek out a different publisher who can be supportive on the new path one is compelled to take—and if possible, continue to write for the old house until certain the career shift is on solid ground, not sinking sand. Have faith that adversity is only opportunity in disguise if you are cast out from the once benevolent home, for loyal readers will follow a trusted author and new readers will join the fold.

Verily, you are not alone for those who hath been there are your brethren and have these "Be" attitudes to share:

▼ Be brave but cautious for ye shall be sorry if thine is a jump off a cliff rather than a leap of faith and thou must discern the difference.

▼ Be perceptive. Should a door open, leap with all thy might and striketh while the iron is hot.

▼ Be educated and aware of inner movements, knowing there is strength in numbers.

▼ Be brazen. Bury bad fan mail but sendeth out all accolades that cometh thy way to the far corners of the house that cutteth thy check. Know ye not that fans have credibility that the author lacketh?

▼ Be prudent. Keep thy mouth shut when writing on spec for there shall be no judgments made against thee and thy work, which needs nurturing, not the hurling of stones by those who share not your vision.

▼ Be not afraid to fail for you won't die.

Are all leaps of faith successful? Of course not. But if we learn from our mistakes then we've gained something after all, and that something might be exactly what it takes

to pull off a Rocky the next time around and emerge victorious from the same ring we got beat to a pulp in before. The trick, those survivors amongst us concurred, is not to become afraid to take chances. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger and it's that strength which not only prevents the market from growing stymied and stale but also can catapult an author to the top.

In closing, one *NYT* bestseller put it this way: When you get to a point that you're self-destructing and just can't do what you've been doing anymore, it's time for a change. Sure, reinventing what everyone else perceives you to be and writing something drastically new is scary, but the alternative is a whole lot scarier. Creative death. It's a writer's living hell.

Do I hear an "Amen?"

Knowing What You Want, Getting What You Need. Moderator: Patricia McLaughlin; Speaker: Virginia McLaughlin, founder of Delta Concepts.

[The discussion included setting goals in a profession that takes many of the most important decisions out of the writer's hands; how to define success; how to distinguish between creative and professional goals and how to set about achieving your goals without alienating our publishers.]

In the first part of this workshop (see Jeanne Casstevens' report next month for the second half, which includes agent and editor input), our personable coach asked: Who knows what they really want? Of about 40 attendees, only five raised their hands. Virginia, not surprised, rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

After starting with an exercise to determine what is the one most important thing in our lives (not easy!), we moved onto the task of getting clear on what we want. Because angst is generated by not knowing which way to go, it's important to define goals. There's a great deal of power in writing them down and being specific is essential. McLaughlin maintains that if a goal can be conceived, it is obtainable.

But what if someone else, say an editor, enters the picture? They have goals as well and for a win/win situation to occur, you have to find out what they want, too. Compromise isn't a total win, however, since both parties only get half of what they want. In order to achieve optimum results for everyone involved, Virginia offered these suggestions:

▼ Vague requests don't get a clear response. Remember that people aren't mind readers; we have to be clear, explicit.

▼ Think win/win. Be clear on what is a win for you. Anticipate what a win is for the other person.

▼ Be clear about your purpose and make clear requests. If your request isn't accepted, shift into inquiry mode.

In addition, we explored the importance of building solid commitments to others and ourselves, paying attention to inner conversations, keeping our self-talk positive, and the need to challenge assumptions.

Clearly, we need to be explicit about these things in order to Know What We Want and Get What We Need.

— Saturday, October 9 —

Look Ma, No Rules! Moderator: Jasmine Cresswell

Literary agent Damaris Rowland and Dutton/Signet editor Audrey Lafehr fielded a flurry of tough questions with tough answers and admirable poise. Once again the subject of reinventing oneself if a career has flat-lined or the muse has gone on strike came up. Herewith, a recap of what's worth repeating from this Q&A session.

Q: What qualities do you need to see as an agent or editor to lift a manuscript out of midlist obscurity?

DR: Why does midlist obscurity exist? What is a writer's body of writing all about? The excellence of the writing is paramount so produce something bold and exciting.

AL: Write a genre book better than anyone else does. Do something different (a la Diana Gabaldon). Write long and consistently enough that you have critical mass.

Q: If an author wants to make a departure, write sagas for example, but the market isn't receptive...?

DR: There are trends, but you need to work with your strengths. Energy is important. If an author's track record is bad or they're in the process of "reinventing" themselves, something utterly winning in the new work helps agents and editors overlook the past and focus on the future.

Q: How does a writer carve out a niche on an overcrowded list and how do they get "chosen" by a publisher?

DR: (Quoting from a Bantam official) "A book's best ambassador is the book itself."

AL: Write the whole manuscript if you want a better shot at crossing over.

