

The Desperation of Desire

BY CAROLE BELLACERA

When Michelle Kwan lost the gold medal in the Winter Olympics, my heart broke right along with hers. Not because she deserved to win. She didn't. Sarah Hughes out-skated her, hands down. Michelle knew it. The judges knew it. America knew it. Her face said it all as she smiled bravely when the national anthem was played—not for her, but for a fellow American. And I understood her pain. Because I know what it's like to want something so desperately that you can almost taste it, and I also know what it's like to suffer the crushing disappointment of not getting it. Watching the public heartbreak of Michelle Kwan brought to mind another Winter Olympics eight years ago and another moment, this one on the other end of the emotional spectrum.

Remember speed skater Dan Jansen? Distraught by the death of his sister, he fell in races in which he was the favorite in the 1988 Winter Olympics. And in 1992 in Albertville, he fell in the 500m and didn't attempt the 1,000m. Two years later in Lillehammer, he was going to try again, and the desperation of his desire was evident for all to see.

Well, most of you probably know what happened. In his first race in Lillehammer, the 500m, he suffered another devastating fall. There was only one more chance to make his dream come true—in the 1,000m race. And finally, it happened. When Dan crossed that finish

line, breaking his world record, he won the gold medal. I was thrilled for him, jumping up and down in my living room as if he were my own son. You see, as a struggling writer, I identified with Dan Jansen. I, too, had a dream, not of winning a gold medal, but of getting a novel published. Little did I know at that time that I was still five long years away from that cherished goal. But Dan Jansen's triumph inspired me. Gave me hope.

Moments after his jubilant victory, I wrote an essay in the form of a letter to him. It went something like this:

February 18, 1994

Dear Dan Jansen:

Is victory sweeter for all the disappointments you've suffered? Look, I'm not just another jaded reporter asking one of her "off-the-top-of-the-head-let-me-get-the-best-quote" questions. I really want to know.

Because, Dan, on Monday when another "sure thing" became a lost cause for you, I cried. I cried for you, for your wife, Robin, for your relatives, for America's disappointment, but most of all, I cried for myself. Because I understood what it felt like for you.

Time after time, you went for the gold medal, and time after time, you fell short. It wasn't that you weren't good enough. No, you'd proved many times that you were the best in the world. You broke world records. You won World Cups and championships. But the Olympics defeated you every time.

I can identify.

No, I'm not an athlete. I'm a writer. Some people say I'm a successful writer. I started writing professionally eight years ago and to date, I've had over 100 short stories and articles appear in literary and slick magazines in America, Ireland, the UK, Canada, Australia, Germany, and Fiji. I've won prizes for my fiction—from first place in prestigious literary magazines to an honorable mention in *Writer's Digest's* short story awards competition.

I'm a talented writer. I know it, but Dan, like you, I was beginning to think I wasn't going to get my gold medal—that it's just not meant to be. You see, I've written two novels, and I'm at work on my third. I've poured heart and soul into those books. I want, more than anything in the world, to be a published novelist. Until I am, I won't consider myself a success.

Yet, after four years, three agents, and many revisions, I sometimes don't feel any closer to realizing my dream than I did at the beginning. Oh, there have been some glowing rejections from major hardcover houses, but in the end, the only thing they add up to is another "no, thanks."

So, Dan, as you skated on Monday and lost, yet again, I relived my heartbreak through your own. I *know* how much it hurts to want something *so badly*, and come *so close*, and still lose. It's agony.

And then, today arrived—your final chance to get that gold medal. When Charles Kuralt interviewed Robin before

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE.....

We are communicators.

This may seem an obvious thing to say, but looking around at what's happening in our world today, I'm not certain we realize the importance of our abilities. I'm not finger-pointing, because I'm as guilty of neglecting or ignoring my responsibility as anyone else.

As communicators, we have a responsibility to explain ourselves clearly. On the whole, most Nincoids (I'm still grinning over this choice of sobriquet, so bear with me) are excellent at this. We've avoided some of the more outlandish free-for-alls that have occurred in other writers' groups, not because we all agree, but because we're willing to choose our words carefully. We don't always *listen* carefully before we jump on our soapboxes, but once we're up there, we're quite eloquent without stomping toes. This is the essence of communicative responsibility—rational disagreement without slander.

And maybe, once we get our explosive outbursts off our chests, our members stop and listen to the responses with more care than those members of other groups who seem to hear only their own points of view. Knock wood.

I can't speak on how we behave outside this group because I don't know everyone individually, but I'd like to believe we carry our abilities to communicate into our everyday lives. It is up to us—the verbal people—to explain, clarify, and otherwise make comprehensible the immense fabric of society to those who know math or bricks or children but who don't possess our ability to communicate their knowledge. Some of us teach our skills. Others use them in journalism to explain the wider world. Many of us simply apply them in our work in hopes of reaching readers.

But as *Spiderman* preaches, with power comes responsibility. We may judge the amount of responsibility we assume by the amount of power we believe we have, but I believe we have far more power than we give ourselves credit for. With our abilities to write evocative letters, we could all join together and create a campaign to lobby publishers for fair payment of book club and foreign right royalties (never see royalties for those sales on your statements? There's a reason for that.). We could petition Congress for fair health insurance laws. And my evil imp says we could all decide on a subject and weave it into our stories this year until it becomes part of the collective unconscious and society demands change.

I'm not saying we can accomplish everything we set out to do, but if we don't do it, who will?

— **Pat Rice**

Your NINK editor is pleased to announce that our collective creativity is still running high. Several of you sent in suggestions as to what we should call the members of our organization. The winning suggestion of Nincoids (I'm smiling as I write) was submitted by Dallas Schultze, who is now the proud winner of \$10. She has promised not to permit this unexpected windfall go to her head. I invite my fellow Nincoids to join me in congratulating Dallas on her great suggestion. — **JC**

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 15 days of this NINK issue, these authors shall be accepted as members of Ninc:

New Applicants:

Catherine Asaro, Columbia, MD
 Jacqueline Carey, Douglas, MI
 Barbara Daly, New York, NY
 Winnie Griggs, Plain Dealing, LA
 Candace Irvin, Conway, AR
 Trish Jensen (*Trish Graves*),
 Reedsville, PA
 Virginia Kantra, Raleigh, NC
 Julie Leto Klapka (*Julie Elizabeth Leto*),
 Tampa, FL
 Laura Phillips, Kearney, MO
 JoAnn Ross (*JoAnn Robb*), Knoxville, TN
 Mica Stone (*Alison Kent*), Katy, TX
 Jeanne Sumerix, Wolverine, MI
 Sydel I Voeller, Forest Grove, OR
 Peggy Webb, Mooreville, MS

New Members:

Lisette Belisle, Ballston Lake, NY
 Karen Drogin (*Carly Phillips*),
 Purchase, NY
 Randi Dufresne (*Elizabeth Ashtree*),
 Elkridge, MD
 Katherine Grill (*Katherine Greyle*),
 Champaign, IL
 Gwen Kirkwood (*Lynn Granger*),
 Dumfries, Scotland
 Mary Lesak, Fenelon Falls, Ontario,
 Canada
 Jane Malcolm, Heber, AZ
 Isolde Martyn, Turrumurra, NSW,
 Australia
 Pat Nagle (*P.G. Nagle*), Albuquerque, NM
 Hope Tarr, Fredericksburg, VA

Correction:

Last month's new member should have read Tracy Sumner, not Tracy Summer

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

THE DESPERATION OF DESIRE

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the race, she tried so hard to be optimistic, but it was obvious she was scared to death. Afraid that once again, she'd have to watch you lose.

"Robin, what if, after all these years of Olympic agony," Mr. Kuralt asked, "there is, at the end of it all, a place on the podium for your husband at last, and a flag rising?"

She shook her head, and her eyes lit up with hope. "Oh, the emotion...I can only imagine the emotion. If that flag is raised for Dan...I get chills just thinking about it. It'll be the most wonderful feeling and it'll make all this that we've been through worthwhile."

As she spoke those words, I realized how I could apply them to myself. How often I have imagined that wonderful moment when the phone rings and my agent says, "Carole, we have an offer on *Border Crossings*." But then, I return to the real world, and I wonder, will it ever happen for me? Perhaps it's *not* meant to be.

But today, Dan, it happened for you. You did it! And like everyone else in America, and perhaps even in the world, I rejoiced. And again, I found myself crying, with tears of happiness this time.

So, Dan, was your victory sweeter because of all the disappointments that came before it? I think I know your answer. Yes. Oh, *yes*.

Congratulations, Dan. You believed in yourself enough to keep trying in the face of adversity, and that's what I have to do, too. If I want it bad enough, I'll fight for it. And I won't give up. Not ever. Not until I get *my* gold medal.

Thanks for the inspiration, Dan. I'm glad you won. You deserve it.

Sincerely,
 A Fellow American

Well, like Dan, I had my victory, too. I got that phone call from my agent, and on a beautiful May afternoon in 1999, I walked into Barnes & Noble, and saw my first book, *Border Crossings*, on the New Fiction shelf. Perseverance, hard work and desire won out for me, as it had for Dan Jansen.

So the other night as I watched Michelle Kwan step out on the ice, I was hoping for another happy ending. I understood the desperation of her desire. It didn't matter that she was probably the world's best skater, that she'd won World Championships and had climbed that podium many times. Nothing compared to getting that Olympic gold medal.

But it wasn't to be.

So, why was I so heartbroken for her? Because again, I identified with her desire. You see, once you achieve a dream, you don't just sit back and bask in your glory. There is always another goal to reach for. With novelists, it's bigger print runs, more money, better name recognition, awards, and of course, making the bestseller lists. The dreams never end.

But as Michelle Kwan knows, not all dreams will be realized. Not everyone can have a happy ending. That's life. I know that I probably won't realize all my dreams. I may never be awarded an Oscar for Best Screenplay and I may never see my name on the *New York Times* list. As authors, we go through dry spells, times when the books don't sell (to the public *or* to publishers), we suffer blocks, brought on by burn-out or by life-changing tragedies such as the horror of 9/11. Bad things happen, and dreams don't always come true. But I've learned a wonderful lesson from Dan Jansen and Michelle Kwan. I'll go after my dreams, and whether I get the bronze, the gold—or nothing at all—I will still be a champion.

Simply because I tried. **NINK**

In Memoriam

We note with regret the death of fellow Ninc member Ellen Magner Tatarta, who died on February 14, 2002. She published 17 romance novels under the pen name Lee Magner.

