

Volume 13, Number 9
September 2002

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

At Ninc’s NYCon, you have the opportunity to network with publishing’s leaders...don’t miss out.

“Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us.”

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero’s Adventure*.

As authors of popular fiction, we know how hard it is to find a hero. In our lives, we are lucky to encounter those special people who lead and teach: those who know they must give of themselves for the quest to be worthwhile.

When I posed the question to speakers, “Who in the industry, whether colleague or author, has most inspired you,” I hoped to get to know the person behind the title — because for each of us, those who inspire are unique to our private journeys.

Our speakers mentioned publicists, editors, agents, and publishers. They listed many, or named one person (two individuals named are speakers at the con-

ference). Sometimes they acknowledged a close colleague, other times associates who may not be aware of their significant role.

Those cited most often? Authors. Did you know you inspired these industry associates?

Here is the final installment of, “In Their Own Words.”

“Trials and revelations are what it’s all about.”

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero’s Adventure*.

Laura Blake Peterson (Curtis Brown Agency): “Writers in general are most inspirational to me. Published or not, acclaimed or toiling away in obscurity, they’re out there working. Taking time away from their families, making untold personal sacrifices to duke it out in a downright hostile publishing environment where it seems the life span of a book gets shorter and shorter all the time, and where

many believe too many voices are already clamoring for readers’ attention.”

Mary K. Chelton, Ph.D (Assoc. Prof, Graduate School of Library and Information Services): “Duncan Smith, the creator of NoveList. He is a gifted writer and teacher, but also a determined entrepreneur who has done an enormous amount of work to help the rest of us, not only understand that one person’s ‘good book’ may not be another’s, but also has given us a tool to find that person’s book.”

Pat Rouse (Public Relations, Readers’ Clubs, *Romantic Times* columnist): “Without a doubt, I have been most inspired by incredible contemporary author Sharon Sala. Her novels as well as her life are all about triumphing over adversity. Her plots deal with issues like abuse, alcoholism, family loss and Sharon has experienced all of these things in her life and speaks very frankly on these topics....”

Continued on page 4 ▶▶▶

Freedom to Write



Sunday thru
Tuesday
Sept. 22-24, 2002

New York
Marriott Marquis
Times Square,
New York City

INSIDE: *President’s Voice...2, Letter to NINK...3, NYCON Updates...4, Q&A: Entertainment Attorney...6, NYCON Notes...7, NYCON Registration...8, Tricks of the Trade: Voice...9 Sticky Notes from the Edge...11, Buzz in the Biz...12, Bits’n’Pieces...13, 14, 17, Outside the Big Apple Looks at KidLit...14, Crawling thru the Desert... 15, Online...16, The Comely Curmudgeon: Going Public...18*

Novelists, Inc.

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Send Address Changes to Central Coordinator

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE.....

I'm writing this in August. It's been over ninety degrees for so many consecutive days that it's broken records for Charlotte, NC, the hot air capital of the world. I just finished revisions on one book, I'm rushing to deadline on another, and I have to summon two proposals from my parched brain. My Muse is sunning herself on the lightbulb in the refrigerator right now, but I have to write this column and finish this book. That's my job.

I have a book out in a few days and the reviews are already trickling in. If there's one in *PW*, my friends know better than to tell me about it. Reviewers happily forward me the good reviews. I'm not going out to hunt down the bad ones. My Muse would find someone else's refrigerator to sun in if I listened to a reviewer talking about saccharine endings and shallow characters and *bad writing*. Like, I have the monopoly on bad writing, right? I threatened to edit that review and send it back to the reviewer, but wiser heads talked me out of it. My job is to entertain my readers, and maybe that's the reviewer's job, too.

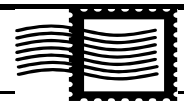
Maybe it's the summer doldrums. Maybe it's old age. Maybe it's experience. But I refuse to sit here and panic because my stocks are in the tank, the Mideast is on the brink of war, and we may be on the verge of the next Great Depression. I'm growing gray because I don't have this column written, my proposals are little more than clouds in the sky, and the book that's due has a rotten beginning. And my laptop just died. We may be on the verge of a Dust Bowl or nuclear war, but dang it, I can't change that. So I'll put on my beanie and my stupid smile and write "What, me worry?" over my head. My job was voting in the election. When politicians ask my opinion on how to run the country, I'll give it. Until then, that's their job, whereas mine is to write this column. I haven't decided whether shooting the dead laptop is on my job list yet. I think it may come under my ever-suffering husband's.

I can't change the reviewer's opinion; I can't change the economy; I can't keep readers from laying this column at the bottom of the parakeet cage. But I *can* sit my rear in the chair and write the column, write the proposals, and finish the book—even if I have to jerk my Muse from the refrigerator and duct tape her to the PC.

As self-employed writers, we don't normally have the benefit of corporate job descriptions defining what is expected of us. In this crazy business we're in, maybe we ought to sit down and create a list of what we can or cannot do before we make ourselves any crazier. When all the burdens of the world loom over our heads, and we feel personally responsible for handling them, we should pull out that job definition and examine it. That way, the next time we want to set fire to a reviewer, or our Muses wander weeping down a wrong road, we can read our job descriptions for our duty in that situation. Treating our Muses to a movie or a new CD might be on the schedule. Treating ourselves to a ball game or a manicure might fit in there somewhere. Firing off a letter of outrage to Dell tech support could fall under my list of duties.

But things we cannot change belong on someone else's list. Let them go, and maybe our Muses will climb out of the refrigerator and sit their rears in the chair where they belong.

— Pat Rice



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.

Pre-Judging a Book by Its Cover

I have learned that the buyer for the giant retail chain Wal-Mart turned down my contemporary comedy *The Last Male Virgin* (Dorchester, September, 2002) because the buyer thought that the cover was “too racy.”

When the Dorchester salesman frantically returned with a picture of Botticelli’s famous Birth of Venus to show the buyer that the cover artist was only imitating a very famous picture, in fact, Great Art (Venus is covering her crotch delicately with her hand, so is my hero on the cover of *The Last Male Virgin*). But Wal-Mart still wasn’t convinced. Wal-Mart stuck with their decision that the cover was “too racy” and didn’t buy.

So readers won’t find any copies of *The Last Male Virgin* in

September in Wal-Mart stores, much to my publisher’s dismay. The Wal-Mart share of the mass market paperback field handled by distributor Anderson News (upward of 40%), is so enormous that not to sell to them is a major set-back. Usually meaning your book’s immediate downgrading on the publisher’s list, and a substantial cut in the print run.

Also, I have it from a reliable source that Wal-Mart refuses to buy the Magazine Romantic Times for the same reason. (“And Wal-Mart readers are our market,” an RT associate groans.) The excuse given seems to be that *Romantic Times* might expose unsuspecting Wal-Mart shoppers to the aforementioned “racy” bookcovers. Presumably if you want those you’ll have to go to Target, or Costco.

If you want to see Botticelli’s Venus and the “too racy” book cover side by side, they’re on my website: <http://www.maggiedavis.com>

— **Maggie Davis AKA Katherine Deauxville**

From the Editor:

Membership on the Grow

Kathy Lynn Emerson, our hard-working Membership Chair, reports that 55 applicants have been approved as new members of Ninc during the first half of our membership year. That’s a lot of new members for an organization with a membership base of around 600. Old-timers will look forward to welcoming some of the newcomers at our conference in New York.

Public Relations Project:

Judy Gill has been hard at work reviewing past NINK articles and gathering them for possible publication as a guide for writers. The board plans to approach *Writer’s Digest* and see if they would be interested in publishing such a book. There are still many practical details to be worked out, but this is one of those projects that was much talked about in the past and the board would like you to know that it hasn’t simply slipped into the Great Beyond, but is being actively worked on. Once we secure additional volunteers, we will be sending out letters to the authors of the articles asking for permission to use them.

Agents, agents, agents!

In order to keep Ninc’s invaluable agent resource as current as possible, would everyone please check in the members-only section of the website and make sure the information about your agent affiliation is correct. Have you changed agents? Has your former agent left the business? Please let us know. E-mail changes to: changes@ninc.com or to nancywarren@telus.net

INTRODUCING.....

The following authors have applied for membership in Ninc and are now presented by the Membership Committee to the members. If no legitimate objections are lodged with the Membership Committee within 15 days of this NINK issue, these authors shall be accepted as members of Ninc:

New Applicants:

Candice Baines (*Candice Poarch*), Springfield VA
Curtiss Ann Matlock,
Minco OK
Judi McCoy, Silver
Spring MD
Florence Moyer (*Hayley Gardner*), Athens LA
Kathleen Nance,
Farmington Hills MI

New Members:

Barbara Dunlop,
Whitehorse,
Yukon Canada
Donna Fletcher,
Jamesburg NJ
Kathleen Holzapfel (*Lauren Bach*), Durham NC

Jill Limber,
San Diego CA
Janice MacDonald,
Vista CA
Julie Ortolon, Austin TX
Tara Spicer (*Tara Randel*),
Palm Harbor FL
Sue-Ellen Welfonder,
Longboat Key FL
Lea Wait, Edgecomb ME

Ninc has room to grow...recommend membership to your colleagues.

Prospective members may apply online at www.ninc.com.

Network with These Publishing Professionals...

The publishing world is coming to our conference as panelists and visiting professionals. These industry leaders are already registered. Are you?

