



NINK

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

When the Well Runs Dry

BY JANELLE BURNHAM SCHNEIDER

It's the worst feeling on earth. I'm at my desk, my fingers poised over my keyboard, staring at a blank monitor. I have a shadowy image of a main character in mind, and some possible means for complicating her life. I wrote a proposal on this story idea six months ago, and at the time, the story seemed like the best idea I'd ever had. Now it's a pile of sawdust in my brain. The dust on my office window is more interesting than this character. I suddenly get an urge to clean the refrigerator. I know I *should* be writing, but writing is the last thing on earth I want to do. My creative well has gone dry.

I've been through this particular version of hell once so far in my 15-year career, and it lasted for two years. E-mail interviews with over a dozen Ninc members reveal a cumulative total of 20 years of empty wells, some cases lasting only weeks, and others stretching on for years. Experience has brought a lot of wisdom to these writers, explana-

tions for the cause of the dry well, tips for living with it, and encouragement for recovering from it.

To begin with, what turns a wordsmith against her favorite companions?

The causes seem to fall into three main categories: professional upset, overwork, or personal crisis, or any combination of the three.

Professional upset can take two forms. One is the famous "writers block," where the work in progress just isn't going anywhere. As Anne Lamott describes it in her classic *Bird by Bird*, "You may feel a little as if writing a novel is like trying to level Mount McKinley with a dentist's drill. Things feel hopeless, or at least bleak, and you are not imaginative or organized enough to bash your way through to a better view, let alone some interesting conclusion."

Veteran author Linda Windsor says this relatively short-term form of a dry spell (though it feels interminable when one is in the middle of it) is usually "the result of the creative juices taking a wrong turn. The plot just isn't right. The POV is wrong. Given time, it will work

out." When she finds herself stuck in this place, "I read, I take on house projects, and I keep stabbing at the project until it takes off."

Carole Bellacera experienced "a few weeks of 'block' with the novel my agent is presently trying to sell. I was jumping ahead in time by about six years, and I realized I no longer knew my characters. . . . It's a horrible feeling to be blocked. I'd never had that problem before, and I hope I never have it again." She says the block lifted when she wrote new bios for her characters.

"I knew what I wanted to say," JoAnn Grote explains when describing her own bout with writer's block, "but couldn't come up with scenes which showed it. When I did write scenes, I wasn't happy with them. Finally, I sent the manuscript in, hoping I was too close to it, and the editor would feel the story worked fine. Nope. I ended up rewriting it."

She credits the "unexpected practical support" she received from the writing/editing team which eventually copyedited the completed book. "They've edited

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

What Kind of Person?

Several years ago, the Friends of my local library had one of their used book sales. For me, the big find of the day was a book published in the 1880s and written by a minister who ran a program to rescue working prostitutes. The book was astonishingly frank and informative, with detailed portraits of the prostitutes themselves, including what had led them to the business, their experiences in it, and their struggles to escape. As a writer of historical fiction with a special interest in American history, I couldn't pass it up. The book went in my already bulging bag with all the rest.

Eventually, I hauled my finds to where volunteers were toting up purchases. The volunteer I drew was an elderly lady who hardly glanced at me as she went through my bags, pulling out my books one by one and adding up my bill. And then she hit the book about the prostitutes.

She stopped, glared at the book, then, for the first time, raised her head and really looked at *me*. I got the feeling she wasn't impressed with what she saw. Eventually, she spoke: "We wondered what kind of person would buy a book like *that*," she said.

I've recounted the experience any number of times since. It always draws an appreciative laugh, especially from fellow authors. Like any good story, however, it has a dark side. And given some of the ramifications of the USA Patriot Act, the "anti-terrorism" bill passed by Congress right after 9/11, it's a *really* dark side.

The Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 (generally referred to, for obvious reasons, as the USA Patriot Act or, as I'll call it hereafter, the USAPA) was passed into law in October of 2001, less than two months after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. In its 342 pages it amends and expands the reach of 15 major federal statutes, including FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) and ECPA (Electronic Communications Privacy Act). Many of the items in the act had long been on the "wish lists" of law enforcement agencies like the FBI and information gathering/security agencies like the CIA, but had previously been rejected by Congress as too intrusive, undermining individual liberties and, in some cases, the restraining power of judicial oversight. But all that changed in the wake of 9/11.

Because the USAPA is cumbersome, complex, and confusing, it's taken a while for the wider public to appreciate the extent of its reach. Three sections of the Act are of particular concern to members of Ninc. All three apply to bookseller and library operations and, thus, have an effect on writers and readers.

Section 215 expands the reach of FISA by lowering the legal standard

for obtaining a search warrant from “probable cause” to a belief that the requested information might (maybe, if they’re lucky) be related to an ongoing terrorist or intelligence investigation. The FBI can request the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC), which is separate from the federal, state, and local court systems, to issue a secret search warrant for specific records or for “any tangible thing” the bureau thinks might be of interest, including book borrowing or purchase records, library computer sign-up lists, records of attendance at book signings or lectures, computer hard drives, and much more. Security video records would not be immune to such a search, for example, and some of those systems are so sophisticated that it’s possible to read a computer screen or the words on the page of an open book.

Section 216 broadens the authority, under ECPA, for federal and state law enforcement agencies to monitor Internet traffic. Law enforcement agencies armed with a court order can now gather any and all “dialing, routing, addressing, or signaling” information to or from a given communication device, including a library’s public access computers. The Department of Justice has interpreted this wording to include the right to collect urls and e-mail headers. Similarly, Section 214 broadens the FBI’s telephone monitoring authority in FISA investigations to include gathering routing and addressing information on Internet traffic.

In all cases, the USAPA imposes a gag order that prohibits the bookseller or library from notifying the individual under investigation, the press, or anyone else that a search warrant or wiretap order has been executed. Libraries can’t even inform the general public that the public access computers they want to use are being monitored. (Library staffs and booksellers are free to consult an attorney, however.)

But *I’m* not a terrorist, you’re thinking. How does this affect *me*?

Quite aside from the broader issues of freedom of speech and information, innocent writers and readers can be caught in or affected by an ongoing investigation because of the broadened information gathering powers granted under Sections 214, 215, and 216. (Those sections aren’t the only ones that might affect us, and booksellers and libraries aren’t the only entities affected. Medical, educational, and other public institutions are vulnerable, as well. But this is a writers’ organization so I’m focusing here on a couple of the many issues of concern to writers.)

One concern is that over-zealous law enforcement agents will take undue interest in individuals who buy or borrow “suspicious” books. The possible purchase of a book drew prosecutors’ interest during the Monica Lewinsky/Bill Clinton show. The Tattered Cover Book Store in Denver spent years in the courts fighting demands by law enforcement agencies to reveal the title of a book purchased by a suspected drug dealer. As writers of commercial fiction, Ninc members tend to have

suspiciously eclectic reading habits. Not only do I delve into the habits of 19th century prostitutes, I own or have borrowed books on poisons, abortion, guns, pornography, smuggling, illegal drugs, Middle Eastern politics and history, techniques of torture, how to build a new identity, operations of radical survivalist groups, and more. Many members own *The Anarchist Cookbook*, which is a handy little reference if you want to blow something up, or merely write stories about those who do. Under the USAPA and the “any tangible thing” allowance for search warrants, agents searching bookstore or library records could easily stumble across *our* records and start wondering what *we* were up to.

