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

Hey, Kids! Comics!

BY LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS

Last month I explained how I discovered comic books as a child, and confessed that I've read and collected them for pretty much my entire adult life. I didn't mention, though, that I've also tried writing them.

This is hardly a big surprise, given that I've tried to write pretty much everything else—I've sold articles, stories, novels, a TV story treatment, a radio play, even a couple of poems. Given my long history with comics, of course I tried writing them!

No, the surprise isn't that I tried; the surprise is how poorly I did at it.

After all, how hard could it be? It's telling stories, and false modesty aside, I'm good at that. And I'd heard all these stories about how some of the top writers

in the business had jumped in cold, with no training, and done just fine—guys who had started out selling ads or working in the mailroom at Marvel had been in the right place at the right time and wound up scripting Spider-Man stories. If total amateurs could do the job, then I, a successful fantasy novelist, ought to be *brilliant* at it!

The problem, as I saw it, was finding the time to pursue it. Since comic books are periodicals and are traditionally done as work-for-hire, you can't just send in a script and hope the editor buys it; you need to make contacts, send proposals, and hope to get hired for a specific title.

I wanted to do that, but I had my career as a novelist, and a wife, and kids—I could never spare the time to really work at getting into comics. I did talk to comic book editors when I had a chance, at science fiction conventions and the like, and I did get as far as sending in some proposals, but none of these went anywhere.

In one case it was just poor

timing that stopped me; I sent DC Comics a proposal for a revival of the old "Blackhawk" series that, I was informed, had arrived two days after they'd hired fan-favorite writer Howard Chaykin to revive the Blackhawks.

But then in 1989 Marvel Comics decided to try an experiment—a science fiction series scripted by actual science fiction writers. The project was titled *Open Space*, and I managed to get myself on the list of writers for it, largely because the editor of *Open Space* had formerly worked at the agency that represented me at the time, and had contacted them for likely prospects.

So I had my opportunity, and I was given all the background on the series, told where my first story had to fit. I got an outline approved easily enough, then sat down to actually write the script.

And that's when I realized I was in trouble.

The editor, aware that he was dealing with a bunch of writers

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

Way too pessimistic?

I have a friend, a good writer with a quirky, engaging voice, who's determined to become a published author. I've read his first book. It still needs a lot of work—he didn't find the real focus of his story until he was almost halfway along, and he still has a lot to learn about conflict and story structure. But despite its flaws, it's an engaging tale with characters you can believe in and a story and a world that draw you in and keep you wanting to read more.

It's clear that the book is the work of a writer with real talent. And though my friend hasn't much liked hearing that his first book isn't ready for publication, he hasn't let that slow him down—he's already deep into his second.

I don't know that he'll sell his second book, or his third, or maybe even his fourth or fifth. But if he hangs in there—and I believe he will—I know he *will* sell, and when he does, I suspect he'll be one of those "lucky" writers whose "first" book gets a strong six-figure advance and lots of buzz and favorable reviews in all the right places and maybe even hits a few of those bestseller lists that most of us can only dream about.

As I said, he's a talented writer. But more important, he's a determined one, and those of us who have reached the level of qualifying for membership in Ninc all know how important determination is. We also know how tough this business can be, and how easy it is to become discouraged.

My friend and I have often talked about the business side of writing. I've shared what I've learned through the ups and downs of my career thus far and what I've learned from other writers as they confront the highs and lows of *their* careers. I've tried hard to be honest, yet optimistic, to point out the tales of success as well as the tales of woe. I *want* him to succeed, and he'll have a better chance of doing that if he doesn't make any of the mistakes that I and other writers I know of have made.

That's why I had to laugh when someone recently told me that my friend had said he really appreciated the business insights, but he sure wished I'd be a little more optimistic about the whole thing!

The comment reminded me of another unpublished writer who attended a class I taught several years ago on *The Business of Getting Published*.

I started off the first session by telling my eager students that John Grisham had made something like \$35,000,000 the year before and that Stephen King had pulled in \$42,000,000 and that Crichton and Steel and a few others hadn't done too badly, either. My students smiled and sat up straighter in their chairs.

I told them of some first sales that drew nice, fat, six- and seven-figure advances and maybe a juicy movie deal or two. The smiles turned to grins. You could actually *see* them calculating what they were going to do with all

that lovely money when they sold *their* books.

And then I told them about the mystery writers whose first sales brought less than \$5,000 in advances, and the romance writers whose first advances weren't much higher, and the literary writers whose sales had maybe reached 4,000 copies hardcover, if they were lucky, and who hadn't drawn any paperback sales at all. I told them that, in general, advances for first books were going down, as was the amount of time their books, especially if they were writing mass market genre fiction, would spend on the shelves.

I shared some of the numbers I'd gleaned about how many submissions all those overworked editors had to wade through every year, and, in comparison, how relatively few new writers they bought. I also told them that a lot of those submissions were so unprofessional they really couldn't be counted as competition, but I'm not sure they got that part.

Judging from the expressions on their faces, I'd just clobbered them with a two by four. The grins had turned to grimaces, and those dazzling visions of castles in Spain had wilted even faster than they'd bloomed.

The rest of the class was spent talking about agents and editors, the submission process, contracts and their essential clauses, royalty statements, booksellers, bookstores, chains, distributors (the industry was in the middle of its mind-boggling consolidation right about then), wholesalers, and all the rest of it. They had a lot of questions and I did my best to answer every one of them as honestly and accurately as I could. I tried to be positive and encouraging, but without sugar-coating anything.

At the end of the class, one of the students, a retired naval officer who wanted to write techno-thrillers, came up to me to discuss his own writing plans. I asked him what he'd thought of the class. He said he thought it had been useful, informative, and worth every penny, but he did think I'd been awfully pessimistic about the whole thing. I told him I'd tried to be upbeat but honest, and that if what I'd said convinced anyone in the class to give up writing, then I'd just done them a big favor because if I could discourage them, then they didn't really want to write in the first place. Anyone who was truly serious about their writing, I said, would just ignore my "pessimism" and keep on pounding the keyboard (or the pen, as the case might be).

Still too pessimistic?

A year later, I ran into that same student at a local writers conference. He said he'd finally finished his first book and had just started submitting it to agents. He thanked me again for the useful information he'd gleaned from the class, but admitted that he still thought I'd been way too pessimistic. I wished him luck and we went our separate ways.

We ran into each other at the following year's conference, too. I asked how he was doing, and he admitted that he'd finally given up on selling that first book, but he was well into his second book and felt that *this* one, for sure, was going to fly.

I asked him if he still thought I'd been too pessimistic and he said he did, but maybe not as pessimistic as he'd first thought. It was a tough business, just like I'd said, but he was determined to succeed and he really *did* like writing. I said that just upped his chances of getting published a few hundred percent, and again wished him luck.

I didn't see him at the next conference, but he was there again the following year. By that time, he'd abandoned books number two and three and was hard at work on book number four. He'd had some nibbles from agents but no bites and had had to switch to writing straight thrillers because the market for techno-thrillers had pretty much dried up by then.

I couldn't help myself. I asked him if he *still* thought I'd been too pessimistic.

That drew a wry laugh. "Nope," he said, shaking his head. "Not any more. This business is *really* tough, a whole lot tougher than I thought. If anything, you were *way* too optimistic!"

I could have told him that.

Conference moving to Spring, 2004

A few members have been asking about dates for this year's conference, so I thought this would be a good time to remind folks that we're not, in fact, going to have a conference this year. In an effort to try something new, avoid the growing demand (and resulting high prices) for hotel space in the fall, and (I'll be real honest here) grab folks' money before they spend it on some other organization's conference, we're moving the Ninc conference to the Spring. Because our funds are limited and the work involved in organizing a conference is so great, we decided not to try for a conference six months after our stellar 2002 conference in New York. That means our next conference won't be until Spring of 2004.

You all offered a number of suggestions for cities where you'd like to have a conference. So far, all we're sure of is that we're aiming for the Southwest this time around. It's been a while since members in that part of the country had a conference close to them, so we decided it was time they did. Now we're trying to sort out which cities in the region have the hotels and amenities we need at a price we can afford.

In the meantime, please bear with us. We should have dates and location for you shortly. I assure you, you guys will be the first to know the details!

— Anne Holmberg

Hey, Kids!

Continued from page 1 ▶ ▶ ▶

who had never worked in comics before, had sent us a bunch of sample scripts and excellent “how to” material, so I knew the format, but I’d never actually *tried* it before. I quickly discovered that it’s much harder than it looks.

The basic problem is that comics are a visual medium. The writer’s job is not just to put in the words, but to tell the artist what to draw. In fact, fairly often comics are written in a multi-stage process where one writer, the plotter, tells the artist what to draw, and later, after the artwork is done, one writer, the scripter, fills in the words. The plotter and the scripter may or may not be the same person. This is called “Marvel style,” by the way.