Publishers and Editors

Chuck Adams, Vice President and Senior Editor, Simon and Schuster
Irwyn Applebaum, President and Publisher, Bantam Dell
Michael Cader, Publisher, Cader Books; Publisher's Lunch
Meena Cheng, Choix Publishers
Alicia Condon, Editorial Director, Dorchester
Beth de Guzman, Editorial Director, Mass Market, Warner
Jane Dentinger, Senior Editor, Mystery Guild
Tom Doherty, President and Publisher, TOR/Forge
Francine Fialkoff, Editor, Library Journal
Tara Gavin (Harlequin Enterprises)
Donna Hayes, President and Publisher, Harlequin Enterprises
Karen Kosztołnyik, Senior Editor, Warner
Audrey La Fehr, Executive Editor, New American Library
Carl Lennertz, Publisher Program Director, BookSense
Lucia Macro, Executive Editor, Morrow/Avon Books
Dianne Moggy, Editorial Director, MIRA Books
Natalee Rosenstein, Vice President, Senior Executive Editor, Berkley
Matthew Shear, Senior Vice President and Publisher, St. Martin's Paperbacks and Reference Groups
Isabel Swift, Vice President, Editorial, Harlequin Enterprises
Nita Taublib, Executive Vice President and Deputy Publisher, Bantam Dell
Marsha Zinberg, Senior Editor, Editorial Coordinator, Special Projects,
Claire Zion, Editorial Director, New American Library
Daniel Zitin, Freelance Editor



Freedom to Write



▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Continued from page 1*

[Her] dedications are very telling of the contents of the novels, since they are profound statements on her wonderful philosophies of life."

Jenny Bent (Harvey Klinger Agency): "I don't have a definitive answer, however I can tell two stories about editors I know whose entrepreneurial attitudes and pure ambition and toughness have really inspired me. The first is about a young editor named Laurie Chittenden. When Laurie was an assistant, she read an article about a writer named Richard Evans.

Mr. Evans lived in Utah and had very successfully self-published a book called *The Christmas Box*. Laurie called information in Utah and...discovered at least 80 Richard Evanses in the Salt Lake City area. Undeterred, Laurie started calling them all. Eventually, she found someone who...put her in touch with him. In the end...Laurie had her first bestseller before she was even an assistant editor! The other story is about an editor named Rob Weisbach. As a young editor, he knew that the big time agents wouldn't send him their best books or clients. So he decided to take matters into his own hands, and started writing letters to celebrities, asking them if they wanted to write books. He wrote to hundreds of celebrities, until one named Paul Reiser responded. Paul's book, *Fatherhood*, was Rob's first *New York Times* bestseller. Laurie and Rob...created their own success and I find that very inspirational."

Bill Gollither (Director Corporate Book Sales & Marketing, Anderson News): "Earlier in my career, the 1970s, I was greatly influenced by Ian Ballantine, founder of Pocket Books and Ballantine Books. We would talk every couple of months and once a year he would visit me in Eugene, OR.

I would fill him in on the opportunities, as I saw them, in the mass market world and how to expand hardcovers into the mass market arena. He would talk about all the creative things he was up to, ie. the Greenwich Workshop project, *Dinotopia*, etc. He was so energetic and positive about the book industry, and always looking for new opportunities. He made the 'book business' fun and exciting!"

"The influence of a vital person vitalizes."

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero's Adventure*.

Natalee Rosenstein (Vice President, Senior Executive Editor, Berkeley): "I would have to say...Lillian Jackson Braun, the author of 25 *Cat Who...* mysteries. Lillian began writing professionally when she was 17 years old and was a journalist for many years. While she had her first novels published in the 1960s, all the rest of her books have been published from the mid-1980s on, after Lillian retired from her career as a journalist. Now, well into her 'golden years,' she still writes at least one book a year with the same enthusiasm and freshness that she did at 17. She thoroughly enjoys her writing and her life, no matter what hardships she faces and I greatly admire her for this as well as her tremendous accomplishments."

Kathie Fong Yoneda (Script Development Consultant, Paramount Pictures Television): "Two colleagues of mine have inspired me. One is Linda Seger and the other is Chris Vogler....Both have strong work ethics and are generous in sharing their knowledge with others. Their philosophy in their professional life as well as their personal life is balanced... I have always come away with some nugget of wisdom. Writers Pam Wallace, Linda Lael Miller, and Tess Gerritson are also inspirational friends and colleagues whose work continues

to grow and shine, but they still manage to keep their feet on the ground.”

Joan Schulhafer (Director of Publicity and Public Relations, Kensington Books): “I can’t answer this question with one name. I’ve been in the industry for a long time, and a lot of people have been there for me, mentored me or simply showed me a great deal about aspiration, inspiration, and the reasons to believe that what we do makes a difference. I will limit my answers to earlier influences and say Carol Fass (publicity director extraordinaire who now heads Carol Fass Public Relations), Julia Knickerbocker (inspiration to dozens of aspiring publicists), Kate Duffy, Karen Solem [*ed. note*: Karen is a conference panelist], Ruth Langan, Nora Roberts, Jude Devereaux, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Dixie Browning. If I go past the 1980s, the list just gets way too long. This business has long been about synergy and the people who allow themselves to become involved with people and projects, and who share their expertise and influence with others.”

Betsy Hulsebosch (Senior Vice President of Creative Marketing, Bantam Dell): “The list is long; but they are my colleagues and partners in publishing.”

Karen Solem (Agent, Spencerhill Associates): “A number of editors inspire me — they seem tireless in their efforts to get an author discovered, whether successful or not. They come to a new writer with a lot of hope, enthusiasm, and determination. And they work very hard.”

Jill Conner Browne (Author): “The late and very much lamented Willie Morris and his widow, my editor, JoAnne Prichard, are 100% responsible for my being here today.”

Barb Burg (Senior Vice President of Publicity and Public Relations, Bantam Dell): “I’m continuously inspired by our authors to do my job every day...The first step in every campaign is finding out what’s different and what’s to love — and happily, our authors make it easy and keep inspiring us to do our best work!”

Webster Stone (Managing Partner and Editor, Rugged Land; Executive Film Producer): “I think Morgan Entekin and Judith Regan are the two smartest people in the industry.”

Al Zuckerman (Writers House): “The person in publishing who most inspired me is Maxwell Perkins who used to be the editor for Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, and a few other great

authors of the ’20s, ’30s, and ’40s.”

Eleanor Wood (Spectrum Literary Agency): “Lurton Blassingame. A wonderful gentleman and agent with excellent taste with whom I had the honor to work in my early days of agenting.”

Irene Goodman (Irene Goodman Literary Agency): “There are too many to mention. I believe that everyone I have ever worked with has inspired me in one way or another.”

Dianne Moggy (Editorial Director, MIRA Books): “I have been inspired by so many people in the industry — from colleagues in our office and at other houses, to agents, to sales reps, to book-sellers and certainly, by a number of authors. I simply couldn’t name names — the list is too long — but it’s one of the reasons I love this business. It’s a great group of people who all want to share stories with readers.”

“The first requirements for a heroic career are the knightly virtues of loyalty, temperance, and courage.”

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero’s Adventure*

Ruth Cavin (Senior Editor, Associate Publisher, Thomas Dunne Books): “Tony Hillerman, not even so much for his great books as for his great self. The title of his memoir, *Seldom Disappointed*, says it all. Tom Dunne, my boss, who brought me to St. Martin’s and has been a wonderful friend ever since, and whom I dearly love.”

Bill Gollither (Director Corporate Book Sales & Marketing, Anderson News): “The man I respect the most today is Tom Doherty, President and Publisher of TOR/Forge books [*ed. note*: Tom is a conference panelist]. Tom has no peer when it comes to putting people first, whether it’s family, friends, or associates, not dollars or bottom lines. His success and recognition in publishing Sci-Fi/Fantasy and Westerns/Historicals is unbelievable. Winning major awards year after year and all the while being one of the most humble men I have ever met. One of the few true icons in publishing today.”

I want to thank each one of our speakers: for the time and thought they gave to the questions; and for what they will share with us at the conference. Thank you for giving of yourselves.

— **Laura Baker,**
NYConference Coordinator

Literary Agents

Jenny Bent, Harvey Klinger Agency
Mel Berger, William Morris
Richard Curtis, President, Richard Curtis Associates; President, e-reads
Jake Elwell, Wieser & Wieser
Irene Goodman (Irene Goodman Agency)
Joy Konarski, Denise Marcil Agency
Maura Kye, Denise Marcil Agency
Maureen Moran, Maureen Moran Agency
Grace Morgan, Grace Morgan Literary Agency
Laura Blake Peterson, Curtis Brown Ltd.
Charles Schlessiger, Brandt & Hochman
Mary Sue Seymour, Seymour Agency
Karen Solem, Spencerhill Literary Agency
Pattie Steele-Perkins, Steele-Perkins Literary Agency
Eleanor Wood, Spectrum Agency

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Mary K. Chelton, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Graduate School of Library and Information Services
Jill Connor Browne, author
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Doug Mendini, Director National Accounts, Kensington Books
Karen Moy, Vice President Creative Affairs, Columbia Pictures
Marsha Spyros, Coordinator, NYPL, Office of Adult Services
Debbie Walsh, Coordinator, Adult Services, Geneva Public Library District
Kathie Fong Yoneda, Script Development Consultant, Paramount Pictures Television

Entertainment Attorney Addresses Writers' Issues

Mark Fowler specializes in copyright law and is a partner at the law firm, Satterlee, Stephens, Burke, and Burke in New York City. He is a former freelance writer, and the co-author of three books; Felton & Fowler's *Best Worst and Most Unusual, More Best Worst and Most Unusual*, and *Famous Americans You Never Knew Existed*.

It should be noted that nothing in this interview should be construed as direct legal advice for any particular situation, but only a general discussion of the law.

Q: Thanks for talking to us, Mark. I understand that when you were an author, your books sold pretty well, didn't they?

A: They did.

Q: Then did you get super-rich?

A: Uh ... no. (laughs) Which is one of the reasons I became a lawyer instead.

Q: So what are you working on now?

A: I'm working on a case that's of major concern to freelancers, which is the online re-use of articles that were originally in a print publication. The question is, say you wrote an article about gardening and contributed it to a local newspaper, clearly the newspaper has the right to print it in paper form, but can they turn around and publish it online without express permission? For a number of years, the publishers operated under the assumption that they could do just that. But a year or so ago, the Supreme Court of the United States held that freelancers and not print publishers have the online rights, if there is no contract in place transferring those rights to publishers.

Q: What's the most interesting

copyright case in the country right now?