Another concern: Wiretaps on public access computers collect information on *everyone* who uses them, not just the person under suspicion. For example, law enforcement agents might have court authorization to monitor the on-line activities of a university student suspected of having ties to a terrorist organization. They know the student, John Q. Suspect, occasionally uses the computers in the university library and want to know what kind of information

Wiretaps on public access computers collect information on everyone who uses them, not just the person under suspicion.

he’s gathering, what websites and chat rooms he visits, and what e-mails he sends and receives. Since the agents can’t know which computer the student will use or when, their only option is to monitor *all* activities on *all* computers. Thus, while they’re gathering information on John Suspect, who’s only on one computer on an occasional basis, they’re also gathering the same information on every other person who’s used any of the computers being monitored.

And law enforcement agencies are interested! In October 2002, the Library Research Center of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign surveyed the directors of 1,505 of the 5,094 libraries nationwide that serve populations over 5,000. A summary of the survey is posted on the Center’s website (http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/gslis/research/civil_liberties.html). According to the summary, the staffs at 219 of the surveyed libraries reported that they cooperated with law enforcement requests for “voluntary cooperation” in providing information about “patrons’ reading habits and Internet preferences.” Staffs at 225 other libraries reported they did not voluntarily provide such information.

Targeted library records include “who has borrowed certain books or used public access computers (and for what purpose).” “In the year after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, Federal and local law enforcement officials visited at least 545 libraries (10.7%) to ask for these records. Of these, 178 libraries (3.5%) received visits from the FBI.” The authors of the summary make haste to note that the number of libraries visited



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by enforcement agencies is actually well below the 703 libraries reporting such queries in the year before the attacks, but add the reminder that, in the case of terrorist-related investigations, the USAPA now prohibits libraries from revealing that a search warrant has been served.

When the Justice Department refused to respond to a request under the Freedom of Information Act for aggregated data on how the USAPA was being applied, the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, the Freedom to Read Foundation, the ACLU, and the Electronic Privacy Information Center joined forces to sue the Justice Department for the information. The four filed a motion for summary judgment, but the motion was dismissed, leaving the matter to work its way through the courts with the glacial speed usual to such things.

So what are libraries and booksellers doing about all this? In a recent speech at the University of Hawaii, Hilo, Judith F. Krug, Director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom for the American Library Association, addressed librarians' concerns and responsibilities.

"Our responsibility is to bring people and information together," she said. "To my way of thinking, intellectual freedom is the core value of American librarianship."

Krug stressed that libraries must have a coherent and carefully thought out records retention plan in place before that first law enforcement agent walks through the door with a warrant in hand. Libraries need information on *what* their patrons are reading or requesting because that information is critical for effective collection development. They also need to keep track of *where* their property is. Once borrowed materials are returned, however, all record of who borrowed them should be erased. The goal of library record keeping, she said, should be to eliminate the "who, when, why" because "that's not our business." Placement of public access computers (already a point of contention in many libraries), type and placement of security monitoring equipment, and thorough training of library employees and volunteers are all issues librarians have to address. One of Krug's examples of ways libraries can protect their patrons' privacy is to send overdue notices in sealed envelopes rather than as postcards.

On the bookseller side, some independents, in order to protect their customers' privacy, are choosing to eliminate at least portions if not all of their customer databases. A recent article in *Publishers Weekly* carried interviews with several booksellers who had chosen to go that route. In

cases like that, it isn't just the booksellers who lose a valuable marketing tool. Customers with specific interests (water gardens, for example) or favorite authors (must have Annie Author's latest, immediately!) can no longer expect their booksellers to alert them to new titles of interest. Or even contact them at all if the bookseller has eliminated names and addresses as well as purchasing records. And authors lose because those hardworking booksellers, the very folks so often responsible for building vital word of mouth for books and writers, now find it harder to connect readers with the right books as effectively as they might have in the past.

All is not gloom, however. Congressman Bernie Sanders (I-VT), one of the few congressmen to vote against passage of the USAPA back in 2001, has recently introduced a "Freedom to Read Protection Act" (HR1157) to exempt libraries and bookstores from the current language of Sec. 215 and "reinstate the 'probable cause' standard for libraries and bookstores." It isn't a complete solution, but it is an important step in the right direction.

Anyone interested in more information about these issues can get a good start by visiting the American Library Association's website at www.ala.org.

— Anne Holmberg

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:

Darlene Gardenhire (*Darlene Graham*), Norman OK
Alison Hart (*Jennifer Greene, Jeanne Grant, Jessica Massey*), Benton Harbor MI
Liz Peterson (*Elizabeth Powell*), Fitchburg, WI
Leah Vroman (*Leah Vale*), Portland OR

New Members:

Eileen Dreyer (*Kathleen Korbel*), St Louis MO
Susan A. Lantz (*Susannah Carleton*), Tallahassee FL
Pam McCutcheon (*Pamela Lutzier*), Divide CO

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

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many of my books, both content and copy editing,” she says, “and we’ve developed a wonderful working relationship. When I told them the problems I was having with this story, they brainstormed with me. They came up with some great ideas, and stimulated my creativity. I’m normally the type of author who likes to put a story together by myself, so this has been a new experience for me.”

But not all creative blockages are so easily diagnosed or remedied. Diminished creativity often follows a professional upset, such as a book which doesn’t sell as well as expected, or worse, being dumped by a publisher or fired by an agent. The more time that passes without the validation of a new contract, the louder the voices of self-doubt become. Olivia Rupprecht describes it this way: “I write to be read, not to put a story in the drawer, and without some sense of confidence that my work will go to print, even the stories that continue to tug at me are put aside for other interests and opportunities. Of course, if a story sank its claws into my throat and wouldn’t let go, I would put it on the page and trust that the passion of the work would grab some editor by the throat as well. Yes, I know working writers can’t wait for inspiration, that more often than not they have to go after it with a club. But frankly, after 15 years in this business, I just don’t have the energy to write without some inner impetus fueling the desire to do it.”

And Lillian Carl Stewart admits, “The dry spells have come and gone during the ‘unable-to-sell’ period. It’s a constant struggle to

keep them at bay.”

So how do writers cope with this kind of creative dryness?

Catherine Hudgins struggled for about a year and she says she got through it, “Not very gracefully. I struggled and struggled and wept and fought and generally felt terrible, defeated, etc.” Her cure was in “being free to quit writing and have the people who’d love me whether I wrote or not help me regain sight of why I started writing in the first place—and go back to that, rather than continue to wallow in frustration and failure.”

Stewart says, “I keep reading and daydreaming and telling myself that writing is my life’s work, writing is who I am. Sometimes I force myself to sit down at the keyboard. Other times I ease up and let myself ‘play’ for awhile.”

