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

The Profit Motive

BY DENISE LITTLE

Publishing is a business. As much as writers everywhere would prefer that it was a collective or, even better, a charity, almost all publishing companies are run to make some corporate entity a profit.

Virtually every book a publisher buys has to stand a chance, as far as they are concerned, of at least breaking even, and hopefully earning some money, or the deal never reaches the contract stage. So how do you, the author, figure out where you stand in your publisher's pursuit of profit? Are your books making the publisher a fat chunk of change, or are you in for some nasty surprises when it comes time to negotiate the next contract? How can you tell?

Some writers feel that if they are earning royalties from a project, the book is probably profitable. While that is certainly a worthwhile goal for every author, and a good sign that your book is profitable, it's not necessary for some books to earn out and start generating royalties for those books to be profitable for the house. This is especially true for so-called "big" books.

With a large advance and big print runs, it takes a whole lot of copies sold to make the project profitable—but not necessarily as many as it takes to make the project generate royalties. Publishers, in fact, will often knowingly pay a bestselling author more in advance than that author can expect to earn from eventual royalties, in the effort to make the author happy,

and to get them or keep them working for the publishing house. Other books, usually books with small advances, may not be profitable until well after the royalties start coming in from the project. This may seem counterintuitive—but it's a reality of publishing.

Since royalties aren't a foolproof way of knowing if you're making money for your house, how can you tell? One of the best ways of figuring out if you're in the red or in the black for your publisher is to know the mathematics of publishing.

Publishers estimate if a book is going to make a profit for them prior to purchasing it by producing an estimated profit and loss sheet, or a P&L. A P&L works out all the expenses of a given project, and all of the income from it, and comes up with a figure called a break-even point—the number of copies the publisher has to sell for the book, under the publishing scenario it has in mind for the project, to start making money.

If the breakeven point looks achievable, then the publisher makes an offer on the project. Then, after the book is published and has been on sale for enough time, the publisher will generally run actual P&L, to see if it made or lost money on the title.

Every company has its own formula for figuring out that break-even point before they buy a book. But the logic behind determining that formula is the same from place to place. So here are all the basic components that go into figuring out a profit and loss statement:

Gross Income Calculations

To figure the gross income a publisher has to work with on a particular book, this is the formula:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Print Run} \times \text{Cover Price} \\ &\times \text{Sell-Through Percentage} \\ &(\text{or copies sold} \div \text{copies printed}) \\ &\times \text{Average Discount} = \text{Gross Income} \end{aligned}$$

Naturally, the figures that the publisher uses to generate a P&L prior to publishing a book are estimates. The figures used to generate the final P&L a couple of years after publication are actual. Since the pre-publication P&L is generally the most important for authors, that's what we'll talk about here, though the formula remains the same for both calculations.

1. Estimated print run. This is the total number of copies the publisher believes can be distributed on this book. The figure is supplied by the sales department, based on the number of copies distributed for the author's previous books. They'll look at the sell-through percentages of the author's recent books to estimate if the initial order for this book will go up, down, or stay the same. If this is an established author's first book with a publisher, the sales people will call national accounts and ask for sales figures for the prospective author's previous works from other publishers. They'll use these to form a pretty close estimate of the author's previous sales record. Either way, the estimated print run will be based on the author's actual past performance. For first-

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Send Address Changes to Central Coordinator

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE.....

I'm slowly sliding into the swing of things as Evil Dictator for Ninc. To my amazement, I'm compiling an agenda as long as my forearm to discuss at our first board meeting. It's not that I personally have an agenda (except writing until I die), but the business of running an organization is on-going and ever present.

As capable as I am of wielding my sword and pen and lopping off heads or metaphors, I truly would appreciate member input on any topic. My e-mail and phone are on the masthead. Although I may be notorious for pretending phone messages will go away if I ignore them long enough, I do eventually speak when spoken to.

One of the first topics on my agenda at the moment is the site—and date—of the 2003 conference. We've listened for years to both sides of the argument about fall and spring conferences, but the day of reckoning may have arrived. Our fall conferences have been poorly attended. The hotel expenses for fall conferences have grown beyond the reach of many of our members. We've had to move to September for the last two conferences because the costs in October were twice as high. The board will be making a decision on the matter soon, but we'd like to hear from the membership on what sites might be exciting if we changed our conference dates to the spring. Think of the possibilities! Does the desert when the cacti are blooming sound good? Let us know.

By the time you read this, the board will already have discussed the purpose of our newsletter in a world where much of our news is available online. We're well aware that half our membership doesn't use our online services, and we won't be ending the newsletter anytime soon. But a large chunk of our budget goes into making a professional journal for the benefit of our members. If our members aren't benefitting from it, we need to know that. We need to know what kind of articles you would like to see, how we can make better use of our time and money. Gossip (oops, I mean industry news!) and bestseller lists are easily available to anyone online these days, so by including those, we're rehashing old news to half our membership. How do we deal with this dichotomy to satisfy both on and offline members? As I've said in a prior column, if we don't hear from you, then the Evil Dictator gets to make the decisions.

Another topic on the agenda is our website. We have a marvelous site packed with informative material and a webmaster who stands ready to do whatever we ask. As Evil Dictator, I choose not to be buried under the tons of material we could conceivably add. I barely manage to update what's there already. Up for discussion is just how much our online committee should handle (the Ninlink is task enough all on its own), what else we would like to see on the site, and who will be responsible for handling it. The board will be considering this over the next months. We would like to hear your opinions as well. Be prepared to volunteer if this is a topic of interest for you. Consider it being a valuable part of our community.

I know 2001 took the stuffing out of many of us. The economy may flatten us in 2002. But I, for one, am a stubborn fighter, and I know most of our members are as well. Working together, we can be bigger and stronger than whatever Fate has in store. Communication is our tool of choice. Let's use it. If you're more comfortable calling or e-mailing one of the other board members, do so. That's why our names are over there next to this column. Let us hear from you.

— Pat Rice

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time authors, the publisher will use an average print run generated by other first-time writers of similar books for this publisher.

2. Estimated cover price. This is the retail price that the publisher plans to charge for the book. Hardcover novels these days typically run somewhere between \$20 to \$28, trade paperbacks run \$13 to \$18, and mass market paperbacks \$6 to \$9. The estimated cover price is based on the going rate for similar books in the marketplace.

If the publisher actually based the cover price on prospective costs, first novels would probably cost a lot more than best-sellers. But competition in the marketplace actually puts a downward pressure on non-bestselling books, and an upward pressure on blockbuster bestsellers.

Publishers put higher prices on books by authors that they know readers will purchase no matter what, prices as high as they think the market will bear. They need the money—and the profit. New, higher price points will debut on novels by authors like Dean Koontz, Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Robert Jordan, Nora Roberts, and so on. For authors who are not bestsellers, publishers must charge a competitive price in order to encourage new readers to purchase these gems, discover the budding author, and hopefully fall in love and become a fan of the author's work for life. For a number of reasons to be discussed later, the per volume cost to the publisher is often higher for new writers than it is for bestsellers. Added to the pressure to keep prices low, this makes it tough for publishers to make money on midlist authors.

3. Estimated sell-through percentage. This is the number of copies out of that estimated print run that the publisher believes it will sell, divided by the total number of copies printed. Typical sell-through percentages on bestselling authors run as high as 80% in mass market, while a typical mass market paperback by an established midlist author runs about 55%, and a first author typically runs about 40%, and can run as low as 5%.

The reasons for the differences have a lot to do with visibility. A new bestselling author's book will be stacked up in massive eye-catching displays at the very front of the store or featured on the front page

of the online vendor, usually with signs announcing the date of its arrival placed there prominently for weeks before it is shipped. Online and traditional vendors will take prepaid orders for the book, and many copies are sold before the book even arrives. For both bestsellers and established midlist authors, publishers will often announce the title and release date of the author's next book in the back of previous books by that author, so readers will know what to look for and when.

Both bestsellers and established midlist authors have previous sales records that help buyers to plan how many copies to put in each store, matching the book order with some degree of accuracy to the expected demand for the books. First-time authors have little advance advertising, no dedicated fans hunting for their work, and their books are shipped in small quantities that are only displayed spine out somewhere in the section for that kind of book, which is usually not the most visible place in the store, or at the low end of a typical online vendors' book browser. The orders for that book are based upon intuition and guesswork, and the most well-intentioned buyer can be dead wrong. Surprise bestsellers can be dramatically under-ordered, and books that have high expectations can tank. Both scenarios cause terrible problems for publishers.

4. Average Discount. Publishers don't get to keep all of the money that a consumer pays for a book. In fact, they only get to keep about half of it. The rest goes into the booksellers' and wholesalers' pockets. Typically a publisher sells a book to a bookstore at 48% to 60% of the cover price, depending on the number of books purchased by the vendor. It sells a book to a wholesaler at 40% to 52% of the cover price. And it sells books direct to the consumer at 80% to 100% of the cover price. So a typical P&L assumes a roughly 50% discount when figuring gross income.

