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

Hot Topic: Suspense

A Conversation with Jayne Ann Krentz and Ann Maxwell/ Elizabeth Lowell

Both of you are writing a form of suspense now. Tell us how you got to this point in your careers.

Ann Maxwell: I can't talk about suspense without talking about the most overlooked, under-reported story in modern fiction: the Class of '82. (Credit to Evan, who coined the phrase!) These are the women who began or sustained their writing careers in paperback series romance and are now hardcover *New York Times* bestsellers.

Jayne Krentz: Sandra Brown, Catherine Coulter, Barbara Delinsky.

Ann: Janet Evanovich, Tess Gerritsen, Tami Hoag, Linda Howard, Iris Johansen, Jayne Ann Krentz/Amanda Quick.

Jayne: Elizabeth Lowell, Judith

MacNaught, and of course, Nora Roberts.

Ann: We'll get brickbats for leaving out authors, but that only reinforces the point. A staggering number of our best-known popular fiction authors today have their roots in paperback romance and are now writing some form of suspense.

What happened to both of you on the way to today?

Ann: I started writing in science fiction as Ann Maxwell and (with Evan) in mystery and historical novels as A. E. Maxwell. In other words, I had a diverse writing background before I discovered the romance genre. More importantly, I had a diverse *reading* background. As a preteen I loved the Black Stallion series (adventure with a dash of mystery) and Nancy Drew (mystery with a dash of the boy/girl thing). Then I discovered Mary Stewart and Helen MacInnes. I read everything I could that was called romantic suspense.

Jayne: I followed a similar path to writing romantic suspense. Walter Farley's horse stories, Nancy Drew, some early Robert Heinlein, and a sprinkling of gothics. My favorite genre is romantic suspense, but I also

read outside that genre and when I do, I go for certain male authors who write with what I think of as a romantic sensibility: Robert Parker, Dick Francis, John Sanford, Dean Koontz. Yes, I know, they may not appreciate being credited with romantic sensibilities, but I can tell you that any one of their heroes could walk straight out of the pages of their own books into a good romance novel and be right at home. These authors create characters who are imbued with the classic heroic virtues: a code of honor, courage, determination. In addition they actually have a profound respect for and are deeply attracted to strong women. Talk about sexy!

Ann: I was looking for the same qualities in my fiction reading—I just couldn't put a name to them. As I grew up, Nero Wolfe and John D. MacDonald beckoned. More happy hours. (Travis McGee is one sexy man!) Dick Francis had wonderful heroes. I tried lots and lots of other mystery writers. Enjoyable, but they weren't engaging to me on as many levels: they simply lacked that romantic/heroic dimension. Everybody has particular, read peculiar, tastes. Mine weren't being met. What I wanted to

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Send Address Changes to Central Coordinator

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE.....

One of the perks of being Ninc president is that I'm allowed 600 words a month to express my opinion on any subject that makes me happy. I haven't decided whether that's adequate payback for fielding a kezzillion e-mails, but I've always wanted to be an editorial writer, so I'll take my jollies where I find them.

I'm torn between two related subjects. After seeing multi-published writers weep and threaten to throw away their careers because a new editor sent them a ten-page revision letter without a word acknowledging that the book is publishable, I'd love to go into a long rant about how editorial negativity can demolish a writer's self-esteem and creativity. But Ninc is an organization of writers, and that diatribe would be preaching to the choir.

How we affect our fellow writers

Instead, I'll take the other path, and talk about how we as writers affect our fellow writers. I'm musing over this as I sit on my balcony in Florida, lapping up the rays and sipping margaritas while typing my words of wisdom into my expensive new laptop toy after successfully completing my thirty-fifth novel.

Now, how did that bit of information make you feel? How many of you thought, "Good for you, Pat, you worked hard and deserve this"? Those of you who did get a blue ribbon and can skip the rest of this column. You've either been in this business too long or you're a saint.

For the rest of you: how long did it take for you to turn my good fortune into another way of condemning yourself for not making enough to live the life of luxury? How many of you are thinking you're a far better writer than I am, or you've written many more books, so why aren't you sitting here in my place?

The truth is, I'm on a quick three-day trip to gray and windy Florida after spending four tortuous months revising a book. My new laptop replaces a five-year-old one that was so cheap I couldn't even add a life-sized keyboard to it. The new toy has already been reformatted once and is about to be thrown off the dirty balcony into the traffic below if it disconnects one more time. And I've learned that margaritas give me hives.

It's a harmful lie

Does that sound a little more familiar? That's the real life of a writer, not the self-aggrandizing, publicity-oriented smiles we see in fan magazines. We can play the part of successful author for our readers, but among ourselves, it's not only a lie, it's a harmful lie, perhaps in more ways than we realize.

We're writers; we know how to put a spin on our careers to pretend

we're more successful than we are. That seems harmless enough. It's not as if we're being deliberately hurtful. But aside from the jealousy and self-doubt these lies might cause, they also inhibit the honest exchange of information that is essential to survive in this business.

Are you going to admit out loud that the print runs on your latest book have been cut in half after hearing another author bragging about how well she's doing? How can we know if the entire market truly is sliding down the toilet if a few noisy ones of us are saying how great life is? How will we know if a publisher is substituting a particularly dastardly option clause into its

contracts if we're terrified of being scorned for signing it?

Honesty can be brutal and painful. Sometimes we're not strong enough to admit our failures. That's understandable. But at least, can we keep it real, folks? I know we're all darned good fiction writers, but between ourselves, let's resolve to be honest.

— Pat Rice

INTRODUCING.....

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

New Applicants

Pamela Burford, Baldwin, NY
Melanie Jackson, Sonora, CA
Victoria Strauss, Amherst, MA
Linda Style, Mesa, AZ
Tracy Summer, Woodside, NY

New Members

Debra Lee Brown, Sacramento, CA
Shannon Donnelly, Burbank, CA
Christine Goff, Evergreen, CO
Elizabeth Harbison, Germantown, MD
Geraldine Burrows Longo (Geraldine Burrows),
Kingston, RI
Jane Porter-Gaskins (Jane Porter), Bellevue, WA
Patricia Potter, Cordova, TN
Stephanie Shafer (Stephanie Kane), Denver, CO
Colleen L. Thompson (Gwynette Atlee),
The Woodlands, TX
Nancy Warren, Vancouver, BC

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

LETTER(S) TO NINK.....



Even in this online age—with Ninclink—we still welcome your letters. Submit to the editor via e-mail, fax, or old-fashioned snailmail [see masthead on page 2]. Letters may be edited for length or NINK style.

Expressing Gratitude

On January 31, 2002, my only son, Joey passed away very suddenly. He was 21 years old. The outpouring of sympathy and support from my publisher, Silhouette, my editors—past and present, Novelists, Inc. members, agents, attorneys, and the entire writing and publishing community has been nearly overwhelming and brought a great deal of comfort during this incredibly difficult time.

On behalf of myself, my husband, and my two daughters please accept our very heartfelt thanks for all of your thoughts, notes, cards, flowers, and prayers. They are deeply appreciated.

— Sharon De Vita

In Memorium

Novelists, Inc. notes with sorrow the passing of Lydia Lee Green, who died on February 12, 2002, and Marion Smith Collins, who died February 24, 2002. These women were not only talented authors, they were splendid members of the writing community.

Among Marion's surviving family is Kate Dooley, who coordinates Ninc's Conference travel and siting arrangements.

HOT TOPIC: SUSPENSE

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Continued from page 1*

read was Helen MacInnes with sex. No such thing was out there.

So you wrote romance instead?

Jayne: I had similar issues. I wanted to read adult Nancy Drews. There weren't any. I decided to write one. The first book I ever wrote was—surprise—a novel of futuristic romantic suspense. I forget the title but I vaguely recall that first rejection letter. The editor was unusually kind. He wrote something about me being several years ahead of my time and explained that, although he had enjoyed the book, no one in his business was publishing that kind of thing. It was my first lesson in marketing.

I quickly discovered that the publishing law that held that futuristic romantic suspense would not sell was actually a corollary of an overarching publishing axiom: *romantic suspense does not sell*. I knew right away I had a problem because the only thing I wanted to write was romantic suspense.

Ann: Again, I went through the whole thing Jayne is describing I even wrote science fiction with (gasp!) romance in it and got lucky enough to find a sympathetic editor. It was the first of nine science fiction books. Meanwhile, with Evan I wrote mystery (as A. E. Maxwell) with (double gasp) a relationship in it. For a time I found refuge, pleasure, and focus in writing short romances as Elizabeth

Lowell. The intensity of the relationship was the plot; the payoff was in a successful resolution to the problems of the relationship. Very like mysteries, except that the questions to be resolved were personal and romantic rather than public and deadly. I was still writing mysteries with Evan, so that aspect of my writing need was satisfied, too.