THE ULTIMATE HOW-TO BOOK FOR BUILDING BELIEVABLE CHARACTERS

BY KATHY LYNN EMERSON

I have to begin with a confession. I don't own many writing books. I invariably suffer a crisis of self-confidence when I attempt to follow advice in how-to books. I don't know how I do what I do, but I've learned that when it's working, I should not mess with it. In particular, I should not try to analyze it.

That said, last year I discovered a wonderful resource for writers in Linda N. Edelstein's *The Writer's Guide to Character Traits* (Writer's Digest Books, 1999).

Creating believable characters is always a challenge, especially when their actions don't seem to make a lot of sense, and this book helps the process by providing easily understood summaries of a number of what the author terms character "styles."

The chapter titles—"Adult Styles," "Child and Adolescent Types," "Psychological Disorders," "Criminal Styles," "Sexual Styles," "Love and Marriage," "Turn of Events," "Physical Disorders," "Career Traits," "Group Influences," and "Nonverbal and Verbal Communication"—give a pretty good indication of what is included. In addition, the last chapter is "The Big Index."

Dr. Edelstein is a practicing psychologist and an associate professor at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. She knows her stuff, but she also knows how to present it in a useful format. Obviously, understanding character traits can help make characters in any type of novel more believable, but let me give a specific example by telling you how I first used this book.

At the time, I was about midway through a mystery novel which revolves around an actual historical event, a rebellion against Queen Elizabeth I in 1569. I was having difficulty distinguishing between two important secondary characters, a task complicated by the fact that

these real women had far too many similarities. I wanted to give each a distinct personality, but not at the expense of historical accuracy. I was stuck with certain details, some of which seemed at best contradictory and at worst totally irrational.

Jane Howard, countess of Westmorland (1537-1593), was the wife of Charles Neville, 6th earl of Westmorland (1543-1601). The oldest of the four sisters of the 4th duke of Norfolk (x. 1572), she was well educated, in part by Protestant tutors, although the rebellion of 1569 was launched to restore the Catholic faith to England. She read Greek and Latin and wrote poetry. She had four daughters, ages unknown, but does not seem to have worried much about their welfare.

During the uprising, she rode with the troops, "a woman of spirit" the records say, but when the rebellion began to lose steam, she abandoned her husband. When it failed and he fled England for the Continent, she stayed behind and petitioned the queen for a pardon, claiming she was innocent of any treason. This was patently untrue.

At one point only her arguments kept the rebels from disbanding. At another she cursed her brother for a fool when he advised them to abandon their plans.

Lady Westmorland was the more outspoken of the two characters I had to develop and she left several sound bites behind. Unfortunately, they seemed to paint a contradictory picture of her personality.

The second character was Anne Somerset, countess of Northumberland (d. 1591). Like Lady Westmorland, she had four daughters. She bore another nine months after the rebellion began. Described as "beautiful and spirited," she is said to have been devoted to her husband, Thomas Percy, 7th earl of Northumberland (1528-1572), in spite of the fact that he was known as "Simple Tom."

During the rebellion, she "rode up and down with the army" and inspired romantic stories with her flight over the

border into Scotland after the rebellion failed.

History records that both countesses were "stouter" than their husbands.

What I've recounted here is virtually all that is known about these two women, and yet I had to find a way to make them distinct personalities. Research helped me figure out what made them willing to commit treason in the first place, but why were they so determined to go on well after their husbands faltered? More important, why did one go into exile while the other threw herself on the mercy of the very queen she'd rebelled against?

It was not until I discovered Edelstein's book that I was able to find a way to make clear distinctions between these two women. The chapter on "Adult Styles" discusses traits of personality types, giving internal and external attributes of each, illustrated with anecdotes. Each is given a descriptive name—"Eccentric," "Resilient," "Ultra-Femme," and so forth.

Some are terms which are self-explanatory—"Passive-Aggressive" and "Loner" and "Show-Off"—but for each pattern of behavior, Edelstein provides a detailed explanation. As it turned out, even slight differences in their words and actions proved sufficient to classify Lady Westmorland as a "Bossy" and Lady Northumberland as an "Adventurer."

What does that mean? According to Edelstein, Lady Westmorland was defined by her tendency toward recklessness, combativeness, and rudeness. She was competitive, stubborn, closed-minded, mistrustful, easily frustrated, undeterred by punishment or pain, and looking for status. A "bossy" is someone good at coercion and able to use others' weaknesses, someone who avoids intimacy, seeing others as puppets, someone who is thick-skinned but sensitive to attacks on herself.

An "adventurer," on the other hand, is someone who is bold, energetic, and needs excitement. Like a "bossy," she wants her own way and is unaware of oth-

ers' feelings. She is not bothered by rules or social conventions. She can be forceful, ruthless, impulsive, and thick-skinned. But it is over-confidence, not a craving for control, that causes her to exhibit poor judgment. Impulsive decisions are what lead to danger to herself and others. And, unlike the "bossy," the "adventurer" has a wide circle of friends.

In my fictionalized version of her life, Lady Northumberland runs roughshod over her household, ignoring the feelings of others, but she is also, as Edelstein indicates she should be, fun-loving, gregarious, entertaining, daring, and overtly interested in sex. Lady Westmorland is much more dangerously unstable. Once I felt I understood why these women behaved as they did in reality, I was able to create fictional scenes in which the words and actions of each re-

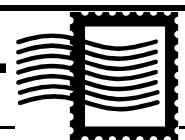
main both consistent and distinctive. Even some of their more irrational real-life behavior is now understandable.

I've consulted Edelstein's book often since then, in particular to help me develop the continuing character of Rosamond, whose first appearance was as a child of two. About two years pass between events in each book in my mystery series. By the time I encountered Edelstein's book, Rosamond was six and had established a few distinctive behavior patterns, mostly of the spoiled brat variety. I immediately saw that she fit the profile of the "hyper" style, but by also taking into account the traits associated with her age group, in particular the list of fears common to children aged 6-12, and the typical reactions to family situation (number of siblings,

relationship with parents, etc.), I've gained a great deal more insight into her behavior. Since I have never had children of my own, I can use all the help I can get. As I work on my current WIP, in which Rosamond is twelve, I'm bravely writing a few scenes in her pov. Edelstein's book is never out of reach. My experience with *The Writer's Guide to Character Traits* by Linda N. Edelstein has all been positive. Any writer striving to create well-rounded, if not necessarily well-adjusted, characters, will find this a worthwhile addition to the how-to bookshelf.

Kathy Lynn Emerson's Face Down Before Rebel Hooves was published in 2001. Her most recent Lady Appleton Mystery is Face Down Across the Western Sea.

LETTER(S) TO NINK.....



Even in this online age—with Ninlink—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.

Close Encounters of the Tax Kind

This is in response to our Comely Curmudgeon's column in the April 2002 issue (hi Laura!).

I was taught a pretty simple way to manage one's funds as a self-employed person, and since I put it into practice, I've never come up short at tax time again.

Set up three accounts at your bank—one regular checking, but *two* saving accounts. The first savings account is your regular household/living expenses account. Label the second one your escrow or tax account, or whatever name pleases you.

Every check that comes in—*every* one, no matter how small—gets split between the two accounts when you deposit it. Since I fund both my taxes and my SEP pension out of my escrow account, I split my checks 50-50. It's almost certain you'll need to split off at least one-third of every check into escrow.

(I also photocopy my checks before deposit and paste 'em in a running file. A trifle obsessive, maybe, but it has several times helped me to track mistakes, and you should have seen the mortgage officer's eyes light up when I dragged it out to prove my income when I was applying for my mortgage, always a slightly dicey proposition for the self-employed. Absolute documentation, yay!)

You live out of your household account, and when it hits bottom, you're broke. The second account is inviolable—that's

not your money, it's Uncle's, you just get to look at it for three months till the next quarterly tax bill comes due. And don't whine to your friends with day jobs—they have to give up *their* money every week.

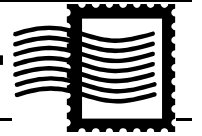
If, at the end of the year, you come out a little ahead (and you should set up your self-deduction so you do), congratulations: you can give yourself a tax refund *and* the interest it earned. Use it to start, build up, or restore your laddered CDs....

Phase Two: as soon as you can, start setting up a ladder of three 3-month CDs to hold your reserve funds, over and above the couple of months worth that should be in your regular saving account. That means that every month, you'll have access to a third of your reserve money (but not *too* easy of access.) I have mine set to come due a few days before my mortgage is due each month, since that's my biggest regular expense. Each CD should, for a first goal, eventually hold one month's living expenses, and for the next goal, two months. It took me a few years to get mine built up, but now I can wait out all those late publisher payments in a more sanguine frame of mind, and cover unexpected expenses if I have to.

Phase Three is funding your SEP or IRA account, but that may be a separate topic. If you don't know what a SEP is, for heaven's sake, find out. Saving in a SEP may turn out to be the biggest tax deduction you can get as a self-employed person.

All basic stuff, but *I* didn't know it till I was shown; maybe it'll help some others. (Laura, are you listening? We don't want to hear that tax rant again next year!)

— Lois McMaster Bujold



An Open Letter to My Book Editor

Dear Editor:

If I could have a few minutes of your time, I'd like to talk to you, professional to professional. I know how busy you are, and that you can ill-afford to spend many minutes reading this because you have so many tasks heaped on your head and shoulders

We authors—and in writing this, I speak for many—have had it explained to us over and over again, in graphic detail, what your lives are like. We've heard how, in addition to your professional duties, you must also endure the normal grind of day-to-day life experienced by any human being. We know your life involves spouses, children, parents, neighbors, friends, community duties, and extended family obligations. We understand about these distractions and know you must deal with them in addition to taking home our manuscripts with you on the weekends and on your vacations because you simply do not have time to do your reading in the office. Believe this: We sympathize. We understand. We wish it could be different for you, that your jobs could be easier, not so stressful, and that the pay was much better.

We've been told about the editorial meetings where you go to pitch the books you've read and loved and hope the powers that be will let you acquire them. We know that much of your time is taken up with art departments, discussions on cover-copy, working with the people from marketing, who seem to have a larger and larger say in what you can and cannot buy. You might want to purchase a ripe, red, round juicy tomato of a book, whereas the marketing people might want you to go for the one that's firmer, will fit better into the little cubical compartments in which tomatoes are now being shipped, and that the decision is taken all-too-often out of your hands, frequently to your sorrow. This we know. These things we accept, maybe not happily, but we do try to be accommodating and understanding, aware of the difficult strictures under which you must work. We, too, try to work in a manner that will accommodate the status quo.