Examples of Gross Income Calculation:

Here's the formula for figuring gross income again:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Print Run} \times \text{Cover Price} \\ & \times \text{Sell-Through Percentage (or copies sold} \\ & \quad \div \text{copies printed)} \\ & \times \text{Average Discount} = \text{Gross Income} \end{aligned}$$

Here's the math for a new blockbuster bestselling original paperback novel:

$$\begin{aligned} & 2,000,000 \times \$8.99 \\ & \times (1,600,000 \div 2,000,000) \times .5 \\ & = \$7,192,000 \text{ gross income} \\ & (\text{Print run}) \times (\text{cover price}) \\ & \times (\text{Sell-through \%}) \times (\text{discount}) \\ & = \text{gross income} \end{aligned}$$

Here's the math for a nice low-level bestseller paperback:

$$\begin{aligned} & 50,000 \times \$6.99 \times (30,000 \div 50,000) \times .5 \\ & = \$104,850 \text{ gross income} \\ & (\text{Print run}) \times (\text{cover price}) \\ & \times (\text{Sell-through \%}) \times (\text{discount}) \\ & = \text{gross income} \end{aligned}$$

Here's the math for a typical first science fiction or fantasy paperback:

$$\begin{aligned} & 18,000 \times \$6.99 \times (5,000 \div 18,000) \times .5 = \\ & \$17,475 \text{ gross income} \\ & (\text{Print run}) \times (\text{cover price}) \\ & \times (\text{Sell-through \%}) \times (\text{discount}) \\ & = \text{gross income} \end{aligned}$$

Expenses:

Now that we know our gross income, we get to figure out what our expenses are. So here are the typical expenses of publishing a book:

(Print run \times cost per unit) + corrugation + shipping costs + overhead + publicity and marketing + author's advance and royalties + copy editing costs + typesetting costs + proofreading costs + cover art = Expenses

1. Print Run \times Cost Per Unit. Publishers have to pay to print every copy of every book they make, regardless of whether or not they sell it. They have to buy paper for the pages, cardboard and possibly cloth for the binding, have the book laid out at the printing factory, printed and bound with a cover on it that can be Plain Jane or eye-poppingly expensive. Some things that go into figuring cost per unit are the same for each title, no matter how many copies are produced. This includes the initial cost to set up the printing presses to print the book and its cover, including things like making printing plates for the pages, having molds carved for any embossing, die-cutting, or foiling needed for the covers, getting good color separations for printing the book's cover art, printing the initial run of cover flats used to sell the books for accounts, and so on.

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► ► ► Publishers spend roughly \$3,000–\$5,000 on these set-up costs, whether they are printing 10 copies of a book or 10,000,000. That means the set-up cost, on a per-book basis, can be negligible for a bestseller, and a big percentage of the unit's price tag on a midlist title. Add that into the higher overall sell-through percentages of bestsellers, and you can see why publishers find bestsellers so profitable.

Since publishers sell almost all books on a fully returnable basis, all printed copies that aren't sold are a total loss for the publishers. Unsold hardcover books and trade paperbacks are returned to the publisher and can be resold to vendors, helping to reduce the costs lost to low-sell-throughs in given locations and redistribute the books properly to maximize sell-through, but mass market books are stripped, and only their covers returned.

Every single shipped copy of a mass market that isn't sold becomes something that the publishers paid for that is lost forever. Low sell-throughs eat away at a publisher's profit margin faster than anything else does. While economies of scale are the rule in publishing, some book production costs are fixed per unit, no matter how many books are produced, such as the amount of paper it takes to print each volume. It costs twice as much to buy paper for a 600-page book than for 300-page book, no matter how many copies you print. This is why publishers are often adamant about enforcing contracted word counts. And there can be additional printing costs that can run up the price per volume—slick paper, photo sections, acid-free paper, color printing within the book's pages, line art on the pages, special book page design and layout, and so on.

It typically costs about 65¢ per unit to print a standard-sized mass-market paperback with a respectable print run, and about \$2.50 to make a medium-sized hardcover novel. Depending on how fancy the cover is, the base cost per unit can vary substantially. Every special effect that a book has on its cover—foiling, die-cutting, embossing, special texturing, matte finishes, holograms—adds to the price both by requiring more material, and by requiring another run through the printing presses for the covers, which adds to the time it spends in the presses and the labor to make it. Basically, you

can expect to add about 7¢ per unit for each special effect on the cover, with a base cost of about a dime per cover.

2. Corrugation. Publishers have to make boxes to put the books in before they can ship them. That runs roughly 10¢ a book. Some bestselling books also have special cardboard display cases with pretty custom printed headers. That adds some serious money to corrugation costs for those books.

3. Shipping Costs. It costs money to get a book from the printing plant to the vendor. Whether shipped by UPS, USPS, FedEx, or truck, plan on at least 30¢ a book for mass markets and a dollar a book for hardcovers. Some hardcovers have a freight pass-through (FPT) included in their cover price. That means that the bookseller is invoiced at a lower price than is listed on the cover of the book to help offset the price of shipping the book. If the book has this (it will say FPT right by the price on the book jacket), you can cut the shipping costs to about 50¢ per book.

4. Overhead. A publisher has to pay for the real estate of their offices and warehouses, and for the salaries of all the people who work for the company, and for the electric bill, and the water bill, and for office supplies and office equipment, desks and computers and carpets, phone bills, travel expenses to send sales reps around the country and their editors to conferences and conventions, and all the other basic business expenses that are a part of publishing. They include that as an overhead calculation, which is computed as a flat percentage of the gross income of every book printed. That overhead expense usually ranges from 10% to 25% of the gross income of the book, as computed in the P&Ls.

Each publisher sets its own overhead percentage, and it varies from house to house. Because overhead is computed as a flat percentage of gross income, it is easy to see why bestselling books are so important to a publisher's financial health. The more gross income a book has, the bigger the chunk of the overhead it picks up.

5. Publicity and Marketing. Even a book that has absolutely no visible publicity has a significant publicity and marketing cost. This calculation computes the cost of author tours, advertising,

launch parties, consumer sweepstakes, and so on, all visible publicity expenses, but it also covers the cost of printing advance covers and catalogues to sell the book to the various accounts, giveaways to the accounts to draw attention to the title, printing the order forms that the accounts use to send in orders for the books, assembling and mailing the sales kits sent out to all accounts, and presenting the book at sales conferences to the sales reps. For a midlist book, just those costs alone run around \$2,000–\$3,000 dollars. For a big bestseller, when you add in national advertising, author tours, and all the other perks and responsibilities of bestsellerdom, the publicity and marketing costs can easily run to a million dollars.

6. Author's Advance and Royalties. This is something every author knows by heart. What they may not know is that, when preparing an estimated P&L prior to buying a book from an author, this cost is tabulated after all the other expenses are computed, and the author gets either whatever money is left after expenses are subtracted from the gross profits—or, especially for some first and midlist books, whatever minimum amount they think the author will accept. Publishers lose their shirts on first books and many midlist books, so the advance, if it accurately reflected publisher costs, would often be in negative dollars. But publishers realize that they can't develop the next blockbuster author without buying books from and working with new authors, so they belt up and pay. It's a gamble they hope will pay off once a talented author's career begins to take off.

7. Copy-editing Costs. It costs roughly \$3,000 to get a typical novel in reasonably good repair copy-edited and prepared for the printer. Nonfiction books, books that require significant correction and rewriting, legal vetting, or significant fact-checking or field testing (for things like cookbooks and car repair books) can cost quite a bit more. Other freelance costs add in here, including the cost of writing copy for the book's cover, and the cost of pulling and editing a blurb for the front matter if the book is a paperback (some houses pay freelancers for this, others have it done in-house by the editors).

8. Typesetting Costs. It costs roughly \$2,000 to get a book typeset and ready

for the printing presses. With increases in automation and the use of electronic disks from the authors instead of scanning, this cost is one of the very few that is actually dropping instead of rising.

9. Proofreading Costs. It costs about \$1,000 to get a book proofread and slugged (this refers to checking the typeset manuscript against the copyedited manuscript to make sure all suggested changes were successfully input.).

10. Cover Art. Beautiful book covers can be generated in-house by the art department, thanks to the magic of computers, using machine lettering and color backgrounds, for essentially free. But if the cover is to have an image created in addition to type, something that shows a scene from the story, then a professional artist needs to be employed, and that doesn't come cheap.

Commissioning a Michael Whelan painting for a book cover, for example, costs roughly \$20,000 (cover paintings, even by the same artist, vary in price, depending on whether it's a front cover only or full wrap-around art, and whether they do the lettering for the cover or whether the publisher provides it). Other artists run roughly \$3,000 to \$15,000 for a painting, depending on the quality of their work and their past successes in launching authors' careers. Since most novels have original art incorporated into their covers, plan on including at least \$5,000, and maybe more. If the title and author's name are hand lettered for the cover rather than computer generated that can cost an additional chunk of change, usually at least \$1,000.

You may have noted that a lot of these costs are fixed, regardless of the number of copies printed. That means that bestsellers have some nice economies of scale that are built into their P&Ls. In addition, as previously mentioned, they pay for the lion's share of publisher overhead. In many publishing houses, half the publisher overhead expenses are taken care of in the P&Ls of the house's best-selling author.

Examples of Expense Calculation:

(Print run X cost per unit) + corrugation + shipping costs + overhead + publicity and marketing + author's advance and royalties + copy-editing costs + typesetting costs + proofreading costs + cover art = Expenses

Based on a publisher overhead

calculation of 15%, here's the math for a new blockbuster bestselling original paperback novel:

$$(2,000,000 \times 1.00) (.65 \text{ for the book plus } .35 \text{ for a really fancy cover}) + 200,000 + 600,000 + 1,078,800 + 500,000 + 2,000,000 + 5,000 + 3,000 + 1,000 + 10,000 = \$6,406,800$$

Profit = Income - Expenses. Net Profit for publisher: \$785,200

Note that the bestselling author got a \$2,000,000 advance, and the gross income covered \$1,078,800 in publisher expenses, and yet the book still made a nice profit for the publisher.

Here's the math for a nice low-level bestseller paperback:

$$(50,000 \times .75) + 5,000 + 15,000 + 15,728 + 10,000 + 15,000 + 5,000 + 3,000 + 1,000 + 10,000 = \$107,228$$

Profit = Income - Expenses. Net Loss for publisher: -\$2,378

Note that this author got a \$15,000 advance, and covered \$15,728 in publisher expenses, and showed only a small loss on paper. That overhead calculation means there's really a bit of padding in a mid-level project, before the book starts dripping actual red ink for the house. The publisher would have been reasonably happy with these results.

Here's the math for a typical first science fiction or fantasy paperback:

$$(18,000 \times .65) + 1,800 + 5,400 + 2,621 + 2,000 + 4,000 + 5,000 + 3,000 + 1,000 + 5,000 = \$36,521$$

Profit = Income - Expenses. Net Loss for publisher: -\$19,046

Note that the author got a \$4,000 advance, and covered only \$2,621 in publisher expenses, and yet lost the company nearly \$20,000 dollars. Even with a low advance (\$4,000), cheap cover art (\$5,000) and a Plain Jane cover, that scenario bleeds red ink, and there's almost no way around it. The fixed costs of getting a book produced, and the low sell-throughs typical of less visible projects, combine to mean that almost every beginning author's books cost their publisher a lot more than the house stands to earn.