Jayne, how did you meet your writing needs?

Jayne: Shortly after my first rejection, I found the romance genre and realized that, with a little modification, (i.e. take out the futuristic stuff and tone down the suspense elements) I might be able to fit my stories into a recognized category of popular fiction.

It took six years to find a publisher, possibly because I never quite managed to remove all of the suspense from my plots. For some reason, while I love to work with a variety of other elements—family relationships, antiquities, art, business backgrounds, etc., I just can't get excited about crafting any kind of plot that is totally devoid of suspense and romance. I guess the combination is just too deeply imbedded in my natural voice as a writer.

At the start of the 1980s the market for the American style of contemporary romance took off big-time. I found a publisher, Dell Ecstasy, that was willing to ignore the mystery aspects that remained in my plots.

I also learned a little secret along the way: editors frequently failed to notice mystery and suspense elements

if they were disguised as high tech or business intrigues. I also figured out right quick that mysteries in which the academic and art worlds were used as settings frequently went under editorial radar. As long as I didn't have a lot of violence on the page, I discovered I could get away with a fair amount of suspense. Since I don't like to put a lot of violence on the page, that worked for me.

My first published novel, *Gentle Pirate*, was one of the two launch books for the Dell Ecstasy line. I later published with Silhouette and Harlequin Temptation. I kept the suspense to a bare minimum but I kept it in the books.

All of my publishers pretty much uniformly solved the problem of how to market my books by the simple technique of making certain that there was little or no hint of the mystery in the cover art or the back cover copy. My books came out as straight romance and the readers never blinked. It was my second lesson in marketing: *People really do judge a book by its cover*.

Ann: I wasn't clever enough to hide my hunger for suspense. I simply separated it out of my romances for the most part. Then writing pure romance consumed more and more of my time. I loved it, was well rewarded by it—and yet—and yet. By now Evan and I weren't writing mysteries anymore. (Nothing ever stays the same, does it?) I found myself longing to write books that combined adventure, history, mystery, danger, politics, art, *and* romance—the whole glorious cultural tortilla.

Nobody, repeat nobody, wanted to print it. Mary Stewart and Helen MacInnes were from the previous

generation. Romantic suspense was dead. Any author who wrote it would be dead, too.

When Jayne tried to use more suspense in her books, she had the same hit-the-wall experience with single-title-release novels. Yet we both believed that women would read romantic suspense if somebody would just publish it.

Jayne: Nobody was writing what we wanted to read. Nobody would let us write it outside of series romance. My first break came when Dell, one of my series romance publishers, decided to experiment with a single-title release. *Double Dealing* died about two days after it arrived in stores. So did the next one I tried, *Trading Secrets*.

Between bad reviews and pitiful sales, I started to wonder if there was some truth in the publishing axiom that stated that romantic suspense did not work. But I was stuck because I couldn't stop writing it.

Ann: Then Harlequin, in the guise of Worldwide, took a chance on my idea of what would sell. The result was *Tell Me No Lies*, a no-apologies romantic suspense novel which got the then-equivalent of a starred review in *PW* and vanished without a trace. Several years later I wrote *The Diamond Tiger* as Ann Maxwell for a different publisher. No review. No attention. Novel vanished. Poof. Gone. Ditto for *The Secret Sisters* and *Shadow and Silk* (both novels written with Evan under the name Ann Maxwell.)

Jayne: Although none of these books seemed to be working, looking back I think we were slowly starting to build our audiences. We just didn't realize it at the time. Unfortunately, neither did the publishers.

Ann: Years later, after I had written nine historical romances for Avon, I asked to write contemporary romantic suspense. To their everlasting credit, they didn't scream and run for the exits. No doubt it helped a lot that Sandra Brown had done a fine job of trail blazing, with Nora Roberts and Jayne hot on her heels.

Amber Beach was my second hard-

cover and my first hardcover romantic suspense. It went on the *NYT*. So did suspense—largely viewed as romantic suspense—written by the rest of the Class of '82.

Jayne: Around 1990 I started to publish with Pocket and Bantam and for the first time discovered the difference between having a publisher's wholehearted support and not having it.

Both of those houses took romance seriously and published the books just like *real* books. What a concept. My second novels for both publishers hit the *NYT* and I was free to write what I really wanted to write.

Ann: Our time had finally, *finally* come.

Jayne: The Class of '82 is not the only story to come out of the romance genre. This area of popular fiction has been in constant flux since the early '80s. Unlike some of the other genres which have become somewhat stultified, even stale in recent years, romance has been drastically broadened and reinvented by a host of writers who have discovered that they can experiment in that genre in a way that was not permitted in other areas of fiction. When Ann and I started out, this proved to be especially true in series publishing.

The beauty of series publishing is that the publisher's financial fate does not stand or fall on the basis of a one or two books. There is room to take chances and an opportunity to attract new audiences. When something starts to work—romantic suspense, for instance—it makes its way out of series publishing into single title and mainstream.

Ann: Which simply proves what I've often said: any author who is at the top of *any* genre, can "cross over" with a publisher's support and go to the top of the larger genre called popular fiction.

Jayne: But you have to be allowed to experiment. Series romance is a great place to try out new story elements. Because of this constant experimentation and reinvention, romance writers have blurred the

boundaries between romance and the other categories of popular fiction to the point where things are wonderfully murky and hard to define at the edges.

Yes, this can make things difficult in the bookstores. Where do you put romantic suspense? The mystery section? Romance? General fiction? But the end result of all this seething, bubbling, creative ferment has been good for the whole of popular fiction, especially the thriller and so-called women's fiction markets in recent years.

Ann: The fascinating thing is that none of the Class of '82 authors writes the same blend of relationship and mystery. The gamut goes from suspense, to medical procedural, humor, near-horror, adventure, politics, paranormal, family relationships, and any other little thing the author wants to put in, including romance.

Authors with their roots in romance have not only pushed genre boundaries, they've demolished them. Depending on the bookstore, you can find Class of '82 books in Fiction, Fiction and Literature, Mystery, Romance, and Horror—and the *same* book can be "categorized" and filed under any and all of the above. Makes marketers and book shelveers nuts. Makes authors and readers smile.

It also makes for some interesting bedfellows, as it were. Men who would sooner be caught naked holding a box of Tampax than fully dressed holding a romance novel show up on author websites alongside avid romance-only readers.

Mystery readers who would much rather be caught dead than reading a romance find themselves looking for a hot "new" author's backlist, only to be ushered to the romance ghetto of the bookstore. Shock. Denial. Curiosity. Hesitant reading of back cover copy *Gotcha*.

Picture two grinning, genre-bending authors. **NINK**

Voice Recognition Software: As Easy As Telling a Story... or Is It?

BY LINDA MADL

Picture it: you're sitting poolside in the shade of a striped umbrella, a cool glass of lemonade on the table, and your feet stretched out in front of you while you dictate the last chapter of your manuscript. Nice.

Make you smile? It's every writer's dream—if not the poolside scenario, at least the hands-free aspect. Yet, how possible is this pretty picture?

Since the advent of speech or voice recognition (VR) software for Windows in 1994, speaking your words into the computer where they turn into letters on the page has become easier than you might think. The technology, which enjoyed a major improvement from slow, discrete dictation to continuous speech in 1997, is used in the medical and legal professions.

Prices start at about \$100 and go up. Minimum hardware requirements start at 133 MHz processor or faster and at least 32 MB RAM necessary for running Windows 95. Dragon System's Naturally Speaking is probably the best-known VR software. IBM's competing product is called ViaVoice for Windows or Macintosh.

A search of the web will turn up several similar software products including Kolvox Lawtalk and VoicePilot. Go to www.utoronto.ca/atrc/reference/tech/voicerecog.html to learn about more types of systems.

Several Novelists, Inc. members have put VR to use for practical reasons with varying degrees of success and shared their comments with me. Diane Chamberlain, author of twelve contemporary mainstream novels, began using Dragon Speak 5 about five years ago when her rheumatoid arthritis made keyboard work difficult to impossible.

She selected the software because it was rated as the

best VR software available at the time. She has used several versions since. Initially the training which involves the reading of certain passages provided by the software product into a headset to accustom the system to the user's voice took over an hour. Now, she says it's much simpler and takes only about ten to twenty minutes. Training can be an ongoing process, allowing the user to add new words to the software's vocabulary as necessary for different projects.

Chamberlain says she found the VR software easy to install, and it is possible to begin using it within an hour of installation. However, she recommends being very patient. "The only way I have found to deal with all the mistakes the voice recognition software makes is by having a sense of humor," says Chamberlain. She wrote an entire book using Dragon. She has also used it for correspondence, word processing, and e-mail.