Rupprecht finds refuge in the opposite approach. “Writing is something that I do, it’s not who I am.” She’s survived this trek through the desert “by inches, by the skin of my teeth, with the support of my family and dearest friends who value me for myself, not my accomplishments.” When well-meaning acquaintances ask her when her next book is coming out, “I just tell them I’m on sabbatical. And then I mention my columnist and editorial work for *NINK*, which really impresses most people and allows me to feel important instead of wishing I could crawl under a rock. It’s so easy to get ourselves locked into this thing where we equate the value of our existence with the success of our careers. That’s bullshit but we buy it. Life is much too short to make ourselves miserable because of circumstances that are often out of our control.”

For those of us fortunate

enough to have a (relatively) steady flow of contracts, it’s easy to take creativity for granted. Then one day we reach down for the next story line, and come up empty.

Robin Lee Hatcher had discovered the agony of a dry well following a long period of steady production and stress, topped by four contracts coming due within six weeks. She says all of a sudden, she wanted to avoid her computer and felt no joy in either writing or in reading. However, because of yet another deadline, “I forced myself into my office and forced myself to put words on paper, even when it felt totally dry.” The result was *The Shepherd’s Voice* which eventually won the RITA for Inspirational.

Vella Munn says her dry spell “came upon me slowly as my personal and writing life spun out of control. . . . I learned that for the first time in my lifelong compulsion (to write), the muse needed to rest.”

In *The Artist’s Way*, author Julia Cameron describes it like this. “In order to create, we draw from our inner well. This inner well, an artistic reservoir, is ideally like a well-stocked trout pond. We’ve got big fish, little fish, fat fish, skinny fish—an abundance of artistic fish to fry. As artists, we must realize that we have to maintain this artistic ecosystem. If we don’t give some attention to upkeep, our well is apt to become depleted, stagnant, or blocked.”

Our personal lives can deplete our creativity as quickly as can overwork. Every author I spoke with cited some element in her personal life which contributed to the dry well.

My own experience began with writing five novels in a single year, followed by a



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▶▶▶▶ whirlwind romance, a wedding, a cross-country move, and pregnancy within seven months of the wedding. My husband spent most of the pregnancy away from home on military duty. Two months after the baby's arrival, my husband was

(Non-exhaustive) List of books to help refill the well

The Artist's Way, by Julia Cameron

How to Write with the Skill of a Master and the Genius of a Child, by Marshall J. Cook

Fearless Creating, by Eric Maisel, Ph.D.

On Writer's Block: A New Approach to Creativity, by Victoria Nelson

Pencil Dancing, by Mari Messer

Just Open a Vein, by William Brohaugh

Writing from the Inside Out, by Dennis Palumbo

Bird by Bird, by Anne Lamott

The Right to Write, by Julia Cameron

The Vein of Gold, by Julia Cameron

Living the Writer's Life, by Eric Maisel, Ph.D.

Writing on Both Sides of the Brain, by Henriette Anne Klausner

Pain and Possibility, by Gabrielle Rico

Discovering the Writer Within, by Bruce Ballenger & Barry Lane

posted to Israel for a year. Six weeks later, my critique group gave me the boot.

Likely no one reading this article will be surprised by the fact that I couldn't write to save my life. It surprised me, though. I went ahead and signed a contract for another novel, due in a year. The closer the deadline loomed, the more nervous I became. Thanks to an overwhelmingly compassionate editor, I got a four-month extension, but the words still wouldn't come.

That's when I discovered Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*. Her twin concepts of starting each day with three pages of longhand "brain spill" and taking active steps to nurture creativity slowly brought back my ability to write. I finished the novel by the extended deadline, and have had at least one project under contract ever since.

Since then, I've made a point of replenishing my "creative ecosystem." I make time to daydream. I play Lego with my children. I've even started drawing pictures (for their eyes only) as a means of stimulating a different side of creativity. During the spring and summer, digging around in my flowerbeds is one of the best therapies I've found.

For Robin Lee Hatcher, it's movies, lots and lots of movies. For JoAnn Grote, it was write a poem and then a short story. "I wrote them for myself, not the market. They still need a lot of work, but I'm looking forward to it. The important thing is that they gave me periods of joy in writing in the middle of a very dry place."

Olivia Rupprecht puts it this way. "If the fire in the belly isn't there—absolutely essential for success in this business—then explore other avenues of writing, or travel,

or go crazy in the kitchen, or garden, and/or get a new job if you need the money. Whatever makes the bad stuff go away, allows the muse to recuperate, and is fiscally feasible. Gainfully employed and emotionally supportive spouses are on a par with winning the lottery in this situation."

Jan Boies says, "Listening to music is good for me. Music itself creates emotions and the lyrics can be interpreted in many ways."

For those still in the throes of a dry spell, our veterans have some wise and compassionate advice, best summed up in the words of Catherine Hudgins. "Give yourself permission to walk away, to quit. Focus on refilling the well rather than forcing yourself to 'be creative, dammit.'"

"It's a tough row to hoe," Olivia Rupprecht says. "I spent a good two years feeling angry, bitter, confused, and resentful. . . . The thing I had once loved beyond reason—writing fiction—had become a torturous experience. . . . It's only in retrospect that I realize this extended sabbatical has been a godsend. It's been an odyssey of self-doubt which led to self-discovery."

The good news is that for most of these authors, the creativity has come back. Some of them are still waiting for a publisher to take an interest in them again, but the ideas are flowing once more. Each of the writers interviewed illustrates the tremendous power of resilience. No matter how long the well has been dry, with care and attention and time, it will eventually fill again.

Janelle Burnham Schneider's creative well gets drained by deadlines, children, dogs, and enforced separation from her military husband. Quilting, reading, email with friends, and gardening refill the well.

The Sounds of Silence: How a Writer's Retreat Reawakened My Muse

BY CAROLE BELLACERA

At this very moment, I'm sitting in the screened-in front porch of a bay-front cottage writing this essay on my Alpha Smart. The only sound I can hear besides the tapping of my fingers on the keys are the waves beating against the shore, the wind whispering through the trees, raindrops tapping against the roof, and an occasional squawk of a seagull. Ah, the sounds of silence. Or perhaps I should amend that to...the sounds of nature.

Have you ever noticed how much unnatural noise there is in the world today? If I were home right now, writing in my office, or even sitting out on my deck with my Alpha Smart, as I often do, I would be hearing the sounds of 21st Century life. Music on my stereo which I always play when I'm working in my office, or if I'm outside, besides the tranquil sound of the fountain in my lily pond, I often hear lawn mowers, shrub trimmers, and traffic passing on the highly traveled road just through the woods behind my house. Not exactly sounds to write by.

That's why I decided to spend a week here on the Chesapeake Bay to re-capture my muse. It's the fourth day of my retreat, and I can already claim it a great success. I've filled three files of my Alpha Smart—approximately 90 pages of my WIP. At home, I was lucky to average five pages a day.

I've had a difficult time with this fifth book. Except for a brief period of writer's block with *Understudy*, my fourth book that will be out this summer, I'd never had a problem with a disappearing muse. But after going through a major career crisis this past year, I found my self-confidence at an all-time low, and that doubt gave me fits when I was trying to plot my new book. At times, it felt like my brain was going in circles. None of my ideas seemed fresh or plausible. My characters weren't cooperating with me, my words seemed stiff and awkward, and any talent I used to possess seemed to have slinked away to hide under a rock. One morning, things got so bad when I sat down to write that I packed all of my research up in a box and tucked it away under my desk. I was that close to chucking the whole idea and going on to something else.