Reporter (scribbling): Seems I've heard that somewhere before.

[Editor (kibitzing): Me, too...]

Editors On Editing. Moderator: Diane Chamberlain

Well, folks, either yours truly was ready to meet some chums for cocktails and gossip, or this session was a tad ho-hum. Probably a little of both.

However, points definitely go to Pamela Dean Strickler of the Scovil Chichak Galen Literary Agency (try saying that in one breath). She came across as a savvy past editor cum savvy new agent. It's her observation that while editors once worked on the structure and form of books acquired, more and more the emphasis is on acquisition itself, as is marketing vs. the real quality of a product.

Leslie Wainger, the only current editor in attendance, agreed (she also gets points for being candid). She went on to say that much to the dismay of today's editors, they're spread too thin to cover all the bases due to corporate downsizing. Duties such as audio, reissues, television, etc.

are increasingly time-consuming and detract from an editor's ability to spend adequate time on the manuscripts they buy.

This is where junior editors come in to take up the slack. Unfortunately, even seasoned novelists can feel the pinch on the learning curve taking place on the other end. Leslie appeared sympathetic to the grumbling of multi-published authors old enough to...well, let's just say amply mature to resent an eager young apprentice going crazy with a red ink pen on the author's umpteenth manuscript.

One author, beset with such a situation before, gave everyone a good laugh to take with them. She related how an editor-in-training questioned her historical data, painstakingly researched.

"Trust me," the writer assured the innocent lass, trying hard to make her own mark in publishing. "I was there."

As I chronicle these events, the calendar tells me two weeks have passed since bidding farewell to old friends and new.

What I took away with me is quite simply this: Do what you must to stay in the game, but when push comes to shove, to thine own self be true.

***Upcoming—more reports from Savannah,
in the January issue of Novelists' Ink.***

Writer Beks for Mercy

I have a book due April 15th, but as Membership Chair, I am doomed to spend much of my work time in February calling and e-mailing those of you who have not yet sent in your dues. Please spare me from having to make those calls by sending in your dues now, if you have not already done so. Remember that we have a benevolency fund you may tap into if this is a lean year for you. The fund may be used once every five years. If you've lost your dues form, you can download one at www.ninc.com, but it is not necessary. Just pop your check, made out to Novelists, Inc. in the mail to NINC at P.O. Box 1166, Mission KS 66222-4524

Thank you!

**— Diane Chamberlain,
Membership Chair**



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 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**.

Member	Title	Oct 7	Oct 14	Oct 21	Oct 38
Catherine Anderson	<i>Baby Love</i> , Avon		65n	49	58
Sandra Brown	<i>The Alibi</i> , Warner	37	75	86	
Sandra Brown	<i>Unspeakable</i> , Warner	38	73	85	118
Sandra Brown	<i>Tiger Prince</i> , Mira		26n	25	33
Catherine Coulter	<i>The Countess</i> , Signet	27	56	75	123
Dorothy Garlock	<i>With Heart</i> , Warner Vision		39n	55	95
Julie Garwood	<i>Ransom</i> , Pocket				236
Norah Hess	<i>Raven</i> , Leisure			70n	81
Tami Hoag	<i>Still Waters</i> , Bantam	52	90		
Joan Hohl	<i>Never Say Never</i> , Zebra	114n	85	135	
Susan Johnson	<i>To Please a Lady</i> , Bantam		76n	81	112
Jayne Ann Krentz, et al *	<i>Charmed</i> , Berkley	109			
Susan Krinard	<i>Touch of the Wolf</i> , Bantam		150n		
Stephanie Laurens	<i>A Rogue's Proposal</i> , Avon		55n	45	65
Elizabeth Lowell	<i>Remember Summer</i> , Avon	53			
Debbie Macomber	<i>Promise</i> , Texas, Mira	43	120		
Linda Lael Miller	<i>A Springwater Christmas</i> , Pocket	106n	52	89	129
Mary Jo Putney	<i>The Bargain</i> , Signet	44			
Patricia Rice, Emily Bradshaw, Karen Harper, et al *	<i>A Country Christmas</i> , Onyx				114n
J.D. Robb	<i>Loyalty in Death</i> , Berkley		245	18	31
Nora Roberts	<i>The Reef</i> , Jove	12	16	29	130
Nora Roberts	<i>Enchanted</i> , Silhouette		37n	28	44
Nora Roberts	<i>The Donovan Legacy</i> , Silhouette		45n	31	41
Deborah Smith	<i>When Venus Fell</i> , Bantam		107n	95	116
Susan Wigs	<i>The Horseman's Daughter</i> , Mira		83n	117	

* et al: indicates that the book was written with other authors who are not members of NINC

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