Lest you think that I'm making these numbers up to prove a point, I took all three examples from actual books I've worked on, typical of their kind—rounded off, of course, to make the math easier.

To do your own estimated calculations to see if you make your publisher money, you need your royalty statement.

Here's the formula:

$$\text{Your Cover Price} \times \text{Copies You've Sold} \times .5 = \text{Your Estimated Gross Income}$$

We don't need a sell-through percentage to figure gross income from a royalty statement—the number of copies sold is printed on the statement, though reserves held against returns and late returns from accounts can make this calculation less than accurate until at least two and more probably three years after a book's release.

Your Print Run X (.75 for a mass market or 2.50 for a hardcover) + (Your print run ÷ 10) + (Your Print Run X .3 for a mass market or .75 for a hardcover) + (Your Estimated Gross Income X .15) + Your Advance plus any royalties received + 11,000 + however much you think the publisher paid to publicize your book on top of basic expenses + \$3,000 if you recognize the name of your cover artist and feel smug = Your Estimated Expenses

$$\text{Your Estimated Gross Income} - \text{Your Estimated Expenses} = \text{Estimated Publisher Profit}$$

This number will result in a very rough guess as to the kind of money you make for your publisher. As I said, this is only an estimate. Every publisher has their own formula for doing this, and rising postage costs, paper costs, and fuel costs can change these numbers dramatically.

Several things, like subrights sales to book clubs, foreign editions, and audio companies, can put some nice dollars into your gross income not dealt with here that can help make a marginal book quite profitable. And if you've got hard/soft publication of your work, the expenses per book are reduced by spreading them out between two volumes. Most hard/soft books use the same cover art for both versions, and need to be copyedited only once, for example. So this basic calculation needs to be run twice, once for each version, pulling out or reducing the appropriate expenses of the paperback version, and then the totals for the two books added together, before you can guess if your book is profitable.

Know that publishers don't expect to make a killing off of genre writers—on the whole, their expectations are that you'll break even after your third book, and demonstrate a rising number of sales after that. Even if it looks like your books aren't profitable, it might not be cause for concern. Publishers buy new writers knowing it's going to take awhile for their work to catch on and find ▶ ▶ ▶

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▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ its audience. If you're winning awards, it helps generate publisher patience to wait for reader recognition to catch up to your eventual bestselling potential, or to just enjoy the prestige of having you on their list. If they think you've got something special in your writing with a potential for bestsellerdom down the road, they may be very prepared to hang tough for several volumes before they see financial success through your work.

These calculations are only estimations—and even if their results are spot

on, they may not mean a thing. Publishing is a business built on hopes and dreams—even in its finances. The most important thing for a writer to do, when trying to figure out if he or she is meeting publisher expectations financially, is to listen to the book's editor, ask intelligent questions about whether the publisher is happy with the performance of the book, and go with the answers that you get that way.

The definitive answer from the publisher will always come when it's time to negotiate a new contract. But if you want to have a look at the math of publishing,

you've now got a formula to play with. Good luck! I hope that your numbers are beautiful. *PL*

Over the last several decades, Denise Little has been a voracious reader, a compulsive book shopper, a bookstore manager, a book buyer for Barnes & Noble/B. Dalton, the writer for that chain's consumer magazines, an editor, a published author, a ghostwriter, and a book packager. She's seen massive changes in book publishing over those years, and can't wait to see what will happen next.



NOVELISTS, INC. 2002 ANNUAL CONFERENCE NEW YORK, NEW YORK

WHEN

The 2002 Annual Conference will be held Sunday, September 22, 2002 through Wednesday, September 25, 2002. Please note, this Sunday to Wednesday schedule is a departure from our typical weekend pattern.

WHERE

Where the sizzle of Broadway merges with the bustle of Times Square, the New York Marriott Marquis presides over a signature address on "The Great White Way." The Marriott Marquis is a luxury hotel located in the heart of Manhattan's theatre mecca, surrounded by 30 world-famous theaters and just minutes from Restaurant Row and premier shopping.

NINC CONFERENCE COORDINATOR

Laura Baker, Albuquerque, New Mexico, is our Ninc coordinator this year. She has coordinated RWA workshops and was the workshop chair for the national RWA conference in 1996. Laura is volunteer hunting for the NINC 2002 Conference. If you have any suggestions or would like to lend a hand, please contact Laura by phone: (505) 298-2021, fax: (505) 298-3434-F, or e-mail: LBaker10@aol.com.

CONFERENCE PLANNER

Once again, Mountain State Travel and Kate Dooley will handle all our conference logistics and details. For information you may e-mail NINC2002conf@yahoo.com, call (800) 344-6602, or fax (304) 624-6234. Mountain State Travel is available Monday–Friday, 8:30 am–5:00 pm, Eastern time.

MORE INFORMATION

The March issue of *Novelists' Ink* will include conference details and information about registration, rates, and reservations.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

BY RONN KAISER

Early in my writing career, when I was young and callow, an editor once said to me, "Response to action reveals character." Though some may regard this apothegm as obvious, if not banal, I considered it rather brilliant. I dutifully jotted the words down on a scrap of paper and taped it to my desk lamp where it has resided for over fifteen years.

The note has endured in its hallowed place on my desk through numerous moves, furniture rearrangements, changes of light bulbs, editors, agents, and publishers, still hanging there, frayed at the edges, yellowing, the pencil scrawl fading like my memory. From time to time I glance at it and try to figure out the import with respect to whatever WIP is on my computer screen. I continue to be surprised at the growing depth and complexity of its meaning.

Though I'm an old dog now, the writing process having become more instinctual, almost as natural as thought or speech, I still must rely on my bag of tricks to navigate the tortuous waters from opening scene to closing line. I have come to realize that how my character responds to stimuli tells the reader more about who he is than all the conversation and internal dialogue I can muster. Talk, after all, is cheap, even when it's in a person's head. It's what a character *does* that matters. Acts can be misunderstood, but they don't lie.

"Response to action reveals character."

Robert McKee expressed the same notion a bit differently. He said, "True character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure..." Thanks to the wisdom of others, I have this pearl in my personal bag of writing tricks.

For every one of you who's yawning, I'm hoping there's someone else who sat up and took note with interest. Whether or not I have anything worthwhile to say about the writing craft isn't the point. Of this I am certain: the knowledge about fiction writing contained in the collective mind of the members of Ninc is awesome. I've seen it in this publication; I've seen it at our conferences; it exists in abundance in Ninclink, our Internet forum. Yet, at the same time, I've sensed an underlying reluctance to enlighten others in a forthright manner. Perhaps it's because we don't want to sound like know-it-alls, or the opposite—we don't want to make fools of ourselves. Well, to that I say balderdash!

I personally believe that one of our responsibilities as members of the writing fraternity/sorority is to share whatever knowledge, wisdom, and insights we possess and to share them generously. Level of achievement is irrelevant. This is a lonely profession and the best way to grow is to grow together. So what if one person's erudition is another's tedium? The object here isn't to *be above it*. Rather, it's to *rise to it*.

When I suggested to incoming NINK editor, Jasmine Cresswell, that there ought to be a monthly column dedicated to writing techniques, methods, theory, etc., guess what she said? Hint: My name at the top of this page doesn't appear there because of my journalistic pretensions. But the point, I hasten to add, is that this isn't about my ideas, it's about *our*

ideas. This is not my column, it's *our* column. I'm merely the collector and collator.

Okay, here's how I propose we proceed. Each month we'll select a topic for the upcoming issue of NINK. The topic may fall in any of the following categories:

1) *the craft of writing fiction* (for example, techniques for avoiding mid-book sag; putting a fresh spin on familiar themes; making characters sympathetic, yet interesting; writing with a distinctive voice; enriching narrative description);

2) *the mechanics of writing and the writing process* (for example, techniques for writing with a computer, i.e. setting up files, editing, etc.; organizing research; creating aids for keeping track of plot or character development/details; dealing with writer's block, bringing energy and passion to your work); and,

3) *career development* (for example, techniques for self-promotion; writing cross-over fiction; changing agents; dealing with fans and critics; the effective use of critique groups).

Once the topic is selected and announced in the column, you will have until approximately the 25th of the month to submit your "tricks of the trade" for the upcoming issue. At the same time you should also submit your suggestions for the next topic.

In addition to the "topic of the month" we might also have a "potpourri" section for hot tips or clever ideas that are "off-topic." And finally, we might include some feedback and commentary on discussions in prior months.

Proposed guidelines:

1) Since we are a multi-genre organization, topics and tips should have broad application, though it's okay if your submission has more relevance to a particular genre.

2) Submissions should be aimed at the target audience, i.e. established writers. But don't second-guess yourself. If you have a technique that is particularly useful and effective for you at your present level of accomplishment, that's good enough.

3) Input need not be original with you. Something you picked up from someone else or read somewhere is perfectly acceptable, with attribution.

4) You may make your submissions under your name or anonymously, if you prefer. It's the wisdom that counts.

5) Be brief and please don't be offended if you're edited down or your suggestions/ideas are saved for a future column. (I took this job because I plan to benefit from everything submitted, whether I manage to get it in the column or not, which is to say every submission will have a minimum of at least one beneficiary.)

All this is provisional pending your feedback. I'm here to serve. Let me know what you think.

I propose we start with this topic: *A common criticism of popular fiction is that the characters are often "cardboard." What are your favorite techniques for giving your characters depth and texture?*

Please submit your character tips and future topic suggestions by the 25th of February in the medium of your choice, as follows:

Email: ronn.kaiser@prodigy.net

Fax: (916) 681-7155

Snail mail: 8133 Ibanez Court
Sacramento, CA 95829

Note: to avoid pontifical musing from me, submit early and often. Your fellow Ninc'ers will thank you.

No Excuses!

"I believe that creativity is directly linked to being healthy and well rested."

BY JODIE LARSEN

Writers come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but we all have one thing in common. To do our job we must deposit our derrieres in a relatively fixed location long enough to produce a masterpiece.