Only problem was...there was nothing else I wanted to write. The idea of *Tango's Edge* had hooked me years ago, and after I finished *Understudy*, I knew it was the next book I wanted to write. I'd written the first ten chapters of it,

and was relatively happy with the pages. It was the second part of the book that was giving me fits. I just wasn't sure I knew how it was all going to come together, and I was lacking in confidence that I'd be able to *make* it come together.

That's when I decided I needed to get away from home. Go somewhere quiet and do nothing but write all day long. No other responsibilities to divide my time. No e-mail (a growing time waster, I've decided), no telephones, no newspapers, and most importantly, no housework. But where could I find a place like that? I couldn't afford to stay at a bed & breakfast for a week (after all, this isn't Europe, and there's no such thing as a cheap B&B in Northern Virginia.) And it had to be somewhere within driving distance because I wasn't going to spend money on airfare (and I hate flying, anyway.)

I thought about doing the time-share thing. We own one in Myrtle Beach, but we'd already traded away our week to vacation in Vail this summer. But I called up the time-share people anyway to see if we had enough points left to get something in the vicinity. Maybe Williamsburg or Massanutten. But there were no vacancies in any resorts closer than Texas for the month of June. Since Texas wasn't exactly in driving distance from Virginia, I had to give up on that idea.

Then I remembered my friend, Robin. Good old Robin. She lives in a cute little cottage on the Chesapeake Bay in Churchton, Maryland. I could immediately picture myself writing the day away in her screened-in porch overlooking the water. She worked on Capitol Hill, and would be out of the house every day from seven to six in the evening. It would be perfect!

I called her up, and made a deal with her. If I could stay a week at her house, I'd prepare dinner for her every night when she got home from work. Okay, I said no housework, right? But cooking isn't housework, and I like to cook. Besides, I've got to eat, too. Might as well make a decent, but not time-consuming dinner.

So, that was our arrangement, and it's been one of the best decisions of my life. I've written 90 pages of my book in four days!!!! Do you know how incredible that is for me? That's awesome!

I've done other than write, though. Every morning I take a walk along the bay, and have found the experience incredibly therapeutic. I've seen lots of wildlife—squirrels, rabbits, all kinds of varieties of birds,



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▶▶▶▶ including a red-winged blackbird which, I hear, is quite prevalent here in Maryland, although I never see them just across the bay in Virginia. And of course, there are the usual seagulls and cranes sitting on docks, looking like the statues you see in the many gift shops in bay-front towns.

On my second afternoon here, a big brown Labrador Retriever followed me out to the pier, keeping me company as I sat and watched the water. The surf was relatively rough that day, with lots of whitecaps on the water. The dog had been swimming earlier in the shallows, and was still wet. Several times he looked like he wanted to jump in again, but always changed his mind at the last moment. I didn't know whom he belonged to. The only other people around were three pre-teen-ish girls sitting down on the swimming dock. The dog noticed them, too, and made his way down there to join them. Suddenly I heard a big splash, and looked back. Sure enough, the lab had jumped into the water and was happily paddling around. Cute, I thought. But after a few moments of swimming, the dog realized he was getting tired and...hey!...how the heck was he supposed to get back up on that swimming dock? He began to bark furiously, still paddling around, and it didn't take a genius to figure out he was begging for help. I asked the girls if the dog belonged to them, and they shook their heads, saying they thought he belonged to me. I could see one of the girls was thinking about going in after him, and I advised her not to. Like I said, the water was rough, and the dog had to weigh 160 pounds or more. No way could that little girl get him out, and I was pretty sure I couldn't either. Back on the shore, I saw a man walking his dog, and ran to ask him for help. He responded immediately, and somehow managed to get the brown lab back on the dock. He found a phone number on the dog's collar and called the owner on his cell phone. So, as far as I know, owner and dog were reunited, and my little part in the adventure was over.

I'm still trying to work out a way to put that dog rescue scene into my book, but it's difficult, considering that the action takes place in the winter in Estonia.

The following days here on the bay have been quiet and uneventful. I've found, in this quiet, that I talk to myself a lot. That's kind of unnerving. But hey, it keeps me company. I've also noticed that I've occasionally become lonely, and I have to dig out my cell phone (which I've kept turned off) and call my husband, my sister, or my daughter to touch base with the real world. I don't, however, ask my husband about any phone messages, and I refuse to think about the mail piling up on my desk or my e-mail box that is sure to be full.

I am living in the world of my characters now, and

that's exactly what I need to do to get a handle on this book. I am learning what makes them tick, and building scene upon scene which will, I trust, lead me through a complicated plot to the light at the end of the tunnel. One day in the not too distant future, I'll type that last line, and follow it with *The End*. And then I'll smile and say (to myself) "Damn! I did it again."

I'm so grateful to Robin for letting me stay at her house. You can bet this will earn her one heck of a dedication in *Tango's Edge*.

Needless to say, I highly recommend a week's writer's retreat if you want to reawaken your muse. It worked for me, and I finally feel like she's back. And hopefully, this time, she won't disappear again. But if she does, I know the cure.

I just hope Robin never sells her house.

Carole has offered to move in with Robin and cook for her full time, but her husband didn't go for it. Meanwhile, she's hard at work on another romantic suspense novel, Hawk Moon Run. Her latest release from Forge/Tor is Understudy.

Bits'n'Pieces

USED BOOK MARKET GROWING BY LEAPS AND

BOUNDS... According to new research by Ipsos Book Trends, one of every 10 book buyers bought used in the last nine months. Per the BEA presented data, "used books now account for about \$533 million in sales annually—13% of overall book units sold and 5% of total revenue—and could lead to as much as \$1.5 billion lost in new sales." People who buy the most books buy more than one-third of those books used. Gee, nice to know someone's finally learned what we commercial fiction writers already knew: used books are impacting new sales.

BERKOWER TAKES OVER AT WRITERS HOUSE...

Amy Berkower has become Writers House president and CEO, as Al Zuckerman becomes chairman. According to Zuckerman, "Simply stated, Amy is remarkable. Since she joined us in 1977, it was apparent she has that rare combination of warmth and tenacity; an individual who is both sensitive to the needs of clients and publishers, and a skilled negotiator on contractual points, jacket designs, and editorial revisions. In the past two years alone, her clients have occupied more spots on the *New York Times* bestseller list than those of any other literary agent." Berkower has built the agency's very successful children's book department, but she's also represented Nora Roberts, as well as Barbara Delinsky and Dorothea Benton Frank.

Compiled by Terey daly Ramin

Build it—independently— and they will come...

I discovered Austin Haley in a tiny restaurant called The Cottage Shoppe where he and his wife Ginger serve the best food in Tupelo, Mississippi—gourmet fare you'd expect in Atlanta or Chicago or New York. A former actor for the soaps, this dynamic hometown boy has not only transformed a small hole-in-the-wall eatery into a restaurant written up by Southern Living, but has also formed his own film production company. Over tall glasses of gourmet iced coffee, he told me how a production company born "out of necessity and dream" has taken on a life of its own.