Since we have been told many things (though probably not even one-fourth of what we should know to fully understand your problems, because editors are generally a hard-working, uncomplaining breed) we hope you'll be interested in the lives of the people who provide you with the manuscripts you read and sometimes accept then edit, and which the art department then decorates, and the marketers make an all-out effort to get it into the hands of the buying public.

Creative people, writers, are a strange group. We have, as a general rule, little or no self-confidence. We live our lives teetering on the brink of rejection, constantly second-guessing ourselves. Even as we write, there's a little voice within many of us asking, "is this the book that's finally going to show my editor how utterly stupid, untalented, and worthless I am? Is this the book that if, for some reason I'll never know, the publishing company buys and puts on store shelves, the reviewers are going to hate, scorn, and revile, the book that will earn me nothing but disdain and contempt from readers who will toss it, after three paragraphs, into the recycling bin and bad-mouth me on every mailing list from here to kingdom come? The constant fear that we will never write another coherent sentence, never sell another book, never see another advance or royalty check, and that the bank will repossess everything we've worked for is something many of us live with from day to day, however much we might try to hide the face under bravado and false confidence.

None of us that I know of think of our editors as the enemy. I, for one, have worked with many over the years of my career and by and large have developed excellent relationships with each one. Sometimes, though, it's difficult to maintain that relationship on what I feel is an even basis. Many other writers I've spoken with on this subject agree. Hence, this open letter to all of you.

We would like for every one of you to understand the way *we* work, what the writing process involves, how tender our egos are, how insecure our psyches, how thin our skins. Each time one of us sends out a piece of work, we're exposing our very soul to you and the world. There is a strange reality most of us live with—the reality of having a vivid imagination, the reality of knowing that the same imagination capable of creating captivating, charming, interesting, or terrifying characters can also create nightmare scenarios of growing old and living on the street, all our worldly goods in a rusty shopping cart, our home on a steam-grate or cardboard box in a park—with an orange plastic tarp over top if we're very, very fortunate.

Sure, we also live with the same kind of reality in the day-to-day world as you do—spouses, children, parents, neighbors, friends, community duties, and extended family obligations. At times, those other realities are as overwhelming to us as yours are to you. *But*, you might say, *what is all this to me? Everyone has problems. Everyone has worries.* You'd be right.

There are, though, a few things you, as editors, might be able to do to alleviate some of our nightmare images, to help us maintain a professional attitude in a world that, in the last five or six years, seems somehow to be skewed against the creative process.

If we write, phone, or e-mail you with a question, none (or very few of us) are so unrealistic as to expect an instant reply, though I'm sure there's not one of us alive who wouldn't whoop with delight and glow with adoration for you if it happened. A week or two would be nice, though, and would allay many worries, such as "Did my editor get my message? If so, in light of there having been no reply, does this mean she/he has as low opinion of me as I have of myself, and can't be bothered with me?"

If, by some miracle you do offer me a contract, and then send me a long, involved revision letter, do you know that if you haven't said even one nice thing about the book, I'm going to go frantic wondering why you ever bought it in the first place? Is it a cookie-cutter book? A square-tomato book? Is it something about which the marketing department said, "Grab it, then make her fix it so it'll fit better into the cubicle in the shipping crate?"

Writers, like editors, are normally a strong, hardworking and (maybe not quite as much as you are) an uncomplaining breed. Many—maybe even most—of us actually like doing revisions, knowing that working with a good editor is bound to make our book better in the long run and don't mind in the least getting such letters. Still, a little bit of stroking on your part can go a long, long way to keeping us content and creative. Therein lies the hard part of writing: Without some positive feedback from you, our beloved editors, we tend to pull in on ourselves, worry, get depressed, live with angst that stultifies our creativity all too quickly and easily, for it is a fragile thing, indeed.

Even a quick note or e-mail saying, "Hi, I got your query letter/proposal/manuscript/question, but am snowed under right now, and will get back to you ASAP," would be of enormous value. Especially if you *do* follow up on it. ASAP. And that "As Soon As Possible" isn't months away so we begin to think, again, you've forgotten we exist—or even worse, wish we didn't.

Most of us, when we've sent something out, are well aware that it might be months, even years for it to work its way through the system, before we get a positive or negative response as to the story's viability. Most of us have learned to live with that, if not to like it. Not many people except those who go in for extreme sports like living on the edge—maybe writing is turning into an extreme sport. No one who regularly gets a paycheck every two weeks can possibly know what it's like to wait and wait and wait, and wonder and wonder and wonder: Can I pay the rent or mortgage this month? Will my kids be permanently, psychologically damaged by growing up with crooked teeth because I can't afford an orthodontist? Are we going to *eat* this week? That's living on the edge. That's the writing life. It's a life we've chosen—or one that chose us. Most of us love it and

wouldn't trade it for anything else. We *have* to write. Not doing so is more painful than doing so and being rejected.

But, with all due respect to you and your struggles to keep up with your overload of work, if you could understand a bit better where we're coming from, that while rejection hurts, even if it's a hurt we can deal with, being ignored hurts worse, causes a great deal more damage to us as people. Being left in the dark provides a breeding ground for those nightmare scenes we live with even as we try to crush them down.

We want to be your partners in this wonderful process of giving pleasure and entertainment to the reading public.

We want to feel that you respect us and our creativity, our talent and hard work, as well as our need to have it acknowledged regularly, frequently, and sincerely. If you don't like a particular piece of work, it's better if we know up front. Then, we can either set it aside to think about another day, or send it elsewhere, or simply toss because we know you're right. Otherwise, we might think it's gotten lost in the bottom of a closet, or in the mail, or that you're sitting on it, holding it in the hope that something better will come along before you're forced to make a decision on it. When we submit a novel to you, it's because we want very much to work with you because we admire other books you and/or your house has published.

We'd all be grateful and much better writers in the long run, providing you with higher quality material to work with, if we could feel that you believe us to be professional equals to you, a vital part of the team. But we'd also like to be treated as individuals with feelings and emotional needs, not just growers of look-alike, feel-alike, taste-alike square tomatoes.

— Judy Gill

Bits'n'Pieces

AND YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE ALL GROWN UP...

Not if you're like me, coz this one tickled my kid-ly heart. A piece in *USA Today* reports that as of May 28, the first unabridged audiotope editions of the Nancy Drew mysteries will be available on audiotape. *The Secret of the Old Clock*, a classic Drew novel, will be read by actress Laura Linney, and for the guys, the Hardy Boys editions will feature vintage music and sound effects. "They are so classic," says Listening Library publisher Tim Ditlow. "[Nancy] is a timeless heroine, a female protagonist who takes control of her destiny." And you still thought you were all grown up. Maybe next month...<g>

— Filed by Terey daly Ramin

Online.....by Lorraine Heath

Vacation time is rapidly approaching. For those of you who subscribe to NINCLINK, here is a quick refresher on handling your e-mail while you're away and when you return.

To stop your mail, send a blank message to: **NINCLINK-nomail@yahoogroups.com**.

To begin receiving INDIVIDUAL posts, send a blank message to **NINCLINK-normal@yahoogroups.com**.

To begin receiving DIGESTS, send a blank message to **NINCLINK-digest@yahoogroups.com**.

Also keep in mind that the posts are archived and available to subscribers—even those who are nomail. When you return from vacation, if you find yourself lost in the midst of a thread of posts and wondering what started it all, you can go to the archives and type in the subject. Related posts will be displayed for you.

NINCHEALTH LISTSERVE

Because health insurance is a concern for many of our members, a new list has been formed to discuss this issue. Ann Josephson reports, "Barring unforeseen glitches I can blame on no one but myself, the NINC health insurance options e-mail list is ready to go. It's restricted to membership (I'll okay anybody who's a member of Novelists Inc.) but unmoderated as to content.

"Any comments or questions about getting/keeping/paying for health, dental, and/or other insurance as a self-employed author are appropriate to post here. I'll try as time permits to copy the archived messages from NINCLINK onto this e-mail list.

"To join, send a blank e-mail to: **NINChealth-subscribe@yahoogroups.com**.

"If you have questions/problems about the list, e-mail me. I don't guarantee I'll be able to solve them, but I'll try." Ann's e-mail address is: **ajosephson99@yahoo.com**.

BUSINESS

Small Publishers, Artists & Writers Network, <http://www.spawn.org>, "was formed to promote an interest in art and literature, to encourage creative expression and to help those interested in the arts connect with others for educational purposes and mutual support." Some aspects of the site are open to the public, but most areas require membership which is \$45 per year.

PROMOTION

Romance at Its Best, <http://www.romanceatitsbest.com>, is a new site where authors can promote their work. According to owner, Jessica Holmes, "Our main motto is that e-book authors and paperback authors are all equal.

"We have a banner rotator for banners of author websites and for banners of their books. We have lists of publishers, author websites, author newsletters, and romance book YahooGroups. We have author spotlights, interviews, articles, columns, awards, giveaways/contests. We even pay our contributors.

"If you have banners, we'd love to add them to the rotator. If you have a newsletter, we'd love to add it to the list. We'd love to be able to add your website to our author website list.

"We'd love to give you a spotlight position if you wanted it

or at the very least interview you (Note: our interviews are different from other sites because we like two types of interviews, one that is on the author and person and then the other interviews are one per book, so that we can focus just on that particular book.)

"If you have books you want reviewed, we'd love to review them and your coming-soon books."

I asked Jessica with so many sites on the Internet dedicated to romance novels, why she wanted to start another one and what did she think made Romance at Its Best different from the others. She said, "We are different, or I hope so, because our interviews are different. Though you haven't seen any yet, we have two types, the first is up, but the second focuses on one specific book and nothing else. We do a large variety of things. We have a great and growing staff. We work hard, put in an abundance of time and we pay our contributors. We also don't focus JUST on romance. In the coming months you will see many reviews and interviews of other genres."

All the promotional opportunities are currently free, but Jessica said that will change in January 2003. "Prices will start at one banner for \$5 a month but the more months you pay for, the less the price is."

A spotlight will be \$15 but will usually be a one-time deal. "A spotlight includes an interview, a detailed bio, a review or more while an interview is just that.

"Reviews, interviews, and lists on our pages will always be free. Also, we have newsletter ads, 50 words or less. They are free until 2003 and then they are \$5 for one month, the more months paid for ahead, the less it is."