For many of us, a very large chunk of the day is spent watching letters appear behind a blinking cursor. Our heroes and heroines tackle insurmountable odds while we risk a sneak attack on the bag of Jelly Bel-lies hidden in the bottom drawer. Mental work is just as exhausting as physical labor, but doesn't burn the calories or provide the cardiovascular workout needed to stay healthy. Jogging does.

I'm too old. My feet hurt. I'm too fat. I don't have time. It's too expensive. I have two left feet. I'm allergic to sweat!

Yes, I've heard them all. At writing conferences, I've watched countless people scrunch their noses and shudder when I suggest that jogging could improve their writing. What do I know about excuses?

At the ripe old age of 32, my doctor gave me some shocking news—my asthma had dropped my lung capacity to 60% of normal, and I would soon need extra oxygen to survive. At the time, I had two small children to raise and couldn't see myself living the life he depicted. He told me that jogging *might* help maintain what lung capacity I had left. I went home in tears.

When I tried to jog around the block, wheezing necessitated a brisk walk. Even so, I was determined not to give up. That was twelve years

ago. Now my lung capacity tops 90%, I'm healthier than I've ever been, and I truly appreciate all the positive things running has brought into my life.

Whenever I speak about writing, my favorite visual aid is a sign that claims, "Creativity must be nurtured, not tortured." Although this simple sentence typically sends me on a rampage about editors from hell, it also reminds me to address some basic life lessons that are all too easy to forget when confronted with a blank computer screen and a deadline.

I believe that creativity is directly linked to being healthy and well rested. I'm not saying that writers can't crank out pages when they're battling the flu, because I'm sure there are many who have learned to work under the worst of circumstances. But those moments of brilliance, those times when that magical plot idea hits like a frying pan dropped by an angel, seem to happen more often when we're able to concentrate with our hearts and souls, without the distraction of life's everyday problems.

Okay, I'll admit that jogging won't wipe clean your slate of problems. What it *can* do is make them easier to handle by reducing the overall stress in your life. Who doesn't have a better outlook after a really good night's sleep? If I had to choose the top benefit of jogging, it would be sleeping like a baby. (Not one of *my* kids, mind you. I'm referring to one of those mythical babies friends brag about who sleep through the night their first day home from the hospital.)

Less stress equals more rest, and

better rest opens the floodgates of your imagination. I promise.

If having a clear mind, replacing flab with muscle, or grabbing a few minutes a day away from it all sounds good to you, then you owe it to yourself to give jogging a try. Hopefully, I've piqued your curiosity and you're craving to learn the basics!

Begin at the Beginning

When you start a book, you write a word, then sentences become paragraphs, finally paragraphs become chapters. No one should expect to jog three miles on their first day. Build your routine slowly, over a period of weeks.

I found that jogging a block, then walking a block, worked well. When you are no longer out of breath after one block, go for two blocks of jogging, followed by one block of walking. You'll be amazed how quickly you're running the entire distance.

How Far Should I Go?

Distance isn't nearly as important as how long you work out. In order to reap the most health benefits, you need to spend 20 to 30 minutes, three to four days a week either walking or jogging. Unless you yearn to race, don't worry about how fast you're going. In time, you'll find a comfortable pace. And in a little more time, you'll go farther than you ever dreamed possible. (Only ten months after I started jogging, I ran the Tulsa Run—over nine miles with lots of hills—and never walked a step.)

The Buddy System

The buddy system isn't just for

swimming. Jogging is truly a delight when you do it with friends. Not only will you build relationships that will last a lifetime, knowing someone else is waiting for you will help get you out the door on those days that you'd rather stay home (in bed).

Although most cities have running clubs, the easiest way to find a running buddy is to keep your eyes and ears open. Watch for neighbors passing by, and don't be afraid to introduce yourself. Most runners love company—chatting makes the miles fly by.

Stretching

Although it seems to change daily, athletic trainers' currently recommend a gentle warm-up, followed by a short period of stretching. The *real* stretching, the kind that reminds you exactly where every muscle attaches to each bone, should be saved for after your workout. Half the people I know stretch, the other half consistently claim they're going to start tomorrow. Unfortunately, I fall in the latter category, but I think I'll try again in the morning. Really! I'm serious this time...

Safety First

As a writer, it's your duty to jot your name, address, phone number, and medical emergency information on something that will always be with you. Running stores sell cute little tags that can be laced onto your running shoes, but a note tucked into a pocket will work, too.

Unfortunately, Stephen King is a good example of why this simple step might save your life. In addition to your ID, I'd recommend carrying a small canister of pepper spray. You never know when some nasty crea-

ture (human or beast) might jump out of the bushes. I've always carried one, but have never used it. Hopefully, I never will.

And the Award for Best Dressed Goes To...

Jogging is one of the only things in life you can do half-naked and no one will bat an eye; unless, of course, it's the dead of winter. Shortly after his fiftieth birthday, my neighbor ran wearing a fur jock strap he had received as a gag gift over his running shorts. I'm amazed to report that I didn't even notice until someone else cracked up. (Hey, it was dark and I don't make a habit out of staring at men's crotches!)

If you want to make a fashion statement, fine, but don't skimp on the one essential item—a good pair of running shoes. Today's high tech shoes absorb a lot of impact and make running much easier on aging joints. Replace them after 400-500 miles, even if they still look perfectly good. (Note—miles add up faster than you'd expect. I run four miles, four days a week—that's roughly 832 miles a year!)

Bad Weather Blues

Mother Nature rarely stops seasoned runners, but there are few rules that most of us play by. The two main reasons to stay inside are lightning or a wind chill below -20°F. You'd be amazed at how much fun running in a light rain can be, and as long as you're careful, plodding through snow can be a real hoot, too.


Whenever it's below freezing, warm up slowly, dress in layers and breathe through a mask to warm the air before it gets to your lungs.

Knowing how many layers to wear is often tricky, but this rule has proven accurate time and again: Add 20°F to the actual temperature, then subtract how hard the north wind is blowing. For example, if it's 50°F outside and there's a 20 mph north wind, you'll be comfortable running in clothing suitable for 30°F. If it's 70°F outside and it's calm or the wind isn't out of the north, dress as though it were 90°F. Running around half-naked seems a little more sane now, doesn't it?

Enough already!

Last, but not least, if you have health concerns, talk to your doctor first! However, if you can imagine starting every day full of energy *before* you have a cup of coffee, then you can make it happen!

Running invigorates you from within, giving a natural high that lasts for hours. It gives you quiet, uninterrupted time to think of the perfect twist for your work in progress. Okay, so it isn't easy, but then again, don't all writers love a challenge?

Remember, running is a lot like sex—you can do it practically anywhere, you get better with practice, there's a lot of heavy breathing involved, you're hot and sweaty when it's over, and best of all—you can do it over and over again! 

All six of Jodie Larsen's books acknowledge the love, support, and influence of her running buddies. She has been a spokesperson for the American Lung Association and enjoys speaking about writing and running to anyone who will listen. Her first hardback, At First Sight was recently published, as well as Berkeley's release of Render Safe in December.

Alert!

A Ninc member has informed us that the health insurance program which has been offered to Ninc members through the National Writers Union is currently in receivership. It is reported that members' medical claims are not being paid.

Online.....by Lorraine Heath

Before I sat down to write this column, I'd let my unread e-mail pile up for almost a month. As a result, I had 327 mail messages from Ninlink. The interesting thing about reading that many messages in one sitting is that I came to appreciate the e-mail habits of many members that I might not have noticed before. As a result, I'd like to express my appreciation to those members on Ninlink who:

1. **Limit their signatures to two or three lines.**
2. **Are on digest and remember to change the "Subject" line so it reflects the topic and not "Digest."**
3. **Include only the pertinent information in their reply.**
4. **Include their e-mail address in the post which makes it easier to reply to an individual rather than the list—when the situation warrants.**

Speaking of e-mail, *USA Today* has a very informative article on e-mail enhancement add-ins for Microsoft Outlook® at <http://www.usatoday.com/life/cyber/cs/cs000.htm>. Many of the add-ins are free and are designed to help you organize your e-mail. For those without Outlook®, several links to non-Outlook-related free shareware are provided. The various types of software offer encrypting, spam-eating, and "Mailbag Assistant" for organizing your e-mail. In addition, links to software designed to perk up your e-mail with video, sounds, or random fortunes added to your signature line are also available.

DOMAIN PRIVACY ALERT

If you own your domain, you might want to pop out to All Who Is at <http://www.allwhois.com>. It's surprising how vulnerable this site might make you feel. The site reveals the ownership information for all registered domains. That information includes the owner's address and phone number.

Many people don't take this "public" aspect into consideration when they purchase their domain, assuming that the information they are providing will be held in strictest confidence. Not so, as many of our members discovered recently. If you haven't yet purchased your domain name, you might want to consider providing a P.O. Box instead of your home address and a cell phone number instead of your home phone number. I used a phone number that included my area code plus all zeroes. I simply couldn't conceive of a reason that they would ever need to call me.

They have my e-mail address. Why isn't that enough?

On Ninlink, members discussed their concerns regarding the ease with which their private information was made available on the Internet when they registered their domain. Some members suggested using a professional webmaster who would register the URL with a business address and telephone number.

Others noted that you can eliminate personal information from website listings by registering your domain through the Authors' Guild, <http://www.authorsguild.org>. You do have to be a member of AG. Members reported that registering a domain through AG is cheaper than using Network Solutions.

RESEARCH

For members in need of foreign language translation, Martindale's Reference Desk Language and Translation Center, <http://www-sci.lib.uci.edu/HSG/Language.html>, provided a wide variety of foreign language dictionaries. Some are downloadable in *.pdf format.

Foreign Word, <http://www.foreignword.com>, has dictionaries and translations for 65 foreign languages.

A site that I found very easy to use was Babel Fish Translations, <http://babelfish.altavista.com/translate.dyn>, which allows you to have up to 150 words translated at a time. Only eight "English to another language" translations are available, but they also translate from other languages to English.

A relatively new site that is worth keeping an eye on is interesting.com, <http://www.interesting.com/>. It promises to provide interesting tidbits about an eclectic range of interests from baseball, Christmas, Irish history, New York history, and more. Each section provides virtual postcards that can be sent free via e-mail.