A: To me, the most interesting copyright case in the country right now is the case initiated by several law professors seeking to overturn the federal statute extending the duration of copyright protection in the U.S. It's interesting because it was a case no one thought would go anywhere. A lower court rejected the professors' argument, and so did an appeals court. Then the Supreme Court surprised observers by reaching out and deciding to hear the case. The original duration of copyright was 28 years. Then it was increased to 56 years, then 75 years, and now Congress has extended it to 95 years, which the professors claim is unconstitutional. A lot of works which were scheduled to go into the public domain were suddenly protected for another 20 years, which affects research, and people's right to re-publish those works without permission, etc.

Q: Republish? If something's in the public domain, I can just republish it? Like I could set up my own publishing company today and put out *Oliver Twist*? And keep the profits?

A: And you wouldn't have to pay anybody for the work—not Dickens' descendants or anyone else. That's why the Classics are low priced in the book store.

Q: No way! I didn't know that. Are you surprised I didn't know that?

A: No, not really. There are a lot of things authors don't understand about copyright that it would be in their best interest to understand.

Q: Like what?

A: A lot of writers are under the impression that they need to register a copyright in order to be protected.

Copyright is actually automatic. The moment you put pen to paper, those words are copyright-protected if those words are original to you.

Q: Are there advantages to registering copyright?

A: There are advantages to registration in terms of the remedies you have against an infringer. If you register before the infringement, you can collect "statutory damages," a court imposed penalty, and you can also recover your attorneys' fees if you successfully sue for infringement. This is important because, without statutory damages and attorneys' fees, it may not be cost-effective to sue. For example, if I write a poem for the *New Yorker*, I might get 200 dollars. To sue somebody for that amount is not worthwhile because you pay your lawyer more than the poem was worth. In the case of low value work or work where it's difficult to establish the value, it may sometimes be wise to register your copyright so you can be awarded a meaningful sum of money.

Q: I polled my fellow Nincoids for questions they wanted to ask you. And here are some they e-mailed me. Ready? By far, the most popular concern was about websites that talk about authors. Is there any limit to what people can post on the Web about us or about our books? Or what about in chat rooms?

A: If what is stated is pure opinion, there's no limit to how vitriolic they can be. On the other hand, disguising a derogatory factual statement as opinion does not give it protection from a defamation claim if it's a remark about the author's personal or professional character, or a statement that could interfere with the author's ability to make a living in the future.

Journalists have sued reviewers (with mixed results) for attacking their professional competence. Chat rooms—yes, under some circumstances, the web site owner can be responsible for what is said in a chat room, as the publisher of those remarks. If an author complains about a remark that is false and defamatory in a chat room, the website should think very carefully about taking that remark down.

Q: Another member wanted to know whether someone can sue you for wrongly believing you've modeled a character after her (or him).

A: One of the things about this great nation of ours is that anybody can sue anybody for anything, no matter how frivolous. In other countries, including England, frivolous law suits are riskier to bring. To win, though, the plaintiff would have to prove that the author had knowledge of her life (so the similarities weren't mere coincidence), that her life was recognizably depicted, and that the depiction was untrue. You can depict people in non-fiction without their permission—it's called an unauthorized biography.

Q: Do you ever deal with frivolous law suits?

A: Sure. All the time. One man claimed he'd been defamed by The Holy Bible. I can't remember which character he thought he was. We won the case on the grounds that the statute of limitations had run out a few thousand years ago.

Q: Thanks for talking to us, Mark. Don't forget to buy me lunch when I'm in New York for the Ninc conference.

A: You bet. At the best take-out papaya stand in town.

Q: I need to make richer friends.

Mark Fowler was interviewed by his niece, Elizabeth Doyle Fowler who writes books, loves animals, and is trying to learn the Celtic harp.

Freedom to Write



Screen writers: One-On-One Sessions

A final reminder about the one-on-ones available with both Kathie Fong Yoneda and Webster Stone. Ms. Yoneda is Script Development Consultant at Paramount Pictures, a specialist in story analysis, development, and evaluation of scripts, plays, novels, treatments and pitches for film and TV.

Mr. Stone is an executive film producer (*Gone in 60 Seconds*, *The Negotiator*, *Citizen X* for HBO) and Managing Partner and Editor, Rugged Land Publishers.

They are both hosting the two-hour Night Owl, "Enhancing Your Chances in Hollywood." Also, they have made a generous offer: each one will meet privately with six people for ten minutes each. If you're interested, contact Laura Baker by September 5 (lbaker10@aol.com; 505-298-2021)

Speaker Update

Alicia Condon, Editorial Director, Dorchester
Tim DeYoung, Senior Vice President Sales & Marketing, Dorchester

Yoneda Booksigning at Drama Bookstore

Kathie Fong Yoneda is signing her book, *The Script Selling Game: A Hollywood Insider's Look at Getting Your Script Sold and Produced* (Michael Wiess Productions), at Drama Bookstore, 250 West 40th St., Saturday, September 21, from 5 p.m. - 7 p.m. (The bookstore is between 7th and 8th Avenues—only a few blocks from the Marriott Marquis.)

"Pre-conference registration ends September 13. Those who do not register by this date cannot be guaranteed conference packets."

As a script development consultant at Paramount Pictures Television she developed the following produced films and animated TV series: *Strictly Business*, *Toy Soldiers*, *Big Business*, *Stakeout*, *Outrageous Fortune*, *Picture Bride*, *Aladdin*, *Goof Troop*, and *Little Mermaid*. Production Assistant, with on-screen credit, for *Alex and the Gypsy*, and *Robin and Marian*. **NINK**

Novelists, Inc. New York Conference Registration Form
September 22-24, 2002

MEMBER NAME: _____ NAME ON BADGE: _____

NAME BADGE PSEUDONYMS (Limit 2): _____ EDITORS/AGENTS/SPEAKERS: _____

_____ TITLE: _____

_____ COMPANY: _____

ADDRESS: _____

TELEPHONE: _____ E-MAIL: _____

ARRIVAL DATE: _____ ARRIVAL TIME: _____

DEPARTURE DATE: _____ DEPARTURE TIME: _____

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Tricks of the Trade

BY RONN KAISER

VOICE Part Two

Those of you who were around last month may have sensed a problem in the making. Well, you were right. As you may recall, most people felt “voice” was the author’s essence, the part of them that came through in their writing. But there’s an apparent problem with that when you consider that with many writers the voice evolves. Does that mean the person is changing? And what about authors who write in different genres or those who write books with vastly different moods? Novels written from multiple points of view? Is the dark, evil vision of your antagonist *your* voice or is it your dark side speaking through a character? Are we talking multiple personality disorder or is all this something other than voice? Is the writer’s voice really an incarnation of the deep self? If yes, then as **Pat Rice** asks, “So how does one develop something that is purely us?”

Consider the following statements. **Dixie Browning**: “I think young (new) writers might be influenced by other voices, but the sooner they gain confidence, the sooner they can start writing in their own voices.” **Diane Chamberlain**: “I became an avid reader of Alice Hoffman’s early novels. She has a very distinctive voice — serious, foreboding, gothic. I am keenly aware of [how] my voice changed due to her influence. I still have that voice today. Maybe it would have developed on its own in time, but I tend to think my voice is, in part, the result of my ‘Hoffman period.’” **Deni Dietz**: “I think voice is something that you’re born with — but I also think you have to find it. When I began my writing career, I tried to ‘sound’ like Rosemary Rogers. It didn’t work then, and it wouldn’t work now.”

Where is the “me” in these voices before, during and after?

Contrast that with the following. **Eve Gaddy**: “I think voice is with you from the beginning.” After finding an old disk of her first book, Eve says, “When I read that first, raw thing I wrote with so much excitement...I could hear my voice in it. Not perhaps as strong as my voice is now, but it was there.” **Pam Browning**: “I recently came across some early writings of mine from age 12 or 13. My voice was there, style the same, really hardly any change. Which makes me wonder why it was necessary to suffer through Freshman English in college.”

Diane and Deni had to “find” their voice and Eve and Pam “had it” all along. Is this a comment on the individuals involved or on the validity of the “me-voice” theory?

Following are some possible explanations. **Melanie Jackson**: “Some people come into the world with their voice in place....For other writers, the crucible of rabid English teachers, critique groups, editors, etc. keeps them from feeling free (for a while) to invent their own style. Of course, they find their voice eventually or they don’t make it as a writer.” **Sylvie Kurtz**: “I think voice is something you find as you write. Some may be born with it, but I think most of us have to meet it halfway.” **Ann**

Roth: “When you first start writing, you want to ‘get it right’ and you’re afraid to use your voice. But as you progress and get more comfortable with the craft, that voice sneaks in....I still believe that under every scenario is a core that doesn’t change.”

How, one might ask, does the “me-voice” theory fit into the following experiences:

Sabrina Jeffries: “I think it’s less a matter of changing [one’s voice] as of finding your true one. The artist’s voice is more delicate than we realize and can easily be influenced.” Sabrina wrote contemporaries in her “true voice” but struggled with historicals, realizing, “I had no real ‘voice’...so I taught myself how to write historicals as myself.” **Madeline Baker**: “I write historical romances and vampire romances and I’ve had people tell me that I have a different ‘voice’ for each genre.” **Deni Dietz** says of her husband, Gordon Aalborg, “Gordon has two ‘voices.’ The one he uses for his romance novels...and the one he uses for...mainstream.”

A number of Nincoids explained these apparent contradictions by distinguishing between “voice” and “style.” **Julia Ross** put it this way, “Along with many others, I think voice is who you are, style is what you can learn to adopt. A good analogy for me might be in the visual arts. Picasso’s voice is there in everything he ever painted after his early adolescence. It’s something in the line, brushwork, approach, emotion that says, ‘this is a Picasso.’ ‘Style’ is something Picasso developed, adopted, discarded at will: Blue Period, Cubism, etc. But it doesn’t matter what style he used, something in every painting is still uniquely Picasso.”