When I visited the site, I noticed that it included reviews for nonfiction and mystery. In the future, they plan to review all genres, including young adult.

The site also pays for contributions. "We pay half a cent a word for the reviews (book reviews and movie reviews). We pay \$10 for articles that are exclusive to OUR site only and get the rights for six months. We pay \$5 for articles that are not exclusive. We pay \$7 a month to columnists for their columns."

Jessica says, "We feel e-book authors and mass authors are one and the same just as new authors and established authors are. We welcome e-book authors just as we welcome new authors who only have one book published. In the future, at Romance At Its Best, you will see movie reviews, more contests, newer contests, new features including 'Showcase' that will showcase a topic each month and we have three sections of that including imprints, publishing companies, and sub-genres of romance with long detailed articles. We want everyone to feel equal, everyone to get something from our site and everyone to feel welcome because they all are."

Romance Designs, <http://www.romancedesigns.com>, also has a new promotional opportunity available. eCard Movies. To preview a sample, go to <http://www.romancedesigns.com/flash/LJpromo.html>. According to Tara Green, partner of Romance Designs, "an eCard is \$250-\$500 depending on the graphical needs involved. Please enquire for pricing details to info@romancedesigns.com with a short description of the movie you envision us creating. There is no obligation, and we are happy to answer any questions you have regarding this new promotional service!"

Bridges Magazine, <http://www.bridgesmagazine.info>, is interested in various types of articles and columns. A list is provided at the website. They pay one cent per word up to a maximum of \$20. Promotional opportunities are also available and you can get the details at the website. The magazine is geared heavily toward "providing a bridge between romance writers and readers."

FOR FUN

If you enjoy watching the world, visit *Webcam Central*, <http://www.camcentral.com>. With over fifty categories including streets and traffic, live events, theme parks, television studios, radio stations . . . well, you get the picture so to speak. They offer a lot from which to choose. We're planning to vacation in Cedar Point, the Roller Coaster Capitol of the World, and have been using the webcam to watch the building of the most recent roller coaster.

If you discover sites that you think would interest Novelists, Inc. members, I'd appreciate it if you'd e-mail them to me.

I'm always looking for interesting and useful sites to include in the column. E-mail me at lorraine-heath@attbi.com.

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Bits'n'Pieces

ANOTHER NEW BOOKCLUB has sprung up in the wake of the Oprah fall-out, but this one's destined to become the commercial & popular fiction star of the bunch, if you ask me. Quite frankly, the few times I've watched *Live with Regis and Kelly* I've found Kelly Ripa downright annoying. Lately, she's growing on me. Maybe that's because of her new book club, Reading with Ripa, which is the antithesis of Oprah's efforts. The club's first selection is *If Looks Could Kill*, by Kate White, which Ripa recommends "for anybody who likes a good, fun read." She says the murder mystery "takes you on a wild ride." Some of Ripa's requirements for selections include such guidelines as, "It shall have no message whatsoever," and "It shalleth be fun," and "titillation is not required but is encouraged and hoped for." Regis's term for the reads is "beach trash."

IN A RELATED STORY, the AP found good results from the introduction of the "book clubs" from Kelly Ripa and *USA Today*. Kelly's pick *If Looks Could Kill* has risen quickly at Amazon and extra printings have brought Warner up to 105,000 copies (after a first print of 30,000). Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* is up to 285,000 paperbacks in print, on six printings. Even though the book recently won the Pulitzer, Vintage publicist David Hyde credits the club selection: "We're hearing from our sales people that the *USA Today* selection is really driving reor-

ders." All of which bodes well for *Today's* club, starting in June, as well as enticing other influencers to join the trend.

"Don't expect Ripa to cite any Pulitzer winners," a spokeswoman for *Live With Regis & Kelly* said. "*Reading With Ripa* will concentrate on commercial fiction." (Quote from an article by Hillel Italie, Associated Press writer)

OKAY SO I LIKED THIS ONE... a bit in PW Newsline headlined "The Agent Who Floats Like a Butterfly". Clearly they were having a slow news day. They called it random. Here's the bit: on April 13, Harvey Klinger agent Lisa Dicker fought in the Golden Gloves finals. She competed in the 125-pound class against Maria Venier. Dicker lost, but her boxing skills will probably come in handy in publishing. And you thought they went to business school to learn to negotiate.

IN OTHER AGENT NEWS... A well-deserved best wishes goes to Damaris Rowland, yours truly's favorite agent, and one of Ninc's most outspoken advocates. September 2002 will find her matriculating once again as she begins a three-year course in Divinity School. Rowland will remain an agent, though first-year study demands on her time from September 2002 - June 2003 will be such that partner Steve Axelrod will take point for the agency in the interim. We're grinnin' here for you, Damaris! You go, girl.

AND YET MORE AGENT NEWS... Besides the Edgars, the trade show and the media circus, the 2002 BEA witnessed the first national meeting of the AAR (Association of Author's Representatives). More news about this as soon as it's made available to me. I have my feelers out...<g>

— TdR

OUTSIDE THE BIG APPLE

BY VELLA MUNN

Here, semi-hot off the press, is the latest from Microsoft. Those in the know (or who give a damn) are aware that the International eBook Awards lasted one whole year before the plug was pulled. Some say the award was stacked in favor of big publishers and ignored the many small, new publishers who were the first to see the potential in publishing. Whatever the truth, Microsoft has taken up the gauntlet, sort of.

According to Dick Brass, v-p of technology development, the International e-Book Association has just been launched. Among its goals: setting awards that focus on the critical technical issues needed to accelerate the acceptance of e-books by customers. (I'm not sure what that means, but no one asked me). At any rate, the focus of the new organization will be on: "policy and industry process, not prizes per se....We believe creating an ongoing force aimed at eliminating barriers to acceptance will help the industry move forward faster." The IeBA (don't you just love that?) will be based in Europe and will concentrate on technology, taxation (say what?), regulatory issues, and ergonomic requirements for e-books.

Anyone nodding off back there yet? Hopefully not because we're not done with ebook prizes. This concerns a name familiar to many of us, namely agent Richard Curtis. Curtis didn't personally win the prize, but here's the deal. As many of us are aware, Curtis has launched his own e-book operation known as E-Reads. One of Curtis' releases was *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* by Manu Herbstein. The book was turned down by conventional publishers before Curtis brought it out. Anyway, the book has just won the Commonwealth Prize for best first book for the African region and will compete for best first book with titles from three other Commonwealth regions. Perhaps this announcement has only vague interest for genre writers, but *Ama* won despite being an ebook which says something about the growing perception of ebooks as legitimate. Speaking of legitimate, hopefully no one will disagree that John Wiley & Sons fits that bill. Wiley has embraced publishing primarily for the library and academic market. Kelly Franklin, v-p of business development for professional and trade, admitted that the ebook program operated at a loss last year, they're hoping to break even in '02.

"Our business processes are still being adjusted for

electronic media," Franklin says. "and there aren't huge profits in the short term. But in the long term, we see it as another way to serve our authors and their readers."

Wiley offers its 700 frontlist professional and trade books in ebook form and etitles are priced the same as the lowest price point available in print. Currently the outlook for the consumer market is slow but strength is in the academic and library market. "We see it (publishing) as another way to serve our authors and their readers."

Ready to leave academia and focus on what the majority of Ninc members write? Good. So am I. As you no doubt suspect, science fiction and fantasy were the first genres to translate into publishing. Those readers are techies anyway and want what they want, regardless of the form in which it comes to them. Romance wasn't far behind, in part because some romance writers, frustrated over the lack of opportunity for traditional print publication, decided to do their own thing. I wouldn't begin to hazard a guess at how many publishers are out there since that changes daily. (Anyone hearing warning bells here?) It's truly a case of buyer (or writer) beware when it comes to evaluating the legitimacy or potential for longevity of these mostly mama/papa publishers. There is help at hand, however.

A comprehensive jumping-off spot for educating yourself can be found at www.writerswrite.com/eublishing. More than 100 publishers are listed, but it takes further digging to learn which are royalty-paying vs. vanity. Hard Shell publisher Mary Wolf's site at www.coredcs.com/%7emermaid/epub.html doesn't pull any punches and is up-to-date. I recommend it. The publishers noted at: www.ebookconnections.com/publisher.htm only get on the list if they've passed a screening process. Outspoken Piers Anthony best known for his Xanth fantasy series lists a multitude of publishers along with his personal comments about them at: www.hipiers.com/publishing.com.

Happy searching.

NINK



Those big-shot writers . . . could never dig the fact that there are more salted peanuts consumed than caviar.

— Mickey Spillane

Tricks of the Trade

BY RONN KAISER

Many years ago when I was a writer at heart, but not yet in fact, the *San Francisco Chronicle* asked three prominent local literary fiction authors to write little stories based on what they saw in a poignant, moody photograph of a man and woman who appeared to be dancing. The photo and the three stories were published in the paper's weekend magazine. I can't recall who the authors were (though one might have been Herb Gold) nor do I recall the stories except that one was about dancing being a metaphor for the couple's troubled relationship, and another was about a crime the couple had perpetrated. I found the exercise fascinating.

Anyone who knows anything about human psychology or creative writing wouldn't be surprised that the same object of inspiration, the same starting point, would propel authors to vastly different destinations, following utterly different routes. What this was, in effect, was a Rorschach test for the storyteller. Who these writers were obviously determined what they saw, the stories that grew in their minds then found their way to the page. The point is that to a writer almost anything can be the germ of an idea that grows like a living thing into a full-blown dramatic tale (not a psychological, scientific, or technological analysis of people or things, but a fictional *story* about people being transformed). How this happens, the process and techniques employed by the writer, is our topic for this month.

Lajos Egri (*The Art of Dramatic Writing*) said, "A novel, play, or any type of writing, really is a crisis from beginning to end growing to its necessary conclusion." Why do we writers look at a photograph and see a crisis? Yes, one could say it's simply the way we see the world. But it's also more. Robert McKee (*Story*), quoting Kenneth Burke says "stories are equipment for living," and, quoting Jean Anouilh, "Fiction gives life its form." "Story," McKee says, "isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence."

It all begins with a premise. Donald Maass (*Writing the Breakout Novel*) says "...a premise is any single image, moment, feeling or belief that has enough power and personal meaning for the author to set her story on fire, propel it like a rocket for hundreds of pages, or perhaps serve as a finish line: an ending so necessary that every step of the journey burns to be taken."