NINK: Austin, you started your film career on the other side of the camera after being "discovered." How did that happen?

Austin Haley: I was living in Birmingham, working as a wilderness instructor for juvenile delinquents. One day I was sitting in a restaurant wearing a full beard when a woman walked by and said, "If you'd cut your beard, you could be a model." She was the manager of a modeling agency in Atlanta. I laughed at the idea, but a year later I was burned out and looking for something to do, so I found her card and gave her a call.

To my surprise, she hired me. I ended up modeling for people like Miller Draft and Levis in places such as Dallas, Miami, Houston....

NINK: How did you move from modeling to acting?

AH: I thought, "If I can walk, I can talk," so I began to audition for commercials. My big break came when

I auditioned in Nashville for a music video with an up and coming star. I was picked out of 500 guys, and the up and coming star turned out to be Faith Hill. She was very supportive of my work, and encouraged me to get into acting, so I decided to move to NY.

NINK: What was it like for a small-town boy living in New York?

AH: I quickly learned to adapt, improvise, and overcome. If you don't, New York will kick your ass.

I had \$300 dollars in my pocket, and I was living on a bed of my sweaters in a friend's studio apartment. I lived on 50-cent hot dogs, day and night. After six months I got my own apartment on the upper west side, moved my sweaters into its one bedroom, stole a lamp off the streets so I could see to read and bought a radio to keep me company. When I had friends over, they'd look at my bed of sweaters and say, "Where's your dog?"

NINK: How did you get your break?

AH: I studied acting at NYU, then ended up at the Atlantic Theater Company and subsequently on *Another World*. I did soaps for a while and a lot of avant-garde free theater. I was on *One Life to Live* for three years.

A friend of mine asked me to play a small role in his film *Kings of Brooklyn*, which he is now taking to film festivals in NY and LA hoping it will be picked up for distribution.

NINK: If *Kings of Brooklyn* is picked up for distribution, will your acting career be revived?

AH: I would like that.

NINK: What's it like to be on the other side of the camera now?

AH: I love it. As an actor, you are not in control. A film is shaped primarily by the director's vision.

I know what it's like on both sides of the camera, and I'm trying to be an actor's director. I want the actor to feel a sense of ownership in the finished product.

NINK: Why did you decide to leave acting and come back to Tupelo?

AH: My grandfather had died, so I came back to take care of my grandmother, who helped raise me. The move set me off in a new direction, partly out of boredom, partly out of necessity, partly out of dream.

I started scrambling around for ways to make money, as well as ways to express myself creatively. My company, Little Bo Productions, is named for my first son, and my theme is to see with the eyes of a child.

NINK: So, how did you get started?

AH: I rented the equipment and started by filming ads for local businesses. I learned a lot during my years in New York, and was able to offer ads with a national feel to local clients.

I have a partner now, Janie Shellswell-White from Birmingham. She knows everything there is to know about advertising and has won many awards. We film on location as well as locally. Recently we were in Ecuador to shoot a mission's trip for Global Outreach.



The Buzz in the Biz.....



We shoot with a digital XLIS camera, as well as with 16 to 35 mm film. The ads help pay the bills until we can get our movie up and running.

NINK: *Tell me about the movie.*

AH: It's called *You Are My Sunshine*. My grandmother used to sing that song to my brother and me all the time. My brother's death with AIDS changed my life, and I wanted to show that painful journey from prejudice to compassion and understanding on film.

NINK: *So the movie is autobiographical?*

AH: Yes.

NINK: *Who wrote the script?*

AH: I did. I added some fictional characters, of course. One of them is a woman who contracted HIV through no fault of her own. The movie shows the downward turn her life takes after that.

NINK: *How do you produce a film without the backing of a major studio?*

AH: I filmed five-minute segments of the movie using local actors. Now I'm in the marketing phase. I'll show it at film festivals and to some producers I know in the big studios. The plan is to get a distributor. Of course, they'll probably change it.

Good Will Hunting went through forty revisions from indie to feature.

NINK: *What is the future of independent film companies?*

AH: There has been a resurgence of the independent film company. We are like the farm league of major baseball. The major studios go to film festivals scouting for the best of the indie films.

We are producing great films, some of which you will never see on the big screen.

Easy Rider was the first indie film. Big companies bastardized it when it hit. I think the pinnacle of the independent film was *Sling Blade*. Considering the great success of those two movies, as well as other indies such as *Good Will Hunting*, the independent production company is here to stay.

Fighting for survival against the big boys is not always easy, but I love the challenge of producing an uncon-

trived movie that "sees through the eyes of the child."

NINK: *Austin, your career path mirrors that of many writers, i.e., hanging on by the skin of our teeth until we write a book that hits, and then fighting for the integrity of our work. Knowing what you know now, would you do it again?*

AH: Yes, I would. When you look back, that was the sweetness of it—the struggle.

Bits'n'Pieces

THE BIGGEST "NEWS" ON THE BEA FLOOR was the rumor of Bertelsmann acquiring the AOLTW book group—a bit of tittle-tattle that had attained an air of certainty among those spreading the word by Sunday. **OF COURSE IT AIN'T HAPPENIN'**, but that's totally beside the point... According to subsequent reports, Bertelsmann is not happy about exaggerated news reports, but...

FIRST WOMEN NAMED TO WMA BOARD... Suzanne Gluck and Jennifer Rudolph Walsh have become the first two women to be named to the board of the William Morris agency in its 105-year history. According to CEO Jim Wiatt in *Variety*, "These are two very significant people in our company, it's the right time and the right people and the company is in the midst of change."

REMEMBER THE REPORT FROM JUNE ABOUT JAPAN'S BOOKS GOING TO THE DOGS? ... Well this month word is that the BEA Went to the Dogs, too. Yes, dogs were apparently a "theme" that emerged while one reporter walked the aisles—from lines for the unusual signing featuring Gregory Edmont and his dog JP to Chronicle's logo of "Sex, Dogs, and Rock 'n' Roll" (Sex = Playboy; Dogs = Doga, e.g. yoga for dogs; Rock 'n' Roll = Rolling Stones), Bullfinch's dog bag for *101 Salvations* to Penguin's *Dogs Don't Bite: When a Growl Will Do*. Methinks somebody's just plain got dogs on the brain here...

— TdR



Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

Start Drinking Now!

Having forgotten one day this past spring to take my drugs, I agreed to speak to a Florida-retirement-community's LOL ("Little Old Lady"—my designation, not theirs) book club. The sweet-faced, great-grandmotherly women read my latest effort, a romantic comedy, with the understanding that I would put in an appearance at their following month's meeting, where we would discuss the book and they could ask me questions.

I should have been more specific. What follows is a true story: The meeting was called to order and after the boring preliminaries, I was introduced. As there were nine or ten of them (possibly more; I can't be sure as I became dizzy at one point) questioning me all at once, and as I have no wish to remember any of their names, I will simply designate the two sides as "ME" and "THEM."