Open Space was written in the “full script” method, where the writer provided all the words and descriptions in a detailed script. Each story was allowed a set number of pages. Each script was broken down into pages, each page into panels, and each panel included a detailed description of what the art should show, along with all the words to be lettered into the captions and dialogue balloons.

I’d never had to work under this sort of strict format before. A novel can leave most of the visuals to the reader’s imagination, and if you write it well enough no one minds if you have a few pages of dialogue, but in a comic book you must describe everything well enough for the artist to get it right, and long passages of dialogue become panel after panel of boring

talking heads. It’s even worse than TV in that regard, because you won’t have the actors providing subtle facial cues; you only have still pictures to work with.

You can’t fit more than maybe 40 words in a single panel in a comic book without rendering it almost unreadable; that means I had to boil down my dialogue to an absolute minimum if I didn’t want to bog the story down.

And pacing—there are a thousand ways to control pacing in novels, and a thousand ways to do it in comics, but they’re not even remotely the *same* ways. Comics use panel size and placement, and repeated images, and close-ups, and long shots, and all these things I’d seen all my life but never *done* before.

But I tried. I pictured each page, and wrote the script describing it, and I knew exactly what it should look like when it was done—but I wasn’t the one who actually drew it, and the finished version sometimes looked the way I pictured it, and sometimes didn’t. Comic books are inherently a collaborative medium—not as much as film or TV, but enough to be very, very different from prose writing. At first I tried very hard to control exactly what the artist did, but I quickly discovered I *couldn’t* control it completely, and that it was a mistake to even try—often the artist would know better than I what would work on the page.

An aside: Much later, as I got more experienced, and I came to trust the artists more, I went from detailed descriptions of every single thing in the panel (“This is the S.S. Dreadnought, an ovoid spacecraft, its nose at the upper right corner of the panel, its tail assem-

bly lower left; lines of cooling vents run diagonally down either side, above and below tapering fins...” and on and on) to much more generalized ones (“It’s a honkin’ big spaceship, weird and scary.”)

And if you are at all interested in the nature of the comics medium, and how the various effects are achieved, I cannot recommend highly enough a book called *Understanding Comics*, by Scott McCloud.

Anyway, I managed to get through my first script, and turned it in, and the editor then spent an hour and a half on the phone with me, going through my 12-page story, explaining where I’d screwed up and how to fix it. This was horribly embarrassing, since I’d thought of myself as an experienced professional writer, but it was also immensely educational—that editor knew *everything* about comics. He’d decided he wanted to write comics when he was in junior high, and focused single-mindedly on learning the trade from then on, and I was astonishingly lucky that he was willing to put so much effort into teaching me what he’d taken so long to learn.

The finished story appeared in *Open Space* #1, and... well, it didn’t suck. It wasn’t really *good*, but it didn’t actually suck, either.

And I was, to my surprise, invited to write more.

I was determined to show I could learn this new trade, so I agreed. I wrote a longer, more complex, but more action-filled story for *Open Space* #2, and it came out a little better. I thought a third story, another short one scheduled for *Open Space* #5, was even better, and I was working on the script for a full-length, 64-page

graphic novel for #7—but they didn't appear; *Open Space* was cancelled after #4, and I was no longer in Marvel's employ. I've never worked for them again, though they did eventually run that third story in a special issue when the artist, Alex Ross, became famous (as much as anyone in comics ever becomes famous).

The graphic novel was never published, and never will be.

Incidentally, “graphic novel” means a single long story complete in one volume, it isn't just a fancy term for “comic book.” A graphic novel has to be at least 40 pages long, with a beginning, middle, and end, though it may also be part of a longer series; some are written specifically as such, others assembled from multiple issues of a regular comic book.

At any rate, despite my departure from Marvel, I'd caught the bug. I wanted to prove I could write really *good* comics. So I sold a short humorous sci-fi script to Dark Horse Comics, which came out well, and eventually, in 1994, I landed a gig with a new company called Tekno*Comix.

How did I get the job? An anthology editor I'd written stories for recommended me. Which brings me to a major difference between comics and novels—there is no standard way to break into writing comics. There are few agents, there are no slushpiles; if you just send a script in cold it will almost certainly be returned unread. Virtually every writer in the field has a different story of how he got his start; some were artists or editors before they started writing, some self-published comics

before being noticed by the big publishers, some stumbled into it in other ways. Marvel has hired writers out of their marketing department, their legal department, even their mailroom. I can't tell you how to break in; I'm still trying to figure it out myself. I got the Tekno*Comix job by selling short stories to science fiction anthologies, and being available and interested at the right time.

Tekno*Comix had been founded by a couple of Hollywood lawyers who thought comic books were going to be trendy, and they ran their company by Hollywood rules, where today's hot creator or hot property may be tossed out tomorrow. What was originally supposed to be a short job filling in some background for a series somehow mutated into scripting two full-length monthly titles that were already behind schedule. I wound up writing and rewriting eight issues in ten weeks, and being flown to California for their big launch party, before they fired me off one title and I quit the other.

Of the eight issues I scripted, they published three, and credited me with two of them. They also credited me with one I *didn't* write. This is not normal for comics; credits are usually accurate.

They did pay me for all eight. Once each, even though one of them I completely rewrote three times, to editorial order.

As for whether they were good comics—no, frankly, they weren't. The level of editorial meddling was much, much higher than I'd had at Marvel or Dark Horse, and the editors were nowhere near the same level of competence as the editor of *Open Space*. I think my original scripts were

okay, but the published comics... well, when my daughter studied comic book art a few years later, her teacher used one of the issues I'd done for Tekno*Comix as an example of how the wrong artist can ruin a perfectly good script.

My experiences there pretty much cured me of my interest in writing comics for the next few years. I thought I was done for good, in fact, until I got a call from the people at DC Comics' Wildstorm division, who'd just gotten the rights to do *Star Trek* comics...

I scripted a 48-page *Star Trek: Voyager* one-shot for them. It came out pretty well, actually, and the folks at Wildstorm were a pleasure to work with, completely unlike the maniacs at the now-defunct Tekno*Comix. I think I'm finally getting the hang of writing comics, and I wouldn't mind doing it again someday.

But I've also learned just how tough it is, and how much isn't under the writer's control. The writer may decide what story will be told, but the artist largely tells it, and the editor shapes it, the letterer and colorist contribute, and any of them can screw it up. Deadlines are tight, schedules fierce.

Novels are much easier on the nerves. *N*

Hey, Kids! Be sure to watch for Lawrence's new column, "Rayguns, Elves, and The Walking Dead." Coming soon!

*Russell Davis, Editor
Five Star Publishing*

As an editor working in multiple genres of fiction, I'm constantly on the receiving end of questions about manuscripts, contracts, artwork, production times, and the thousand other details that go in to making a published novel out of a manuscript. So, when I received a phone message from Olivia Rupprecht, my first thought was that I must have a submission from her somewhere in my office, but she assured me that in fact, all she wanted was for me to write an article for her. The conversation went like this:

"An article," I said. "Sure, why not? Who am I writing for?"

"Novelists, Inc.," said Olivia. "We're an organization of over 600 multi-published authors."

This is when I began to get a little nervous. After all, I'm usually the one who gets to judge their words, not the other way around. "I see," I said. "And what is the article supposed to be about?"

"Oh, you know," says my new friend Olivia, "about you, your background, how you got into publishing, that kind of thing."

"Uh-huh. And how long should it be?" I ask, fearing that I'll have to explain my professional life story in 500 words or less.

"As long as you want," says Olivia.

"Really?" I say, while in my mind, echoes of maniacal laughter have begun. *No word limit and I get to talk to writers? Bwah-ha-ha!*

"Really," she says. "Just have fun."

"Oh, I will," I say. "I absolutely will."

And so, I will...

I don't know for certain, but my mother swore that the first book I read was *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. I do know that I was reading on my own by the time that I was four. Every night, my parents would have me read the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, sounding out words that I found difficult and then trying to tell them what the words, the sentences, and ultimately, the stories were really saying. I've been in love with the word for so long that I can't remember a time when I wasn't reading, hearing them echo in my mind with the peculiar power that accompanies language.

I was twelve, however, before it occurred to me that someone was actually *writing* all those words, and *that* someone could be me. I set out to be a writer that same day, but it would take me eleven years before I ever got paid a penny for something I wrote—\$10 for a poem in a regional literary magazine. That same year, I sold an article to a restaurant magazine for \$100, bringing my grand total for the year to a whopping \$110. It's a good thing I wasn't trying to feed a family on that kind of money, isn't it?