A story is more than just a series of events. It is a series of events that reflects a pattern of conflict, born of antagonistic desires, which builds to a climax and resolution. The craft of creative writing (and the task of the author) involves what Egri calls "orchestration."

He explains: "Orchestration demands well-defined and uncompromising characters in opposition, moving from one pole toward another through conflict." So how do the seeds of inspiration become stories?

Nincoids have various techniques for nurturing and guiding their creative impulses. Sally Hawkes explains her method as follows: "The core of the story centers around an event

(sensational hotel fire) or plot extension (taking a movie theme in another direction) or visualizing a situation (a woman sitting in a dark room waiting for someone with a gun in her hand) or busting stereotypes (North vs. South). The next step for me is how do the characters fit into the initial concept? What personality traits will work with the plot and help create conflict between the characters? What do the protagonists have in common and what do they disagree on and why?" Sally likes to define her characters by pivotal moments in their childhood and using genre clichés in unexpected ways.

Denise Dietz takes that single image, moment, feeling or belief Maass spoke of and turns it into a "what if?" question. Deni gives the following examples from her books: "What if some maniac was killing off successful dieters?...What if a serial killer was murdering M*A*S*H lookalikes?...What if the major clue to a murder was an elephant joke?...What if an uptight actress, cast in a horror film, was possessed by a promiscuous doppelganger?" Deni then develops a cast of characters and "plays along."

Cheryl Zach says "...plotting (after the initial plot idea) usually comes back to having a strong conflict, then understanding the characters, their backgrounds and motivations. If I have a good concept/situation to start with, it's why did they get into this mess, why do they respond the way they do, and what can happen to make them act differently?"

Egri states the case more emphatically. "After you have found your premise, you had better find out immediately—testing if necessary—whether the characters have the unity of opposites between them." (Egri defines "unity of opposites" as a situation in which compromise is *impossible* without fundamental change in the dominant traits or qualities of one or more of the characters.) He goes on to say, "If they do not have this strong, unbreakable bond between them, your conflict will never rise to a climax." (Think *Scarlet* and Rhett, *Clarice* and Hannibal Lecter.)

For some Nincoids the process is an intuitive or subconscious one, perhaps even mysterious, and occult. Phoebe Conn recounts this story: "I was sitting in a workshop at a *Romantic Times* conference taking notes when I heard a man's voice say, 'He wiped the blood off the sheriff's badge and pinned it on his own leather vest.' I looked around to see who had spoken, but there was no one there. Then I waited for more of the story, but there was absolute silence. I thought it the best opening line for a book I'd ever heard and put it in my idea file. Then perhaps a year later, I was ironing and wham, the whole plot of the book just popped into my head. Stephen King gives credit to the boys in the steam room of the subconscious, but I've no idea what inspired them to send up that first line and then wait so long to complete the idea."

Nincoid Sherry-Anne Jacobs, who's written a book on plotting and editing, which she sees as linked activities, shares three techniques she finds useful in stimulating her creative imagination and problem solving: "First and foremost I rely on insomnia. When the story-creating part of my brain is in action, I get insomnia. I lie awake 'seeing' the scenes, just like in a movie." Sherry-Anne also plays cards on the computer to get going ▶▶▶

Tricks of the Trade

▶ ▶ ▶ because her brain is “used to the idea that cards lead to creativity.” And third, she never fully plots a novel in advance knowing it’ll change anyway, thus avoiding a fight with herself while writing.

Elizabeth Doyle has an interesting approach to the process. Says Elizabeth, “I don’t like to write stories about events; I like to write stories about feelings. So I feel my way through the events, as though it’s real life and it’s really happening to me. When I get a plot idea from the outside world, I might tuck it away in my mind as something I might have happen, but for me, the plot is never what the story is *about*. The plot is just what happens, but the story is about something more.”

Donald Maass might have been thinking of Elizabeth’s approach when he said, “If a premise has gut emotional appeal, the novel will start to write itself in my mind. The very idea invites me to imagine characters, complications and dramatic climaxes. It gets me. It feels personal. That, I believe, is because it touches emotions that are deep, real, and common to us all.”

Whatever the writer’s mindset and approach, he/she still faces the task of orchestrating the story and producing hundreds of pages of manuscript. This can be a daunting task, so some Nincoids find it necessary to take a systematic, less intuitive approach in fashioning their tale.

Karen Harper makes a listing of what she calls “escalating events,” to turn general ideas into workable plots for her suspense novels. “In effect this is a listing of key action points in the book from least ‘scary’ and least revealing to most scary and most revealing. These events impact the heroine to frighten and threaten her but also to give her clues to solve her growing dilemma. The event occurs; she reacts, learning more about who is threatening her until she can solve the mystery or crime.” Karen gives several examples from her recent book, such as: “an untraceable gift the heroine receives that could only have come from a sister she thought was long dead.” She goes on to say, “All of these increasingly threatening ‘bumps in the road’ end with a literal threat on the heroine’s life before she finally triumphs.”

Martha Johnson files away her story idea and waits to see if it “takes root.” She says, “If it does, I’ll soon find some other ideas attaching themselves to that original thought. At that point, I start a new 3-subject spiral-bound notebook for the project. The first section is random ideas as they come, character sketches, stray thoughts, etc.—anything from a few words to several pages. The second section is used for notes on setting, research, and descriptions. In the third section I’ll actually start planning the book, once I have enough material to work with....At the organizing stage I generally jot individual scene ideas on 3x5 cards that I can shuffle and deal out over the floor of my office until the order starts to make sense. Somehow, out of all of that, a novel emerges!”

Lillian Stewart Carl makes this observation: “When I was just writing for fun plotting was indeed intuitive and spontaneous. Now that I’m doing it professionally, it’s become much more of a

rational process. And a hell of a lot more work!” Lillian went on to note that in looking over her early work she was “struck by the inventiveness of language and situation. I know many writers feel this way, that once you start applying principles and rules you lose spontaneity.”

Lillian asks several questions that could serve as the topic for another column and are certainly worthy of consideration. She asks, “Is it market pressures, do you think? Knowing that your finished product will be publicly criticized and compared to the work of very fine writers? Is it simply that you’ve already written so many scenarios you get a certain been-there done-that feeling? Or is this issue simply an offshoot of the art vs. craft discussion?”

Okay, I’ll take a crack at this, Lillian. At the risk of sounding like I’m copping out, my answer would be “all the above.”

Art, like life, is fueled by love and passion. When your work wells from the fires within, it will seem spontaneous and perhaps more inventive, as well. On the other hand, when the *impetus* comes from one’s needs, obligations, or fears—fulfilling a contract, maintaining a public image, competing, avoiding failure, overcoming inertia or boredom, the writer tends to fall back on rational thinking and his or her work becomes constructed as a result.

This does not mean emotion is the artist’s friend and rational thought his/her foe. Both are essential because we work not for our own pleasure alone, but for the pleasure of our readers and our feelings are not always the most reliable guide to the fulfillment of others. Love and passion are sure to create heat, but not necessarily clarity. We might get lucky, but we may not.

What we must do, then, is examine our unfettered passion through the lens of rational thought to ensure that the necessary elements of the dramatic form are present for reader satisfaction and fulfillment. Once astride the beast we give it its head, but we keep hold of the reins, ready to make corrections should our subconscious get off track.

Writers are, I think, much like actors. To write successfully, we must “get in character” (not an easy thing to do, day-in and day-out) though when we plumb our emotions and emote, we do it in front of the computer screen rather than a live audience. You might call the process “controlled spontaneity,” i.e. the judicious use of reason to affect the optimal product of inspired passion. If you like metaphors, consider this: the trick is to allow the child within to express itself all the while remaining the good parent. If you achieve the right balance, I believe you can have your cake and eat it too.

Topic for August: *The writer’s voice. What is it? How important is it? Are you born with it, or can it be made?*

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

E-mail: ronn.kaiser@prodigy.net
Fax: (916) 681-7155
Snail mail: 8133 Ibanez Court
Sacramento, CA 95829

Bits 'n' Pieces

AND THIS SNIPPET FROM NINC

MEMBER Kathy Lynn Emerson who had to present the award and is consequently milking it for all its worth *Washington Post* Reviewer Receives 2002 Nehr Award For Excellence in Mystery Reviewing: on May 4, 2002 the American Crime Writers League (ACWL) presented the 2002 Ellen Nehr Award for Excellence in Mystery Reviewing to Katy Munger, a mystery reviewer for the *Washington Post* Book World.

The presentation was made at the Agatha Awards banquet of the annual Malice Domestic convention in Arlington, Virginia.

In presenting the award, Ellen Nehr Committee chair Kathy Lynn Emerson praised Munger's "unbiased and informed criticism."

"When it comes to reviewing books," says Munger, "I try to balance the desire to alert readers to talented new or lesser-known authors with the obligation to tell the truth. Books cost a lot of money these days and people have a right to information that goes beyond the fawning jacket copy before they put their money on the counter." In addition to her reviewing work, Munger is the author of nine mysteries under her own name and the pseudonym Gallagher Gray. She is an alumnus of the University of North Carolina and a resident of Durham, NC. The American Crime Writers League (<http://www.acwl.org>) is the only U.S. organization solely composed of published writers in mystery fiction and nonfiction. Its current president is Les Roberts.

— TdR



Sticky Notes from the Edge

Numbers Games: Advances, Royalty Statements

You need to know you're talking to someone who isn't allowed to subtract in her own checkbook and who can get turned around in a phone booth and not be able to find her way out.

Which brings me to my point. Before getting into this being-published game, I'd always thought that any advance made to me, especially one coupled with an offer of money, should be reported to the police. Or, worse, to my father, who would have promptly filled the offender's backside with buckshot. Of course, folks repeatedly making advances to me with offers of money attached would have caused me, finally, to look seriously at the vibes I was putting out. Maybe I was showing too much cleavage (flaunt it if you got it). Could be the skirt was a bit short. However, I suspect the fishnet hose and hanging out under streetlights at night, late at night, didn't help, either. Or maybe it did.

Anyway, now that I am in the being-published game, I feel like...well, see "fishnet hose" and "hanging out under streetlights late at night." Hey, I didn't say I don't like it. I do. It's how I make my (ha-ha) living. Just don't tell my family—they think I play the piano in a house of ill repute. So, advances and money. They could come around more often, right? And they could come with lots more zeroes to the left of the decimal point. It's not a lot to ask in the overall scheme of things, such as when one considers books (using that term loosely here) by, say, Howard Stern or Monica Lewinsky (Remember her? That was fun.).