The software will not misspell a word, Chamberlain explains, and it will try very hard to make contextual sense of what you're saying.

Here is one of the most memorable examples: I said, "The fantasy was quick and delicious and entirely unbidden." And the Dragon wrote: "Panasonic's business decisions upset its chicken's contraceptives."

How many of these errors does a writer have to deal with?

"The technology is simply not as good as one would hope," says Chamberlain. "Even if it were 95 percent accurate, that still means approximately twelve mistakes occur on any given manuscript page. And the mistakes can be hard to track down, because they will never be misspellings. If the mistakes are not caught early, it may be difficult to remember exactly what it was you were trying to say. There is a feature by which you can play back a recording of what you said, but this adds more time to an already time-consuming process."

Thanks to new medications, Chamberlain's physical

condition has improved. She uses Dragon when her hands get sore which is only about ten percent of the time.

When Jaclyn Reding, historical romance novelist, took a tumble on an icy driveway and fractured her wrist while on a tight deadline she decided to try IBM ViaVoice Advanced Edition Release 9. It required upgrading of her system, including a new sound card and speakers with USB ports. The necessary headset came with the software. She decided on this VR product because it works directly with Microsoft Word and it has a thirty-day guarantee. It also works with most e-mail programs and Web browsers, and had great reviews for accuracy.

She has been using it a couple of weeks. She found that installation was easy, about fifteen to twenty minutes. But she did have to take some special steps.

“Make sure it is quiet when you are reading the training paragraphs,” Reding advised. “My eight-year-old was chattering in the other room, and I had to stop it several times and start over.”

Background noise can also become an issue when dictating, causing the cursor to jump a line or two. She has been using it mostly for e-mail and some editing of her manuscript. “I imagine with practice that it will get easier.

“I guess I’m too accustomed to the rhythm of typing when I’m creating. When I tried dictating, it just felt off.

“I do like it for e-mail and instant messaging because it keeps my injured wrist from tiring. It’s also great for navigating the Web and it integrates easily with most other programs on my computer.”

In addition, she recommends, be prepared for an adjustment and learning period...also be prepared for some typing when making corrections. “You will have to learn some commands, such as how to tell the program to capitalize, switch to spell mode, correct misinterpretations, etc., but this product came with a handy card listing the most common commands that I keep right by the computer. Eventually you just learn the most common commands.”

Gaelen Foley, Regency novelist, selected Dragon Naturally Speaking Preferred Portable so that she could dictate in the field.

“I wanted the portable handheld recorder that you can talk into, and then upload into your word processing programs,” says Foley. The system required that she upgrade her computer system to run the voice recorder software. But the experience was still frustrating.

“The training is not difficult,” says Foley, “but the program only works well for about fifteen minutes then seems to overload and commands such as Scratch that or Insert quit working.”

But bottom line, all agreed with Reding’s comment, “I wouldn’t recommend starting this (working with VR software) in the middle of a project unless you have to, such as I did with this unexpected injury.”

Chambers says, “I would not recommend VR software unless it was really needed. If someone has carpal tunnel or arthritis, and writing has become painful and/or damaging to them, I would recommend they give it a try, but don’t expect miracles....However, it (VR software) gave me the opportunity to continue writing when I would have not been able to otherwise. It let me keep my chosen career.”

Remember, if you try VR software and get really frustrated, no matter what you say to it, the software will attempt to put your utterances into words. **NINK**

Linda Madl, who is still searching for her pool-side table and striped umbrella, talks to her computer even though it doesn’t take dictation. She believes verbalizing is healthy, but she is not ready to give up her keyboard for fiction and article writing.

To 'er or not to 'er, that is the, er, question....

If one who writes is a writer, then one who’s a Ninc member must be a “Nincer,” yes? Or is it “Ninc’er”? Or is it something else altogether?

E-mail or fax your entry to Editor Jasmine Cresswell at jasmine444@aol.com along with your most persuasive rationale why your style is correct...in 50 words or less.

Hurry, deadline is April 25, and there will be a \$10 book token for the winner. The judge’s decision will be totally arbitrary....

Online.....by Lorraine Heath

Recently Novelists, Inc. member Ginny Schweiss did a little domain registration comparison shopping and wanted to share her experience with us at *000domains*, <http://000domains.com> (that is three zeroes).

“Last night I registered a domain for my husband at 000domains.com instead of Network Solutions. The cost was \$13.50 (as opposed to \$35), everything was easy to understand and follow, his information was in the *Who Is* database this morning (less than 12 hours), and they have a control panel on site that enables me to go in and change any information at any time without having to play *Now Fill Out This Form* with Network Solutions. If you’ve ever done the latter, you’ll understand! I used his pseudonym, my PO Box, and a cell phone number—anonymity as close as he can get!

“This same control panel enables anyone with a (Network Solutions or other) registered domain to transfer said registration to 000domains simply by clicking on the Transfer button and filling in the information. There’s a tour if needed.”

Ginny also mentioned *Stargate Communications, Inc.*, <http://stargateinc.com>. This site allows you to register domain names for \$8.85. She didn’t find the site as user friendly. “I never found a control panel.”

When I checked out Stargate, I located the Transfer Xpress button. I had to scroll down to find it, but once I clicked it, the transfer process appeared to be fairly straightforward, although I didn’t complete the process.

AUTHOR WEB SITE BLOOPERS

Lisa Craig, <http://www.lisacraig.com>, has enjoyed a fifteen-year career in the high-tech industry. In addition to writing category romance, women’s fiction, and non-fiction, she helps authors and others leverage the Web to increase sales and bookings. She wrote the following and gave me permission to reprint it in my column.

Top 10 (12) Web Site Bloopers for Authors

As a veteran in the Internet industry, I have seen the good, bad, and ugly when it comes to websites. I’ve compiled my top ten list, (well actually, I’m an overachiever and I came up with 12) of the biggest bloopers an author can make on their website and tips for avoiding them. The first two are huge blunders, but if you have three or more

on this list, you could be seriously chasing away visitors, otherwise know as clients.

Confusing website addresses. If users can’t remember your web address, or if it’s difficult to type correctly, they’ll never get there. Invest in your own domain name (i.e., www.yourname.com).

Don’t update your site. A static site gives visitors no reason to return. Freshen your content at least every other month.

Overuse fonts and large type. Keep type size to the equivalent of 10-12 points. Headers can be a bit larger. Multiple typefaces and big print are distracting and signal the work of a beginner.

Long scrolling pages. Murphy’s Law dictates that the information users will want will be buried at the bottom of the Grand Canyon page. Break content into smaller chunks and put on separate pages. No one likes to scroll.

Left to right scrolling? Always minimize unnecessary mouse movements. It’s difficult to read while scrolling up, down and sideways.

Laundry list navigation. Organize content into descriptive categories (no more than ten, but fewer is better), so visitors can find what interests them. Make sure your content is no more than three clicks away for the user.

Pages that read like a novel. Give users information in bite-size chunks. This is your chance to show them how you are unique. Think unique marketing statement. Your content should be interesting and offer value.

Audio and video. This could offer a top ten list on this alone. Music and video are hogs when it comes to download time and offer little substance in return. These media types are also very distracting. Avoid using high bandwidth media.

Divert users to a list of links. You want to attract and keep visitors and get them to come back. More time spent on your pages increases the odds the user will do business. Links send users to other people’s websites.

Use cheesy pre-packaged graphics or animations. Both are the mark of an amateur. Animations waste download time and are distracting. You’re trying to build a brand name. Clip art doesn’t make you unique. If you found the graphics, chances are others will be using them, too.

Require too much information from users. People are busy. Respect visitor’s time and privacy. Users are

leery to give out information. Tell users what you plan to use the information for and let them know you will not sell it to any other party.

Use unreadable backgrounds and text colors. Dark backgrounds require light text colors. Light backgrounds need dark text contrast. Busy backgrounds compete with content and make pages difficult to read.

My parting advice is simple: Project a professional image, especially on the Web. An amateur website will not build readership. Your website is an extension of you. Make sure your image is as polished as your novels.

- Less is more!
- Identify website goals and make sure content supports those objectives.
- Hold your breath during the download time. If you're gasping for air before your page comes up, it's taking too long.
- Do what you do best, then hire a professional to develop your website.

WEBSITE ENHANCERS

Although, Lisa advises against cheesy graphics that can be easily picked up on the Internet, some sites do offer free backgrounds and borders that can enhance your web page.

MediaBuilder, <http://www.mediabuilder.com> is a terrific source of free backgrounds, borders, fonts, etc. If you're not content with the free offering, you can purchase a Premium Gold Site Membership for \$39.95. This membership is good for one year and gives you permission to use exclusive graphics that aren't available in their free area. They add 2,500 new animations monthly to the Premium Gold area.