I've remained dedicated to writing ever since—my most recent novels are *Touchless* (Wildside Press) and *Cloak & Dagger: A Tom Clancy's Net Force Novel*, co-authored with John Helfers. At present, I'm writing a novel set in the *Twilight Zone* universe for iBooks. But it was while I was in college at the University of Wisconsin—Green Bay, that I tried and fell in love with the other half of the writing equation: editing.

Now, I often tell people that writers write, editors are writers who couldn't, agents are writers who

wouldn't, and reviewers are writers who shouldn't. There are exceptions to this philosophy—after all, I'm one of them—but it's generally true. No matter how many rejections they pile up, a real writer *will* write. But why are editors writers who couldn't? The answer, I believe, is that editors are people who can see not just the trees through the forest, but the shrubs, grasses, animals, insects, and a hundred other minutiae, all while keeping in mind that they are looking at a forest. And more often than not, seeing all that minutiae will prevent an editor from putting the words on the page in a way that's acceptable to the editor part of them. Writers, on the other hand, don't suffer from this problem nearly so much. (Which isn't to say they don't suffer from other problems, of course!)

I started editing in college, working with both fiction and poetry, and was the lead editor on compiling a retrospective anthology of student literary work that covered the twenty-year history of creative writing at the university. From there, I began editing short fiction professionally, working in the science fiction, fantasy and horror genres. I co-edited a dark fantasy anthology for Cumberland House—*Mardi Gras Madness*—with Martin Greenberg. Marty and I were also co-editors on *Apprentice Fantastic* (Daw), and we're presently finishing two more anthology titles: *Haunted Holidays* and *Fairie Fantastic*, also for Daw.

In the spring of 2000, I was hired to start a new publishing house in southern Maine, and relocated there. The short-lived Foggy Windows Books, which was set to publish both anthology and novel titles in six different genres, was killed off when

the publisher got cold feet three weeks after the first books went to market. But I somehow managed to land on my feet and in the only other publishing job in the state of Maine!

On September 10, 2001, I started working as an editor at Five Star Publishing, which is an imprint of the Gale Group. I'm currently editing two lines for them: *Expressions*—a romance and women's fiction line, and *Speculative Fiction*—which covers everything from science fiction to fantasy to horror. This year, I'll be the editor of 26 hardcover originals for the *Expressions* line, and I'll oversee another 26 for the *Speculative Fiction* line. In total this year, Five Star will publish 130 hardcover originals and about 32 trade paperbacks. I also do a great deal of the art direction for the house.

Needless to say, if you call and get my voice mail, you'll know why!

Since Olivia pretty much gave me free rein with this article, and now that you know a bit about how I came to be here, I'd like to talk about what intrigues me as an editor and what I'm looking for in the future.

I've always believed that there are three kinds of editors. The first kind, and perhaps the most common type of today, I'll call "non-editors." A non-editor isn't an editor at all, but a buyer. They read something, they like it, they buy it. This approach happens in fiction with greater and greater frequency and is one of the more alarming trends in publishing today.

Even the best writer in the world can be better—that's what the editor is for. But a non-editor, a buyer, won't do anything for anybody except deliver some words on paper. He or she doesn't help the writer get any better; isn't helping the publisher deliver the best books possible, and certainly isn't helping the book business get any better—nothing like continually disappointing the readers with mediocre books to suck the life out of our business, is there?

The second kind of editor is what I'd call a "mechanic." A mechanic is the guy who can fix the nuts and bolts of your story. He knows about punctuation and grammar and spelling; he understands the basics of character, setting, dialog, and plot. There's a need for these types of editors because without them, the basics wouldn't be covered and there'd be a lot of creative writing teacher vacancies at high schools and universities all over the country that went unfilled.

Now the third kind of editor, and how I classify myself for what it's worth, is a "story" editor. We know about the mechanics, but it's not what really *interests* us. We're interested in the story, not just the plot; we like it when the sentences are constructed correctly, but we know that is fixable. What really grabs a story editor is intangible; it's the magic that makes the reader turn page after page, unwilling to stop until he or she gets to the end. Story editors, good ones anyway, are the midwives of great fiction. We try to help the writer birth the best story possible. And while we don't always get it right—I certainly don't!—that's what we're trying to do.

So, just by reading this, you can probably guess what interests me: story, story, and more story. I want to be enthralled. Whether it's romantic suspense, chick lit or hard sf, I want to be so engaged that I don't see the chapter breaks, I ignore my need to eat, and for a brief, glorious time, I get to live in another world, be another person, and escape from the trenches of tired fiction that's been done a million times. That's what interests me, and I think it's what interests most writers and readers.

A few years ago, I was on a panel at the World Fantasy Convention in Corpus Christi, Texas, about teaching fantasy fiction. (In my copious spare time, I do some work in schools.) We were asked to prepare a list of works that we would use to begin teaching this challenging genre. Not surprisingly, the work of Tolkien was mentioned. Names like David

Eddings, Stephen Donaldson, and Robert Jordan, among others were bandied about. Damn fine writers. Good story tellers. But I've never been one to go with the crowd. I suggested starting with *Winnie the Pooh*. Why? It's what I'd call a "first fantasy." Here is the story of a desperately alone little boy and a magical wood where his stuffed animals come to life and befriend him through all sorts of adventures. Who can't remember hearing about *Pooh* and wanting so much more?

Man. Now *that's* story.

The point of all this (I'm getting there, I swear!) is that as writers and editors we should be telling the stories that enchant and fascinate us, rather than pandering to what we think an editor or a publisher wants. These are the stories that live and breathe for the readers. These are the stories that last. And these are the stories that I want to help writers tell.

One more thought and I'll wrap this up. I recently finished editing a novel called *Fallen from Grace* by Laura Leone—aka Laura Resnick. A love story about a woman who falls in love with a male escort, it was well written, polished, and neatly done. But you know what else it was? It was *too damn scary* for the people who are publishing books in New York these days. Which is exactly why it was perfect for me.

So, how to submit to me? Pretty simple. Send an e-mail to Five.Star@gale.com and request our guidelines. Read them. Then read them again because as sure as someone in the Bush administration is going to raise taxes, you'll have overlooked something. Once you've done that, query me. Tell me about the story that lives and breathes for you, that you want to do more than anything. Amaze me by breaking a rule or two; astound me by charting your own course.

Oh yeah, and one more thing... don't forget to check out some of our other books. You can request a reading list by sending an e-mail to the same address as above, or call 207-859-1000 and ask for a catalog.

Thanks for your attention, and Olivia... thanks for the time. *N*



Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

Writing Makes You Ugly

My original title was “Writing Makes Me Ugly.” But then I thought...why should I be the only one?

Here’s the thing. Following hours of writing (a state of mind that causes one to disregard reality) that had begun immediately after morning coffee, I passed by my mirrored bedroom closet doors. Never mind my destination. The point is I caught my reflection.

Clearly, I’m not a vampire. I can now put that personal fear to rest. Anyway, I saw me. I stopped. I stared. It was hideous. I screamed.

People, putting mirrors on closet doors has to be the stupidest idea since putting the fat/calorie content on candy bar wrappers. I mean who the hell wants to see what he/she looks like when in the throes of a deadline?

But there I stood: One stuffed plastic bag, shopping-cart shy of being a bag lady.

(Disclaimer: If you or a close relative is indeed an actual bag lady, I’m sure you or she is a nice, well-intentioned person).

Anyway, I suffered this burning question of the ages, one you will find is applicable to most of humankind’s endeavors: “What the *&^% \$#@ (French for “heck”) happened here?”

Sadly, I must tell you what happened because this column needs to be five hundred words in length.

OK, I had started the day in my knee-length, green nightgown (and pink underwear). More than you wanted to know? Sweetie, we’re just getting started. Also had on my big, round, red-framed, hoot owl eyeglasses, instead of my

contacts. And the blue bedroom slippers. So far, so good.

I don’t know exactly when events took a wrong turn, but at some point my very long hair must have got in my way because I had secured it with a purple banana-clip. And, while possibly considering some obnoxious plot point or the other, my legs had felt cold. Why else would I have pulled on gray, drawstring lounging pants under my nightgown?

Yeah, you’re starting to get a visual that causes you to want to gouge out your mind’s eye, aren’t you?

Anyway, my arms, too, must have felt cold. I know this because I had donned a pilfered (don’t call the cops—pilfered from a loved one, not a store) men’s X-large, striped flannel shirt. What I hadn’t noticed at the earlier, critical moment was I had shrugged it on inside out.

And you’re right: Except for my conference clothes, I was indeed wearing the sum total of my entire wardrobe. I’m telling you, I looked like a toddler, sans fashion taste, who’d been hell-bent on dressing herself and had been allowed, by her exasperated mother, to do so.

The results were big, round, and ugly, none of which I used to be. I suspect this isn’t the first time I’ve looked like this, so I have to blame writing. And...no, it had obviously not occurred to me simply to adjust the thermostat. Apparently, writing also incapacitates logic.