ME: Thank you for asking. I was first published ten years ago—

THEM: How many books have you written?

ME (smiling): I've had 22 published so far.

THEM: Do all of them have sex in them?

ME (sobering): No. As I was saying, I was first published—

THEM: How many children do you have?

ME: Two. My first book—

THEM: What are they?

ME (confused): What are what? Oh, my children? Boys. Well, men now.

THEM: What do they do?

ME: They live far, far away from me, mostly.

Now, in 1992, I sat down to write—

THEM: Where'd you live back then? You have a funny accent.

ME: I do? Well, I lived in Oklahoma.

THEM: You don't sound like an Okie.

ME: That's because I've lived in a lot of places—

THEM: Like where?

ME (catching on): America and Europe.

THEM: That's just two.

ME: I know. So, anyway, and skipping forward, I wrote the book you read—

THEM: Are those your real eyelashes? They're so long. They look fake.

ME (blinking): Really? Fake? They're not. They're mine.

THEM: Are you wearing a wig?

ME: No, this is really my hair.

THEM: It's too long. You need to have it cut. You have split ends.

ME (fingering my too-long hair): I do? Well, my heroine certainly didn't have split-ends—

THEM: Maybe not, but how many teeth do you have?

ME (after using my tongue to count them): Twenty-eight.

THEM: You're supposed to have 32.

ME: Says who?

THEM: Everyone does. You must have had your wisdom teeth pulled.

ME: No, they never came in.

THEM: (Silent now and looking at me as if they felt this explained a lot)

ME (jumping on the opportunity): So, let me ask you some questions. Did you enjoy my book? The characterization? The plot development? The humor? The snappy dialogue?

THEM: Would you like another piece of cake or something to drink?

ME: No cake, but I'd love a rum and Coke. You got any of that in your kitchen, huh? Do you? A big bottle, maybe?

THEM: Do you always drink this early in the day?

ME: No. I just started.

The author would have you know she has no idea how to spell "corollary" or "equestrian."



Catch 22: The Meds are Messing with the Voices in My Head...

Dear Annette:

Like a lot of writers, I have my emotional ups and downs. I am not bipolar, just moody. Anti-depressants work but they blunt my mind and motivation as well as my emotions. I'm content as a cow, but lack both the drive and creativity to write. In talking with other writers, this is a common side effect of anti-depressants and the reason many of us have decided to weather the emotional storms as opposed to being tied to the anti-depressant dock all the time. Is there an anti-depressant medication/regime that works and yet still leaves a person motivated and creative?

Signed—Content and Uncreative

Dear Content:

The answer is... maybe. I heard this exact complaint from a number of NINC members after my column on depression. Like you, I'm not surprised, either. Neither were the psychiatrists and physicians I consulted. While blunting of emotions/thoughts seems to be a fairly rare side effect of antidepressants, it's the one writers and other highly creative people would be most sensitive to.

The reason I say, "maybe," is that there are several classes of antidepressants that act in slightly different ways. The most prescribed drugs, serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (Prozac, Paxil, etc.) can affect dopamine levels in the brain, making people feel slower and sluggish, and, most likely blunted.

One caution: these effects seem to vary greatly between individuals. If you are currently taking antidepressants, *please* don't discontinue them without consulting your physician. Incorrect withdrawal can result in severe, rebound depression and other medical problems.

Okay, back to our regularly scheduled programming... For people who have suffered from long term depression, my first suggestion would definitely be to try a different type of antidepressant. Other classes of medications (not SSRIs) don't appear to have the same effect on the brain. Wellbutrin, Desyrel, and Effexor are entirely different classes of antidepressant that don't appear to have this same, blunting effect. All of the physicians I spoke to thought these meds, and Wellbutrin in particular, could help with depressive symptoms without slowing brain activity. In fact, these types of meds actually seem to increase energy and arousal. Although I heard from one writer who found that Wellbutrin lessened her depression, but profoundly affected her sense of creativity.

Like you, a number of other writers who wrote said they have chosen to make the trade off: keep their writing ability and creative sense intact and live with the symptoms of depression. I'd hate to say, "Gosh, depression is just the price you have to pay for creativity," but there are times I think that may be true to a certain extent. Medical science clearly hasn't yet been able to fiddle with the neurotransmitter problems that cause depression without affecting other brain functions.

Still, there are techniques out there that have been shown to be quite effective in managing depression. As I have a feeling you already know too well, they require perseverance, dedication, and just plain hard work.

Cognitive therapy has been shown to be at least as effective in treating depression as medication. Cognitive therapy focuses on teaching people to recognize and eliminate (or at least minimize) the negative, irrational thought patterns caused by depression. I could see how training in cognitive techniques could be a great help—learning how to block the negative, self-esteem-eating thoughts without sacrificing positive, muse-nurturing energy.

The caveat here is it has to be *cognitive* therapy specifically. Not traditional, long term, insight-focused therapy. While I can attest to the success of insight-oriented therapy for many, many issues, depression is not one of them. Depressed people already key into the negative. Dredging up mounds of issues from childhood will only add to the problem.

As writers, we'd be a cognitive therapist's dream. We're already excellent at paying attention to the voices in our heads. I'd bet we would be much better than average at identifying our negative self-talk. After identifying irrational thinking, the second goal of cognitive therapy is to combat it by generating different thoughts. Can you say, "writing dialog?" I think we've got that one covered.

The bad news is that finding a good cognitive-based therapist isn't necessarily easy. It requires a lot of skill to teach it correctly, and the vast majority of therapists are trained in insight-oriented techniques.

Outside of therapy as a non-drug treatment, the options narrow a lot, unfortunately. Acupuncture is just recently being studied as a treatment. Preliminary research does suggest, though, that in the hands of a skilled practitioner, symptoms of depression can be lessened significantly.

Another option I'd suggest is committing to a long-term regime of yoga or some other form of guided meditation. I have no data to back this up, but I know that (speaking from personal experience) practiced regularly, with a skilled teacher, yoga helps quiet the mind and take mental focus away from internal thoughts.

Nutrition is another key. I suspect that, like diabetics, people who are prone to bouts of depression may need to be much more vigilant about what they ingest than the average person. Eliminating alcohol, sleeping meds, and stimulants (argh, but living without espresso!!) can help much more than you think.

Also, for those who seem to have a sensitivity to blood sugar changes, going on a lower carb diet can help tremendously with mood swings. (Just ask my husband if you want a testimonial). A double espresso and a perfectly innocent cinnamon bun for breakfast, and three hours later I could tear you apart with my teeth. Another hour into the sugar crash, and I'm the worst writer in the world (and everyone hates me).

In the end, whether we actually suffer from depression or not, I know that we writers do pay a price for our creativity. We make our livings listening to (and encouraging) the voices in our heads and nurturing an intensity of emotion we can convey on the page. The downside is, when those thoughts and emotions turn negative, it's hard to turn off the tap—which is fodder for a whole column of its own.

Clearly, I don't have any miracle answers here. I'm sorry. I wish I did. I just hope I've offered some suggestions people haven't yet tried.