Something else, too. Royalty statements. Pre-being-published game, I thought those were crowned-head pro-

nouncements such as: "We are not amused." And "Off with their heads." And the post-being-published game? Well, being the recipient of many such vein-in-the-head-exploding documents, I can see I was right all along. We are not amused. And...off with their heads. It's the only solution. It really is.

And why are royalty statements figured in ancient Martian hieroglyphics and using a numbering system abandoned by the Cro-Magnons as ineffectual? Who decided that? Do they just not want us to understand them? No, that can't be it! But if that is their objective—and many people (a.k.a. writers and agents, although I can't think of any specific names at the moment) think it is—then they've succeeded. I can't decipher them. Can you? Personally, I believe that only some guru sitting on a Bolivian mountaintop could unravel the mystery of royalty statements for us. I understand he has a secret decoder ring.

Actually, I suspect the people who came up with the formulas and format on these things used to work for the IRS or Microsoft, the actual people who really control our lives. And you thought it was Hollywood, didn't you? You are so funny.

Finally, and in conclusion, well, I don't have one I can draw in public. Do you?

— 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



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At last count, four dozen of the most well-known, respected, powerful, and creative professionals in the business are confirmed as panelists. They are also some of the most generous with their time and have kindly answered five questions I posed to them. This article is the first installment of those answers.

The Questions

- 1. What type of stories do you have your eye on as possible favorites in the market?**
- 2. Do you see lines blurring between genres or sharpening to meet readers' expectations?**
- 3. What did you find most distinctive in your last favorite read?**
- 4. Who in the industry, whether colleague or author, has most inspired you?**
- 5. What one thing can a writer do to increase his/her chance of success in the market?**

As you might expect, this savvy group offered interesting answers. Mostly diverse (only one question resulted in answers anywhere close to a consensus), often surprising, many times enlightening, and always individual... something like our books.

The question evoking the most similar responses was about "possible favorites in the market." (Contemporary, upbeat, and fresh)

Two questions resulted in a wide variety of opinions. Answers for "what was most distinctive in their

last read," ranged from voice to character to emotion to offering a new perspective. And evidently there is no "one thing" a writer can do to increase her chance of success. (But then maybe five things are better, anyway, instead of counting on one.)

And as for whether lines are blurring or sharpening? Both, neither, and depends.

Here's what they had to say.

Jenny Bent. "For a while, you could sell anything in the vein of Bridget Jones. The market has become flooded with them, and every house has at least one or two of them coming up. The only way you can now sell one is if it is really, really fabulous." Jenny, meanwhile, has been "successful selling dark fiction lately. I seem to be in the mood for dark, stormy, and gothic."

Irene Goodman, on the other hand, wants "Upbeat, fresh, contemporary women's stories with a very strong voice." Voice is also what she found most distinctive in her last favorite read. And Irene believes that genre lines are "sharpening to meet readers' expectations."

Karen Solem is another agent looking for "contemporaries that are fresh. Classic love stories with a slightly different approach." She also sees a growing segment of the market for sexy

books. The most important element for her, is that the stories have "solid emotional underpinnings." Her advice is to "write a good book. Taking one's time with the story is critical. I think too many authors think on an idea, put it on paper, and send it in. There needs to be gestation time. Real, hard thinking time about story, character, pacing, etc. is missing in most cases. I'm sorry to say that a lot of what crosses my desk is completely unmemorable." She also has "the hardest time with books that fall between the cracks. I see the lines [between genres] sharpening."

Audrey La Fehr also has her eye out for "young, contemporary American romance. The ones I like best are very sexy, funny, smart, and even slightly edgy. As always, the most distinctive thing about my favorite books is the writer's voice." In her opinion, "genre boundaries may be sharpening in some areas (historical romance) and blurring in others (mystery/contemporary romance). In general, especially for new writers, I think it's best not to blur the lines, but to aim straight for the heart of that genre, and strive to emphasize those elements or qualities that define a genre." She agrees with Solem in that, "The best thing a writer can do is focus on the writing. Do not expect miracles from your publisher if you deliver a manuscript that is mediocre or late. There is too much competition out there in every genre—authors who are talented and hardworking and fast, who will blow right past you if you don't deliver consistently great work and always on time."

Webster Stone. "We try to publish books that have a strong voice, real narrative-drive and that are accessible. I like books that put you in the cockpit of someone else's life." Regarding genre lines, "For lesser authors or starting authors the lines are sharpened. For bigger authors they have the ability to not only blur the lines but to crossover to very different genres." Stone's advice is to "Know your genre, know your market entirely before you even start. Don't submit until five people who never thought you would hack it as a writer tell you it's going to be a bestseller. Use more active voice. Structure it, don't just write it. Even novelists should think as if plotting a Lillian Hellman play."

Betsy Hulsebosch advises authors to, "learn about the marketplace. Not the marketing, the marketplace. Read the competition. Look at bestseller lists—and not just national ones. Write your own novel, and rewrite it, and listen to what your editor is saying and what your editor is not saying. Ask questions. And try to understand the answers, because we all speak in arcane jargon in this business so please be sure you know what we mean."

Finally: apply common sense. No book was made in a day." Betsy always keeps her eye on "authors whose books seem to 'perk' up in the marketplace." She asks herself, "Is it a new release or new look or new marketing approach that is causing the stir?" In her last favorite read (*The Polish Officer*, by Alan Furst), what

moved her was “the author’s ability to evoke a time and place, and to breathe life into a character in a style completely unique and thoroughly satisfying.” She points out that readers respond to “scope and character.” Genre lines may be “blurring, sure, but what remains constant is the desire for a quality read and consistency.”

Ruth Cavin “has been saying for quite a while that the best mystery novels have to a large extent become very good novels that happen to be about a crime. If the characters are believable, the setting does its job, and the prose is good to read, the plot can be fixed. The only exception being that a ridiculous plot element is so much a part of the whole thing that it’s impossible to deal with. I once got a proposal for a book in which neckties of their own volition strangled their wearers. But if the characters are two-dimensional, the atmosphere phony or nonexistent, the writing clunky, and the plot a pretty good puzzle, forget it. Of the hundreds of submissions I get, many are okay, even publishable, but the main problem with them is that they are just like everything else.”

Daniel Zitin likes stories “that are full of surprises, but that also fulfill readers’ conventional expectations. A successful book will be the right mix of the conventional and the new.” He urges authors to give readers “what they expect in a fresh way.” In his opinion, this unique approach is a natural force in the blurring of lines. “Genres are fluid structures, like language. In the writerly sense, [genre] may signal a certain tone or subject or concerns. Authors are inventive, always searching for freshness. As a marketing idea, it means certain attributes or features in a book that an audience recognizes and wants to buy over and over again. Marketing concepts seem to change more slowly.” And it’s the perceived obstacles in marketing that can keep an editor from trying a book. “The inspiring people in the industry are those who are devoted to quality writing and at the same time have an understanding of market demands. The people who don’t inspire me are those who say: It’s a great book, but it’s not something we could market successfully. I say, if it’s a great book, it’s your job to figure out a way to market it.”

Carl Lennertz wants us to know that “most sales and marketing people I know love books and do want them all to succeed. It’s in their own best interests, too, after all. The rub? They are the ones who have to go out and face the booksellers and hear that they can’t take the hoped-for numbers. So, it is a case of being a messenger about to be killed.

“But ultimately, a book succeeds if the book is good. Yes, many are the stories of a marketing person saying she or he doesn’t have an easy handle for a novel about a hostage situation in Peru or a dead horse or two Chinese orphans and a trunk of books or an island where letters are falling off a building. They are just girding themselves for a fight with the buyers, but meanwhile, they are getting manuscripts out to the reps to read, knowing that a spark will catch and they will enthrall to each other and give them the ammo to go to booksellers and say, here, to summarize this book wouldn’t do it justice; read it, trust me. And many a book is born this way.

“So, if anyone can name all four books I alluded to above, you get this free advice: write the book you want to write, not a book written for one perceived audience or another. My other advice? Get a cloth/paper deal. More and more books don’t catch on ’til the paperback, but after soft cloth sales, many books are not, unwisely, not picked up.”

Both librarians agree on most points. **Mary Chelton** asks “Which market? For libraries, understand how purchase decisions are made and that one cannot rest on ‘intrinsic worth,’ but more importantly on categorization and packaging.” A problem, she admits, since she also sees genre lines “blurring rather than sharp-

ening.” **Debbie Walsh** says, “Absolutely a blurring of genres. As a library manager, it’s awful. How can I put the books of a well-established romance author on the shelf next to her new spine-chilling suspense novel? The reader who likes to feel safe will not be pleased with the violence. The reader who loves edgy and violent books avoids the romance section on principle. What do I do with an SF title with more romance than a traditional SF reader will tolerate, but too much science for a romance reader? And don’t even get me started on the mystery-crime-thriller continuum. It’s getting harder and harder to accommodate the boxes we’ve designed when the authors insist on jumping out of the boxes before we can construct new ones!”

On the other hand, Debbie’s last favorite read was *Daughter of the Game*, by Tracy Grant. “This is not a Regency romance, doesn’t try to be. This is an example, and a pretty clear one, of what makes a book ‘good’ for me lately. It’s not ‘genre blending,’ but rather, genre bending, or maybe genre splicing.” In analyzing the appeal of this book and others, she says, “These books all take something comfortable and recognizable for me and stand it on its head to make me look at it in a new way. Instead of trying to

The Respondents for this article

Jenny Bent, Harvey Klinger Agency

Ruth Cavin, Senior Editor, Associate Publisher,

Thomas Dunne Books

Mary Chelton, Ph.D, Assoc. Professor, Graduate

School of Library & Information Services

Irene Goodman, Irene Goodman Literary Agency

Betsy Hulsebosch, Senior VP Marketing, Bantam

Dell

Audrey La Fehr Editorial Director, NAL

Carl Lennertz, Publisher Program Director,

BookSense

Karen Solem, Spencerhill Associates

Webster Stone, Managing Partner & Editor, Rugged

Land; Executive Producer

Debbie Walsh, Coordinator, Adult Services, Geneva

Public Library District

Daniel Zitin, freelance editor

copy something, or fit a mold, the writer uses the mold with a whole new type of material. I think this is so cool and creative.”