The writer asks that each of you please send her five dollars in cash. No reason why. She can just use it.

Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*

REVIEWED BY JANELLE SCHNEIDER

Reading *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott is a little like reading the e-mail digests from Ninclink. There's writing advice, humor, and observations on life in general. In other words, no matter what your mood, you'll find a chapter to fit. This book is different from any other "writing book" I've ever read in that it describes the writing life as it is, rather than as it should be.

Anne Lamott has often been described as "irreverent," which she is, but which also means she doesn't take herself or her writing too seriously. A single chapter from this book will show you that she definitely knows how to put words together, and does so with care. Just the same, she's firmly grounded in everyday life.

Life for Lamott seems to have been a messy business from the beginning. The Introduction describes her compulsion to write, as well as the forces which have shaped her voice. Dysfunctional family, drug addiction, and single parenthood are just three of the hurdles she's managed to stumble through. As a result, even though her book is subtitled *Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, the reader never once feels the book has come from that fabled Ivory Tower.

Bird by Bird is divided into five sections: Writing, The Writing Frame of Mind, Help Along the Way, Publication—and Other Reasons to Write, and Last Class. These headings may make it seem like the book itself is predictable and textbook-like. In reality, they're simply the threads that tie the collection of essays together.

The first section describes with excruciating accuracy the struggles any author faces when confronted with

the blank page. In the middle of these wry observations and laments on our crazy choice of occupation sits the chapter entitled "School Lunches," because she says "the longings and dynamics and anxieties are so similar" to writing.

So it is throughout the book. Practical advice, laugh out loud funny descriptions, and poignant memories form the framework for wisdom that brings you back for more. As I read, I couldn't decide whether to portion it out to myself a chapter a day to prolong the enjoyment, or to just keep reading until I'd reached the end.

The heart of this collection is, for me, the section entitled "The Writing Frame of Mind." Lamott uses both painful honesty and clever humor to lift the veil on the haunting ghosts of self-criticism and jealousy. She also writes about how to be passionate about your writing, how to notice the details in life (it's okay to be obsessive), and how to keep yourself mentally prepared for writing. The common theme in each essay is being as compassionate with yourself as you are with others around you, allowing your insecurities to come out of hiding, yet having confidence in your ability to tell the story or write the article anyway. Some of that confidence comes, she says, from committing yourself to writing every day, whether it be 200 words or 200 pages.

"Help Along the Way" not only chats about finding good sources, the benefits of writing groups, and finding a good critique partner, but also addresses the monster called "Writer's Block." She gives beautifully agonizing descriptions of what it feels like, then provides encouragement. "The word block suggests that you are constipated or stuck," she says, "when

the truth is that you're empty." From personal experience I can tell you that reading this essay alone is enough to begin restoring one's creative confidence.

The first essay in the final section begins with a paragraph I'd like to give to every aspiring writer I know. The paragraph opens with this statement: "Publication is not going to change your life or solve your problems." Then Lamott goes on to talk about "the other reasons to write."

"I just try to warn people who hope to get published that publication is not all that it is cracked up to be," she says. "But writing is. Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. The thing you had to force yourself to do—the actual act of writing—turns out to be the best part. It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward." *N*

Janelle Burnham Schneider writes inspirational fiction when not otherwise occupied with two young children, a dog, and a spouse employed by the Canadian military.

Bits'n'Pieces

JUST IN CASE YOU

WONDERED... The Vatican has given the Harry Potter series two thumbs up because the good vs. evil plot lines are imbued with Christian morals. As a brought-up-Catholic, may I just say...I'm so proud.

— Filed by Terey daly Ramin

The Buzz in the Biz.....by Peggy Webb

This month we're talking with two of the six founders of BelleBooks, CEO Debra Dixon and Publicity Director Sandra Chastain. Both these dynamic women are published novelists who got their start in Bantam's Loveswept line about the same time I did, too many years ago to remember. While it is not unusual to find writers who are successful in other fields, it is unusual to discover writers who banded together to form their own publishing company, then made a whopping success of it! How did that happen?

NINK: Sandra, tell us how BelleBooks was born?

Sandra Chastain: We were at a conference—Fantasy/Science Fiction I think—sitting around the way writers will, discussing what our publishers were doing with our books and wondering why they couldn't do things differently. (Now we're finding out!) One of us—I don't remember who—said, "Why don't we start our own company?"

NINK: How do you transform a great idea into a thriving business?

Debra Dixon: First you tie all the writers to their chairs so they can't leave the room when the discussion turns to business details! We scheduled our first unofficial board meeting as a retreat in the mountains. For the first day and a half we did nothing but "organize" ourselves by asking questions so that we could identify our expectations, our goals, and the blanks in our knowledge base.

SC: It took us two days to come up with a name we all liked. Of course, we were discussing serious issues, too, such as *what can we publish?*

DD: The following couple of days we made decisions in several key areas based on our discussions, need for information, and goals.

Critical to the planning stage was identifying what needed to be done to get a book out the door, grouping that work into areas, and then assigning responsibility for those areas. For instance, Virginia (Gin) Ellis in an extreme act of bravery took on the duties of production. Everyone has an opinion about the art and you can never make everyone happy!

We knew we wanted "real" print runs and not print-on-demand, and that we wanted to try producing the books "in house" rather than paying a book designer. So Gin, who has also been a successful commercial photographer, began reading and researching production so that she could purchase and operate the software necessary for book production, gather printer bids, etc.

Other areas identified were the website, editorial, marketing, public relations, and legal/business/distribution. Everyone in the ownership group took a piece of the puzzle and was expected to contribute time and effort to their area. Sometimes the areas overlapped a bit and we had to work

through the most effective way to help each other. My background was heavy in business operation so I took that piece of the puzzle by default.

SC: We started on a small scale. For instance, we didn't go outside the company for our first book: each of us contributed stories. Nor did we go outside for funding. Each original partner put in money, and we all became shareholders. We receive no salaries, and the time we put in is *free*.

NINK: How long did it take from conception to reality? When did your first book, *Sweet Tea and Jesus Shoes*, come out?

DD: If memory serves, we had our first serious organizational meeting in November of 1998. We officially "opened" our doors approximately a year later in January of 2000, and our first book was published May, 2000. So, I'd say about 18 months from the first serious meeting until our first product hit the market. We had the book "in house" in January of 2000 because we wanted to be sure and have the book for the advertised publication date.

NINK: By the way, *Sweet Tea and Jesus Shoes* is a great title. What's the story behind it?

SC: When we were discussing what we would publish, we made the decision to focus on growing up in the South with our first book, a collection of short stories. We wanted a title that would reflect our theme, and nothing says *Deep South* better than *sweet tea*. The idea for Jesus shoes came from an experience I had at Bible School as a child. We would outline our feet on pieces of cardboard; then the teacher would punch holes around the edges and add shoe laces. We'd walk around in those homemade cardboard shoes calling them our *Jesus Shoes*.

NINK: How did you market your first book and how has that changed over the years?

DD: Our marketing has definitely changed. Our first goal was to simply see if we could produce a book and achieve modest sales. The big wholesalers, even then, were terribly difficult to "crack" for the small publisher. So our first marketing plan relied on reviews, ARCs, generated publicity (not ads), trade show appearances (SEBA), and direct sales. Our plan was to create some buzz and then approach the wholesalers when we had some sort of track record or leverage.

SC: When we set up at SEBA we served sweet iced tea in beautiful crystal glasses. Word got around and soon everybody was looking for the sweet tea.

DD: Fortunately *Today's Librarian* picked up *STJS* and gave it a glowing review, so we were able to approach Baker & Taylor to let them know the book was being reviewed and that we were placing a quarter page ad. This was impor-

tant to B&T, enough so that they wanted to stock the book. We were able to negotiate a wholesale discount that was better than the average one-book small press agreement.

The wholesale distribution deal with Ingram came when we had finally managed to get one of the chain stores interested in stocking the book. We went to Ingram with a large order in hand and said, "Wouldn't you like to fill this? If so, we need to talk."

NINK: Has your marketing plan changed over the years?

DD: Yes. Originally we didn't place large numbers of ads. Lately we've been spending quite a bit in advertising because of the *Mossy Creek* series. We believe strongly in visibility at trade shows. We've produced library mailings, attended library conferences, book festivals, etc. The whole concept of "marketing" is still evolving for BelleBooks. We've gone from trying to "brand" the company and create awareness of who we are to focusing on marketing plans for individual books.

NINK: What are the greatest obstacles you've encountered with Belle Books, and how did you overcome them?

DD: Every Belle will answer this question differently. For me it was keeping expectations in check. I thought we were quietly having a little bit of fun, and then I realized that BelleBooks had captured a great deal of attention. A lot of eyes were on us. People expected great things from this little company. You wouldn't think expectations would be a problem, but when the pressure comes from outside the company it can create pressure on the inside. Before you know it, you find yourself pushing to meet other people's expectations instead of your own goals.