Now contrast Julia’s analysis with this from **Tess Gerritsen**: “I think voice is a changeable thing. I’m conscious of my writer’s voice changing between books, depending on the story. In some ways, it’s like an actor taking on a new role — if it’s a new mood, a different sub-genre, then I have to adopt a new voice for that project....I believe that ‘voice’ is the emotional tone, and ‘style’ is the mechanical stuff — rhythm, sentence structure, use of metaphor, etc. Both, it seems to me, can change from book to book, or from genre to genre. I’m not really aware of having a distinctive and unchanging ‘voice’ all my own, but instead feel like a chameleon, adopting the voice of the character’s point of view.”

Ann Roth sees things “the other way around. My voice is always there (though moderated for the book, characters, and situation). My style changes to suit the type of book. It continues to mutate as I continue to grow.” Similarly, **Karen Harbaugh** says, “I’ve always thought of voice as who you are, yourself. Style is something you put on — like a style of clothes.” **Dallas Schulze** talks about being influenced by books she reads during a project. “My sentence structure will change and the language tends to take on a different rhythm, become a little more elaborate and archaic. I suspect that my voice remains the same however — the emotional feel is my own but I apparently have a bit of chameleon in me when it comes to style.” **Pat Rice** in musing about voice and style wonders if “the two may be so integral to each other that it’s difficult to separate them. It may be possible to polish and adapt ‘style,’ but somewhere under there is our own strong sensibilities.”

Returning to the musical analogy discussed on these pages last month, **Keith de Jong** asserts that “Voice is something you

Tricks of the Trade

▶▶▶▶ are born with — style is a trained voice....Style is something added to voice...with due regard for the conventions of the *written* word....This is voice-with-technique and it is *learned*.” With respect to the apparent contradictions in the “me-voice” theory, Keith adds a new concept — tone. “Writers change the *tone* of their voice for different kinds of writing — for comedy or drama, romance or nonfiction — just as we change the tone of our speaking voice to [suit the occasion]....Voice is the raw material we work with to create style and tone, by using learned writing techniques.”

Ruth Schmidt explains the differences between voice and style by source and choices. “Your voice,” she says, “is formed out of background: 1) What kind of family you were born into, their thought patterns and approach to handling life, their speech patterns; 2) Where you were raised, what region of the country or earth and its accents and way of life; 3) How much and what kind of formal education or training you received; 4) Other influences you’ve accepted into your life, like religion, travel, politics or a specialized study of anything specific.” Style, on the other hand, is based on choices. As Ruth says, “You can choose: 1) the mode, tone, manner; 2) the shape, format, layout, structure; 3) the specialty classification, or genre; 4) the character or brand; 5) the method, approach, or technique; 6) the motif, amount of detail, or the theme.”

I’ve saved Laura Resnick’s input for last because Laura makes what I consider the most important point and that is how this thing called voice works. Laura’s concept of voice is very similar to most other Nincoids. Like Tess Gerritsen, she uses acting (my favorite metaphor for writing, as well) to explain voice: “The actor can change his style, his posture, his attitude, his physical appearance — but the core instrument, the actor himself, is always the same individual. That’s the equivalent of voice, the part of the work that is inherently you, yourself, your personal instrument, the part of your work you cannot exchange for another in the way that you can exchange accents, wigs, styles, and emotional attitudes.”

Now we get to get to that critical point of how voice works. Laura continues, “My voice relies on clearing away all extraneous, self-conscious, and other-imposed stuff and keeping a big, wide, well-paved tunnel open between my creative core and the page as I write.” For Laura a strong clear voice is “the constant current of fresh air I get if I make sure nothing blocks the tunnel....the cleaner the tunnel, the stronger the voice, and the stronger the work that results.”

Laura then adds this comment which is consistent with the voice-style distinction most Nincoids accept: “Which is different than the extensive, rigorous, almost obsessive, editing, revising, chiseling, sanding, and polishing I do to my style.”

The nice thing about orchestrating a column like this is that you get the last word. Be warned, I’m an iconoclast. Basically, folks, I don’t buy the “me-voice” or “your voice is you” theory. Nor do I buy that voice and style are two different things. And no, we’re not just talking semantics here. I think too many things are left unexplained or rendered impossible by the theory.

I believe, for example, that Gordon Aalborg can have two distinct voices without having multiple personalities. I believe that Tess Gerritsen’s voice can change from book to book. Yes, I believe that Eve Gaddy and Pam Browning have written with the

same voice from the start and that there are authors you could identify in a blindfold test. But I also believe that Diane Chamberlain has adopted Alice Hoffman’s voice and made it her own without *being* her. I believe that while the dark, psychotic anti-social mind set of my villain may flow through my fingers to the keyboard, his voice, his primal longings and perversions, his evil heart and mind are *not* me — a “part of me” in a mysterious way, perhaps, but not my essence, my core, my world view, my philosophical, psychological, cultural or sociological being.

Nor can any of this be explained away by distinctions between voice and style. They have more in common with each other (if indeed they aren’t different aspects of the same thing, as I believe) than either have to do with my essence as a human being. My point is that while my voice and I may be intimately acquainted, we are not one.

So what’s the deal?

Here’s my theory. What is commonly called “voice” is nothing more than the *personality* of one’s mode of written expression. The act of expression is a *process*, a dynamic, not a thing. We, by contrast, are things, beings.

The process of expression is in some fundamental way the act of connecting with the universe, bringing what’s “out there” to the reader. This is where Laura’s “tunnel theory” about voice being the fresh wind is useful.

How does a writer express her or himself? Where does expression come from and how does it work? Laura says it flows from one’s “creative core.” That’s good, but I think only part of what’s at play. I prefer the analogy of the well. In the well is all that stuff Ruth Schmidt and others talked about, the things that make us who we are, but also all the rational, conscious, mechanical stuff Ruth and others talked about in connection with “style.” When we express ourselves, it’s like dipping a bucket into the well and up comes a character, a setting, a scene, a book. Stylistic things tend to be more surface and amenable to rational manipulation, but they come from the same well and are influenced by the same sources as the deeper currents associated with “world view” and the like.

It gets more complicated. There is more down in that well than just us. The spring that feeds our well is outside of our immediate life experience. There are genetic based things, the collective unconscious and (if you’re so inclined) deeper still is the spiritual realm. The stuff at the surface is consciously understood, the deeper we go, the more unconscious the source material until it outside us, beyond us, beyond experience. At best, we tap into it.

The average person turns a blind eye to these mysteries of self and existence, but we writers probe it, we listen to the hum of the universe and draw from those deep waters flowing through our well. We don’t know most of what’s down there or where it came from. As writers we are constantly surprising even ourselves.

Most people when they “express” themselves splash the surface with a teaspoon. We are different. We are in essence seers, interpreters of the universe, people who draw on the deeper currents. Our key talent is the ability to plumb the depths, or as Laura says, to draw that fresh air from the tunnel, unimpeded.

To say that process is nothing more than us, begs the question and is at best a tautology. Because the fingers on the keyboard are ours, it does not mean we are the exclusive source. Let’s put it this way, the you that your family knows and loves, the you that sings in the church choir or mows the lawn or who got an A in English is not the you who writes your books, though he/she may be present. The writer/mystical you *transcends* the

temporal you. Don't you do your best work when in a semi-trance? When you're in the flow aren't you a spectator to the process, your rational mind sitting there with you, observing what's happening on the computer screen?

Voice is nothing more than the qualities, character, and personality of the stuff flowing through us. Some of the qualities are profound, abstract, others are tangible, things like patterns and rhythm, word choices, sentence structure, etc. This is why voice and style are not distinct things, they are different aspects of a single continuum. Both are integral components of the process of expression. (Even our words, our verbal images can surprise us when they come from a place beyond conscious choice.)

Like Tess and Laura, I like the dramatic arts metaphor. If my preceding comments are too mystical or occult for your taste, perhaps acting will help explain phenomena like Gordon, Diane, and Tess's experiences with "voice." Regardless of what you believe to be the source of the script, writers are like actors (in my lexicon "channelers" might be the preferred term), performing by placing words on a page.

All actors are not the same. Some have a narrow range, perhaps a distinctive personality that's visible in all their roles. Some say these people play, in effect, themselves every time. (John Wayne, Clark Gable?) Others actors are like chameleons or shape changers. They *become* entirely different personas as they move from role to role. (Meryl Streep, Gary Oldman?) The point is there are many ways to act, many ways to sing the song of the universe. It

comes down to how effective you are at plumbing the depths and pulling up something meaningful, worthwhile and entertaining.

Even the most diverse and skillful actors and writers have their limits. At some point, if they stray too far, they lose their credibility. In the case of the writer, too much conscious manipulation causes the work to lose its authenticity. I think what **Jayne Ann Krentz** meant when she said "believe in yourself and in your own voice," was let that bucket sink as deep as possible and don't censor or doubt the validity of what you bring up.

I personally find it helpful to think of myself as the servant of the process, not the master, not the ultimate source. Voice is but the personality of my expression. The script, I believe, comes from something bigger and more mysterious than me.

Topic for October: *What clever tips about the "mechanics" or "environment" of writing have you discovered that might save others time or trouble? Computers? Research? Business records? Promotion gimmicks? Naming characters or remembering their attributes? Clearing your mind or saving your back? Ensuring your privacy? Organizing your office? Neat products? The best advice you've ever gotten in one pithy phrase?*

Please submit your October tips and topic suggestions for November, in the medium of your choice, ASAP as follows:

Email: ron.kaiser@prodigy.net

Fax: (916) 681-7155

Snail mail: 8133 Ibanez Court
Sacramento, CA 95829



Sticky Notes from the Edge

The Pet Body Rules

"Friends, family and society are the natural enemies of the writer..." W. Somerset Maugham.

Well, that about covers it. Talk to y'all next month.

Yeah, you wish. See, there's a great, big hairy thing Mr. Maugham forgot: our physical selves. My body, my enemy? Yep. Think of your own body as a spoiled and hulking pet (choose your breed) left on your doorstep, and you, Dear Writer, must deal with the little bastard's every whining demand. Call it "Pet Body." It takes up so danged much of your writing day, every day, with its incessant demands for attention that you come to hate it. I hate mine. Don't want or need it. Hey, I can shut out friends, family, and society when I need to. But not the demands of my Pet Body.