Professor Stanley K. Schultz, Department of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and William P. Tishler, Producer, provide "lectures" and numerous links at American History 102 From The Civil War to The Present, <http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/>. Some of the lectures are also available on Wisconsin Public Television.

For French history, visit France.com, <http://www.france.com/culture/history/>. The time periods covered are 2 Million B. C. through the twentieth century. The datelines accompanying the articles highlight key years and events.

SEARCH ENGINES

Google has added catalog searches, <http://catalogs.google.com/>. You type in a word and you will get a series of clips from catalogs that have that word mentioned in them.

PROMOTION

Know a site that will provide a link to an author's homepage? Please e-mail me the URL. See the grid below for current listings.

NEXT PAGE REMINDER

Don't forget to send Neff Rotter your upcoming releases for February, March, and April so they can be included on the Next Page, found at Novelists Inc, <http://www.ninc.com>. "Please send name (and pseudonym), title, publisher, ISBN, and month of publication. It's fine to send books for the whole year now, if you'd like. Thanks." Neff's e-mail is neff@belgravehouse.com

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Bookbug	http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/8078/recommended.html	Romance
Fiction DB	http://www.fictiondb.com/	Romance, mystery, suspense
Murder Express	http://www.geocities.com/murderexpress/	Mystery
Romance Central	http://romance-central.com/Links/author.shtml	Romance
SFF Net	http://www.sff.net/sff/aut_page.htm	All
Ultimate Internet Romance Book Site	http://icgnet.com/romancebooks/authors.cgi	Romance
Useful Links for Romance Writers and Readers	http://www.jaclynreding.com/links	Romance
Virtual Texas	http://www.virtualtexan.com/readingroom/books/romance/index.htm	Romance—TX Authors

The Buzz in the Biz.....by Olivia Rupprecht

As one might guess, December wasn't exactly hopping with industry news. Things began to pick up speed in January, but not by much, so fortunately Claire Zion was good to her word and dished up this scoop:

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Upon the December demise of Time Warner's iPublish, many top-notch professionals were let go and had to find other opportunities. Claire Zion not only landed on her feet, she's hit the floor running. Where? Back to New American Library where she first started her publishing career. February marks her return, this time as the new Editorial Director for NAL, a division of Penguin/Putnam. She'll be working with Leslie Gelbman and recently appointed publisher, Kara Welsh.

Although Claire is looking ahead to what will surely be a bright future at NAL, she has a unique perspective to offer on iPublish and e-books in general, and took the time to provide some reflection on both. When asked what she took from the experience, she had this to say:

"I think it was a terrific and valuable experiment. We learned a huge amount—for ourselves, for Warner, for the whole industry—about what readers like and want in books, in their reading experiences and in their publishers. I guess the single most important thing I learned is that there are a ton of talented authors out there, undiscovered. They end up in the slush pile because they can't get an editor or agent to even look at their books. Mostly because there are only so many hours in the day and the small army of editors and agents screening material just can't look at *everything*. I hope to see the resurrection of a system for breaking these people out, whether it be the kind of peer review database iPublish had or another, new idea."

But what about the future of e-books, does she think they really have one? "It's taken longer than we had hoped for a good, affordable reading device to be offered to and embraced by the public," she admits. "But the truth is, I think it was the economy in general that made an emerging market like e-books just too tangential to sustain a costly R&D business. In the long run, though, I have no doubt that a good cheap reading device will become a standard piece of hardware in most American homes and everyone will be reading books, magazines, and newspapers on them. Not next year. But I think before my 11-year-old graduates from college. I've heard it said that technology never develops as quickly as we think it will, but when we look back ten years it's always amazing how far we've come. I think that's true."

So how does she think this applies to authors today? "If I were an author, I would keep my eye on online publishing," she advises. "If I were really energetic, I would be collecting names via my website, and my publisher's website if possible, for an e-mail list of fans. Every time I had a new

book, I would e-mail a free digital copy to the whole list. Some might opt to only give away a teaser chapter. But, right now, I think you should give away the whole book. Nobody is going to read the whole thing on their desktop—they'd get a backache! So I don't think you're risking cannibalizing hardcopy sales. Rather, you'll just be getting your fans' attention for each new release you have."

And besides the colleagues she readily admits to missing something terrible, what does she wish she could keep from her tenure at iPublish? Claire says, "Probably the one thing I enjoyed most about iPublish was replacing the two-ton shoulder bag I'd been lugging manuscripts in all my life, with a Palm pilot, which held as many as 16 manuscripts I was reading and line editing at one time. That was fun!"

Claire has promised to share whatever buzz is happening in the biz at NAL once she's settled in, so be sure to stay tuned!

Expansions and Contractions

By now everyone knows Random House, which employs over 3,000 people including their sales staff, has cut loose some employees. The question remains, as of this writing, just how far the let-go situation will go. Two of the most unexpected firings included Peter Borland, VP and executive editor of Ballantine who was due to edit Jonathan Kellerman; and Amy Scheibe, laid off from Doubleday Broadway after editing the highly acclaimed *Bee Season* by Myla Goldberg. Although representatives of Random House—and those receiving their pink slips—were tight lipped with information, it was made clear that the cuts in staff were due to budget concerns, not job performance.

Peter Olson, chief executive of Bertlesmann's Random House division, issued a public statement in December that was decidedly pessimistic. "Our publishing programs are not immune to the overall downturn in book sales nationwide," he said, adding that, "It won't get easier for us in 2002."

Stuart Applebaum reiterated their apparent financial concerns. "Looking at our cost structure is something that we, as well as every other well-run business within and beyond the media world, has to do in this time of recession," he said.

While Random House is clearly making some cuts, they aren't nearly as wholesale as those of McGraw Hill, which announced in December they were letting 925 employees go, with 575 of them being eliminated from the education division.

In sharp contrast to all this, Simon & Schuster president and CEO Jack Romanos reported, "despite very real dangers, the distractions of ongoing current events and a marketplace that was difficult at best, we will finish the year with one of our strongest-ever publishing and sales performances." And then there's WH Smith, the UK bookseller sensation with 539 main-street stores and 189 travel shops at airports and stations, who currently employs over 20,000 people in the U.K. Rather than pull back, WH Smith is

forging full steam ahead with plans to open another 120 stores over the next three years, thus creating 3,000 more jobs, and pouring about 120 million pounds (that's \$170 million U.S.) into the expansion.

Perhaps it is S&S's fiscal success that has led them to do some expanding themselves with a new line. Ready for this? For all you World Wrestling Federation fans out there, get your pens ready and throw your best shot at a proposal into the ring. That's right, S&S is launching a new imprint that will feature both fact and fiction about the WWF. Autobiographies on the WWF personalities? Check. Fictitious stories about them? Check. Illustrated books, calendars, young adult books, guide books? Check, check, check, check! And that's not counting audio, large print editions, and ebooks.

Donna Goldsmith, Sr. VP of Consumer Products will be overseeing the venture, which will mostly be published through Pocket Books. KA-POW!

Free at Last (For Now) and Other Legal Stuff

Vanessa Leggett, held and jailed on charges of contempt for refusing to hand over years of research on the murder of Doris Angleton (killed in 1997, perhaps by her husband Robert), was freed on January 4 after serving five months in a federal detention facility. Her intent was, and is, to write a true-crime book on the slaying—though now she plans to add additional chapters regarding her incarceration. Due to security issues she wasn't able to work on her project in jail, and it's entirely possible she could end up behind bars again since her freedom came as a result of the federal grand jury (which imprisoned her) ending its term. According to her lawyer "the government could always bring another subpoena to a new grand jury and start the process again."

Although the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press presented her with roses, federal prosecutors contend that because Leggett has never had a book or news article published, she is not a journalist and therefore is not protected by the First Amendment's protection of the press.

Hmmm...wonder what the chances are she'll have some kind of book out before the long arm of the law can make a swipe at her again?

Okay, enough about Vanessa Leggett (for now). Remember Dmitry Sklyarov, the Russian programmer who got thrown in the slammer while speaking at a conference in Vegas on encryption failures? He's been out on bail since early August but had to stay in California. He's finally been allowed to go home to Russia with charges deferred and likely dropped if he testifies against his employer, Elcom-Soft, at their April 15 trial and agrees not to violate copyright laws again. For those unfamiliar with the case, Mr. Sklyarov helped his Russian-based employer create a program that allowed some duplication of Adobe e-book files after purchase.

While we're on the subject of copyrights, the U.S. Copyright Office is *closed* (for now). The Library of Congress, where the Copyright Office is located, hasn't been opening its mail since October 17. It's due to the anthrax

scare, of course, and the Library of Congress's newsletter, *The Gazette*, reports that approximately 2.75 million pieces of mail had gone unread and unopened by the end of 2001. It's suggested that individuals who desire prompt receipt of their materials use some means other than the US Postal Service for delivery—private carriers or hand delivery recommended. For further information, go to www.loc.gov/copyright/.

And last, but certainly not least, on the legal front, score one for the little guys. That would be authors Ken Engle and Patricia Simpson, who filed charges against HarperCollins in 1999 for allegedly depriving U.S. authors of royalties by selling books to affiliate companies at deep discounts (mostly HC Canada). Harper sought to overturn a lower court's decision allowing class certification for a breach-of-contract lawsuit, and since the NY appellate court denied said appeal, notices will be sent out to all authors with books published by HC from January 1, 1993 to April 20, 2001 regarding the class-action suit. NY Supreme Court judge Paula Omansky will decide on the contents of notification to the authors, along with a schedule for discovery, with a conference set for February 1 of this year. Attorney for the plaintiffs, Robert Lax, anticipates the discovery proceedings to finish by December of this year, but doesn't expect the actual trial to take place until 2003.

Word of Mouth

Mmm-mmm-good, you've just got to check out this **cookbook**. Not only the 800-plus slow cooker recipes acquired from Susie Homemakers across the nation, but the stunning success story behind the *Fix-It and Forget-It Cookbook*. Forget Emeril and other big celeb chefs who command lush photo spreads and publicity campaigns, compiling authors Dawn Ranck and Phyllis Pellman Good—who tested each and every recipe—have done darn good with plain black-and-white line drawings, a great title, and not much else.