NINK: There are obvious benefits from having friends as business partners, but there must be problems, as well. How do you

manage to balance business with friendship?

DD: I told the Belles right from the beginning that being in business could shred friendships. Building a business is incredibly hard—lots of room for bruised egos and feelings. We've managed to come through relatively unscathed because we care so deeply about each other and the concept of BelleBooks. But I'd be lying if I didn't tell you there are days when we all feel like we're herding cats.

Trust is a huge issue. You have to have trust between all the owners. You have to be willing to honestly discuss problems or inequities without egos getting involved. You have to truly believe in the equality and value of every owner or you'll just drive yourself nuts.

Democracy helps. One director, one vote. So you always have a voice in the future of the company. You could be outvoted but at least you know you'll get to put in your two cents.

While I wouldn't say we've done a great job "balancing" business and friendship, we have done a great job of sorting it out over the years. We're still standing. No one's killed anyone yet, but they have threatened to kill me if I torture them with any more contract clauses.

NINK: What are your plans for the immediate future?

SC: BelleBooks is growing much faster than we expected. We're having to slow down a bit and take some time for our own careers.

DD: In 2003 we'll publish just one title—*Summer in Mossy Creek*, but at our January board meeting we green-lighted three more projects and are also anxiously awaiting delivery of our first non-owner single title. That means 2004 ought to be a banner year for BelleBooks with a possibility of four titles hitting the stands that year. Making the decision not to rush any of these projects was very hard, but we can only do so much if we want to do it well—and without killing ourselves!

Virginia Ellis is editing a second collection of Southern short stories to follow our immensely popular first book.

SC: That first book was picked up by Berkley's Signature line.

DD: Gin's got to wade through a mountain of suitable material from our submission stacks to select what will be in the collection. Not to mention browbeating her partners for contributions to the collection!

SC: I'm at the helm for *Blessings of Mossy Creek*, the fourth book of that series. Right now I'm in the process of finalizing my buys.

DD: We've got a children's picture book in production. It's a charming story, and we hope it will be the first in a series of children's books with a Southern slant. Working with an artist on illustration is proving to be quite the adventure.

Deborah Smith just finished her editorial chores on *Summer in Mossy Creek* and will be taking a little break from editorial until our single-title from Carolyn McSparren comes in the door. (Think Southern female James Herriot). The author's excited about this book. We're excited. We've already had publishers ask for an early look with an eye toward subrights purchase.

In the midst of all this we continue to ship and promote our backlist for BelleBooks.

NINK: Do you foresee venturing into the foreign market?

DD: We'd love to enter the foreign market, but once again there is only so much we can do without burning out. We have to take everything one step at a time.

NINK: Do you have plans to publish books that are not considered Southern fiction?

DD: Eventually we'll venture beyond Southern fiction, but for right now, we need to maintain our identity so that the library and the bookseller, not to mention the reader, know what they're getting when

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

The Buzz in the Biz.....

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ they choose a BelleBook.

NINK: *What are your long-term goals?*

DD: We're sticking with what has been successful—finding/creating good fiction that has “legs” in the marketplace. Our philosophy is “If we build it, they will come.” If we believe in a project enough to put our time

and money into it, then we can't go wrong.

One area of change might be a switch to publishing in hardback since some publishers have expressed interest in the trade rights to our books. Every day brings a new opportunity and new challenges. We try not to drive ourselves crazy by taking on too much, too quickly. And we remind

ourselves that today's *no* can just as easily be tomorrow's *yes*. We can always change our mind. We own the darned company!

NINK: *Indeed, they do. What a success story! These Belles are heroic examples of my favorite philosophy: take the risks and the angels will come.*

International Checking...Checking

A TRUE STORY BY KAY GREGORY

Not long ago one of my publishers, normally reliable about remitting royalty checks on time, failed to send my much anticipated Christmas check.

I ascertained that other authors had long since received theirs, waited with quiet desperation and finally phoned the publisher's office in England at an hour of the morning not usually acknowledged in my household.

“Oh,” says the dingbat on reception after I've briefly explained my problem, “Are you a customer?”

“No, I'm an author. That's why I'm hoping for a check.”

“Oh, I'll put you through to Reader Service.”

“But--” Too late. I am put through to Reader Service.

“Oh,” says Reader Service. “You need to talk to Business.”

I say I'd be delighted to talk to anyone with the remotest grasp of business.

“Ah,” says Business. “You need to talk to Switzerland.”

“Fine. Please can I have the number?”

“Yes. Hold on.”

I hold. Several minutes later a voice asks, “Can I help you?”

“Yes, PLEASE.” I explain the problem again.

“Oh. You need to talk to Switzerland.”

“Yes, so I've been told. I was waiting for the number in Switzerland.”

“Oh. Hang on.”

I hang. Number in Switzerland is finally divulged. I phone Switzerland.

“Bonjour,” says chirpy female voice.

I freeze as I am treated to a barrage of fairly simple French that I am long past understanding.

“Bonjour,” I stutter. “Do you speak English?”

Being lovely Swiss, of course she does. I explain problem again.

“Ah. You must phone London.”

“But I've already phoned London.” Note of whining panic in my voice. “They told me to phone Switzerland.”

“Ah. Hold please.”

I hold. Computer clicks madly in my ear. Different voice comes on line.

I explain problem again. More Swiss clicking. Man's voice comes on, young and sounding competent. I explain again.

“Hm,” he says. “I will check if your check has been cashed.”

Aha! There IS a check in the equation. First piece of useful information I've received. Most of check no doubt already spent on international chatting. I point out that it is unlikely check has been cashed seeing as I don't HAVE the damn check.

More clicking. “The check has not been cashed.”

“No, I didn't think it had. I didn't receive it.”

“Ah. I will look into it tomorrow.”

“Thank you. Shall I phone you if the *&^(&*** check arrives in today's mail?”

“No. We are going home. We will look tomorrow.”

“Right. Thank you for your help.”

I collapse over large cup of tea—it's too early for something more sustaining—consoling myself with the knowledge that somewhere out there in the cosmos there is a check, and that someday, sometime to somebody (possibly even me) money will be dispatched. He was a nice young man.

I sit down to write London office, merely for their information.

“Christmas is coming. Kay is going mad, please put a penny in ...” No. Never mind. I throw letter in wastepaper basket.

Note: The check eventually came. It was better than I expected. When the next royalty period came round they sent it again. Ah, temptation ...

N

I've been rather obsessed with publicity lately—not for myself, but for my RWA Chapter's conference. I always considered myself somewhat informed as to how best to publicize myself, my books, and related events, but I've recently learned there is always something to learn.

Our conference coordinator, Nancy Haddock, managed to entice an award-winning news anchor and an Emmy-award-winning reporter into presenting a workshop on publicity at our conference in March. By the time you read this column, it'll probably be too late to attend the workshop, but you can still benefit. The reporter, Jeff Crilley, recently published a book, *Free Publicity*, which I purchased because Crilley had offered to speak with me about ways to publicize the conference, and I thought it would earn me points to read his book before we spoke.

I was right. Crilley revealed that reporters are very ego-driven and that being able to tell a reporter that you've enjoyed his work immediately puts him in your corner.

Now you're probably wondering what all this has to do with my column.

Crilley has a website, www.jeffcrilley.com, where you can purchase his book for \$16.49, which includes tax and postage. *Free Publicity* is written in a friendly, honest manner from the perspective of a reporter. Sharing his own experiences as an insider, Crilley explains why some press releases go straight into the trash bin, how to get a reporter's attention, and how to get the coverage that you want. The final section of his book lists television news websites across the country. When I spoke with Crilley, he advised me not to send my press releases all over the place, but to focus on only two or three newspapers. He said that good coverage in one place was better than trying to get a little coverage everywhere.

Based on Crilley's suggestions, I'm still doing my research, striving to find a reporter who fits the profile he gave me for someone who would be interested in covering our conference, but what he taught me is that finding the right reporter to cover you, your book, or your event is very much like trying to find the right editor to purchase your manuscript. It's not enough to have a reporter's name—you must have the name of someone who would take an interest in you, your book, or your event. Someone who might feel that they have a stake in seeing a report appear on you in the newspaper or on the news.

Crilley provides examples of press releases that work—and those that don't. He offers suggestions for how you should prepare for the interview, how to "become a media darling," and how to extend your 15 minutes of fame. Publicizing yourself, your career, or an event requires extensive preparation. *Free Publicity* teaches you how to prepare.