Help Wanted: I'd like to thank the many Ninc members who've offered to share their struggles. I'd love to tackle any comments or questions related to mental health (our own and maybe even our characters'), creativity, self-esteem, motivation, or family issues—just to name a few areas—in upcoming columns. All comments and questions will be kept strictly confidential. My contact information: e-mail annettecarney@sbcglobal.net, fax: 775-746-4560, phone: 775-323-0445.

Annette Carney, Ph.D is a Marriage and Family Therapist with 15 yrs experience and a hellacious addiction to double tall lattes.

She's published several short contemporary romances and young adult novels and has recently mustered up the energy to tackle a long-planned historical romance.

Bits'n'Pieces

AND I SUPPOSE IT WOULDN'T BE SUMMER WITHOUT THE ANNUAL PLAGIARISM REPORT...

Brian VanDeMark's *Pandora's Keepers: Nine Men and the Atomic Bomb*, published by Little, Brown not long ago with a 15,000-copy first printing, is supposed to have "more than 30 uncredited passages that are identical, or nearly identical, to those found in their own books by four other authors, including two by Richard Rhodes," according to the *New York Times*. VanDeMark told the paper he thought "detached readers would find a majority" of sections being challenged were "reasonable paraphrases," but "a minority should, and will, be reworded or credited in a footnote." Publisher Michael Pietsch said, "We're investigating and the author is investigating."

AND THEN OF COURSE THERE'S THE "BORROWED" DA VINCI CODE...

Lewis Perdue, (*Daughter of God*, published 2000) discovered what he calls a "phenomenal" number of parallels between his book and Dan Brown's bestselling *The Da Vinci Code*. *Newsweek* says "so far he's only proved how hard it can be to tell plagiarism from weird coincidence." Brown's attorney Michael Rudell stated, "Dan Brown has never read or heard of this book." *Newsweek* quips, "Absent a smoking gun, like 'Daughter of God' on Brown's American Express statement, he might make out better simply writing another book. He could twit Brown by calling it, say, *The Da Vinci Legacy*. Except Perdue already used that title-in 1983." Oh goody! Let the games begin — because Perdue is taking legal action, citing 19 different "plot elements" one member of his team says "indicates that virtually every aspect of the plots are substantially the same — beyond the coincidence of two authors having just a similar idea for a novel." I can so hardly wait to see how this one turns out.

— TdR



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

"Jabla"

West Africa, 1993. I'm on the outskirts of Bamako, the colorful and chaotic capital city of Mali, one of the five poorest nations in the world. We make our camp in the ruins of the Lido, a small hotel destroyed by fire during the riots of 1991. By night, I sleep on the veranda of the gutted building, surrounded by flowering vines and trees full of singing birds.

At the bottom of the wooded hill on which the hotel sits, there's a beautiful pond, perfect for swimming, with rocks for diving and sunbathing. The little cascades running into the cool water are enough to make me rationalize that this is *moving* water and therefore okay for swimming in.

Many bodies of water in Africa contain dangerous parasites, deadly diseases, and cranky wildlife, so it's unwise to go near water that isn't well known for being safe. The realities of living in the bush, however, soon alter a person's standards. A month later, for example, I will launder my mud-caked clothing in a river where people get killed by crocodiles on a regular basis; by then, this will seem like an acceptable risk to me.

Anyhow, hot, tired, and intensely dirty after having crossed the Sahara Desert (not to mention spending considerable time digging our vehicle *out* of the Sahara Desert), I throw caution to the winds and join my companions swimming in the pond hidden in the jungle near the Lido. And it's fabulous! This is the first time I've been cool in weeks and the first time I've been clean in over a month.

Then a small group of locals comes along. They are led by an old man who has no teeth and speaks almost no French (officially, the common language of West Africa; in reality, not always useful). The old man warns me, the only French speaker in the group, that this water has jabla and is therefore terribly dangerous.

Jabla, I ask?

The old man tries to explain, but his lack of teeth affects his articulation, and he doesn't seem to be using many French words, anyhow. He grows increasingly agitated over my lack of comprehension and insists we *must* get out of the water, we're in terrible danger, we're all going to die. The jabla is very bad, he tells me, and a number of people are dead because of it—two of them died just last year, in fact.

Yes, but what *is* jabla, I ask? A disease? A parasite? A crocodile? An evil spirit? A venomous snake? Drowning? A vengeful curse? A local joke invented to get rid of unkempt

white people?

Because of the language barrier, I can't find out what jabla is; but the old man's conviction that it'll kill us convinces us to get out of the water.

I spend the next two weeks wondering exactly what I'm going to die of, and how soon. Are we talking about something as severe as snail fever, for example, which you get from contact with the wrong water and which really *will* kill me if I don't get myself to a Western hospital for expensive treatment right away? Or is jabla some kind of demon which I don't even believe in? Did I escape jabla when I got out of the water alive and unharmed? Or is jabla already in my bloodstream and attacking my nervous system? And, if so, how soon before it kills me?

This is what's so damn distressing about jabla. You don't know what causes it or what its initial symptoms are. You don't know if someone *else's* mysterious undiagnosed illness is jabla or something else entirely. You don't know if you've got jabla within you and just don't realize it yet. And you don't know how—or even *if*—you can get cured once you discover jabla has infected you.

Oh, yeah, jabla is a bitch.

But, hey, you don't need me to tell *you* about jabla. You know all about it. After all, you're a writer.

My first exposure to jabla was not in Africa. It was when I was an aspiring writer, awaiting news of my first submission at Silhouette by day and writing my fourth manuscript by night. While exploring the fiction pond in the publishing jungle, I noticed many writerly corpses near the water. This sparked a dark, boundless fear in me.

For example, at garage sales and second-hand bookstores, I kept coming across tattered ten-year-old paperback books with cover blurbs touting them as "The Incredible International Bestseller! Nineteen Weeks on the *New York Times* list!" And in most cases, I had never heard of the authors, nor could I find any in-print fiction by those writers. Additionally, there were numerous romance writers (romance being the genre I was trying to break into) who seemed to have disappeared off the face of the planet after a few books, and I was plagued by morbid suspicions about this. I thought it seemed unlikely that they'd *all* died suddenly or gone to Rio, even if a few of them had.

That's jabla: "What in the world *happened* to that missing writer, and—the key question—can it happen to *me*?"

In fact, that instance of jabla got chased away when I had the opportunity to meet one of these writers. She'd sold three books. The third one had not been a happy editorial experience, and her fourth book got rejected. After that, she never wrote or submitted a book again.

In other words, jabla never even got a *chance* to get her, because when she went into the water, she tied rocks to her feet and went down without a struggle.

Since then, despite being dumped by two publishers and having another fold out from beneath me, I have never seriously feared disappearing. Because ever since then, the explanation for the disappearances of writers seems practical and self-evident to me, no longer a dark mystery with a sinister name for which I have no real definition. I learned that writers disappear when they stop writing and submitting, writing and submitting, writing and submitting.

Simple cause and effect, not jabla.