Published by Good Books, a small family-owned press run by Merle Good (husband of author Phyllis), there were no reviews, no publicity, or author appearances. The timing was terrible, too, coming out in mid-December of 2000, six weeks later than scheduled. "We did everything wrong by the usual standards for publishing a cookbook," said Merle Good, "except for the title." Based on early orders, they shipped about 5,000 copies to bookstores at the price of \$13.95 trade paperback. Within weeks the book took off at the major chains. Over 300,000 copies have now been sold, it's been the #1 cookbook at B&N since June, was a top-seller for Ingram all year, was a Book Sense 76 pick for September/October, and last November it hit *The New York Times* advice and how-to list at #11. And that's just the beginning! Move over B&N, Borders, and Waldenbooks. Wal-Mart, Lowes, and QVC are making the book available in mass retail, and there are no signs of sales letting up.

After reading all the raves on this little phenomenon, I couldn't help but go and buy a copy for myself. *The Fix-It and Forget-It Cookbook* has plenty of great recipes, and though some seem rather redundant, there are lots of ▶ ▶ ▶

The Buzz in the Biz.....



tasty ideas worth fixing. Except for that “Tastes Like Chile Rellenos” recipe on page 201. Forget it.

Something to remember, however, is that Ninc has its very own cookbook author. Ruth Glick—who writes as Rebecca York for Harlequin Intrigue—has also had 13 cookbooks published. Her publishers have ranged from Random House, Times Books, The American Diabetes Association, and the Light Street Press (owned and operated by Ruth and her husband). Wow! This is one novelist who actually cooks!

Food calls. The stomach rumbles. Time to switch subjects before fudging on the diet.

This, That, and Everything Else

Goody, goody! My favorite part of the column, where lots of information gets boiled down to the bones, and the shorter we keep it, the better.

- Patricia Cornwell signed on for two more Kay Scarpetta novels with Berkley and Putnam. This in addition to a nonfiction work on Jack the Ripper and two other Scarpetta novels, all with the same house under an earlier contract.

- While Joyce Maynard’s collection of J.D. Salinger letters sold for \$154,000 in 1999, a collection of 32 letters to his daughter Margaret didn’t sell at auction this December. The bidding stopped at \$170,000, not meeting an undisclosed minimum bid for purchase.

- JRR Tolkien’s grandson, Simon Tolkien, has sold a novel entitled *The Stepmother*, a psychological mystery about a politician’s teenage son.

- Yes, it has to be magic. On December 26, J.K. Rowling married Dr. Neil Murray in Scotland.

- Forget winning the lottery, author Robert J. Waller sold *A Thousand Country Roads: An Epilogue to the Bridges of Madison County* to Iron Mountain Press, a small independent publisher in Alpine, Texas near his ranch. The owners, Mike and Jean Hardy, had the project “fall into our lap” when Waller called on Thanksgiving and asked if they’d like to see his manuscript. The deal was handled by The Aaron Priest Agency; no financials were revealed. The Hardys plan on an initial 25,000-copy print run and will distribute the books themselves. As to his reasoning, Waller says, “I got my start selling my books out of the back of my pickup truck in small towns in Iowa. I like to do things on a small scale.” Gee, and I had such fun not liking this guy. Now he goes and does something nice.

- Julia Phillips, author of *You’ll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*, died from cancer on New Year’s Day at the age of 57. Her tell-all memoir recounted her days as a cocaine addict, the end of her marriage, the downward spiral of her career after receiving an Oscar in 1974 for *The*

Sting, and the overall meanness of Hollywood. *Taxi Driver* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* were also projects she co-produced before bottoming out and rising back up to dish the dirt on the many Tinseltown big shots with whom she had worked. Besides *You’ll Never Eat Lunch...* Ms. Phillips also authored *Driving Under the Affluence*. April will see the re-printing of *Lunch* as an NAL trade paperback. Ms. Phillips may have given up a lot of Hollywood lunches for dissing old colleagues, but she certainly gave the reading public plenty of gossip to devour.

Hey, Baby, What’s Your Sign?

For those who get into astrology—or simply enjoy checking out their daily horoscope in the newspaper—have I got a treat for you! Predictions for the publishing industry from Susan Miller, professional astrologer and regular contributor to *SELF* and *TEEN* magazines. She’s also known as PW Daily’s favorite stargazer and author of Warner’s *Planets and Possibilities: Explore the World of the Zodiac Beyond Just Your Sign*.

Due to space limitations we can’t run the whole PW article Ms. Miller generously agreed to share with *NINK* (rats!), but here’s a small glimpse of what she foresees:

“The year 2002 continues the consolidation in the book, magazine, and Internet publishing fields. Before you stand on your desk and shout, ‘I knew it! I am heading to the poor house!’ Hang on—a great deal of good will come out of this trend, as you will see.

“Saturn, the planet that sets limits and forces us to make practical decisions, is now in Gemini, the sign of the written word. This combination is putting publishing through its hardest testing period in 29 years (which is Saturn’s cycle). Saturn won’t leave Gemini until June 2003, so, unfortunately, the industry shakeout will continue another 18 months. However, when this cycle ends, the industry will be stronger for having gone through it, and we won’t see anything like this again for three decades.”

Well, Hallelujah for that! Ms. Miller goes on to illuminate in great detail what we can expect due to the stars’ alignments and presents it all quite convincingly. We can only hope she’s right when she asserts, “Nothing will be quite as hard as what the publishing industry is experiencing now. Having hit bottom, the future in 18 months is far brighter!”

For those who want to know more, Susan is the creator of the Astrology Zone® and there’s plenty to investigate at her website: <http://www.astrologyzone.com>. Hey, check it out, and as Casey Kasem would say, “Keep your feet in the ground and keep reaching for the stars.” ♀

Olivia Rupprecht is a Capricorn. She still believes in Tinkerbell, is a frequent visitor to Never-Never Land, and wishes upon a star as often as possible.



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“No Rest for the Wicked”

It's Christmas Eve, and I'm at my friend Julie's house for dinner. (Maybe you remember Julie, occasionally quoted in this column?) Her parents are here, too. A few of you have actually met Vic and Katie, since they happened to be in New York during Ninc's 1997 conference, which I chaired, and so I invited them to attend the cover-art exhibition we held there. I was eager to look responsible and mature in the eyes of the couple who still remember me as a curfew-breaking teenager, and they thought it would be fun to meet some novelists who aren't me. They were also kind enough that night not to tell any of my colleagues (to whom I am also eager to appear responsible and mature) about my misspent youth. Or so they say.

Anyhow, as we were sitting in Julie's house enjoying a festive feast of fresh seafood in honor of the most famous birth in history, Julie hands me an article about Jonathan Franzen which she cut out of a magazine for my amusement.

Is Jonathan Franzen A Jerk? the headline asks. As if I care.

While I'm drinking my wine, Julie's dad (who accepts that we're actually old enough to drink now) asks me what I think of this whole Franzen hoopla. Having known me most of my life, he finds it no surprise that I now fill two regular opinion columns (my other one being in the *SFWA Bulletin*), and he assumes I have an opinion about Franzen.

Okay. On the off chance that you haven't come out of your cave for several months, I'll give you a quick recap: Talk show diva Oprah Winfrey chose author Jonathan Franzens 2001 novel, *The Corrections*, for her Book Club. Franzen publicly discussed his ambivalence about being singled out for this extremely lucrative distinction. He said he didn't want Oprah's logo of corporate ownership on his novel, and he felt that Oprah had picked enough schmaltzy one-dimensional [novels] that he cringed at also being one of her picks. In other words, what he lacked in graciousness, he made up for in pomposity. So Oprah decided she didn't want Franzen to appear on her show, go figure. Franzen then sought public forgiveness for his PR gaff, but his apologies lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Example: To find myself being in the position of giving offense to someone who's a hero—not a hero of mine *per se*, but a hero in general—I feel bad in a public-spirited way.

Reading that, I feel bad in a grammatical way.

Color me confused, since I thought literary wonder-boys like Franzen were supposed to be infinitely superior to pop fiction lowbrow schmucks like me when it comes to putting together a stylishly exquisite sentence. If I ever begin an apology (or any other kind of statement) with the words to find myself being in the position of, you have orders to shoot me.

But I digress.

It's Christmas Day, and I'm at my friend Karen's house for brunch. (You remember Karen? Quoted so often in this column that she's threatening to demand royalties.) Her two-year-old son finds me inadequate at table hockey and sends me into the kitchen to talk to the adults. Karen's sister-in-law, Susan, works at my beloved local independent, Joseph-Beth Booksellers, previously named Bookseller of the Year by *Publishers Weekly*. Over mimosas in the kitchen, Susan mentions that she's recently read *The Corrections*, and she wonders what I think of this whole Franzen hoopla.

What I mostly think is that Franzen should stop invading my holidays.

Pedal backwards for a moment. It's Thanksgiving Day, and I'm up in Detroit at the home of my friend Cindy (whom I haven't yet quoted here, but I'll get around to it). Her parents, who've known me since I was fifteen, want to know (wait for it!) what I think of this whole Franzen hoopla.

Okay, I did not say this to my close friends and relatives, whom I like, in front of small children at holiday gatherings, but I will now say it to you. Here's what I think of the whole Franzen hoopla: I don't give a shit.

I have more pressing things to think about than Franzen's foot-in-mouth kerfuffle. I'm trying to figure out how to pay my immediate bills if my acceptance money for *In Fire Forged* still hasn't arrived by the time you read this. (The penalty for producing a book in geological time is that I also get paid in geological time.) Franzen, meanwhile, is a *New York Times* bestseller, undoubtedly enjoying all the financial rewards which that phrase implies (with a book, moreover, which Karen's sister-in-law Susan tells me was a slog to get through). My primary career goal is to get more people reading my work, yet my next hard-cover print run will not even be 5% of the hard- ▶ ▶ ▶



THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

► ► ► cover print run of *The Corrections*, while pundits joke that Franzen's primary goal is to get fewer people reading his work.

To put it simply, Franzen won the promotional lottery when Oprah picked his book, and I can't work up a whole heap of interest in his attempts to treat it as a burden rather than a boon.