REVIEW SITES

Since I began writing this column in 1999, I've often included review sites or extensive compilations of review sites to help you identify where you might want to send your ARCs for review. The list has become so long, however, that it's no longer plausible to include it in the column. But I have posted the list at my site, www.lorraineheath.com/links/reviews.htm. The list provides the name of the site, the URL, and the genres which the site reviews. Hopefully this information will save you some time when trying to determine where to send your ARCs. If you know of other sites not listed on my *At a Glance* page, please share them with me and I'll feature them here with credit to you before adding them to the list at my website.

PROMO ITEMS

I've discovered a new site where you can find inexpensive promotional items. *Cheap Giveaways*, www.cheapgiveaways.com, has items that cost less than \$2 apiece. The owner, Donna Birdsong, is extremely pleasant to work with. At one time, Donna had plans to be a writer, but now she strives to help writers and others promote themselves. A former member of the Dallas Area Romance Authors, she's savvy when it comes to promotion.

BACK UP YOUR INFORMATION OFTEN!

I cannot stress this advice enough—especially since I thought I was following it and discovered when my hard drive suddenly crashed that I wasn't. Backing up all my miscellaneous files began to be so time-consuming that I'd developed the habit of simply backing up my current work-in-progress files with the intention of backing up everything "later." Well, later turned out to be too late.

Fortunately, I was diligent about backing up my WIP each night so when my computer unexpectedly began giving me a message that it couldn't save information, I only lost one day's work. But after two weeks at the PC hospital, my computer was returned to me sans its previous memory, and I quickly realized that I hadn't been diligent about backing up what I'd thought were non-essential files: address books, e-mail, ideas, research books, and possible sites to mention in this column. And those files were really very essential.

The backups for those files were several months old, and while they provide a foundation for rebuilding, I would have preferred not to have to rebuild.

I now have a new strategy: daily backup of WIP, weekly backup of all files. And I plan to take the time to learn to backup the essential elements of other programs that I use such as Outlook®. Hopefully a ▶▶▶▶

monthly backup of those files will suffice.

I often heard writers lamenting the loss of their information, shook my head thinking that would never happen to me because I always backed up my data—but when deadlines loom, we often delegate backing-up our system into the same arena as dusting shelves: we'll get to it once we've met the deadline.

Unfortunately, unlike dust, which isn't going anywhere without our assistance, files can suddenly disappear—often without any warning. I did learn from the PC repairman that although it was not at all responsible for my hard drive crashing, Windows ME® is a very unstable system. I have since moved over to Windows XP® and so far am very pleased with the way that it's working.

I do have a favor to ask.

A few of you had sent me wonderful sites to be used in future columns. Unfortunately, that information disappeared along with my hard drive, so if you could e-mail it to me again, I'd greatly appreciate it. Meanwhile, I leave you with this final thought—go back-up your computer now! *N*

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Moderators: If You Have Questions, E-Mail:

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Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@attbi.com

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

CATEGORY MANAGEMENT AND BORDERS...Remember back when we were discussing Greg Josefowicz taking over as Borders CEO after running Jewel-Osco supermarkets? Remember all that stuff about category management, the hoopla, the open letter, (wherein *PW* was enlisted to, er, counteract "An inaccurate *Wall Street Journal* article and a somewhat wild-eyed 'open letter' to Borders' CEO Greg Josefowicz...") from Ralph Nader, et al. The article noted, "In large part because the plan is called 'category management,' some in the book world have reacted with fear and suspicion, linking category management with such notorious general retail practices as stores selling shelf space and stocking control to suppliers, or big-box retailers dictating to suppliers." Remember that? Well, turns out Josefowicz wasn't actually performing an experiment as *PW* tried to tell us. Nope. Category management, pretty much here to stay, wave of the future, and all that. In a recent article, *Business 2.0* presented a solid look at category management, the "bizarre and controversial place in which the nation's biggest retailers

ask one supplier in a category to figure out how best to stock their shelves," with particular attention to Borders efforts to employ the system. In fact, Josefowicz is quoted as saying, "Rather than build strategies for this thing called 'books,'" he says, "we have to meet customer needs within more finite segments." (Or, people don't shop for soft drinks the same way they shop for meat...) Twenty "lead suppliers" named by Borders so far pay significant fees of up to \$100,000 each to manage categories. For now, the article concludes, "If the supermarket and mass-merchant experience is any guide, what that means for Borders and its customers depends on whether the bookseller can remain the true captain of its categories."

A RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT FROM BARBOUR BOOKS...Effective immediately Heartsong Presents is accepting ONLY electronic submissions. Please advise everyone interested in submitting proposals to HEARTSONG PRESENTS to submit them electronically at: fictionsubmit@barbourbooks.com. Questions regarding this change or anything else concerning Heartsong Presents, please feel free to email Jim Peterson, Acquisitions Editor, Heartsong Presents at CHK6@aol.com.

— TdR



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“Let’s Face the Music”

Way back in my Silhouette days, I got stuck on a book and couldn’t continue writing it. This was problematic, since the deadline was approaching and I was already behind schedule. I just couldn’t figure out what the story was about. I had characters, setting, plot, and conflict, but they felt like a jumble of elements; I didn’t understand the story’s heart, only its limbs.

So I walk around for days like a mad woman, muttering to myself over and over, “What’s this damn book about?” I ask this question as I shower, as I clean house, as I do laundry, grocery shop, drive around town on my errands, phone the IRS, and so on.

On the third day of this mental pacing, I walk past a pony keg (which is local slang for a shop which sells wine and beer). It’s a nice day, and the shop’s sound system is blaring out of their open door. I walk past the door, obsessing about my problem: “What’s the book about?”

And, floating out of the pony keg, the voice of Don Henley, who was one of The Eagles, is singing a song from his solo album *The End of Innocence*, in which he advises me that it’s about forgiveness.

Eureka!

Don was right! That’s exactly what *The Bandit King* was about. Forgiveness was the heart of that book. And without that song pointing it out to me in a serendipitous moment, who knows how much longer it would have taken me to figure it out?

Nor is that the only thanks I owe to Henley. A year or two later, I got the double-entendre title of my award-winning category romance novel, *Untouched By Man*, from listening to the title song of his *End of Innocence*. Similarly, I got the title of a short story, “Heaven’s Only Daughter” (which appeared in a DAW Books sf/f anthology called *Whatdunits*), from Paul Simon’s brilliant album, *The Rhythm of the Saints*. A song in that album also inspired the plot line in another Silhouette I wrote, *The Black Sheep*, when the characters decide to try to save the little harbor church of Saint Cecilia (the patron saint of music).

Considering my modest earnings, however, I do not fear that Henley and Simon will demand a cut of those back royalties.

I recently delivered my first romance novel in years,

Fallen From Grace (due out this June), which I wrote on a tight schedule, squeezing it between fantasy novels. Without constantly playing the soundtrack of *Tous Les Matins Du Monde*, a French film about 17th century musicians, I don’t know how I could have written that book. I also like to listen to Bach, Mozart, and Handel when I write. The elegant, precise, and slightly exotic tones of Baroque music help me focus my mind on my work even when I’m panicking about looming deadlines for multiple commitments in a short span of time and a bank account running on empty while my fantasy publisher spends weeks not answering my agent’s questions about odd phrases in the contract he’s finally received from them.

But I digress.

I listened to *Between Earth and Sky* by Rhea’s Obsession so much while writing my May ’03 fantasy release, *The White Dragon: In Fire Forged, Part One* that I discovered I couldn’t proofread the copy edit of the book without putting that CD back in the stereo. I hadn’t listened to Rhea’s Obsession in months, and once again hearing the exotic, passionate, melodic, and faintly brutal semi-Celtic music of this little Canadian band put me right back in the saddle of that book, able to assess the copy editor’s work without ambivalence or hesitation. It was as if I had never been through the period of months when I *wasn’t* totally immersed in that book’s prose every day. The galleys for the book have recently arrived without warning (of course), and I’m going to be proofreading them while visiting friends in another city this weekend. So, naturally, I’m taking the Rhea’s Obsession CD with me. I will also keep it handy for eventually proofreading the copy edit and galleys of the second volume of that novel, *The Destroyer Goddess: In Fire Forged, Part Two*, due out in December.

(*In Fire Forged* was at my publishing house for 14 months before someone noticed how long it was. At which point they suddenly insisted, at the very last possible moment, that I split it into two volumes. This was after eschewing my previous offer to do so; but silly me, I’d made that offer more than a year earlier, when there was actually *time* to do this, and to come up with a publishing plan for it. But, oops, I digress again.) ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶



THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

▶ ▶ ▶ Where was I? Oh, yes, playing one CD over and over and over again while writing hundreds of pages of a novel.

As it happens, this seems to be ordinary—dare I ever say *normal*?—behavior among writers. Bestselling romance novelist Teresa Medeiros says that finding the right music for a book kick-starts her brain: “Once I find that magical piece of music, I will play it over and over until the cats and my husband run screaming from the room. I actually find myself typing to its rhythm, and if I’ve been away from the story for a few days, the music will pull me right back in. It’s as if it acts as the key to my subconscious.” [Curmudgeon pictures Terri’s cats fleeing room with expressions of mad horror on their little whiskered faces.]