Web Design, <http://webdesign.about.com> offers free backgrounds for web pages as well as clip art images. Some images do require a fee. The site also offers web design advice. You could quite easily spend the day reading all the helpful tips.

Web Clipart, <http://webclipart.about.com/>, offers free graphics that you can use on your website.

Vivian's Notebook, <http://www.vivianbeck.com>, offers free backgrounds and borders. While the other sites offer such an abundance of selections that it can be overwhelming trying to find what you're looking for, Vivian Beck only has a few designs for you to choose from. With pleasant pastels, some are very romantic. She has posted some rules for using the backgrounds, including that you give her credit for the design and link back to her website. In exchange, she links to your website.

RESEARCH

Although it seems not as many publishers are interested in Western-setting stories these days, I can't seem to give up my fascination with the time period. *Linecamp*, <http://www.linecamp.com/>, offers quite a bit of his-

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Patricia de la Fuente	Patricia@hiline.net
Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@attbi.com

tory. It provides links and information on the American Western History Museums, Stagecoach through the History and Commerce, and The Great American West Past, Present, and the Future.

Wondering what the child in your 19th century-set story might read? Visit *Children's Literature, Chiefly from the Nineteenth Century*, <http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/kidlit/kidlit/kidlit.html>.

The Internet Medieval Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>, is a comprehensive site for medieval information. It's maintained by Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies.

Do you need to add some authenticity to your work by including a foreign language? Check out *Foreign Languages*, <http://home.paichai.ac.kr/~bungle/flan.htm>. The course offerings are all free.

Cops Online, the World's Leading Law Enforcement Site, <http://www.copsonline.com>, provides courses, books, and a locker room where you can learn about all the equipment a policeman wears.

For those of you interested in another search engine, try *Dogpile*, <http://dogpile.com> which advertises that it provides "all results, no mess."

JUST FOR FUN

Check out *CopyKat Creations*, <http://www.copykat.com>. You'll find the recipes for some of the most popular dishes at your favorite restaurants. Enjoy!

NINCLINK

At www.yahooogroups.com/group/NINCLINK, you can learn more about Ninclink, subscribe, or set your preferences (digest, individual posts, etc.).

If you discover sites that you think would interest Novelists, Inc. members, please e-mail me at lorraine-heath@attbi.com. **NINK**

OUTSIDE THE BIG APPLE

Is there publishing life outside the Big Apple? Yes. Of course. How much and in what forms is the subject of this ongoing column.

BY VELLA MUNN

Had it with the New York publishing scene? Feeling overwhelmed and lost in a sea of mergers, musical editors, dropped lines, etc., etc.? If someone offered you the opportunity to mine the resources of the Internet in an effort to market your unsold baby, would you check it out? Me, too. There might be more than one such service, but I spent a morning cruising the Web and found only Authorlink, (<http://www.authorlink.com>) located in Irving, Texas.

According to the FAQs, Authorlink which has been around for six years, “has more than 250,000 loyal readers per year. Annual page views by editors, agents, writers, and others now exceed two million. We are frequently browsed by major publishers, including Random House, Knopf, Simon & Schuster, St. Martin’s Press, Penguin Putnam, production/management studios in Los Angeles, and many others.” So far so good.

Authorlink isn’t a literary agency or editorial service, but it does have its own publishing imprint distributed by Ingram and selectively offers small presses and independent authors certain print-on-demand services under their Fusion Press imprint. Authorlink pays its bills by charging writers to display their work. Registering and displaying a manuscript costs \$35 for three months and \$105 for a year. There’s a set-up fee which, apparently, runs \$20 (Don’t quote me on this because that’s a tad obscure) The fee is \$50 if the ms. is revised.

In exchange for forking over, said work is available for agents and editors to request. Toward that end, every offering is placed in a genre, includes a 110-word synopsis, a 750-word excerpt, and a short author bio. The offerings are broken down into two categories, Author Showcase comprised of ready-to-submit manuscripts and Emerging Writers which includes—well, we know about that. Apparently, all ms. are screened by published writers and some may even be rejected. Those considered the best of the lot are flagged. In answering the question of whether Authorlink is effective, they state that an, “average of 65 percent of

the evaluated manuscripts are requested by agents or editors. Of those, 20 to 25 percent are offered literary representation. Among those, about 12 to 15 percent become published.

In addition to the Internet listing service, Authorlink states they put out four to six direct mailings per year to editors and agents, have a presence at a number of writers’ conferences, make two to three yearly trips to New York, make book-related media contacts, and, for the chosen, initiate queries to select editors and/or agents. I don’t know how many writers subscribe to the service, obviously enough to keep them in business. According to Authorlink, nearly 70 writers have gone on to be published as a result of their service.

The posted partial list of sales doesn’t tell the whole story of course but both major and small presses were represented. Not too surprising, the list contained more non-fiction than fiction, and there was no mention of advances—if any. After scanning the various offerings, I agree that the tagged submissions earned that designation. Some of those in the Author Showcase category (meaning they were ready to submit) were not ready in my estimation. I didn’t read any of the Emerging Writers work. The bottom line question for Ninc members is whether Authorlink might benefit them. After my perusal, I’d say no in my case, but I wouldn’t automatically steer others away.

If you’re looking for an agent, some high profile agents have registered with Authorlink although I’m not sure how active that listing is. The sales info was somewhat out of date, leaving the question of whether the Big Boys still check the offerings, but several small or new presses appear to be mining the offerings. Something that begs consideration is Authorlink Press. No advances are offered, but industry-standard royalties are, along with the assurance that Press has “full publisher” status with Ingram.

Press publishes ten to twelve titles per year and gives priority to Authorlink writers (no kidding). Every new manuscript is reviewed as a candidate for a possible Press release, and those selected so far include mainstream, true crime, self help, romance, and something called a documentary novel. Authorlink maintains that their “close, established relationships with editors and agents throughout the US and elsewhere, give us an opportunity to later sell your book ‘up’ to a larger house.” Maybe. **NINK**

Vella Munn has been writing since before forever and has become addicted to Internet “research.” Those are her only credentials for this column and she asks, fellow Ninc members to guide her into

Tricks of the Trade

BY RONN KAISER

Ever read a review of, say, a Grisham or Crichton novel? Chances are, along with the “gripping” and “compelling” accolades you’ll see a less than favorable comment about characterization. Terms like “cardboard,” “thin,” “stock” might appear. Other writers, some less famous, are lauded for the depth, texture, and complexity of their characters. So what gives?

There’s no point in debating the relative importance of character and plot; readers react to and care about different things. But while a page turner doesn’t require a protagonist like Hamlet, Captain Ahab, or Tom Sawyer, I think it’s safe to say deep characterization can’t hurt your reputation as a writer or the power and memorability of your work. Indeed, some might argue the complete novelist understands and exploits to the fullest the interdependence of character and plot.

Robert McKee, in his celebrated work on screenwriting, *Story*, says: “The function of *character* is to bring to the story the qualities of characterization necessary to convincingly act out choices.” If true, it seems to me that for the reader to care deeply about the character’s struggle, and thus identify with him/her, there must be a sense of the character’s humanity *as it relates to story events or plot*.

McKee believes that structure and character are *one in the same* [emphasis added]. The point of our craft, then, is to dramatize human experience. And to do that we must create characters that *are*, in a sense, what the story is about. We must be selective in what we reveal, but what we *do* select must be both telling and appropriate.

Let’s get specific. Are we talking about the difference between cartoon characters and a fully realized drawing with perspective and dimension? Is it a matter of *detail* or something more? Most characters, even the thinnest, come with eye color, body type, an occupation, personality traits, a history and some problems. What’s the distinguishing factor here? Angst?

McKee again: “The revelation of true character...is fundamental to all fine storytelling...What *seems* is not what *is*. People are not what they appear to be. A hidden nature waits concealed behind a facade of traits.” With respect to that tension between what is and what appears to be, Donald Maass (*Writing the Breakout Novel*), says, “Conflict is the first principle of plot construction, and it is also the underlying secret of great characters.” He explains, “I am talking about inner conflicts, those seemingly contradictory

sides of people that make them endlessly interesting to think about.”

Ninc’er **Laura Resnick** focuses on the contradictory sides of people in her writing. She believes that the advice given by a classical acting teacher in England, “Play the inconsistencies,” works for the novelist as well. The object is to identify inconsistencies in a character and play them up rather than avoid or excuse them. Laura gives these examples: “the most ruthless villain in the novel demonstrates compassion; the most devious and cunning character commits an act of naive self-sacrifice; the most cowardly character commits an act of bravery; the most heroic character commits a terrible act; the most deadly and untrustworthy character is nonetheless the most likeable one.”