Yes, Franzen has probably experienced embarrassment and stress over this whole Oprah! thing. I admit, I'd be very upset if I were being ridiculed as frequently and publicly as he's been ridiculed ever since turning up his nose at Oprah's endorsement. However, he has experienced this embarrassment and stress due to ill-advised statements which he voluntarily chose to make in the full glare of the public spotlight, and I rarely (if ever) feel sorry for someone for the consequences of that. If you're not willing to endure the feedback, then you don't deserve the privilege of spouting off in public in the first place. Every pleasure has a price, and the piper inevitably demands his pay. If anyone ever made the bed he now has to lie in, it's Jonathan Franzen. As another friend from my wasted youth who was also in town for the holidays would say, Whoopie cush.

The reaction I actually expressed to my various friends and relatives, while more polite than I don't give a shit, is also true: Good grief, can't that guy count? I don't like Oprah's taste, either, as readers of this column already know, but if she suddenly decided she liked one of my novels, I'd send her a thank you note, prostrate myself nightly before the Djinn of Unexpected Good Fortune, and start shopping for a villa on the Amalfi Coast in southern Italy. I nearly flunked high school algebra, but even I can do the math: Oprah's endorsement = huge exposure + big bucks + many readers + massive opportunity. For goodness' sake, how hard is that to figure out?

Actually, I think Franzen can count just as well as I can. According to the articles I've read, Franzen kept his ambivalence about the famous Book Club to himself until after Oprah's endorsement got his print-run bumped from 90,000 to 800,000 copies. Only then, I gather, did he turn his artistic integrity into a series of unfortunate soundbytes. Oh, yeah, that guy can definitely count. (I want to assert my literary purity...but only after the check has cleared!) Pretty amusing, if you ask me—and, as it happens, everyone did ask me. Repeatedly.

I could not, however, comment on Franzen's work, when asked. I haven't read *The Corrections*. Nor do I intend

to. For one thing, although Franzen evidently fears that Oprah's endorsement aligns his *chef d'oeuvre* with populist trash, my own exposure to Oprah's previous picks convinces me that the odds are in favor of Franzen's book being yet another novel of characters I don't care about in a story which doesn't absorb me. 'Nuff said.

However, prior to Oprah's discovery of *The Corrections*, I had already decided I'd rather read a phonebook than any opus by Jonathan Franzen. He made a very poor impression on me while doing the news-and-talk-show circuit in the wake of 9/11. I had never heard of him before, and he was suddenly ubiquitous for some reason. Throughout September, I was baffled by why various news networks thought this guy had something relevant to convey to me during one of the worst tragedies in our national history. As a talking head, he consistently struck me as elitist, self-involved, and much less articulate than his manner seemed to suggest he thought he was (and I cracked up when Maya Angelou gently but firmly contradicted him on one of his more absurd comments). So, even before the Oprah incident, nothing was going to induce me to rush out and add a Franzen novel to my TBR pile.

(By contrast, the first time I ever saw mystery writer Sarah Caudwell speak, I was sure that anyone that charming and articulate had to be well worth reading, and I rushed out to buy all three of the novels she had in print at that time. I also bought her fourth novel, published posthumously, last year, and I've already read it twice.)

It also didn't help that the sole excerpt I've read of *The Corrections* ridiculed the Midwest as a wilderness of taste and suggested that a portion of it should be set aside where a strategic national reserve of cluelessness might be maintained. (How too, too predictable of a literary novelist living in New York City. Next he's going to say that he writes to make people think, because I am so incapable of thinking on my own that I need the likes of him to make me do it.) Well, Mr. Franzen, step into the ring and play with me. I am a native Midwesterner, born of native Midwesterners, and I still live in the Midwest. And I'm willing to bet real money that my taste and my cluefulness can compete with yours—and that of your fictional characters—even in my sleep.

(Yes, I'm starting the year off in a feisty mood.)

So now I've gone ahead and joined the rest of the country in picking on Franzen. I previously hadn't intended to, because I found him too heavily stereotypical

to stir my interest. I mean... A white, male, literary novelist in New York City comes across as pompous and self-important? Wow. Alert the media.

However, despite my genuine lack of interest in Franzen and his troubles, everyone from my civilian life (i.e. non-writers) kept insisting throughout the holidays that I think about him. Such is the fate of being the one in the gang who grew up to be a writer. (Warn your children. Warn them now.) So now you, my lowbrow pop fic colleagues, get stuck with the results of my enforced musings on the subject. (Warn your friends who haven't yet read this month's column. Warn them now.)

Of course, I'm not the only one to undergo this phenomenon. I have no doubt, for example, that Jonathan Franzen's holidays also involved a lot of talking about Jonathan Franzen. That's fine for him, but I would appreciate it if he'd keep his foot out of his mouth between

now and next Christmas, since I, for one, hope never to talk about him again. *✍*

Editor's Note: Francine Mathews is a multi-published mystery and suspense novelist. Thanks to an article she wrote for the January 2002 edition of *The Rocky Mountain Writer*, I can append some sales figures to The Comely Curmudgeon's column: Francine reports that in the weeks before Oprah elevated *The Corrections* to Book Club status, the novel sold roughly 900 copies per week in the major chains. Post-Oprah, Franzen's sales figures soared to 16,000 copies per week. Having dissed the show and been booted by Oprah, Franzen's sales fell to just under 6,000. Even the National Book Award, granted to *The Corrections* last month, failed to boost the sales above that mark.

Breaking Out with Maass

BY RONN KAISER

Nope, it hasn't happened yet. But thanks to Donald Maass (*Writing the Breakout Novel*, Writer's Digest Books, 2001) I've got a better handle on how to do it.

I'm not much of a reviewer as you'll soon find out. So, instead of faking it, I'll just go with my gut instinct and recount my personal experience with the Maass book. It's a story, after all, and I'm a little better at spinning yarns.

Flashback to late July: I'm wrestling with my current WIP. It's due September 1, and I'm at the one-third mark. This is a tighter time frame than normal for me, but I'll probably make the deadline because the hard part is behind me—the usual false starts, plot restructurings and character facelifts. I've even figured out what my book is about. But, being an author, I'm riddled with self-doubt, struggling to convince myself that all is well. "It's a worthy effort," I tell myself, "it'll be just fine. Anyway, if there are problems, I'll take care of them at the revision stage. It's happened before and everything worked out."

Then the *precipitating event*: I get a call from my agent, Helen Breitwieser. I forget what the nominal purpose of the call

was, but I remember her working around to what in retrospect turned out to be the telling point of the conversation. "You've been working hard on your career," she says, "and not making a lot of progress." (I'm paraphrasing here, omitting the diplomatic language. Helen, I must say, is both kind and constructive, but she also is wise enough to tell it like it is, which is what I pay her for.) "You might want to take a look at Donald Maass's new book, about moving up to the next level," she continues. "Maybe it'll give you some ideas."

Internal conflict (read paranoia) sets in: What is she trying to tell me? My career is stalled? She (not to mention the publisher) is losing faith? This is my last chance?

No, I convince myself, she's just trying to help me. But now I face a dilemma. What about my WIP? Do I stop work on it and read Maass? I've got an intense month of writing ahead of me. Maass could help improve the result, but he might also confuse me, not to mention shake my confidence.

Sucking it up, I decide to spend a day on Maass to get a feel for the situation, reasoning that the worst possible outcome would be if I finish my WIP, then read Maass only to discover the WIP is crap. Come September I didn't

want to lament, "Why didn't I read Maass *before* writing the damned book?" So, I start reading *Writing the Breakout Novel*. I finish it in one sitting. Revelations and insights hit me from all sides. I reevaluate my WIP in light of Maass. It's not crap, but neither is it breakout caliber. I can see that. And I'm also beginning to see what I need to do to fix it. I look at the calendar. Beads of perspiration form on my brow. My WIP is not just another book. It's my first hard-cover original with this publisher. I can't afford a second-rate effort. I have no choice. I have to start over with one month to deadline. Sh*t.

[Note to reader: The above paragraph is an example of "raising the stakes," a technique explained by Maass in his chapter on stakes, which, given my particular weaknesses as a writer, was the most important of several valuable chapters. More on that later.]

If I'm going to do this, I decide I'm going to do this right. I read Maass's book again, this time underlining and taking notes.

In the introduction and first chapter, entitled "Why Write the Breakout Novel?" Maass explains what he is trying to do and why it is important. I don't need a lot of convincing. I'm a sucker for "how to" books and have ▶▶▶

Breaking Out

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ been since I was an eleven-year-old kid, determined to build a boat to sail across Lake Michigan. I can do anything, I reason, if I just know how.

However, in those early pages Maass makes an important philosophical point which you may or may not buy. He says, in effect (I'm paraphrasing here), if you ain't already a breakout author, it's your fault. This is a hard one for some of us to swallow. I had long since convinced myself that my shortcomings were due to bad luck. And shortsighted publishers. And prejudiced reviewers. And blind readers. But, *me*? My fault?

We've all heard the good luck stories and the hard luck stories. We all know there are damned good books (not necessarily our own) which scarcely see the light of day. That's fact, dammit!

Well, maybe. But Maass has already convinced me of this: if there's nothing more to making it big than waiting for a winning lottery ticket, I could be holding my breath for a very long time. Yes, I look back on a few of my better titles and say *that* should have been a breakout book and, with a little luck, (or less obtuseness in certain quarters), it would have been. Then again, maybe not.

Maass debunks certain myths about book publishing: "a big advance equals instant fame," "an editor will make your novel shine," and "promotion is the key to stardom." He argues that the name of the game is reader excitement, and he states unequivocally that "there is one reason, and one reason only, that readers get excited about a novel: great storytelling. That is it. End of story."

With Maass's help, this is what I now believe: "publishability" is not the name of the game, nor is competence, knowledge, deftness, craftsmanship or even literary merit. These can be elements, sure, but it's the *Gestalt* that matters. What it's about is taking the reader's breath away, impressing her so much that she simply must to tell her friend about the fabulous book she just read. There are many paths, but the one you take better lead to reader excitement.