My personal Pet Body clamors every day to jog (and hurt) for four idiotic miles. I ask you: is jogging writing? No. But heaven forbid I shouldn't take it out for its run! It threatens to tell my doctor I'm not exercising it. And then, after a jog, it takes up even more of my writing day with its shower with expensive soaps and shampoos and conditioners. Have I mentioned that my particular Pet Body's head has this beautiful, long and flowing hair (my column, my hair)? Can we talk about the "time spent not writing" that this hair takes up in the course of a day? And is it grateful? No. It sheds...but only those select hairs without split ends.

My evil Pet Body also insists on being fed things that aren't good for it but require major preparation time (i.e., not writing). And then, once it gets these things, it spitefully gains weight and sometimes even makes random or heinous noises at inopportune times because it ate those things earlier. Stop laughing. Try having your pet body rumble loudly when there's a microphone right in front of you and you're the keynote speaker. See? Not funny.

I do, I hate this thing. Everyday with the needs: It insists on being walked, bathed, fed, brushed, combed, poofed, fluffed, entertained; having its nails done, its hair colored, and it wants new outfits and shoes. And in return it will eat, sleep, flop around, go flabby, and gripe. I ask you: where's the time for writing?

The daily time this Pet Body takes up is criminal! Hours out of my day! Hours, I tell you. I'm so desperate I have taken the danged thing for long rides out to the country and dumped it. Guess what? It arrives home the same time I do. Every time. Amazing.

I have tried to starve it, indulge it, coddle it, cajole it, wheedle it, threaten it, punish it, reward it, ignore it, even live in it. But I can't. Of all the things in my life that take me away from my writing, I hate my Pet Body the most. I can't get away from it. Everywhere I go, there it is...growling.

— **Cheryl Anne Porter**

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

As a top-brass lifer at Harlequin, Isabel Swift hardly needs an introduction. What may come as a surprise to those who haven't met her personally, however, is how approachable and downright friendly she is. While Isabel did a few Fred Astaires around some of the more delicate questions put to her, she deserves big points for returning calls and e-mails faster than Superman can change in a phone booth. Considering the demands of her schedule, that's darn impressive—and so is the professional record she brings to the table in this month's Q&A about the biz.

NINK: Tell us, Isabel, what made you decide to pursue a publishing career, and how did you get from there to here?

Isabel Swift: Shocking to most who knew me in high school and college, I have had “one” job my whole life (though admittedly a few title changes).

I was given excellent advice as an undergraduate to “do something that I enjoyed.” An avid reader, I happily became an English major; however, none of the obvious careers—journalist, teacher, writer—seemed right. I was still a voracious reader and the books I loved best were ones that swept me away by sheer storytelling. I read books for plot, I loved Jane Austen and read Regency romances throughout high school and college. Then I realized someone was getting paid to read romances and knew that someone should be me.

I am now VP of Editorial for Harlequin after starting as an editorial assistant for Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster/Silhouette) and working my way up. As a company Harlequin has branched out into women's fiction as well as romance, but we remain very relationship and female centric (books written by, for, about women that sell in over 24 languages in over 100 countries around the world). My colleagues, authors and their stories are all a delight to spend time with. I've even given talks on my passion for my career at both my high school and my college. While Harlequin is always hiring new entry level staff and acquiring new, unpublished authors, we also have people who have worked here for decades (me) and authors who have written over 100 titles for us. It's a great job.

NINK: Publishing was long considered a gentleman's game, yet some of the most powerful players these days are women—you amongst them. To what do you attribute the shift toward gender equality in the upper echelons of publishing? Do you think there is still a ways to go, that most women have to work harder than their male counterparts to attain similar status?

IS:

I think both men and women work hard to succeed, and that the strides women have taken are based on a number of elements, one of which was having a group of women who set their sights at a higher level. Ideally it also meant those in charge—both men and women—mentored and encouraged that drive. Building new leaders is an investment. When I first started at Harlequin, there was one female Vice President. Now almost 60% of our VP level Executive Committee are women and our president is a woman. What I would really like to see now is more women at higher levels on the book distribution side.

NINK: What is the most challenging part of your job? The most rewarding? Frustrating?

IS: Rewarding? Being able to deliver satisfaction to all our

constituents, meeting and exceeding expectations and keeping fresh, surprising and innovative. When we are able to achieve the above—something we aim to do every day—it's great.

Challenging? While it's not always easy to deliver to those goals, it helps to have such a close and often longstanding connection with our authors, readers and colleagues and to know we are all working to achieve the same thing—do a great job delivering excellent stories to our readers.

Frustrating? When we don't accomplish those goals!

NINK: Harlequin is always looking for ways to expand in the marketplace. In what new directions is Harlequin looking to expand in both the near and far future?

IS: We are expanding our focus from romance fiction to include the broader spectrum of women's fiction. We started this in '94 with the launch of the MIRA imprint, now with mass market, trade and hardcover programs, which has been an incredible success story for us. We've taken another step with last year's very successful launch of Red Dress Ink, which we're also in the process of launching in eight different countries around the world. We'll also be continuing to explore new areas of growth within women's fiction.

NINK: Do you put much stock in trends? Why, or why not?

IS: We are looking for both timeless appeal as well as relevance in the stories we acquire. We are a global company. What we buy today needs to have resonance with a woman in Japan in two years (think publication and translation time), so fads don't work. If “trend” is defined as a new way of looking at a timeless issue in our lives, our authors, readers, and our publishing programs certainly respond to and anticipate trends in the marketplace

NINK: The Shadows line was considered by many to have been conceived before its time. Silhouette reissued some of those titles. What happened with that?

IS: We've been pleased with the performance of the repackaged Shadows titles in the Dreamscape program. Our use of theme-led and author-led backlist programs has been very satisfying in getting stories and authors' work back out to readers. We are continuing to explore incorporating paranormal elements within series (e.g. Mermaids in Silhouette Romance) in MIRA (e.g. publishing Maggie Shayne's vampire books) and in an upcoming continuity, *Family Secrets*, with genetically modified characters, as well as exploring other venues.

NINK: Harlequin is synonymous with romance. Yet you've issued many single titles that are more plot driven than romance driven. Do you foresee Harlequin branching out into a non-romance direction, even perhaps with non-fiction? (Excluding romance manuals, postcards, marketing-driven offerings, etc.)

IS: Our goal is to be the global leader in women's fiction—which would still include building our series programs as well as expanding our single titles. Challenging, sure—but we think achievable given the strength of our three distribution channels (Retail, Direct to the Consumer, Overseas), our longstanding relationships with booksellers, authors, and agents, and our proven

ability to spot and grow talented authors. We've invested a lot in building websites around the world to support our lines and authors and to continue to deepen our relationships to our readers. These all give us a very strong foundation to build on.

NINK: *In what ways has romance fiction grown in the past 20 years? And what role has Harlequin played in promoting that growth?*

IS: The past two decades have seen an expansion of the boundaries of series romance for both Harlequin and Silhouette, and romance fiction has also taken up residence on all the major bestseller lists, in all formats including hardcover. In general romance and women's fiction are being taken more seriously, though we still have a ways to go. It's also true that almost all of the top writers in the genre have written for Harlequin or Silhouette, many publishing their first books with us. While acknowledging each author's significant storytelling gifts, Harlequin and Silhouette's series programs have discovered and developed a remarkable number of talented writers. It is particularly satisfying to see an original series title—Nora Roberts' history-making Silhouette Special Edition, *The Perfect Neighbor*—or reprint series title hit a major bestseller list. Harlequin has worked tirelessly to promote, expand, and enhance the perception of romance, the genre and our authors for the over 50 years it has been in business.

NINK: *Growing pains. What have been the biggest "ouchies" for Harlequin/Silhouette since you first came on board?*

IS: Wanting to be the best immediately when we move into a new area.

NINK: *Harlequin recently gave pseudonym rights to their authors, who considered it a victory hard won. You were perceived as an author's advocate on this issue. How difficult was it to be wedged between your authors and corporate concerns? And what happened to solidify Harlequin's decision after so many years in a tug of war with writers and their professional writing associations?*

IS: It's my job to be both the author and corporate advocate and representative, and as with any relationship, that can entail compromise from all parties. The positive resolution on the pseudonym issue has been a long time coming and a collective effort. I know Donna and the editorial team—to whom significant credit should go—are delighted to be part of this result. Harlequin has an enormous amount to offer an author and Donna has said that she wants our authors to publish with us because we're the best house for them—not because they have to.

NINK: *If you could change one thing about the business of publishing books, what would it be, and why?*

IS: Probably distribution, as there are many inefficiencies. But if I could wave a wand, I'd like to give everyone more leisure time to enjoy the wonderful stories we are creating.

NINK: *Nora Roberts spoke quite fondly of you in a recent interview with NINK. She also entertained us with a synopsis of her life and career, beginning with "Once upon a time..." If Isabel Swift could paint her own happily-ever-after, what would we see?*

IS: I am fond of saying that if I could invent an author, I could not come up with anyone as great as Nora.

As for my own happily-ever-after, I have to admit I feel incredibly lucky just the way I am. I read great stories, work with remarkable people around the world who love what they do and are committed to excellence. My job is always different, challeng-

ing and fun. On a personal front, I think my husband is the greatest—and if you look at the fact that we live in different cities as simply part of the adventure, then I wouldn't change a thing.

Thank you, Olivia, for this opportunity, and Novelists, Inc. for their tireless advocacy and support of a genre I love. **NINK**

Bits'n'Pieces

AUTHORS GUILD EXPANDS WEB SERVICES...

Through <http://www.authorsguild.net>, the Authors Guild is offering writers the ability to produce low-cost websites. The program is open to members and non-members of the Guild, though participants will have to have been published by an established press or have published at least three major freelance pieces. The service is touted as user-friendly and cost-effective. A single page listing costs \$3 per month in maintenance; a standard site, can feature up to 10 books, & is \$6 per month; a larger site can feature as many as 50 titles and costs \$9 per month. The Authors Guild will also register new Web site addresses (such as JohnDoeAuthor.com) for \$18 per year (the average is a minimum of \$30) and provide e-mail to those building websites with the Guild for an additional \$3. In return for the fees, the Authors Guild will submit sites to major search engines and promote the sites along with its own.