Ann Roth also focuses on the good and bad in a character, what she calls the “yin and yang.” She cites Conan Doyle’s ability to use tidbits from his character’s personality and life (e.g. melancholia, cocaine addiction) to afford a “glimpse into what makes the guy tick.”

It would seem that detail is important, but not just any detail (who cares about the character’s preferred brand of dental floss, for example.) I think it’s safe to say that the more specific and the less general the character, the better. Most Ninc’ers seem to believe it all begins with *knowing* our characters.

Ninc’er **Sherry-Anne Jacobs** quotes writing teacher Brenda Ueland: “It does no good to make the words try to sound better, snappier...one must have a clear idea of the people and what happened to them...”

Deb Shore agrees with writing teacher Elnora King who says that, “99% of the time...the problem with a story is due to the fact that the writer thinks they know their characters, but they don’t know enough.”

So, how do we get to know our characters?

Deb has an interesting technique, what she calls the “Five Dimensional” approach: “Front—the way they want you to see them. Back—because sooner or later they always leave. Side—the most unguarded viewpoint. Top—or God’s view (and as writer I am God), which gives me their ‘unremembered’ history. Inside-out—which gives me his or her ‘remembered’ history.”

Aware of the importance of shadings of character, **Karen Harper** makes “a list of possible flaws...breaking the character weaknesses into two groups: annoying or destroying. (In other words little flaws vs. big, dramatic, Greek tragedy type ones.)” **Susan Aylworth** also focuses on the character’s foibles. Of her characters, she says, they “are my children, the offspring of ▶ ▶ ▶

Tricks of the Trade

▶▶▶ my mind and heart, but (very much like my real kids), they have their flaws. That's part of what makes them whole—and lovable.”

Some writers are both systematic and thorough in their approach to character development. One Ninc'er uses a 15-page computerized “book notes” form for each character. The form contains information on goal, motivation, conflict as well as back story, physical and psychological characteristics which are developed from a series of questions. One particularly interesting question is, “What is possible for each character at the end of the story that is impossible at the beginning?” (**Janelle Burnham Schneider**)

Laura Baker starts with a character grid which she uses to analyze both the protagonist and antagonist in these categories: inciting incident; long range goal; short range goal; character flaw; relationship barrier; black moment; and realization. During analysis she delves into deep background, motivations, etc. Laura also does a character interview in which she asks a series of questions, such as “What's your greatest regret?” She looks for character traits that highlight and contrast character. “Think Colombo: sloppy and observant = trait and character.”

Several other Ninc'ers like to interview their characters. **Tina Wainscott's** interview is based on questions designed to highlight the characters' traits, weaknesses, and strengths in addition to other information pertinent to her WIP. **Sue Pace** blocks out her characters using an outline containing information in the following categories: childhood; friends; enemies/rivals; interests and activities, secrets, goals, and needs. With regard to the last two, Sue says they can be quite similar, “but goals are things the character openly pursues, while needs are usually unknown in the beginning and discovered by the character in the course of the story.”

Another approach is to look at your characters through other people's eyes to get their heart and contradictory natures. A woman, for example, may at the same time be a child, a mother, a wife, a boss or co-worker, a friend or a rival. **Jo Beverley** likes to write a paragraph describing the character from the perspective of these other characters, whether they appear in the book or not. This technique shows different dimensions to the character and likely conflicts. As Jo says, “The friend's strong, warm support might be an underling's bitch-boss-from-hell, and the mother's cause for concern.”

Ever base your characters on people you know? **Dixie Browning** likes to develop characters that way since people usually don't see themselves as others see them, enabling her to “dig in and help myself to their traits and then try to figure out why they're the way they are.” **Elizabeth Doyle** brings her characters to life by imagining they're real people who lived a long time ago and that as she writes she is in

dialogue with their ghosts. Such characters have a will of their own, which they don't hesitate to demonstrate by commenting on her work and the way they are used. Says Elizabeth, “I put their souls in the book, but they have to put up with whatever plot, setting, situation I put them in. No complaining allowed.”

How about backstory? **Lillian Stewart Carl** believes that is key. She says, “The character's backstory should affect how they respond to the action in the story—indeed, how they get involved in the story to begin with. This segues into motivation, of course.” There are various ways to develop the backstory for your characters. **Sharry Michels** says her preferred method is to “take the role of the character and write my history in the first person. Who I love and hate, what's important to me, and so on.” She adds, “I come away from this process ‘knowing’ my character's personality very well.”

Carol Cail described one of her characters as being a terrible dresser, wearing loud shirts and tight pants. She wasn't sure where that came from until she recalled he was the youngest child in a large family, who always wore hand-me-downs and didn't know how to buy clothes. “That taught me to consider every detail that I put into my writing; it isn't enough to say something is so—there must be a reason it is so.”

Various Ninc'ers have favorite tricks for discovering just who their character is and for revealing him/her to the reader. **Fran Baker** says “I have to know what kind of music and which songs my characters like.” And once she figures it out, she listens to “their” music and sings “their” songs while she writes. How about using pets? “The type of animal and the way the character interacts with him/her can tell the reader a lot. I also like to use the animal's reaction to other people as a way for the pet's owner to see their character more clearly.” (**Annette Mahon**)

Are you into astrology? Even if you aren't, it can be useful. **Pat Rice** says a favorite “...cheap trick is to find the astrology sun sign that most matches the character I have in mind and see what quirks and foibles I can pick up...” Physical description is a given. But what about a more subtle aspect of the physical dimension? **Mary Kennedy** relies heavily on body language to reveal character, especially on facial expressions. “Does the husband look distractedly around...when he talks about his missing wife...does he blink three times in succession when asked about an argument that day...?”

And then there are the intuitive writers like **Julia Ross** whose characters grow spontaneously in her mind. Says Julia, “Character is revealed by all those seemingly random details that insist on being there, even in the first draft.”

Few would contest the assertion that the more fully drawn a character (assuming skill, technique, and economy) the richer the reading experience for the reader. In the words of the legendary theorist Lajos Egri (*Art of Dramatic Writing*), “The moment your characters are rounded, in terms of the three dimensions [the physiological, the social,

and the psychological], you will find they are not only exciting theatre, but novel as well.”

That said, we can't forget what we are. We aren't psychiatrists, sociologists, journalists or biographers. We are storytellers. We are, of necessity, students of the human condition. But the creation of rich, complex characters is only the beginning. Our characters must be drawn in such a way that they work seamlessly with our story and our theme. Or, as Donald Maass puts it, “Weaving an inner struggle into the fabric of the outer events of the narrative magnifies a novel's final impact, particularly if the inner and the outer conflicts can reach a simultaneous climax.”

Laura Baker put it nicely when she said, “Knowing my

theme infuses depth into the character, because I'm asking myself the point of every scene—how best to parallel, contradict, mirror the theme through characterization/conflict/action etc.”

Topic for June: *What techniques do you use to convert the initial germ of a story idea into a fully plotted novel?*

Please submit your *June* tips and topic suggestions for *July* in the medium of your choice, by *April 25* as follows:

E-mail: ronk.kaiser@prodigy.net

Fax: (916) 681-7155

Snail mail: 8133 Ibanez Court
Sacramento, CA 95829



Sticky Notes from the Edge

Writers are danger junkies. Wait. Don't get ahead of me. We aren't danger junkies so much when we're writing. Yeah, we inject suspense and/or danger into the veins of our stories. But we do it from the comfort of our own minds, where we can safely put our fictional people through sheer heck that would terrify the life out of us if that plot actually happened to our own personal selves. So, it's better to write about it than to have it happen to us, right? Conclusion: Penning a story isn't danger junkie stuff because we know, in advance, how it will end: The story folks will come out dead or OK or in love.

Now, here's a way we are danger junkies. Or masochists. We know our work, when it debuts, is going to be remarked upon, judged, and rated in a slew of magazines, newspapers, websites, and newsletters. And yet we continue to put works out there. Amazing.

We repeatedly expose our hearts and souls to the barrage of slings and arrows we know are going to be slung and shot by every (insert vivid noun of your choice here) with a public forum. Now, folks, you just have to be hopped up on something to keep doing that. OK, we are. Here, memorize this (it helps): “The fact that I have engaged in the act of literary creation is far superior to what any reviewer or critic (or my/your mom) has to say about it.”

Here's more. If we weren't danger junkies, we'd

sell only one book just to prove we could, and then be done with it. You know, I detest those wretchedly cheerful souls who've done exactly that. You know the sort. They saw getting published as their personal Mt. Everest—approached it, climbed it, stuck a flag on it, and then winged their way down on the backs of llamas or Sherpas and now say things like “What was so hard about that?” Hate them. They are worthy only of being pushed down hard—and more than once.