Longtime Ninc member Lillian Stewart Carl plays the same music for a book over and over, too, and says, “I can pick up books I wrote 10 to 12 years ago and remember the music I was listening to at the time!” Madeline Baker got hooked on the *Braveheart* soundtrack this way for a while.

Janelle Burnham Schneider finds that silence lets her brain wander too much, whereas music keeps her focused. Gail Link describes herself as “a writer who *needs* music to set the mood... When I find a piece that fits what I’m working on, I use it over and over, ad nauseum.” She got into this habit when writing her very first book, *Wolf’s Embrace*, when she repeatedly played an album by the Irish group Clannad.

Come to think of it, before I started playing Rhea’s Obsession to death while writing *In Fire Forged*, I was playing Clannad to death for several hundred pages.

Kay Hooper finds that something about the rhythm of Gregorian chanting helps her concentrate. (Me, too. Gregorian chants work well when I want something playing in the background but find myself listening too much to “real” music.)

Many Ninc members who write to music cite the “right” music as being a key issue for them, using music to help them find the mood or tone of a novel. “I pick a composer for each book, one whose work I think echoes the tone and theme of the story,” says Tracy Grant. She adds that she doesn’t listen exclusively to that composer, however, because it takes her a year or so to write a book, and she’d go nuts without any variety during that time.

Since it takes me a long time to write a fantasy novel, I need a little variety, too. In fact, even on my upcoming romance novel, which was a mere leaflet of 480 MS pages,

I switched CDs about halfway through the book, finally growing tired of the first one. Novelist P.G. Nagle uses music not only to set the mood for a whole book, but also for specific scenes: “Battle music for battle scenes, folk songs for folksy scenes, etc.” Karyn Witmer-Gow says, “Love scenes, especially tender love scenes, require Barber’s ‘Adagio for Strings.’” [Curmudgeon makes note to self.]

Though Sylvie Kurtz will play a particular CD over and over again if it’s helping break through a bout of writer’s block, she usually prefers silence. Candace Schuler usually plays mellow jazz in the background, though she says that neither silence nor noise makes a difference on the all-too-rare occasions when she’s in “the zone” and too deeply immersed in the work to hear anything else. (I have been in that zone maybe twice.)

Though Jo Beverley will use music (often chosen to suit the era or the tone of a novel) to block out intrusive noise, she usually writes in silence. Sherry-Anne Jacobs also prefers to write in silence, because modern noise jars her when writing historicals. The delightful Jean Brashear also prefers silence, finding that music influences the mood of her work *too* much, actually getting between her and her characters.

Though Annette Carney likes the *idea* of finding the right music for each project, it doesn’t work for her in practice: “The music seems to take up all the space in my head,” and she therefore prefers silence, too. Having also had trouble with the whole “background music” experiment, Dixie Browning says she has nonetheless found one CD that goes with everything: Tommy Emmanuel’s solo album, *Only*.

Katherine Garbera first started writing at work when she was a receptionist and therefore can’t write in silence (so she plays music), but Ninc members Ann Roth, Melanie Jackson, and Toni Herzog are all members of the “silence is golden” contingent. Toni adds that the passage of time has only made her more adamant about needing silence to work. Pat Roy *dreams* of silence as she tries to hear herself think above the noise of children, dogs, and football announcers.

After years of writing books with three small children in the house, Judith Bowen says that now, “I need silence!” She prefers to write in an empty house, while the kids are at school and the dogs are asleep—and adds that she’ll even cover the bird’s cage if necessary. She also uses earplugs to ensure silence for her concentration. And she’s not the only one to do so; when someone else is in Suz-

anne Simmons' house, or when lawn mowers are disturbing her concentration, she, too, relies on earplugs.

Though I normally prefer music when working, I rely on earplugs on days when I can hear a lawn mower outside of every damn window of my home and can't ignore the grating roar which cuts across the music I'm playing. I also resort to earplugs on the occasions when my next door neighbor's teenage son blares rap music from a CD player while working on his car in the driveway below my windows. And I relied on earplugs often when I had upstairs neighbors whose daily habits were so noisy that I could scarcely hear my stereo above the thumping, crashing, and smashing which occurred round the clock. (They moved before I could kill them.)

Although Cheryl Wolverton prefers silence when she's writing at night, by day she enjoys movie soundtracks. One of the ones she mentions is *Last of the Mohicans*, which Karyn Witmer-Gow describes as "the all-time best writing music." A lot of fantasy writers love that one, too, including me.

Ronn Kaiser says he gave up listening to background music years ago, since he falls into a meditative trance when writing which makes him oblivious to what's going on around him. He does add, however, that one could say he writes to "white noise," given that his old, noisy computer sounds like a washing machine. (My old, noisy computer lately sounds like a helicopter about to crash, which is rather alarming.)

In fact, "white noise" is pretty popular among Niners. Although all man-made noises pull Sue Pace out of the story, she likes the sound of rain falling on the roof or a waterfall splashing outside an open window. Lauren Bach, who used to need total silence to write, has found her productivity enhanced by playing a CD of ocean waves. Meanwhile, music lover Janelle Burnham Schneider is particularly fond of a CD that mingles soft instrumental music with the sound of a waterfall. I have a Sound Soother, a little audio device that makes sounds like waves, rain, or a babbling brook. Silence almost never works for me, so I have found the Sound Soother particularly useful for days when my concentration is so fragile that any music, even Gregorian chanting or Baroque cellos, distracts me.

In a twist which I do not hesitate to call eccentric, Robin Bayne refers to the QVC channel on cable TV as "great white noise for writing." (I would shoot the television after 20 minutes.) Lynn Miller and Annette Mahon are two more writers who can write to the noise of the TV, though both say they prefer music, particularly instrumental music, i.e. without lyrics.

Indeed, the vast majority of novelists who write to music seem to prefer music without lyrics. As Colleen Thompson says, "When I'm at the keyboard, songs with audible, understandable language interfere with my own flow of words." So, like me, she has different tastes in music, based on whether or not she's writing to it. With

few exceptions, I prefer music without lyrics or (to borrow a phrase from Colleen) Music With Incomprehensible Lyrics when I'm writing; and, when I'm not writing, I usually prefer music with lyrics I can listen to.

One notable exception to this common preference, however, is Phoebe Conn, who describes Janice Joplin as her all-time favorite music for writing. "If I can get her pain in my prose, then I know my reader will sob along with my characters." Certainly, there are many singers and lyric songs I've heard in my head while I work, even if I rarely *play* them while working.

As we've seen here, there are writers who need complete silence to work--and their professional accomplishments are evidence enough that they certainly know what they need for their process. However, I myself couldn't work without music, at least not as a regular habit. Music stimulates, soothes, inspires, and focuses me. I consider it a mainstay of my writing process—as, I've now learned, many other novelists do, too. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the hundreds of composers and musicians who, through their art, their craft, and their talent, have made possible the development of my own. **N**

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:

Dinah Dinwiddie (*Julia London*), Austin TX
Katherine Haupt (*Kate Bridges*), Mississauga Ont. Canada
Lois Kleinsasser (*Cait London/Cait Logan*), Hollister MO
Michelle Nicole Place (*Nicole Byrd*), Franklin TN
Linda L. Sankpill (*Linda Conrad*), Key Largo FL

New Members:

Anna Adams, Ft. Worth TX
Pamela Toth (*Pamela Roth*), Woodinville WA

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

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

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

BLIND MEN AND ELEPHANTS PART I

BY RONN KAISER

You remember the parable. Several blind men are asked to describe what an elephant is like. They approach the beast and each grabs hold of a different part. The one with the trunk says he's like a snake, the one with the leg says he's like a tree, the one with the tail says he's like a rope, and so on. None of the blind men was wrong, of course. What the parable tells us is that truth is relative; that there are many truths, many realities, many perspectives.

Take the question: What causes a story to fail? Not surprisingly, the writers who responded to this topic came at it from a variety of angles. Like the blind men, there weren't contradictions so much as differences of perspective and emphasis. Story has many aspects, some more essential or determinative than others, depending on who is judging. Let's have a look at what some of our perceptive Ninc "blind men" had to say.

Two responses were what I would, for want of a better term, call "impressionistic" judgments. These two souls approached the beast, sniffed, listened to the sounds being made and drew their conclusions.

Carol Cail believes the pivotal factor causing a story to fail "is because the writer is *predictable*, either 1) in word choices and sentence structures, 2) in plot and character devel-

opment, or 3) (horrors) both." The key to avoiding failure, says Carol, is for the writer "to produce fresh descriptions, unexpected details and word play... Readers love to be surprised." The writer's job is "to entertain with believable surprises."