Okay, so what makes a novel fabulous? Probably that it is so *memorable*. It's not about connecting the dots, you see, it's about moving hearts. Fine, you say,

what's the trick?

That's what the rest of Maass's book is all about.

He begins with the notion of *premise*, the spark that inspires your story and more importantly, you, the writer. The breakout premise is special. I won't summarize the chapter here, but I will touch a few high points. The object is to transport the reader to a different world, inhabited by memorable characters who are involved in great events, resulting in an experience that transforms the reader. The breakout story must be plausible, contain inherent conflict, be original, and have gut appeal. Maass explains how to accomplish these things, starting with that germ of a story you've already got in your head.

How does my WIP measure up? I ask myself. I see promise, but I realize what I've written doesn't excite enough. It's competent, worthy of a nod, one thumb up, but not a fist thrust into the air with a heartfelt "Yes!" Alas, my story and my character need work if this is to be a breakout book. I begin to look for specific shortcomings.

Chapter Three is entitled, "Stakes." For me this was the key chapter, the area where I am most deficient. You may find the critical nuggets elsewhere in the book, but if capturing the reader's attention and holding it is where you need help, this chapter is worth close scrutiny. The object here is to make the story more powerful, to give it more weight, by raising the stakes, making it count for more. Maass is not talking about increasing the danger and violence, necessarily. There are many ways to raise the stakes and, as you might expect, what's critical is often what's going on inside the character's head. Maass says there are both private and public stakes, the latter lending the story sweep and a sense of importance.

Here's a gem on raising the stakes: Maass says ask yourself what's the worst thing that can happen to your character, then do it to him. You don't have to hurt him physically. Emotionally will do. Having survived the ordeal, his eventual triumph will count for more. It occurs to me that what Margaret Mitchell did to Scarlett O'Hara at various turning points in her novel might be an example. It's a

kind of tough love, when you think about it. Your readers will thank you.

The quest: Armed with Maass's theory about stakes, I tear my WIP apart. In the original version my character left his hometown, San Francisco, a broken and dispirited man. Circumstances bring him back from exile in New York to save his family and solve the crime of his brother's murder. My character learned, he grew, and eventually triumphed. Nothing wrong with that. There was lots of conflict and lots of reason to sympathize with the guy. It wasn't a bad story. Readers would have liked it. The problem was that by breakout book standards it fell short. It lacked that special quality, the ability to enthrall. I needed to raise the stakes.

After a day of reflection, here's what I come up with: the character's back story is as before only now when the book opens he has *already* broken out of his morass and has found success and a modicum of happiness in New York. He even has an attractive girlfriend. He's on cloud nine when circumstances bring him back to San Francisco to deal with the family crisis. Now he is forced to choose between dealing with the horrors of the past at the expense of his newfound happiness. My character is not just facing adversity, he is not just struggling, but he is torn, badly torn. The stakes are higher.

But I don't stop there, constantly looking for opportunities to turn the screw, sharpen the pain, compound the character's consternation. It's more than making bad worse, it's adding insult to injury. For example, my protagonist has struggled mightily for redemption. Near the end of the book, he finally overcomes the heroine's resistance by demonstrating virtuous intent. The seduction successful, they are in bed after sex when he gets a call from New York. The girl he left behind is pregnant and the child is his.

Before reading Maass it wouldn't have occurred to me that seeming cruelty on the writer's part is, as noted above, a form of what I call tough love. To sympathize with your characters too much, to give respite out of compassion, may show a kindness of heart, but it turns a blind eye to the depth of the human condition. The deeper you dig, the more likely you are to strike a nerve, exposing a quality in the character that is instructive of the human condition. It's important to be deft and skillful, sure, but it's also important to be bold. Courage is what we tend to admire in others; it's also what the reader admires

on the page—the writer's boldness as well as the courage of the character.

The interesting thing is that once the importance of stakes was in my mind, opportunities kept presenting themselves for enriching the plot, raising the tension and the level of excitement. I found that my protagonist had been transformed as well. I liked him a lot better, even respected him.

It is interesting that the elements discussed by Maass—premise, stakes, time and place, characters, plot, pace, voice, and theme—are so interdependent. Do something dramatic in one area and others are affected. What begins as a simple attempt to raise the stakes results in a richer, more complex plot, a more powerful and interesting protagonist. The inner zeal I feel as the creator of the story infects the subplots, the place and setting become more vibrant because of the energy I've infused. In its revised form, my story becomes more complex, layered, and (I hope) engrossing. Even the theme takes on greater clarity and focus. As they say in sports, "I am feeling it."

Another section of the book I want to bring to your attention is the chapter on "theme." I found it to be the heart of the book. And being a spiritual person, I always look for the transforming quality in things. Maass says, "Novels are moral. In fact, all stories convey society's underlying values, whether they are danced around a campfire or packaged in sleek black trade paperbacks. Stories are the glue that holds together our fragile human enterprise."

That notion appeals to me—not because I see myself as a prophet or a philosopher, but rather because I want to be engaged in something meaningful. After reading this chapter, I asked myself whether my work measured up. There have been sparks of insight in my writing, I have to say, but on balance they've been muted. My stories are entertainments, first and foremost, yes, but I would like to think they are capable of moving the reader in a way that is memorable. I don't want to expound a philosophy so much as I want to provide an experience that is consequential. My work may not change lives, but it should raise questions, stir emotions, make the reader reflect enough to look into his own heart.

Maass's advice is to ask what you care about, what stirs you. If you write about things other than that—routine, token, or predictable things—your stories will lack fire and therefore will not fire the reader.

"Cleave to your convictions," Maass says. "Cherish them. Let them stoke your story with an energy that will drive it like the giant pistons of a steam locomotive. Let yourself care because that is to live with passion—and it is passionate stories that your readers crave."

We all have our passions, but we aren't always eager to share them. What Maass did for me is to explain why it's not only all right to let that passion show, it's essential if I'm to write a breakout book. Fire in the belly can take many forms. With some accomplished writers the strength can be quiet, the technique subtle, but at some level the reader must sense something special and be moved by it. The key in this process is not what's in the reader, but rather what's in the writer.

The climax: In rewriting my WIP, I endeavored to get in touch with some of those deeper currents within me, to infuse my passion into my character or, more accurately perhaps, to empower my characters by liberating myself. The important lesson I gleaned from Donald Maass was this: to one degree or another every writer can benefit from a good hard look into his or her soul. Enthusiasm, conviction, passion are among the qualities in a person that enable him or her to move others. Breakout books, it would seem, bear the imprint of a deeply committed writer who can transfer such things to paper. Tepid skillfulness, uninspired knowledge, tentative conviction seem to be the stuff of ordinary achievement. How refreshing to know that the most difficult aspect of this striving for excellence may simply be finding the courage and the willingness to tap into your own genuine self.

The resolution: For those who may be interested in the outcome of the little saga of my WIP, I managed to get an extension, turning my 686-page manuscript a month late. I felt much better about what I sent off. I found myself reflecting what might have been had I read Maass before writing my prior titles. But then I consoled myself with the thought that getting a message is one thing, being ready to receive it is another. Learning and growing, discovering the mysteries of one's craft as well as the mysteries of one's own soul, are the fabric of work and life.

Whether all this insight will lead to tangible results in the bookstores, I don't know. *Squeeze Play* is now in production and won't be out until September, 2002. Of course, if you're so inclined (heh, heh) you can read it and judge for yourself. But

this much I'm reasonably certain of: my "post Maass" rewrite resulted in a better book. My editor, in noting a change in my writing, said, "I loved [the book]...it's more complex, more involved." Now, if the reading public will only agree.

But, as a writer, I must be prepared for the worst. Maybe the marketplace won't see my epiphany as significant as do I, if only because I'm not yet where I need to be. Regardless, there's always something to be thankful for. Given how difficult it is to continue being published these days, I regard survival in itself an achievement. If I can impress just one acquisition editor, then I've got a fighting chance. That, in the end, may be my reward.

Here's a final thought on my experience with Maass: though I don't know the man, I believe he's touched me as a writer in an important and, I hope, telling way. I am now convinced that my career is in my hands, that I have it in me to keep improving, to transform faith and conviction into concrete results. Maybe I'll make it big someday or maybe I won't. At least I feel I have a better shot, thanks to Donald Maass.

Equally important for present purposes is this: I have the added satisfaction of knowing that, if not me, then maybe you. We are, after all, on the same journey. *✍*

INTRODUCING.....

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

New

Applicant

Kristine Smith, Zion IL

**Ninc has room to grow...
recommend membership to
your colleagues.
Prospective members
may apply online at
www.ninc.com.**

USA Today Bestsellers by Ninc Members

NINC MEMBER	BOOK TITLE/PUBLISHER	DEC 23	DEC 30	JAN 6	JAN 14
Victoria Alexander	<i>The Prince's Bride</i> /Avon		128	94	
Catherine Anderson	<i>Sweet Nothings</i> /Avon			New	48
Sandra Brown	<i>Thursday's Child</i> /Bantam		New	119	135
Catherine Coulter	<i>Pendragon</i> /Jove			New	32
Chera Griffin	<i>The Prince's Bride</i> /Avon		128	94	
Jayne Ann Krentz	<i>Smoke in Mirrors</i> /Putnam			New	64
Linda Lael Miller	<i>Springwater Wedding</i> /Pocket		New	48	59
Anne McCaffrey	<i>The Skies of Pern</i> /Del Rey		New	40	33
Carla Neggers	<i>The Cabin</i> /Harlequin	New	115	71	96
Mary Jo Putney	<i>The Spiral Path</i> /Berkley				86
Nora Roberts	<i>Heaven and Earth</i> /Jove	13	14	13	18
Nora Roberts	<i>Dance Upon the Air</i> /Jove		143	143	114
Nora Roberts	<i>A Little Magic</i> /Berkley		New	45	55
Christie Ridgway	<i>First Comes Love</i> /Avon			New	145

Track tracker Vella Munn has several apologies to make. First, Amanda Scott's *Border Bride* was #126 in October 12. Ruth Ryan Langan, contributor to *Once Upon a Rose*, is a Ninc member, not et al. Andrea Kane's *No Way Out* made both the *USA Today* and *The New York Times* lists for three weeks in November.

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