So, how about it? Danger junkies? Sure we are. We're tiny little individuals going up against big corporations, the Fourth Estate, and a seething mass of public opinion on a daily, yearly basis. I like that about us. Not only do we trust, every day, when we sit down to engage in the act of creation, that it will be there, but we also get the giddies from that adrenaline rushing through our veins that tells us we are alive. We live on the edge—and we like it here. Yeah. Danger junkies.

Want to pen a Sticky Notes column of your very own? Contact me at Lookahawk@aol.com.

— **Cheryl Anne Porter**

On the edge in Tampa, FL, Cheryl sticks to her favorite things: writing, teaching writing, speaking about writing...and griping about writing.

Freedom to WRITE



**Sunday thru Tuesday
September 22-24, 2002**

**New York Marriott Marquis
Times Square, New York City**

Why come to New York City?

The Fun Reasons

Come on...New York...do I have to list the reasons? Okay, how about thirty Broadway theaters within three blocks of the Marriott Marquis? Walking distance to Fifth Avenue shopping and the Rockefeller Center. Not to mention steps away from the bustle of Times Square.

The Practical Reasons

First of all, you know it makes good business sense. Your editor is there and you've been promising yourself a trip to New York City. You can visit your publishing house, see your editor's office, shake hands with the publisher, take a peek inside the infamous conference room. You can have lunch with your editor and agent and talk career across bright, white linen. Or maybe you're in between editors? Or in between houses? Then you owe yourself this trip.

At press time, we have confirmed editors from Avon, Ballantine, HarperCollins, Kensington, New American Library, Random House, and St. Martin's Press, with more added to the list every day. We're reaching out to romance editors, of course, but also to science fiction and mystery and thriller and mainstream. And we're making it easy for them to say yes, with only a nominal charge of \$20 for refreshments. They will be there. Will you?

The Immeasurable Reasons

Maybe more important than networking is the recharging. Friends will be there: the ones you know and the ones that await you. And the Night Owl sessions are there: candid, energizing, and always thought-provoking.

The Quantifiable Reasons

In other words...how much bang will you get for your conference buck? Plenty. Think in terms of a cannon, because we're bringing in the heavy artillery. The members asked for an all-business conference and we're delivering. We have panels forming of buyers from the big chains, book club representatives, book packagers, distributors, sub-rights agents, publicity pros, sales reps, and some of the most powerful editors, agents, and publishers in the business.

You want names? How about...Bill Gollhofer, Director of Corporate Book Sales at Anderson News; Carl Lennertz of Book Sense; Michael Cader of Cader's Books and Publishers Lunch; Trident Media Group; Literary Guild Book Club. Publishers are coming. Publicists, too. We're going after Hollywood next.

These people will be there. Will you?

The Real Reason

The hardest part of my job so far has been tracking down these people (something akin to hacking into the CIA's mainframe). But once I got names and numbers, all I had to do was mention Novelists, Inc., and the resistance evaporated. Down to the last person, the problem wasn't whether they *wanted* to come, but whether they *could*. As one publisher said, "The calibre of the organization is well known by my colleagues."

So, here's the reason you haven't named yet. Maybe the reason you hadn't thought of, because you didn't know. What's your best reason for coming? Because all these people are coming to meet *You* and you and you and you...

Come to the conference thrown for you.

— **Laura Baker**

New York Conference Coordinator

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

Hang on tight, fellow Nincers, we're taking a hair-pin curve and heading into a new direction with The Buzz in the Biz—formerly known as Breaking News. Instead of examining bits and pieces of industry news, we'll be focusing on a specific event or subject of interest, via in-depth interviews with those in the know.

This month we're going to investigate agents. Successful agents who were successful editors and/or publishing administrators, prior to heading in a new direction themselves.

Why the change of career path? Why do so many editors eventually become agents? And does their initial connection with the publishing world give them a leg up on the agenting chain, enabling them to better represent their authors?

Let's find out from some top-notch masters of the game, with publishing savvy to spare:

BATTER UP!

Karen Solem is a familiar name, and with good reason. She's been in publishing for over 30 years now, the last seven spent as an agent. After a six-year stint at Writer's House, Karen recently opened her own agency, Spencerhill Associates, Ltd., located in Chatham, New York. When contacted by *NINK* to learn more, here's what she had to say:

NINK: Karen, can you give us a brief bio with your editorial credentials?

Karen Solem: Most of my time in publishing—over 30 years—has actually been spent on the other side of the desk. I was intrinsically involved with the launch of Silhouette and many of their lines before assuming the position of Associate Publisher and Editor-In-Chief at Harper-Paperbacks. After so many years in the corporate environment, I was ready for a change. Becoming an agent allowed me more personal flexibility and I was able to completely be the authors' advocate, something I wasn't always able to do in my administrative capacity. It was a good decision. I love what I do.

NINK: Why did you decide to leave Writer's House and strike out on your own?

KS: Writer's House is a wonderful agency, so my decision was based more on logistics. I was commuting several times a week and working a lot at my country home, but the business started taking over my personal space, which made a convenient, outside office seem logical. It didn't make sense, though, to have two offices and already I was having trouble with putting my hands on what I needed with some of it here and some of it there. In the end, I decided to open my own agency. Not only did it simplify my life, it was fiscally more to my benefit not to

have to split my commissions with Writer's House.

NINK: Do you have any associates working with you now?

KS: I have an assistant to help in the office, but no associates at this time. Maybe sometime in the future I'll consider it.

NINK: What do you think sets you apart from the competition?

KS: That's a good question...I like to think I'm reasonably aggressive, I try not to get over-extended and neglect any of my authors...but I have a lot of respect for my fellow agents and can't say I'm so much better than someone else. I just try to be dedicated and focused, and do my best for a client.

NINK: Who are some of your authors, what kind of books do you represent, and are you accepting new clients at this time?

KS: I hate to leave anyone out, but a few of my authors include Leanne Banks, Elizabeth Boyle, Jeanne Savery Casstevens, and Mary Alice Kruesi. I'm partial to commercial fiction, particularly women's fiction, but there are all sorts of genres I represent. I have a great male thriller author I'm really excited about, and mystery authors, and I have a client who writes inspirational books. As for taking on new clients, I'm certainly open to that, but I don't want to take on too much and be unable to focus on the authors I already have.

NINK: Where would you like to see yourself professionally in five years?

KS: Doing the same thing. But I'd like to have more *NY Times* bestsellers, more hard covers, and see my authors grow. That's what I've enjoyed most about being an agent, seeing how my clients have developed and grown in their writing ability—and in their professional success.

NEXT PLAYER!

Second up to bat is **Nancy Yost**. Nancy first came to New York with aspirations as an opera singer, only to have her hopes trampled in a very tough profession. The experience gave her a true empathy with the plight of other artists, which probably has a lot to do with the special rapport she has with writers. Many would agree it's been to their benefit that Nancy traded in her dreams for the operatic stage to pursue a career in publishing. She began with a one-and-a-half-year stint in contracts at Random House, then went on to Avon where she worked her way up from editorial assistant to editor. After four years at Avon, she decided to give agenting a try. Twelve years later she's still at Lowenstein Associates, and she's still all about writers.

NINK: Your career was promising at Avon, Nancy, so why did you decide to make the switch?

Nancy Yost: A couple of reasons. Some publishing houses are more nurturing than others, and



The Buzz.....



Avon was very nurturing. Avon was the best and it's still a good place, but the dynamics began to change. At the end of the day I found the editorial capacity to be somewhat restricting and it felt a little like hitting the glass ceiling. I wanted to branch out. I wanted to explore kinds of books that Avon, at the time, didn't want to do. When I became an agent I had so much more freedom.

NINK: *What kind of freedom?*

NY: I could be more my own boss, I could decide which authors and books I really wanted to work with, which isn't always the case as an editor. I could be totally the author's advocate instead of being caught in the middle. An agent has a lot less "no" men to deal with. I love being an agent. I can pretty much do what I want to do (laughs)—like ignore authority!

NINK: *It doesn't sound like you miss your old job too much.*

NY: I missed certain people when I left—that was the hardest part. And there are some things I still miss, such as working on a book from beginning to end, being totally involved in the publishing process. The editorial meetings were great, too. It was really neat to sit in some of those meetings, to trade ideas and associate with bright people in the know.

NINK: *Do you think the authors you represent benefit from those past associations?*

NY: Yes, very much so. We can speak the same language, I know their standards, and we know each other's tastes. Editors tend to be appreciative when an agent knows what's going on from both ends since it can make their job easier and you can form more efficient teams. Besides all that, having an editorial background give you a sense from the very beginning of what things are worth, how the publishing system works, which battles to fight and what's not worth fighting over, so you don't waste goodwill.