BOOK-SHARING PROGRAM—OR A NEW TWIST ON RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS...

According to *Have Books, Will Travel* by *LA Times* staff writer Susan Carpenter www.bookcrossing.com is a website that makes a global game of books purposely left behind, then found by someone else. In other words, "If you happen to find "On the Road" at a gas station or "Who Moved My Cheese?" next to a hunk of Gouda in your grocery store, it might not be an accident. You could be the unwitting beneficiary of a bookcrosser—a person who intentionally leaves books in public places hoping they'll be found by strangers." And if you really want to do the thing up right, you'll not only read the book you'll log onto the site and let the bookcrosser know you got the book. Bookcrossing.com has accumulated more than 18,000 members since it was "released into the wild" last year and averages 112 new participants daily. Books stand the best chance of being picked up depending on how well they're marked, what type they are, where they're placed, and whether or not the finder has Internet access (that's re: whether or not you'll hear back on the web site when you post and email address and details on leaving books.) The game sounds like fun—a little like "Where's Waldo" with clues, and books for the winners.

Compiled by Terey daly Ramin

OUTSIDE THE BIG APPLE

Three children's books, *Harry Potter*, *The Princess Diaries*, and *Shrek*, were made into movies. Duh, you say. Like I didn't know. Hang on here. There's more to the story—certainly something to interest Ninc members. Those three movies brought in approximately \$670 million in ticket sales in 2001. Responding to that, this summer, 40 movies with G or PG ratings were released. Interested in trying to get a piece of the action? Me, too. In fact, I just sent my YA to two publishers and entered a contest run by another. True, the odds of having a children's or YA book made into a movie is up there with that pesky meteor hitting earth, but movie companies are looking for projects (strong concept, simple, fable-like stories, original, recognizable)—and the majority of those projects first saw life as books.

The children's book market is far from a "one size fits all." There's fiction and nonfiction, commercial publishers and educational, packagers, picture books (preschool to 8), pre-K (under 5), beginning readers (4-7), young readers (5-8) middle-grade (8-12), young adult (12 and older, maybe, sometimes). The *2002 Children's Book Market* includes 535 listings.

Just under A in the listings are such diverse publishers as ABDO which "offers high-interest/low-reading-level books for kindergarten through young adults," Africa World Press in New Jersey (go figure) whose needs are limited to books about Africa, African American, Caribbean, and Latin American issues, the Jewish perspective Alef Design, Amsco School Publications nonfiction textbooks and supplementary educational materials, and Anchorage Press Plays in Kentucky (another go figure) which caters to dramatic arts programs.

Schools and libraries are more than major players in the children's market. As agent Ellen Levine told PW, Hollywood is keen on, "children's books that will hold the interest of adults, too." A hot tip. Adults control the school and library markets. Publishers are hungry to cater to the needs of the educational system. Not all of the following have possibilities for Tinseltown but a little background is in order. Wayne State University Press publishes nonfiction for all ages that "contribute to the advancement of education and reflect the cultural diversity of its readers." Scott Foresman (my mother knows him) provides curriculum materials for teaching reading, language arts, science, math, and social studies. Fulcrum Kids is known for its resource materials for teachers, librarians, and educators but also publishes trade fiction and nonfiction. The message here is, maybe this route is the foot in the door if, like me, you're new to the children's market.

Former reading teacher Judy Bradbury and author of the Christopher Counts! Series (Beverly Hills agent Stephen Moore puts a recognizable or beloved title or author at the top of his 'look at' list) reminds writers that its no wonder, "books written for kids about school-related issues are always in demand." They cover everything from studying for tests, getting along with others, working in a group, writing a book report, grooming, members of the opposite sex, surfing the Internet, and interacting with peer groups. Bradbury warns that many educational publishers don't publish material for kids. Instead, they offer materials for adults to use when they work with kids.

One of, if not the largest children's publisher is Scholastic (remember those book club fliers your kids bring home). *The Ant Bully* published by Scholastic in 1999 recently sold to Universal; in other words, Scholastic Books get looked at. (So do other publishers' offerings but more about that later) According to executive Scholastic editor Kate Waters, "Most often ideas generate with us and then we approach the author we think will be best to write the book. We look to make a successful marriage of our ideas with good writers."

That's us, right? Under the Scholastic umbrella is Scholastic Professional Books which targets educators and markets its titles to language-arts specialists, curriculum coordinators, and teachers in preschool through 8th grade. They published 137 nonfiction titles in 2001, 34 of which were developed from unsolicited submissions. The trade paperback division includes fiction and nonfiction picture books, adventures, mysteries, science fiction, and children's sports. They only accept agented submissions, worth a look since in 2001 they brought out 350 titles. The hardest nut to crack is Scholastic Book Club which publishes under eight imprints. They're responsible for The BabySitters Club and The Magic School Bus series. According to publisher Jean Feiwel, "Our standards are very high. If you have top-of-the-line writing skills and a sense of what appeals to children, you may send us a query." Gee, thanks. On second thought, maybe I'll play their game. *The Bully Ant's* success ain't nuthin' to sneeze at.

More next month..

— Vella Munn

Bits'n'Pieces

THE BUSINESS OF TV BOOKCLUBS IS FLOURISHING so well that businesses want 'em, too. Chapter-a-day (website <http://www.chapteraday.com>) a Sarasota, FL company that builds and maintains online book clubs by sending out daily book excerpts for libraries and bookstores is getting as many as a dozen queries a week from corporations. According to a bit in *Wired News*, along with the basic business book club, Chapter-a-Day will also offer a sales and marketing book club.

"When employees in a company receive a five-minute read every day from a popular business book—it is really like everyone in their company being able to receive a five-minute seminar every day," said Suzanne Beecher, founder and president of Chapter-a-Day. This book club arrives in a daily e-mail.

TdR

Crawling Through the Desert

BY JANELLE BURNHAM SCHNEIDER

Remember your First Sale? The euphoria, the delight, the “oh yeah, I’m on my way now”? It felt so good to be a Published Author. You sat down to work on Book Number Two, and while you might have had to wait longer than you wanted to see that one in print, it appeared in bookstores, too. Next, your publisher offered you a contract on a three-book series. You were on your way!

Then it happens. Shortly after the first book of your series goes on sale, your publisher is bought out. Or your editor is promoted, fired, or changes companies. Perhaps your agent calls to say he no longer wants to represent you.

Regardless of the source, this feels like the ultimate rejection. Olivia Rupprecht describes it as “being tossed aside like yesterday’s leftovers after being told [you’re] destined to become tomorrow’s star.”

Linda Windsor easily recalls receiving the bad news. “My editor loved my work,” she says, “but couldn’t sell it based on the numbers.” How did she react? “On the phone, gracious and understanding. Off the phone, I cried.”

Lillian Stewart Carl describes her experience even more graphically. “The editor I loved had already quit the business and turned me over to one who simply did not speak my language. I was out on the street before the third book (in my series) was even published.” Her reaction was “shock, horror, grief, depression—I spent a lot of time in the kneehole of my desk, whimpering.”

Each of the eleven authors (representing 55 cumulative years without a contract) interviewed for this article describe going through a grieving process. For some it consumed weeks or months. Others felt ready to rejoin the submission fray within days. So while the process is very personal, these veterans of the desert still have some helpful suggestions anyone following in their unenviable footsteps.

First of all, acknowledge the loss. Friends and family might try to encourage you by saying, “You’ll find someone else soon,” but that doesn’t begin to soothe the wound left by the rejection. Charlotte Hubbard says there were times during her six years without a contract that she just

gave herself permission “to spend my day being miserable.”

This honesty is often accompanied by or followed by loss of confidence in one’s ability. After being dismissed by her agent, Jan Boies reports, “I was shocked and my confidence was shaken. I think this hit me harder than rejections from editors. If (my agent) didn’t think she could sell my work, then who is going to buy my stories?”

Carole Bellacera had double reason to doubt herself. She ended up in the desert because she turned down a contract offer. She explains, “I simply felt I could do better.” However, a replacement offer didn’t materialize. “I jumped without a net, and (for months) I just kept falling.” But she also kept writing. “If you believe in what you’re doing, if you know writing is what you’re meant to do, you have no choice but to keep going.”

Each author has a different way of “keeping going.” Anger provided motivation for several. Cindi Myers (w/a Cynthia Sterling) said, “I very politely turned down an offer I felt was too low and thereafter could not have sold a diamond mine to the editor in question.” After realizing what had happened, she felt “really angry for a long time.”

For Mary Kennedy, it was a “come out swinging” kind of emotion which makes an author refuse to give up. Mary Kennedy puts it this way, “Illegitimus non carborundum. Translation: Don’t let the bastards get you down.”

Lillian Stewart Carl says it was that “head of anger” which helped her survive the desert. The agent from whom she parted in 1999 not only failed to sell her work for eight years but “he also kept sapping my confidence. I think he finally made me angry, for one thing, which restored some of the confidence.” The sense of “I’m going to show them!” kept her writing in spite of the lack of contracts.

Charlotte Hubbard “survived by clutching at every straw that came along—a blurb about an editor wanting manuscripts for a new line I thought I could write for, a word of encouragement from agents/editors at a conference asking me to submit. I tried to see this time as a chance to grow professionally and to expand into a different genre to make myself more versatile. I wrote synopses and kept

sending them, each time thinking ‘this one might be my ticket out of the slump.’ I kept buying research materials on vacation trips, for locales I might want to set a future story in, telling myself that one day I *would* put it to use.”

Then she adds, “Some days I [told myself] there has to be an easier way to go insane, and [decided] to get into some other line of work. Those spells would last maybe a few days, because going back to teaching or finding another ‘real’ job after thirteen years of writing at home terrified me even more than not selling stories.”

As anyone who has experienced grief can tell you, the process is anything but linear. Anger may motivate a writer to keep writing, but seeing someone else’s novel displayed prominently in the grocery store lineup can launch a fresh wave of hurt, anger, and just about any other painful emotion you want to describe.