Debbie’s advice to writers continues the thread of writing something different. “I’m always looking for discussable books. A book that troubles me, or moves me, or amuses me, or energizes me, or gets me to thinking. Sharing the book assures me a discussion partner when the patron returns. I don’t believe that for most people reading is a completely solitary endeavor. The impulse to talk about books with other people drives our boom in discussion groups and book talking programs.”

In a final comment, she puts words to what seemed to be the underlying theme from all the respondents: “Make your book connect with people in an unforgettable way.”

As for unforgettable, here is Irene Goodman’s answer to what a writer can do to increase chances of success: “When asked for one tip on why he had lived so long, my grandfather replied, ‘Eat a banana every day at 11:00.’ So that’s my answer to you. Take it from him—he was 105!”

Laura Baker, NYConference Coordinator

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

In April there was a news flash that stunned many in the publishing industry—and it wasn't the discontinuation of Oprah's bookclub. Nope, the really BIG news was Nora Roberts' announcement that after 22 years in partnership with Silhouette Books, they were amicably parting ways.

With so many fine authors on our roster, NINK hasn't made it a practice to single out one of our own. Nora, however, is nothing less than an icon in the industry—and, despite her megastar status, you'll find no prima donna here. Although she had just wrapped up a month-long tour and was on vacation, Nora agreed to chat with NINK about...well, just keep reading and see....

NINK: Nora, you have a wonderful rags-to-riches story, rivaled only perhaps by that of J.K. Rowling. How about a paragraph describing your life that begins with: "Once upon a time..."

Nora Roberts: Once upon a time there was a beautiful, intelligent, loving young mother who found herself trapped in her charming cottage with her two delightful and energetic little sons while a blizzard raged. Evil forces tried to take over the sweet-natured yet spunky young heroine, attempting to slither into her happy home through Candyland, a demon tool disguised as a child's harmless board game. Courageously, our heroine resisted the dark forces and fought them off by spinning tales. She discovered she had considerable affection, and some talent for the spinning of the tale and continued to do so even when other dark forces blocked her desire to share those stories with the world. But she persevered until, one day, some faerie godmothers got together and spread her tales around the land—and rewarded her for her courage and tenacity with gold coins. It was a pretty good deal all around, and our heroine

continued to raise her delightful sons in her charming cottage, found sisters and friends in other tale spinners who enriched her life immeasurably. Eventually, she roped in a tall, handsome prince which rounded it all out nicely. And they lived happily ever after.

NINK: When you first began to write, did you ever doubt that you'd be published, or could you just taste it and know?

NR: I always figured someday, somebody would buy one of my books, if I just kept at it long enough, and bombarded NY with manuscripts. And if they didn't, hey, I was having a great time writing anyway.

NINK: Most authors leave category as soon as their mainstream careers take off, but you stayed for well over a decade. Why?

NR: I stayed for close to two decades, I guess. I enjoy the category form, very much. I still had a great deal to say, within that framework. I remember when I was a young mother with two kids and there wasn't much of a slice left in my reading pie, and how the category romance filled that need for me. I knew, from reader input, that the books I did in the form filled a need for others.

NINK: How many editors did you have over those 22 years at Silhouette...and do you have a favorite/s? What made her/them special?

NR: I suppose I had three. Nancy Jackson who bought me in 1980. She switched to young adult books and passed me to Isabel Swift in 1983, I think it was.

I've worked with Isabel, almost exclusively since then, but for a brief period when I did a couple of books with Paula Pearl. I loved working with all of them. Isabel, naturally, holds a special place in my heart. We've worked on so many books together

over the years, and have a genuine understanding and love for each other. She got all the jokes. You can't put a price on an editor who not only loves and understands you, but gets all the jokes.

NINK: What can you tell us about your decision to leave Silhouette? (This is what everyone's burning to know, Nora, so please relate as much as you can with your typical candor. Thank you!)

NR: I was prepared to continue to write category and work with Silhouette for some time to come. But it came down to very different visions, publishing-wise. Basically, it involved the publication of my backlist—the control of the number of books reissued per year, the format of the reissues and so on. We just couldn't come to terms on this, to me, vital issue.

Without being able to hold some elemental control over the direction and publication of my backlist, I didn't feel it was possible to continue to provide Silhouette with frontlist.

We simply had different priorities and vision in this matter. And we no longer fit.

NINK: Have you had any second thoughts? And should you miss writing category, do you think you might ever go back to it?

NR: I will miss writing category. No question about it. I wasn't done, certainly not done with some of the families I'd established in series and had planned to write about. But no, I won't go back. Door's closed for me. We had 22 years together, and I'm really proud of the work, really treasure the relationships. Silhouette was part of my family, and still is. But there comes a time when families have to go their separate ways in order to maintain the affection.

NINK: Of all the books you've writ-

ten for Silhouette, do you have a favorite and what makes it stand apart from the rest? Non-category titles?

NR: I really don't have favorite books. I have a genuine affection and connection for all the stories, and all the people in them.

NINK: What role do you think or hope you've played in the evolution of category romance?

NR: Gosh, I don't think about this sort of thing very much. I just like to think I did good work, in the category form and out of it. I did the first—I'm told—category romance who-done-it back in the '80s with *Storm Warning*. I started using the hero's pov—and multi povs early on. Connecting books—but others were doing connectings. Family series, but I imagine others were doing those, too, back in the '80s. There were so many of us during that period experimenting with changes and evolution. It all just kind of grew.

NINK: Given your stature as an author, do you think there's ever been a fear factor when it comes to actually editing you, or making suggestions about your work? (Like, who's going to tell Nora Roberts what to do!)

NR: Well, not so I've noticed. I work with Leslie Gelbman at Putnam/Berkley, and have for a decade. She's another gift from God. A solid editor who understands me, loves me on a personal level and gets the jokes. I can't say she, or Isabel, ever had trouble making suggestions or asking for revisions.

I'm really not that intimidating—and I'm very aware no book is perfect. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John needed an editor. We all do.

NINK: You're incredibly grounded, Nora, although there's got to be a lot of fan adulation and, okay, ass kissing going on. What keeps you humble?

NR: Who says I'm humble? Okay, the fact is I have a really normal life. When I knock off work, I cook dinner. And I'm not always happy about it. I have kids, and to my kids, I'm

Mom. Period. They may be proud of me, but I'm still Mom. I have four dogs who don't understand I'm a really important person and don't have time to run downstairs and let them in, let them out, let them in the damn house. My readers are great—absolutely the best—but most of them relate to me as a person, with the same sort of stuff going on in my life as they have going on in theirs. I don't have staff, I don't have servants, I don't surround myself with people who'll tell me how fabulous I am. I have friends, who are perfectly happy to tell me I'm wrong or annoying or ridiculous. That's why they're my pals.

NINK: If you had a year with no deadlines, no expectations from anyone but yourself, how would you spend that time?

NR: Pretty much as I spend it now. I'd write, I'd break for an hour and work out as I'm obsessing about the size of my butt—and don't expect that obsession to go away any time soon. I'd cook dinner. I'd let the idiot dogs in and out of the house. I'd worry about my kids, talk to my husband, have sex if we're in the mood. Shortly, I'll be adding a grandbaby to the mix (August 24 is B-Day) so I'd steal the baby as often as possible and play. I'd garden, read, watch TV. I'd

think about the work in progress and wonder why I thought this plotline was a good idea in the first place. Then I'd get up the next day and do it all again.

NINK: Was there ever a book you were burning to write...but you're still waiting for just the right moment to pen?

NR: If I'm burning to write it, I write it. Why suffer?

NINK: You're a very goal oriented person, Nora. Where do you possibly go from here?

NR: To the next book. If there's another thing that keeps me grounded it's that, for me, it's all about the work. Not about what will I get out of the work, but the work itself. I just like to tell the story.

NINK: Going back to your story that began with, "Once upon a time..." What sort of ending would the master storyteller like to write for herself?

NR: Our heroine, at the age of 122—and still looking stunning—dies quietly at the keyboard after finishing her last book—and shortly after having really incredible sex with her prince. Everyone in the land weeps copious tears at her passing, then gets really drunk and has a party. **NINK**

Bits'n'Pieces

AND IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR SOME FREELANCE WORK... Publisher's Lunch job postings at: <http://www.mediabistro.com/publisherslunch/joblistings/?igid-5> for some interesting listing. This past month (and possibly still) there were listing for travel writers needed at Avalon, associate editorial positions available at Harlequin, as well as some interesting Senior editor positions. But it's those freelance positions that really caught my eye, so if you're looking to pick up some extra work...take a gander!

— **TdR**



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“Reaping the Whirlwind”

On April 11, 2002, a small newspaper printed an interview with Ninc member and former RWA president Robin Lee Hatcher—an interview which infuriated any number of romance writers and readers. The *Idaho Statesman*’s circulation is only about 65,000 copies. Small enough that, but for the Internet, I doubt that I—living halfway across the country from Idaho—would ever have heard about the interview.

However, this is the age of instant worldwide access, so it wasn’t long before word spread and hundreds—perhaps thousands?—of people across the country read the online edition of this small Idaho newspaper’s interview with a midlist novelist. And started raging about it on electronic Bulletin Boards, on e-lists, and—eventually—in faxes and e-mails to RWA headquarters.

The Internet firestorm was already several days old by the time Hatcher herself learned about it—from RWA, which contacted her to assure her it wasn’t taking any action against her despite the faxes and E-mails it had received.

When I first heard about this, I thought that hearing from RWA’s office must be a dreadful way for Hatcher to learn about all the people angrily condemning her. But then I figured that how you learn that readers and writers are bitching about you all over the Internet probably seems like a minor point when the news passes through you like bad shellfish.

Any number of writers whom I respect expressed outrage and indignation in various online forums after reading the interview in the *Idaho Statesman*. Some readers expressed disappointment and anger. Others expressed such venom and vitriol that I was genuinely repelled. One website published a mean-spirited satire about Hatcher which, among other things, ridiculed her religious beliefs. Some reader publicly asserted that Hatcher’s extensive volunteer work on behalf of literacy was probably self-serving and therefore unworthy of anyone’s esteem.

Other readers and writers expressed sympathy for Hatcher—and were consequently, in a few cases, also attacked.

What surprised me most, upon reading the *Idaho Statesman* interview myself, was how ordinary and predictable I found it in contrast to the controversy which it had provoked. Hatcher, who has been writing Christian fiction for the past five years, was portrayed in the article as firmly distancing herself from her previous work as a commercial romance genre novelist. The article conveyed mixed messages, on the one hand describing Hatcher as still an enthusiastic supporter of romance, and on the other hand as someone who hated writing “those obligatory sex scenes” and who equates reading romances with suffering

from alcoholism. (See below.)