Robin Bayne believes stories fail "when they don't engage the reader's emotions...When I read a horror novel, I must feel the adrenalin rush as I fear for the hero. Reading a romance...I must feel that tug in my gut when it looks like things will never work out." She adds, "An old piece of writing advice is to keep throwing obstacles in your heroine's path. That's good advice, I believe, if every obstacle makes the reader react as if she were living the story at that moment."

Our other "blind men" tended to focus on various aspects of "story." **Ann Roth** was perhaps the most peripatetic, having circled the beast and taken hold of several parts. Her list included flat characters, poor motivation, plot holes, telling rather than showing, and so forth. With respect to the former, Ann said, "Regardless of the genre, readers want character they can either identify with, despise, laugh or cry with, fight for, cheer on, boo, fear, etc....Three-dimensional characters are complicated people, and that means not all evil and not one hundred percent wonderful [either]."

Sherry-Anne Jacobs also took hold of several different factors: "...many of the bad movies and bad books seem to me over-simplistic in characterization and in motivation and in plot." Sherry-Anne went on to say, "What makes a good story

'good'... is that one can relate to a complex hero or heroine fumbling his/her way through life..." The key for Sherry-Anne is that characters be "truly human" and the plot sufficiently complex that the reader is "willing them to succeed." That, says Sherry-Anne, is when "I'm usually hooked."

Dallas Schulze is the realist in the group. The reason stories fail for any given reader, says Dallas, is "almost completely subjective. When it comes to creativity, I don't think there are any universal truths." But if there is a quality that gives a story "near universal appeal," it's in characters that "are deeply sympathetic... larger than life and yet manage to remain human...It's the characters that make the story come alive. I'm an avid Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan and it's the characters that pull me in. I care about what happens to these people. I want things to work out for the good guys and I want the bad guys to get their comeuppance. They matter."

Taking a slightly different tack is **Cheryl Anne Porter**. "For me," says Cheryl, "the essence of a story, whether it succeeds or fails, can be traced back to one word: motivation....If motivation is not adequately justified by the writer, if it does not induce sympathy or empathy for our protagonists on the part of the reader, then the character, and therefore the story, fails because we don't care what happens to him or her.... It's been my experience," Cheryl adds, "when crafting a tale, that motivation permeates every aspect of the story. Even goals arrive from motivation: the character has thus-and-

such goal because she's motivated by whatever past experience it was that made her this way and made her, therefore, have this stated goal."

Cheryl goes on to make this interesting and important point: "I look at motivation as the optimum way to tie the character to her story, i.e., give her all the reasons why she can't simply quit and walk away. Because if she can at any point in the story quit and walk away, I don't have a story because...her motivation in having that goal wasn't strong enough."

Let me make an aside that relates to Cheryl's last point. My wife, who is in my view a brilliant story analyst, has a theory about why many films and books fail. We will be watching a movie and I'll turn to her and say, "This isn't working, why?" Often she'll reply, "The character doesn't care, so why should we care?"

This sounds strange, I know, but when I stop and think about the story in question, I can invariably see what she means. Things are happening on the screen or in the pages of a book, but they just don't grip us because we realize they simply don't matter enough to the character in question. The writer or storyteller has not succeeded in raising the character's fears, needs, or desires to a level where we can feel his or her anguish. We can't empathize because we don't "feel" the importance. The character is simply going through the motions or, as Cheryl says, her goals are not credibly motivated and portrayed. If a character is too accepting of his or her lot, too passive or not struggling enough to overcome adversity, perhaps even bored, then we're bored, too.

This, I think, is key: the factors that cause the character to "care" need not be earth-shaking, they don't need to involve high drama and tragedy, they don't even have to seem important or of weight to the reader. *But they must be very important to the character.* If the character cares deeply about what is happening to them, the reader will care because human beings are by nature empathetic. We

only need be given a reason to care.

One need do no more than read Anne Tyler to see what I mean. Anne is a master at taking everyday events, the ordinary transactions of life, and turning them into meaty drama. How does she do this? By making what happens of tremendous importance to the character. However, Anne doesn't take just any character, she creates one who we can accept on faith would react as they do. We see *and* feel their emotion because Anne gives them what Cheryl Anne Porter would call the "proper motivation."

Judith Bowen illustrates this principle beautifully with the following "war story." In struggling with her upcoming book Judith realized that a character just wasn't working. Judith says, "no matter what I did or tried, [the character] just lay there on the page like last week's meatloaf. He was stereotyped, cliched, flat, cut-out, you-name-it, according to my editor (and me!). Even my agent, an irrepressible optimist, felt [the character] 'needed work.'" Judith checked into a hotel for uninterrupted peace and quiet and spent a week on the problem. Finally, it hit her. The problem with the character was that she was "not taking him seriously."

What Judith was suggesting was that she was 'using' the character. Despite being an experienced author, she'd "fallen into the trap of 'putting a book together.'" She'd seen the character functionally as an element of the puzzle, a piece of the plot. Says Judith, "I was using the problematic character as a hook, as a plot device, as a foil to the hero...[but] I was not [really] 'seeing'... inside him... as a character, as real-people, as someone with a past, a present and, possibly, a future....I had to 'take him seriously' before I could make the breakthrough...."

Again, Cheryl Anne Porter might have added, Judith's character needed to be properly motivated. Failing proper motivation—as Janice Kaiser might say—we would have trouble

caring, meaning the character and story would go flat and the reader would lose interest.

Among our Ninc "blind men" **Annette Carney** has taken the most theoretical approach. Annette turned around my question and asked herself this: "What stops me from closing a book or turning the channel when I'm reading/watching a story that should, by all rights, be boring me to death...but it's got me hooked?"

Annette recounts her experience of watching the Adam Sandler film, "Mr. Deeds." Though it contained "lame humor, lame, cardboard, weird characters, silly acting," Annette says, "I watched the darn thing until the end," adding "I was pretty satisfied with the story itself...[because] the main characters in their silly, unbelievable, cartoonish ways, all went through that old Hero's Journey...."

In this regard Annette is a disciple of Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler who emphasize the mythic basis of story. She explains thus: "I've started plenty of books by otherwise exceedingly competent authors who offer slick pacing, characterization, dialogue, narration—but found myself putting the book down at the point where I realized no one in the story was going to take that heroic journey and come out on the other end with any sort of insight. The journey can be searing, comic, tragic, on a huge scale or practically microscopic, but it's there. Or it isn't—and for me, when it isn't, no marquee actors or big budget production persuades me to finish the movie, or buy more books from an otherwise gifted writer.

"....Now when I analyze stories that either work strikingly well or fail spectacularly badly, I invariably see that none of the characters truly entered a new world and came out of it somehow changed. As a reader, I'm willing to put up with a fair amount of bad pacing, poor dialogue, stilted characterization, and other technical things that [tend] to pull me out of the story...but I'll

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

TRICKS OF THE TRADE



quit reading as soon as I see there's no character journey being taken."

Well, do you have a better idea now as to the true nature of our elephant, the story beast? I hope so because I think that our Ninc "blind men" each have it right in their own way. But let me go out on a limb here and take exception to something said by my good friend Dallas Schulze, who opined, "When it comes to creativity, I don't think there are any universal truths." While I would agree that not everybody likes the same things and people come to different conclusions about a work of art, I think there is a valid universal truth about the nature of *story*, a magical quality of "elephantness," if you will, that transcends, and perhaps helps explain all the others.

Next month in Part II, I will

make my case, posit my theory, as to why stories fail and succeed. I should note that it will be my final "Tricks of the Trade" column. Two new *NINK* columnists are waiting in the wings to step on page (sorry) and it's time for fresh blood. I've had my 15 minutes and, frankly, I have little left to say. So, I'm stepping aside, but not until I've shared the theory about the nature of story I've been working on for 20 years. You can judge for yourself if what I have to offer is useful, or if I'm simply full of...well, you know what.

Being a writer, I've got to end this with a teaser. Here's a hint as to what I consider the "magical element of story." Three such disparate characters as Jesus in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Ian Fleming's James Bond, and David Kelly's Ally McBeal, all share it—the former blatantly, the next subtly, and the latter surprisingly. It is this magi-

cal quality that makes their stories work. Can you guess what it is? See you next month. *N*

Bits'n'Pieces

AND NOW IT'S RANDOM HOUSE BALLANTINE PUBLISHING GROUP...As

I'm sure you've heard by now, the Random House reorganization has indeed taken place, and Ballantine head Gina Centrello is now president and publisher of the newly formed group.

AND IN CLOSING...Our congratulations to NINC's own Julie Pottinger aka Julia Quinn, who did an interview with *TIME* Magazine (February 3, 2003) and held up her end beautifully—certainly a rare thing with this crusty old news rag! Well done, Julie.

— *TdR*

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