NINK: *Which profession would you say is more stressful?*

NY: Editing is absolutely more stressful. There's never enough time to get it all done, whereas agents have more control over the pace they want to set for themselves. Even when they love what they do, editors can be overwhelmed, pulled from so many directions. An agent has a lot more autonomy. And they can make a lot more money.

NINK: *What sort of books do you gravitate to, and are you taking new clients?*

NY: Thrillers, suspense, historical novels, books like *Bridget Jones' Diary* that are smart but light, I lean towards all those. I'm very interested in the women's market and strong characters are a must. As for new clients, I never say I'm not looking. I'd definitely be interested in speaking to any Novelists, Inc. members, although I'm taking on very few authors now. I don't want to spread myself too

thin. My authors are very important to me and my first priority is taking care of them.

THIRD UP TO BAT IS...

Damaris Rowland had 20 years of publishing experience prior to becoming an agent. In league with Steve Axelrod, she established her own agency from the get-go, and just as she did in her editorial salad days, paid her dues before hitting the top. In 1974, Damaris started out as a gopher at Bantam, then went on to spend three years at Ace Books, mostly editing Westerns. It was there that she had the opportunity to edit Francine Rivers's *Rebel in His Arms*. It was her first taste of romance and she fell in love. On to Jove Damaris went, for a stretch of nearly nine years before moving on to Dell. She spent four years there, rising to the rank of Associate Publisher of Women's Fiction.

Speaking of "women's fiction," the esteemed Ms. Rowland is credited with coining the term. After her author, LaVyrle Spencer, came out with *The Gamble* and *Morning Glory*, which hit the *NY Times* list, Damaris sent a memo to the powers-that-be, saying they couldn't call such books romance anymore. She felt they formed a bigger umbrella in substance and style, and "women's fiction" best described it. Now that she represents women's fiction and more—much more—let's find out what Damaris has to say about sitting on the other side of the negotiating table:

NINK: *After so many successful years in editorial and administrative capacities, what was the impetus to become an agent?*

Damaris Rowland: I had given some thought to becoming an agent several years before I actually did. When the thought first crossed my mind, I casually mentioned it to Steve Axelrod over lunch and he jumped on the idea. Then after I was laid off from Dell, I became a lot more serious about it, and after I made another mention to Steve, he wouldn't leave me alone! Finally I decided to take the leap...only I didn't have the money to do it.

NINK: *But you did. And how! Only, how did you do it without the funds to start a new business?*

DR: This is a great story. Shortly after I'd made my decision, LaVyrle Spencer was in town to publicize a new release and she wanted to get together. I told her what I intended to do and without knowing my situation, she immediately said, "Oh great! I'll help you." And she did. She loaned me the start-up money. I paid her back quickly. But I had to sub-let our home in New York and take up residence at our summer place in Vermont since I couldn't afford the house payment until the business took off. After two years in Vermont, I was able to move back to New York. That was 1996.

NINK: *What was it initially like to be on the other end of the wheeling and dealing?*

DR: At first it was scary. But once I dove in, I took to agenting like a duck to water. I felt very at home, it just felt natural to speak on behalf of authors. I discovered that I love to negotiate, to broker new deals, and it's a joy to see

the authors I represent hit the *Times* list. As it turned out, when one door closed, another one opened, and the minute I walked through...I knew.

NINK: *Knew what?*

DR: For me, *this* is what I was meant to be. An agent.

NINK: *You say that with such passion.*

DR: I love what I do. I'm always learning something new and Steve has taught me so much. He's great at what he does and he's been so good to me, he's just wonderful. Maybe that's why the highest compliment I ever received was when he spoke at a conference and said that I "negotiated like a pit bull." This comment came fairly early in my new career, after I negotiated a deal for a respected author who had been out of the loop for awhile.

NINK: *Wow. High praise indeed, coming from someone like Steve—who, as I recall, worked on the other end of publishing himself before becoming an agent. Why do you think so many editors become agents?*

DR: People get laid off and the business is contracting. Becoming an agent is a way to use your experience in a new way.

NINK: *Apparently you found your niche in agenting, but don't you miss working at a publishing house, even a little bit?*

DR: No. Absolutely not. As an editor you're the middle man, caught between an agent and a publisher. This is a hard position for an editor, especially when she cares about an author. As an agent, I can be a full advocate for my authors. I find that much more fulfilling. And lucrative.

NINK: *How lucrative?*

DR: I make three times as much being an agent as I ever did in publishing administration.

NINK: *Do you agent any authors who you once edited?*

DR: Yes, Karen Robards. I edited her at Dell.

NINK: *Are you accepting new clients?*

DR: In a very selective way.

NINK: *If you could give a fledgling editor any advice, what would it be?*

DR: Just as we agents are always saying how important it is for authors to develop their voice, so is it equally important for editors to develop "their taste" by which I mean read widely, and come to learn the type of book you really, really love. You'll be known for just what sort of book turns you on as the years go by, and you'll be your lucky authors' most ardent champion.

HEERE'S OUR PINCH HITTER!

Andrea Cirillo of the Jane Rotrosen Agency slides in with a few comments of her own: "After four and a half years in editing, I became an agent. Why? The need to grow, which I would have considered doing in another editorial job but nothing good was available.

"At first it was somewhat intimidating because I didn't have enough training in contracts. Editors only

needed to know the basics. Yet my experience as an editor has been invaluable to me as an agent. The editorial content of what I represent is the most important aspect. The stronger it is, the better chance for success it has. As for why so many editors decide to become agents...to me, it's doing a very similar job but with much more autonomy, influence, and satisfying results."

AND THE AUTHORS GO WILD!

So, do editors-turned-agents strike out, or do they score a home run with the authors they represent? That question was posed on our Ninlink, and according to the authors who responded, the answer is a resounding *yes*. Here are a few of the replies:

"...I think all that experience helps in a variety of ways, from understanding a writer's problems to knowing what editors look for and then how to get it to them. Experience counts." — **Jeanne Savery Casstevens**

"My agent was an editor at Berkeley before he quit to make real money. So far, he's gotten me better deals than my previous agent...(and) I think the experience as an editor really does help him deal with the publishing house mentality." — **Jodie Larsen**

"My agent is a former editor, and yes, I believe it's helpful in that he knows exactly what goes on in a publishing house, he understands the business, and yes, the personal contacts are important. I think when editors get a submission from him, they take him more seriously because of his former editor status." — **Carole Bellacera**

"Yes, I do think his experience (as an editor) enhances his agenting skills and he has oodles of contacts in the industry. You can trust and rely on him, he's courteous and kind. I think he's guiding my career with skill."

— **Sherry-Anne Jacobs**

And **Vicki/Victoria Thompson** sums it up like this: "There are several things I've found to be very advantageous about having a former ed as an agent. She can think like an editor; this means she knows exactly why eds and publishers do the things they do, and she explains to me the reason and helps me strategize to get around it.

"She can tell me what's wrong with a manuscript and how to fix it. My other agents knew when something wasn't right, but they couldn't always help me fix it. They just weren't editors." **NINK**

Olivia Rupprecht thanks the many contributors to this column. She hopes the readers of NINK enjoy the new Biz format and welcomes suggestions for future topics—and people—to explore.



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“Back in the Day”

My friend Sheila lives in a beautifully renovated, three-floor, Victorian townhouse in Chelsea, an upscale neighborhood of London. When a French sf/f con comflew me over to Europe for “Utopia” last fall, to eat all their food, drink all their wine, and do virtually nothing in return, I had the airplane drop me off in London first, where I stayed with Sheila for a while.

I lived in London for three years in the mid-1980s, and it remains one of my favorite cities in the world. And since I have friends located all over the country, I really enjoy visiting the UK when I get the chance. Sheila, however, is not actually a friend from my London days. She’s an American, like me. We met when we were both twenty-one, broke, and living in New York City.

Back then, Sheila and I both worked for a little import-export company peopled by a bizarre cast of characters. Our chain-smoking, White Russian boss was volatile and clearly crazy. I always thought his well-dressed Egyptian partner seemed more like a high-level assassin than a businessman.

I was hired to assist a jet-setting, multi-lingual Englishman who went to the Italian Alps and the Egyptian pyramids on his weekends. From New York.

Sheila was the assistant of a soft-spoken guy who had fled Cuba when the Russians got interested in taking him to Moscow to study at some sort of academy for making bigger and better nuclear weapons.