I’m summarizing a lot, but I think I’ve included the aspects of the article which evoked the most negative reactions.

Anyhow, yes, I found it ordinary and predictable.

For one thing, I think it’s a rare reporter who doesn’t play up the sex angle—cheesily and with a heavy hand—when writing about romance novels, romance readers, or romance writers. Regardless of what Hatcher actually said or emphasized when talking to the reporter, it was better than even money that he was going to focus sharply on sex when writing about their conversation. Back when I was romance writer Laura Leone, every reporter who ever spoke to me always asked me about sex. By contrast, since I became sf/f writer Laura Resnick, not one single reporter has ever asked me about sex. Not even one.

Moreover, I don’t think the interview with Hatcher portrays views which are particularly surprising in someone who chose to leave the commercial romance genre in order to write Christian fiction. No, they’re not necessarily the views of a Christian fiction writer; but they’re not exactly surprising.

It’s also hardly unusual that a writer whose career took a sharp turn, as Hatcher’s did when she turned to Christian fiction, now states—as Hatcher does—that she doesn’t recommend her earlier work to her current readers. Speaking as someone whose career also took a sharp turn, I certainly don’t recommend my old romance novels to my current sf/f readers. They’re two very different kinds of work for two different audiences. In fact, I chose to use my Leone pseudonym on the recent Wildside reissues of my old romances not because I think there are still Leone readers out there (it seems unlikely to me) but because my previous work is so different from my current work that I believe it should appear under a different name. Like Hatcher, I certainly make sure that all information about my romance genre work is available on my website for any of my current readers who might be interested in it. And, like me, Hatcher is making sure that a number of her out-of-print titles are now getting back into print for any fans who might want to read them. That doesn’t mean that either of us necessarily expect our current readers to like our former work in another genre.

In any event, after Hatcher learned from RWA’s office about the fury the *Idaho Statesman* interview was provoking online, she publicly clarified what she actually said, where she was misquoted, and where she was quoted completely out of context.

Yes, she was misquoted and quoted out of context. Top-

level journalists with exceptional reportorial skills are not usually the guys who get sent out to do puff-piece fillers about midlist writers for general publications with small circulations. Go figure.

Lori Foster, a romance writer in my local community, was telling me recently about the time an interviewer paused on the way out the door and asked her, “Do you think you’ll ever write about more serious subjects?” Foster shrugged and said, “Sure, why not?” Based on that exchange... the reporter quoted Foster as saying she planned to write about alcoholism and gays—a public assertion which amused Foster’s teenage kids.

A few years ago, a reporter from a small local newspaper interviewed me for a puff-piece filler about my overland trip across Africa. At the end of the interview, I related an anecdote about attending a religious festival in the Ivory Coast. As I was describing my initial meeting with the village chief, the reporter suddenly leaned forward and interrupted me to ask, “And was this guy as black as the ace of spades?”

I was so stunned that my mouth worked like a fish mouth, opening and closing with no sound coming out.

Not surprisingly, the article repeatedly misquoted me—literally put words in my mouth which I would never say—on the basis of that reporter’s world view. No, nothing actionable. But I was embarrassed and was very glad that interview was in an obscure publication that I assumed hardly anyone would ever read.

Whereas Robin Lee Hatcher’s misquotes got plastered all over the Internet and were read by people who took issue with them. Even by people who took issue with her for being misquoted.

Here’s one example. *Idaho Statesman* reporter Mike Butts wrote: “Hatcher said women can develop addictions to sexual fantasies in romance fiction, and that writing them seemed to her almost like serving a drink to an alcoholic.” Yeow! Yeah, that really does look bad.

Hatcher says, “I remember the discourse from which the above was taken. I was relaying the comments of some of my readers, women who had reported to me that this was their experience. At the time I spoke strongly on behalf of the romance genre, stating my belief that it is often unfairly criticized. I stated that romance fiction, as a genre, is about women winning and about men and women forming committed relationships. Unfortunately, by virtue of what was omitted, probably due to article length restrictions, it seemed I was criticizing the romance genre as a whole rather than supporting it.”

(So the “strong women, committed relationships” part of the interview got omitted and the reporter zeroed in on booze and sex. Imagine that.)

After Hatcher made this and other clarifications in public, numerous people on the Internet then said that she never should have shared certain comments with the reporter. That she should have managed the interview better, or shouldn’t have given the reporter ammunition to fire at the romance genre. That there were aspects of her own experiences that she should not have revealed in an interview.

Well, I wish I could have managed that racist ass who misquoted me better, too, but I’m just not that clever.

Anyhow, I sympathize with Hatcher because I could easily be as vehemently reviled as she has been if it ever occurred to any interviewer to ask me about my past as a romance writer. Luckily for me, no one ever does.

The truth is, I didn’t like writing “those obligatory sex scenes” any more than Hatcher did. Look, I have nothing against sex scenes, and, indeed, I still write them. What I objected to was how emphatically obligatory they were in my own experience as a romance novelist. More than half of my thirteen romance novels got editorial comments telling me to add more sex—sometimes just more sexual tension, sometimes another fully consummated sex scene, sometimes an expansion of an extant sex scene. “More sex” was a regular theme in my working life as a romance writer. And, no, I did not have an incompetent, crazy, or ignorant editor. I had half a dozen editors at three houses over a period of about six years. Most of them were excellent (two of them, in my opinion, are the two best editors I’ve ever worked with), and the only bad romance editor I ever dealt with left the business years before I left the genre.

Most likely, I just wasn’t a very good romance writer. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong writer... Whatever.

Anyhow, whether or not the frequent pressure to write “more sex” was anyone else’s experience as a romance writer, it was mine. Whether or not it would be my experience if I wrote romance now, it was my experience back when I was writing it. Whether or not it’s ever happened to you, it’s what happened to me.

I don’t define the genre by my own experiences. I never generalize my own experiences and say, “Romance writers are always told to add more sex.” I don’t pretend that romance editors want the qualities now that my editors (and the many other editors who rejected my work for years) wanted when I was writing romance, or even that editors necessarily wanted the same things from other writers that they wanted from me.

When I talk about my life as a romance writer—which I seldom do, because no one ever asks—I try to stick specifically to my own experiences. Actually, I try to do that as a fantasy writer, too, since I know that my experiences are not necessarily the experiences of other fantasy writers.

And speaking of my experiences as a fantasy writer... When I wrote the initial proposal for what became my first fantasy novel, my agent, who liked it, said to me, “But it needs a lot more magic. This audience expects it. Do you think you can add more magic to it?”

I seldom have occasion to relate this experience. But when I do mention to other fantasy writers that my agent told me to put more magic in my first fantasy proposal, no one gets upset, offended, or appalled. I do not become the subject of Internet debate, let alone condemnation. It’s not a hot-button issue.

Whereas among romance writers, when I say that editors often instructed me to add more sex when I was a romance writer, I usually wind up feeling that I’m causing offense or committing a faux pas. So I seldom mention it. (But right now, you see, I’m pining for hate mail.)

Okay, so maybe you’re a romance writer who’s never once gotten an “add more sex” note. And maybe you can cite thirty best-selling romance novels that had no sex at all in them. Fine. I’m not insisting you say otherwise. I’m not here to define the romance genre or your experience in it. I’m just taken aback by how much vehement objection I’ve seen to Robin Lee Hatcher’s relating her experiences in it. Especially since I thought the most notable part of the *Idaho Statesman* interview had nothing to do with the hot-button issue of sexual content: Hatcher said she came to a turning point in her work when an editor at Harper deleted a passage in one of her books which

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THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

▶ ▶ ▶ described a man praying for the life of his wife and child because, the editor told Hatcher, she was afraid it might offend some readers. That experience pushed Hatcher toward writing for Christian publishers, where she feels she has more freedom to express her views.

Maybe you're a romance writer who's never had such an

experience; but Hatcher had it, and it made a key contribution to her decision to make a big shift in her career. Speaking as someone who has also made an enormous career shift, albeit for different reasons, I found this anecdote the most compelling point in the interview. Because, of course, a writer cannot do her best work unless she can write about what matters most to her. Like Hatcher, I think some tremendous writers have done some wonderful work and developed innovative careers in the romance genre. However, like Hatcher, my own experiences in the genre eventually led me to leave it. I understand why she's honest about that, and—should anyone ever ask me—I have no intention of being secretive about it, either. So I just hope I have the resilience to deal with the repercussions as well as Hatcher did when the resultant whirlwind engulfed her. **NINK**

Bits'n'Pieces

NEWS FROM THE BEA...A study into whether or not PDF owners would prefer print or e-Books discovered that if the e-Books are the same price the PDF owners will opt for e-Books at a rate of 23%. An additional 16% will choose the e-Book if it's cheaper—to a point. In other words, if a print book costs \$80 and a 50% discount is offered on the e-volume, the PDF version still ain't gonna move because the *perceived* value of a PDF edition is no more than \$10 – \$15. Hmmm. Interesting for those of us in print format only, huh? ... **The ABA's membership** is on the decline. 2001 membership was 2,191 regular members, down from 2,794 the year before. Associate memberships also declined, to 702 from 948, as did the "others" category, from 409 to 261. Outgoing ABA president Neil Coonerty called for greater initiative and participation in the organization's signature programs, while incoming president Ann Christopherson admits the

difference in numbers comes from the lack of new stores opening. So I guess that means that what we're hearing is true. Bookstores *are* dying. Or at least their owners aren't joining the ABA... **Oh, all right, before you** remember that I didn't say anything, no, Harry Potter's next book wasn't in evidence at the BEA. Does this mean that J.K. Rowling is having too much fun being (gasp!) a newlywed or having a life to get the book finished?... **And No Show Doesn't Mean No Business** for Penguin...which publishing company didn't put on a show at the BEA. "We don't miss BEA at all. There's no need for us to see accounts here, and seems very crowded. We're doing very well without attending, and going forward, we have no plans to come back. We support the regional shows in a big way, though, with authors and promotions. That seems more worth it," said Dick Heffernan, President of Penguin Putnam Sales. Both PP's international sales force and its children's department took up their customary rooms at the show, but editors who never gave the BEA a second thought scheduled three weeks worth of meetings in one week. Just an FYI for those of you who were wondering...

— TdR

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