Charlotte says that for a long time, “I could no longer stand to see a copy of *Romantic Times*. Knowing that all those authors on the covers and in the ads had paid big bucks to be there—and reading the glowing reviews of authors I considered myself every bit as good as—provoked such envy and bitterness I finally cancelled my subscription.”

So, what survival techniques do these authors recommend?

Once the initial wave of grief has eased, and you’re ready to think about your career again, use this as a period of evaluation.

Lillian Stewart Carl asked herself if there was anything else she’d rather be doing, and the answer was no. “Decide whether this is your signal to get out of the business. If there’s anything you’ve ever wanted to do, go do that, temporarily or permanently, your choice.”

Having confirmed your commitment to your writing in spite of its heartbreaking setbacks, stay in contact, both with colleagues and with potential markets. Speaking from her own experience, Jan Boies recommends, “Have people around you who believe in you even when you don’t believe in yourself.”

Catherine Hudgins urges, “Find at least a few people you can be honest about the situation with, who will encourage you to stay off the pity pot and focus on the writing.”

▶ ▶ ▶

Crawling Through



Charlotte Hubbard echoes this. “Stay connected,” she says, “whether by e-mail, by going to conferences, by checking out new markets and submitting proposals, etc. There’s no guarantee you’ll ever sell again—I certainly didn’t dream my own dry spell would last six years!—but if you don’t keep writing and sending proposals around, you are guaranteed of never getting back in.”

If the way out of the desert were to be summarized in a single word, that word would be tenacity. Lillian Stewart Carl says, “I’ve simply forced myself to write. I keep to a schedule. More often than not, the magic sets in, and I’m happy with what I’ve accomplished each day. When I feel the self-confidence waning, I remember that this is what I’m meant to do—whether my work gets published or not—this is my purpose here on earth.”

Tenacity has been Jen Hollings’s coping method, as well. “I continued to

write, whether I sold the books or not. I read lots of books on writing, studied successful books in my genre, and taught myself how to plot out a novel before I write it.”

Mary Kennedy decided to go a step further. After being dumped by both editor and agent, she decided to reinvent herself as a writer, moving from YA fiction to adult. While she’s still looking for another agent, she describes herself as “a wildly optimistic soul. I know that I have written and sold 28 books and will do so again.”

Cindi Myers has moved her writing from the western historical genre to Regency, short contemporary, young adult and comic fiction. “I really enjoyed experimenting with these different forms, and some very good work came out of it which my agent is now marketing.”

Charlotte Hubbard also reinvented her “writing self” and is enjoying her career more than ever. “I am having more sheer fun concocting my plots and characters for an editor who now trusts me . . .” she says.

So how has the dry spell ended for each of these wonderfully candid authors?

Catherine Hudgins has an editor who is good at bolstering her creative confidence.

Jen Hollings found a new publisher and editor in 2001.

Carole Bellacera landed a new contract within weeks of being interviewed for this article.

Linda Windsor came out of the desert with sales to inspirational publishing houses, and has since won several awards for her books.

Olivia Rupprecht, Lillian Stewart Carl, Cindi Myers, Jan Boies and Mary Kennedy are still awaiting the contracts which will represent their return from the desert. In the meantime, they just keep writing.

Charlotte Hubbard offers the perfect parting advice. “Mostly, you have to believe. You have to consider yourself a success at life even when you aren’t producing stories that sell.”

Cindi Myers puts it a bit differently. “In the end, you’re your own best ally and the only one you know you can count on.”

NINK

Online.....by Lorraine Heath

It seems that many authors, particularly in the realm of romance, offer contests to increase reader awareness and draw readers to their website. I decided I wanted to run a contest, but I was baffled as to how to get the word out about it. With a deadline looming, I wasn’t certain I’d have time to make a worthy effort that would produce any real results. So I decided to place my contest in the hands of someone experienced at managing contests: Vickie Denney of *New and Previously Owned Books*, <http://www.newandusedbooks.com>.

I provided the prizes and Vickie did everything else. As she explained it, “The authors or the publishers get in touch with me about running a contest on my site. I create the contest, the author/publisher provides the prizes. We run the contest and a little computer program picks the winners (randomly). When the contest is over, I send each winner a congratulatory e-mail and post the names of the winners on the site—in the Winners section. Normally, the author sends out the prizes. By e-mail we provide the author/publisher with the names and addresses of the winners.

“We run the contests at no charge to the author—as a promotional effort or draw to the New and Previously Owned Books website. Once there we hope readers will enter the contests, buy books...read the articles ... buy books... The contests are attractively designed and a blurb about the book and cover are posted. That way readers become more familiar with the book and the author—before they enter the contest.”

“We spend quite a bit of time presenting the book (graphics, posting, mentioning it in our newsletter, *The Book Banter*, so, we want the prizes to be wonderful—an enticement to the reader to enter and feel like they have a good chance of being a winner. In other words—we recommend that the author give away three to five copies of the new release that is being showcased in the contest—or a combination of prizes (new release and previous titles), co-prizes—like a book and gift basket or other outstanding goodies.”

“Contests are mentioned in *The Book Banter* which has a subscribership of over 13,000 and growing daily. We recommend that the contest start 30 to 45 days before the book streets and ends on or about the day it streets. Contests need to be scheduled at least 60 days in advance of the start date of the contest. We need time to be creative...”

In exchange for providing a link to her website from mine and sending her an autographed copy of my next release, Vickie ran my contest from start to finish, advising me along the way when I tried to make the contest too complicated. She explained that I needed to view the contest as advertising—a promotional tool. She also suggested I review the other advertising opportunities offered at her site, <http://www.newandusedbooks.com/advertising.cfm>.

I was extremely pleased with the contest page that Vickie designed for me. It looked very professional and was much nicer than anything that I could have done for myself. By the time this

column runs, my contest will be over, but you can check out other contests at the site to get an idea of the professionalism involved. If you'd like to share your experiences in running a contest from your website or at another site, I'd be interested in hearing about them.

PROMOTION

Another way to promote your work is through the "Reader Rewards" program at *Escape to Romance*, <http://www.EscapeToRomance.com>. Owner, Julie Shining, explained that her "website offers romance readers an online bookstore, book reviews, author interviews, a reading group, and much more. We also offer a 'Reader Rewards' program—in which readers send in SASEs for bookmarks and other promotional items from romance authors.

"The 'Reader Rewards' program is our way of introducing a variety of romance authors to our readers, and what better way to do so than with a bookmark, or cover flat, or pen? Please feel free to contact me, julie@escapetoromance.com, if you have any questions or comments."

This month I also heard from Tara Green, Partner at *Romance Designs*, <http://www.romancedesigns.com>. To expedite requests to add books to their romance community sites, they have added a form that allows you to add your books yourself. You'll find the form at <http://www.romancedesigns.com/addbook.cfm>. After completing the submission form, you can send images and cover art to info@romancedesigns.com.

Tara wrote, "We also add anthologies, and books by series, but this form does not accommodate these form submissions but will at a later date. This form is also open to the public, and we believe our book database will expand rapidly with this in place. If you have any questions or comments please let us know. Feel free to add as many of your books as you would like at any time and pass this on to anyone you think should receive it." If you have any questions, her e-mail is tara@romancedesigns.com.

The site also now has an automated "add an author." If you are not on their author list, you can easily add your name.

RESEARCH

Newspaper Archive.com, <http://www.newspaperarchive.com>, has more than one million pages of historic newspapers online. You can search for articles using a single word. Free membership gives you access to five newspapers. For \$79.95 annually or \$24.95 quarterly, you can access everything at the site. I did a search for 1865 and received over 2100 matches. For 1830, I received over 1,000 matches. I was locked out of most of the articles because I'm not a member, but I was still able to catch an interesting glimpse of history based on what I could access. The site also provides full size reproductions for \$14.95 per page plus postage.

FOR FUN

Book Crossing, <http://www.bookcrossing.com>, is a community of book-lovers who've taken a novel approach to establishing a book club. Members read a book, then enter it in the Book Crossing database where it's given a unique identification number. Members print out a label, affix it to the book, and then give the book to someone else: a friend, a hospital, a library. As the book travels, readers are encouraged to log onto Book Crossing and report where the book was found. The process reminded me of the movie *Serendipity*. Even if you are not interested in par-

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ticipating in the program, you can go to the site, search for your name, find your titles, and see where the books you've written have traveled. It's a rather fascinating site.

NINCHEALTH LISTSERVE

To discuss health insurance or health concerns, subscribe to the **NINHealth** list. Use the addresses in the grid, but substitute NINHealth for NINCLINK.

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. Thanks!

Bits 'n' Pieces

WORD FROM THE STREET IS THAT GENESIS PRESS'S discontinued Love Spectrum

line is back. This is great news for multicultural writers, since Genesis is known as a generous publisher (editorially) with terrific book packaging. I haven't been able to confirm any of this independently myself yet, but various sources report that Genesis is reinstating Love Spectrum and combining it with their also discontinued Asian and Hispanic romance lines and renaming it something more cross-ethnic. Wil Colom's daughter, Nyani, one of the original founders of Genesis is at the helm. She apparently has big plans, so let's wish her luck. Information about the new line is not yet available at the website (as of 8/13/2002) but you can contact Lolly Tice, Acquisitions Editor for information or send submissions to Genesis Press, Inc., 315 Third Avenue North, Columbus, MS 39701. The website is located at: <http://www.genesis-pres.com/>

TdR



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“I’ll Just Sit Here In The Dark”

I’m at the opera tonight.

Some of you, I feel sure, are already groaning. The *opera*? Egad! Even the wailing of off-key bagpipes is not such tooth-cracking torture as the climactic notes of a coloratura soprano at the end of a long aria about (inevitably) her emotional misery, or her unrequited love, or her approaching death due to a terminal disease which is mysteriously unable to impair her ability to deliver high notes loud enough to be heard six counties away.