Our receptionist was a refugee from El Salvador, born to an illiterate housemaid and the upper-class playboy who’d had his way with her. The company’s beautiful French-Japanese comptroller had an assistant who was an Afghan aristocrat in exile. The incredibly well-dressed Chinese woman who shared my alcove fought loudly on the phone almost every day with her husband.

In the highly dysfunctional atmosphere of this exotic intercultural business with failing finances, Sheila and I, a couple of middle-class Midwestern kids fresh out of col-

lege, became friends and stuck together.

Sheila and her roommate lived in a one-bedroom fifth-floor walk-up which had a bathtub in the kitchen. I had a variety of roommates and a variety of apartments—culminating in a sixth-floor walk-up (yes: six floors, no elevator) where the hot water regularly ran out. I subletted the place from a stage manager, and I shared it with a model who was seldom there. Since rent and other expenses in New York were so high, Sheila and I both had second jobs in restaurants on the weekends; I worked in a place with two enormous scowling bouncers (one of whom was a pre-school teacher in his day job).

Within a year, I abandoned New York for Europe. Later, of course, I eventually returned to Ohio and became a novelist. Sheila eventually left the import-export firm for a better job, then later left New York to get her MBA at Georgetown University (my alma mater, where I studied languages and linguistics—thereby enabling me to make friends in bars all over the world).

Now, years later, Sheila has a career in finance. I don’t know what she does exactly (even though she’s explained it to me several times), but I assume she must be pretty good at it, since she’s been promoted to posts in Belgium, Ireland, and England, she currently lives in an enormous flat in a fashionable borough, and she drives a car so nice you could eat off it.

Now, whenever Sheila and I get together, we marvel all over again at the joy of no longer climbing six flights of stairs at the end of each day, no longer showering in the kitchen, and no longer waiting tables on the weekends. Yes, getting older has its compensations. In the spring of 1984, I was a penniless secretary/waitress with incredibly tired legs. In the autumn of 2001, I was an award-winning professional writer lolling around Sheila’s luxurious London flat while a French convention picked up the tab for my trans-Atlantic trip. Who says my life ain’t working out?

Anyhow, I had a wonderful time in London in Octo-

ber. It was my first visit there in six years. I spent time with Sheila, reacquainted myself with the city of my delightfully misspent youth, caught up with old friends and their families, attended world-class art exhibitions, saw first-rate theatrical performances, and haunted the halls of some of the most extraordinary museums on the planet. I had such fun that I decided I mustn't let nearly so much time pass before I visited again. Sheila generously assured me that I am welcome to stay with her anytime the guest room is empty.

So when she e-mailed me a few days ago to say she's being transferred Stateside later this year, I decided to try to squeeze in another visit to her over there this spring. After all, I had recently sold two books, and I could afford the trip, thanks to the nice raise my agent had negotiated for me. A springtime visit to London seemed like the perfect way to celebrate!

Within twenty-four hours, though, I was forced to abandon these plans, go on a diet of bread and water, and contemplate taking up highway robbery as a secondary profession.

I'm sure you'll understand the evil implications when I say: I received my tax bill.

Have I used the words "pirates, rapists, and thieves" lately? If not, let's revive them now.

I know, I know, you thought I might actually get through a whole year without ranting about the IRS. Oh, please. Did you also think the sun would rise in the west, rain would fall upwards, and they'd finally finish repairs on Interstate 75?

As if.

In *Thus Was Adonis Murdered*, a British mystery novel by the late Sarah Caudwell, one of the characters—a tax attorney, like Caudwell herself—finds herself stuck in a vicious cycle. Each year, she's hit with such a heavy tax bill that she must work longer hours and earn more money in order to pay it. The resultant increase in her income ensures that the following year's tax bill is even bigger, thereby requiring her to further increase her income in order to pay it, which thus results in the following year's tax bill being even bigger due to the increase in her earnings, and so on and so forth.

Where will it all end? the desperate character wonders.

I, too, will need to make more money now in order to cover the unforeseen size of this year's tax bill. That means that I, too, will find next year's tax bill even bigger than this year's, and will have to earn even more next year to pay it. And so on and so forth.

Like the character in Caudwell's novel, I now find myself thinking it was probably a mistake ever to begin paying taxes in the first place. It has led to the IRS taking shameless advantage of me ever since.

Nine member Valerie Taylor comes over for lunch and finds me moping about my tax bill, which I've received

that morning. I'm so traumatized by the experience that it will probably be weeks before I can bring myself to open the mailbox again. I advise Val to enjoy the food on my table while it lasts, since I obviously won't be buying any more this year.

She comes up with a whimsical proposal for a taxation scheme whereby artists, writers, and musicians whose annual income is below a certain level would not be required to pay income tax. This system, she explains, would be an equitable exchange for choosing to subsist below a certain income level in favor of pursuing one's art.

Having listened to her attempt to cheer me up with such lighthearted distraction, I now open a bottle and pour myself a very big glass of wine.

The scheme would be redundant, anyhow. Statistically speaking, I remind Val, the average writer in this country doesn't earn enough to be taxed on his writing income. Well, not taxed seriously. Not taxed the way *I* am being taxed, for example. Not taxed to the extent that he may have to go get a part-time job to pay the tax bill on his full-time writing income. Not taxed to the extent that he has to abandon plans to upgrade the computer equipment he uses in his writing career. Not taxed to the extent that he wonders if he'll have to sell an additional book this year to make up for the mistake of having sold one last year, and then sell two additional books next year to make up for the mistake of having sold an additional one this year. Not taxed to the extent that his vacation plans were smothered at birth!

Having listened to me, Val pours herself a very big glass of wine.

That night, CNN does a feature on a theatrical production I dearly want to see.

It's showing in London.

In fact, it was theatre which took me to London in the first place. Back in the day, I thought I wanted to be an actress. So I auditioned and got accepted to a post-graduate course at a London drama school and thereby wound up moving overseas. I chose to study in England because I had always admired British actors so much—particularly upon seeing them on-stage when I was living in New York. (We used to line up at a half-price ticket booth after work to get cheap same-day seats.)

Well, acting's an even harder life than writing, and I'm not the only one of my fellow students from the academy to wind up in another profession. Several of them did become successful working actors, but others, like me, found their true calling elsewhere. Despite my love-hate relationship with writing, after I sold a book I never once looked back at the acting dreams I'd abandoned. I am so suited to this work, and so unsuited to the work I once thought I wanted to do. I found my true profession early in life, and even I know enough to be grateful for that.

Nonetheless, it's fair to say that studying acting taught me most of what I know about characterization and





THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

▶ ▶ ▶ dialogue as a writer. There are other things—such as conflict, structure, and pace—which I knew nothing about when I sold my first book and had to study hard to learn on the job, so to speak. But the intense focus that my drama training gave to character development, intention, motivation, subtext, backstory, action, reaction, and interaction, and to all the different ways of delivering dialogue and the different meanings it could convey—whether post-modern surrealism, or classic verse, or naturalism—taught me a great deal that I was able to translate into my work as a writer without missing a beat. Acting taught me to get inside the skin, minds, and hearts of a broad variety of characters—which is, of course, what a good writer has to learn to do.

I've never gotten inside the skin, mind, and heart of an IRS agent, though. Even in my art, there are limits past which I will not go.

My tax bill sits beside me as I write this. It's tucked inside the dull, plain, conservative blue folder in which my accountant delivers the bad news every year. "Dull, plain, and conservative" is, I have always been told, more or less what one wants in an accountant, so I find the color of the envelope reassuring, even though its presence on my desk is somehow reminiscent of a sleeping viper.

I looked at it once when it arrived. Immediately felt hot, faint, and queasy. Fell into a depression. Nearly suc-

cumbed to tears. Drank a little too much wine with lunch. Since then, I've been doing things like turning off all the lights, walking instead of using gas by taking the car, and rinsing Ziplock® bags for reuse instead of throwing them away as if I could afford such careless waste.

At some point, of course, I will have to pull out the envelope, thoroughly read my tax returns, sign them... and then write a check to the IRS. I must do so by April 15, of course; the IRS has persecuted me so many times for late payment, even though I have never once paid late, that I don't dare *actually* pay late. I have a shrewd suspicion that if I did so, they'd bypass all the usual threatening letters and simply send a hit man after me.

At some point, yes, I will have to write that check.

For now, though, the blue folder sits on my desk, silently condemning. A mute reminder of all the money which is suddenly no longer mine. Wordlessly goading me with the knowledge that the better my career gets and the more I earn... the more the IRS will make me suffer for it.

Where will it all end? the desperate novelist wonders.

Laura Resnick's next novel, the 445,000-word opus In Fire Forged, is scheduled for release in June, 2003. She recently sold two more fantasy novels to Tor Books, and she has instructed them to send all her money directly to the IRS in future, in order to save time.

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