Plus, opera is performed in other languages, making it impossible for us to follow what’s going on. Not that that really matters, since relatively little of importance is ever said sung. The lead tenor can babble musically for twenty minutes without moving the plot forward one little step! And when a translation is provided (on a tiny screen which you need binoculars to read), it usually reads something like: “Let me die. Let me die. Let me die.” If I wrote dialogue that dull, I’d be out of work before the singer had time to draw breath for the next line (which probably reads: “I’m so unhappy. I’m so desperately unhappy.”).

This, I sense, is what you’re thinking.

At any rate, it’s certainly what *I* was thinking the first time I ever attended the opera—which happened when my mother asked me to go to a production of *Don Giovanni* with her because my father insisted that 35 years of marriage did not entitle her to force him to sit through three hours of opera. I figured that keeping my mother company at *Don Giovanni* was probably an easy way of perceiving myself as a good daughter (a perception which I rarely pursue in any proactive way), so I agreed to go.

I brought a book with me, just in case.

As it happens, I never opened that book. From the moment the performance began, I was riveted. I was a convert. I became, if not an opera fanatic, then at least someone who really likes some works of opera.

Don Giovanni is, after all, that pinnacle of our own art: a good story well told. The music is engaging, the characters are compelling, the lyrics are witty, the plot twists work well, and the conclusion is satisfying. This was not (as you may have gathered) what I had expected. Delighted to have been so wrong, I have been attending operas ever since.

And thank goodness, too! This year I sold a fantasy

novel which first occurred to me while attending Puccini’s *Turandot*. I was riveted by the shiny exoticism and dark corruption of the kingdom portrayed in this opera. I was entranced by the lush eroticism woven into the physical danger and moral decay which permeates this crumbling monarchy. I sat there in the dark with only part of my attention on Puccini’s soaring music; the rest of my mind was absorbed with what kind of story *I* would write in such a setting. That very night, I started making notes for *The Palace of Heaven*, a tale which I’d never have thought of—let alone sold—if I had not seen *Turandot*.

Tonight’s opera, however, is not proving so inspiring to me. *Elektra*, by Richard Strauss, is dissonant, bleak, and depressing. But then, what did I expect of a German composer’s rendition of a Greek tragedy? (The tickets were complimentary.)

Electra’s mother conspired with her paramour to kill Electra’s father, Agamemnon, and Electra is taking it badly, go figure. The opera opens with everyone singing about how crazy Electra seems lately. Then a crazy woman emerges from beneath the floorboards and, sure enough, she’s Electra. She spends a while in high-pitched wailing about her emotional misery (okay, so there’s a reason we have this image of opera). Electra craves vengeance for her father’s murder—a man about whom she expresses such strong feelings that, well, it’s pretty obvious someone should have found this girl a boyfriend years ago.

However, when we finally meet Clytemnestra, Electra’s murderous mother, it’s really easy to see how Electra grew up to be such a basket case. It’s initially a little harder to figure out how an over-dressed, shrill virago like Clytemnestra got herself a handsome lover like Aegisthus; but then one realizes that an ambitious man might have looked past the queen’s unpleasant personality to perceive the longterm advantages of assisting in her quest for sexual satisfaction and early widowhood. That is to say, Aegisthus has what we in the trade call *motivation*.

Perhaps my experiences as an opera-goer are an example of how some operas (such as the exotic and sinister grandeur of *Turandot*) are inspiration for epic fantasy writers, while other operas (the psychotically dysfunctional family life of *Elektra*, for example) are

evidently inspiration for modern literary writers. I'm already so depressed that I'd like to kill Clytemnestra myself so we could all go home now. However, I'm in the balcony and can't get to the stage. So I sit here in the dark and listen to her and Electra bitch at each other in a minor key.

And, boy, can Clytemnestra *bitch*. I squint and read the translation of the German lyrics as Clytemnestra sings that she's so fed up with her crazy daughter that "my eyelids swell and my liver is sick."

I decide to stop reading the translations until we get through this all-too-biological portion of the opera. I just sit here in the dark and listen to the talented cast singing in a language which I, thank goodness, don't understand.

Sitting here in the dark is something I've been doing all my life, in fact. I don't know when my parents first took me to a play, but *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown* is the first one I remember. When Snoopy sang like the rest of the cast, I wasn't surprised. I'd known all along that dogs were that smart.

At the age of seven, although sick with a bad cold, I refused to miss the Broadway touring company's performance of *1776* in my native Chicago. I was young enough to be confused about the characters' genders because they all had long hair and frilly clothes, so I freely pictured myself in many of the roles—particularly that of the young soldier who sings a heart-rending ballad about dying on the battlefield while his mother looks for his body. The plaintive sorrow in his voice, the wrenching lyrics, and those captivating moments as I sat in the dark have stayed with me for over thirty years.

Most of all, though, I remember the gripping tension I felt as the Second Continental Congress furiously debated the question of American independence. As June turned to July onstage, Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin faced overwhelming odds in their struggle for a seemingly impossible dream. I wanted to weep with anxiety as I rooted for the Congress to sign Jefferson's document and bring forth a new nation, the very nation where I was born free almost two hundred years after this play takes place. I knew how the story ended, but I was nonetheless on the edge of my seat until the actors finally ratified the Declaration of Independence as the pages of their onstage calendar turned to July 4, 1776.

Now *that's* good storytelling.

It's not what the reader already knows; it's what you make them believe in and care about while they're reading. I learned this sitting in the dark.

Now, sitting in the dark again so many years later, I risk opening my eyes to see where we're at in *this* story.

Clytemnestra, still in a pissy mood, is complaining about people "exposing their abscesses and boils to the breeze."

I hastily close my eyes and continue my reflections.

My favorite musical is *Man of La Mancha*. Probably because it's about a writer. (I am as transparent as glass, as

constant as the sun, as self-absorbed as the next guy.)

The *Man* in question is the sixteenth century Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes, who was imprisoned at Argamasilla in *La Mancha* due to some financial irregularities (and what writer can't identify with that?). Stuck in a cell with criminals and vagabonds in the first scene of *Man of La Mancha*, Cervantes invites them into the world of his imagination—into the tale of Don Quixote, the knight of the woeful countenance who tilts at windmills believing they're giants, and who perceives a bitter tavern wench as the noble lady whom he loves, Dulcinea. Just as Don Quixote changes the world he sees with his impossible dreams, so does Cervantes change the world of the prison with his writer's imagination, with the gifts of the storyteller, with the visionary conviction of the novelist.

We are the magicians of the mind, and I learned this sitting in the dark.

I hear a new voice on the stage now and open my eyes again. Orestes, who is Electra's brother, has finally arrived on the scene. He seems understandably shocked to discover how badly things have gone at home during his absence. Then again, what did he expect? He's been gone so long that his sister doesn't even recognize him. And I know just enough Greek mythology to realize that he should never have come home. As a result of what happens next, Orestes will be pursued by the Furies—who make his mother Clytemnestra seem like pleasant company.

Now *he* starts singing about abscesses. It's clearly a family obsession.

I go back to drifting.

I live in Cincinnati, a conservative city famous for ignoring the First Amendment. Thus it was that a controversial low-budget Canadian play, *Poor Superman*, decided to make its U.S. debut here a few years ago, in a little theatre only a few blocks from where I'm sitting now. The producers were reputedly counting on the predictable local uproar (and the probable attempts to ban the play here) to provide enough free publicity to get national attention for the play. Naturally, I went to see it.

Poor Superman is about a married man who, much to his own surprise, enters into a passionate love affair—with another man. The experimental theatre which hosted the play here is a small place, and we happened to wind up sitting in the front row. Practically *on* the stage. The actors were often within a few feet of me. So, in the big love scene, when the two male leads start passionately stroking and kissing each other's stark naked bodies... and doing this so close to me that I could have touched them both with only a little effort... I sat there in mute panic, thinking, "*Please* don't either of you fellows get an erection. Just *don't*. Should I look away? Should I close my eyes? Should I just keep watching as if I'm not obsessing about your genitals? Aren't you done kissing and touching *yep?* Because if this goes on any longer, one of you





THE COMELY CURMUUDGEON



could have an involuntary reaction, if you get my drift! And I am a total stranger sitting within four damn feet of you, in case you hadn't NOTICED!"

Though my seat wasn't as dark as usual, the writing lesson was very memorable: Don't *ever* pull your reader out of the frame.

Bad research. Anachronistic writing. Self-serving polemics and lectures barely disguised as narrative. Incongruity and lack of continuity. Weak characterization, leaden pacing, lack of motivation, stiff dialogue, lazy plotting... There are a thousand ways for a novelist to wind up naked onstage while an appalled audience thinks about her exposed genitals at a critical moment. So to speak.

As soon as I am reminded that the characters are only figments, the story loses me. I stop thinking about them and their story; I become riveted on *my* story again—in

this case, my own anxiety about an embarrassing moment in a public place.

Our real flesh-and-blood existence dominates our senses and our thoughts so insistently that fiction can only conquer by being even more powerful than life. More vivid, more colorful, more intense, more compelling. Every page we write has to be so good it eclipses the reader's reality while she's reading it. If we can't do that, then we can't hold our audience.

I learned this sitting in the dark.

After worrying about abscesses and condemning the sins of the flesh, Electra and Orestes finally enact their plan. They assassinate Clytemnestra and her ambitious paramour, Aegisthus. There's also a bloody body that's been lying around on stage for a while. Since my eyes were closed for so long, I don't know whose it is. But based on the way Electra fondles it, I suspect it's the over-ripe corpse of her father, Agamemnon. (This girl needs *help*.)

Next, Electra keels over dead, worn out from all the grief and vengeance and sustained high notes.

Hooray! The end! We can finally go home!

If the audience is eager to leave the theatre, it occurs to me, then the opera has failed. (At least with *this* audience member.)

The word *opera* literally means "work."

Our work as writers is to keep the reader lingering in the story, savoring its taste, satisfied with the ending yet sorry to have reached it. Our stories should live with the reader as welcome ghosts after the last page is turned. Our task is to keep the reader applauding even after the curtain has fallen and the house lights have come up. Our work is to bring the reader back, season after season, until, like Electra, our song wears us out and we sink into the ground, forever silent.

This is what I've learned, so far, from sitting here in the dark.

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