But when something goes terribly wrong for a working writer, other writers are often spooked by it. I know because I get spooked. And also because my own career has spooked people. When I was dumped by Silhouette after 11 books, for example, other Silhouette writers peppered me with questions, trying to find symptoms which would either confirm or negate the possibility of their having my disease. Similarly, when another writer delivers a book which the editor declares unacceptable and won't pay for, I usually pepper the writer with questions, trying to define a set of circumstances I could take steps to avoid in my own career. When another writer's sales decline and she's advised to change her pen name if she wants to keep working, I want to know what the first signs of trouble were so that I can examine my own career for them.

When someone, despite writing and submitting, writing and submitting, writing and submitting can't get work, I interrogate him if I get the chance, eager to discover a pattern which I can learn not to emulate. And when a previously steady or prolific writer burns out or comes up against the wall of writer's block—jabla alert! I'm not the only writer wondering, "Why her and not me? How did she catch it, and how can I make sure I *don't* catch it?"

When a writer dries up, or when she keeps writing but no one will buy her work anymore, or when someone who was once a star can now barely sell a book... Oh, yes, that makes for big, hairy, long-fanged writer jabla. That's the darkest, ugliest jabla of all: "Is what killed that writer going to kill me, too?"

I'm something of an expert on this because I thought about jabla a *lot* when I was mired in *In Fire Forged*, my 1,732-page fantasy opus which is being released this year as a two-volume novel, *The White Dragon* and *The Destroyer Goddess* (how's that for titling the story that nearly killed me?).

Until writing that story, I had never experienced writer's block and had never given it much thought. But the long-term paralysis I experienced on that book was a wake-up call

from hell, and I learned that it can indeed happen here—because it happened here for at least 18 months. I spent so long unable to write a single word on that book that I was surprised when a friend recently told me it had never occurred to her that I might never finish it. The possibility of never finishing it occurred to *me* all of the time. Every damn day for well over a year. The fear made me sick. When I only had 60 pages completed more than a year after the book's due date, you *bet* it occurred to me that I might never finish it.

That was probably the nadir of my professional life, those many long months that I spent burned out and trying to get that damn book to lift off. I couldn't get anything *else* to lift off, either, while that book hung around my neck like a dead albatross. And I had written 14 novels before this! How could this happen to me? *Me*, a prolific workhorse who'd always thought writer's block and creative burn-out were things that happened only to *other* people?

Jabla finally got me.

In truth, many tangible factors contributed to my lengthy, blank-minded, terrified standstill on that book. But one of them, I eventually realized, was my unwitting focus on the final, polished result which I wanted the reader to encounter when opening that novel. I discovered that it's all too easy for a writer to lose sight of the story she wants to tell, and to think instead of the story she wants to reader to read. It's surprisingly seductive for the writer to get mired in thoughts of the effect which she wants the final, polished, completed novel to have on people. I was doing this, and it was a significant factor in scaring me into sheer paralysis, because no single sentence or scene I could craft on any given workday could equal the overall completed novel in which I wanted the reader to become engrossed.

Every journey is made step by step, and every book must be written moment by moment. The tricky part, of course, is that we have to balance the individual moments with the *whole* project in our head, or all we get is gobbledygook. But I can't sit down to the *whole* project and write it, because then I just freak out. I know this. I've known it ever since I discovered it while writing my first book. Yet many books later, I forgot this basic tenet of my craft, and I freaked out when I sank into the quagmire, early on during the process of writing *In Fire Forged*, of thinking about the book I wanted the reader to read, rather than the story I wanted to write.

Comedian Mike Myers has said, "One of the deaths of creativity is being results-oriented, having any sort of expectation or attachment. What you have to do is just focus on what you're working on."

I knew that.

So my long period of writer's block wasn't jabla, after all. There was an explanation for it so self-evident, I could just punch myself.

Not only did it take me many months to identify and shed this problem, but I'm still wrestling with it today. It's the antagonist which will not die. However, I didn't originally define this form of jabla by diagnosing myself. No, I'd originally recognized it when talking with an-





THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

▶ ▶ ▶ other writer, someone who had written many short pieces, who wanted to write a novel. He knew exactly what story he wanted to tell. But he paralyzed himself with fear by focusing on how he wanted the book to be perceived by readers and critics. We talked about it at length because, in someone *else*, this problem was as obvious to me as a dead elephant on Madison Avenue. I mean, you look at it and say, “Gosh, that dead pachyderm doesn’t belong there!”

It took me a lot longer, though, to realize when *I* was inflicting the same paralyzing burden on my own creative process. Now that I’ve caught myself in the act, I wish I could find the secret formula for never letting myself do it again—but at least I’m getting better about monitoring myself in this respect. And I know it isn’t jabla, after all. I’m not going to die of it. Not just yet.

There’s some wise advice out there that has helped me shake

off this phenomenon when it happens. One piece of it comes from Susan Sontag, who once said that while writing *The Volcano Lover*, she kept thinking it was a bad novel, but she figured (I paraphrase): “Oh, well, everyone’s entitled to a bad novel now and then, so I’ll just keep writing.” So now, when I become paralyzed with fear over how brilliant my work-in-progress *isn’t*, I force myself to repeat that phrase and just keep writing. Similarly, a quote which former Ninc president Julie Kistler has shared with me is: “The first step to get past writer’s block is to lower your standards.”

I’ve also learned to tell myself, “Look, when you finish the book and it sucks canal water, you can buy it back, so no one will ever find out what drivels it is. But, first, you have to finish it.” And a non-writing friend of mine taught me this mantra: “If a thing is worth doing, then it’s worth doing badly.” As opposed to not doing it at all for fear of not doing it perfectly.

Anyhow, here’s the thing which years in this business and years at this keyboard have taught me about jabla: It’s real power over us is fear, that’s all. My swim in the jungle near the Lido only lasted about 20 minutes; but I spent every day of the next two weeks being scared. *That’s jabla.*

Creating Macros in Word

(97 & 2000, which are the only two programs in which I’ve done so)

BY JUDY GILL

This basic operation works for any macro you want to create—such as a letterhead or your editor’s address followed by Dear Whoever, or notification that the same has held your proposal for 99 months and what the heck is going on, anyway, is she dead? . . . whatever you might want. I’ve made macros for all sorts of things—my manuscript style, with all the proper margins, line spacing, font, etc, and can call it up with the click of a toolbar button.

All you do is type in the stuff you want when the Record Macro icon appears on your blank document, then click stop recording. The next time you want what you’ve designated to be in that macro, just click on the special button you’ve put on your toolbar. So here it is, step by step. Go as slow as you want; the hesitations won’t be reflected in your final macro. However, if you make mistakes and have to undo or backspace, those keystrokes will become part of your macro.

Here’s how to create a macro for the three asterisks writers often use to indicate a scene break. Go to Tools>Macro>Record New. Top line, Macro Name=Timebreak (NB: no spaces allowed in macro names) At the bottom is a block for description. This is optional. In the center,

choose Assign to Toolbars. A box called Customize will appear.

Drag the little three-box icon and the words following it from commands to a toolbar. Make sure the icon is actually on a toolbar. One possible place is immediately to the left of the vertical line that indicates the end of the toolbar. (This is something I learned the hard, frustrating way and am happy to pass on to save others from ruining their caps or enamel by gnashing their teeth.)

Click on Modify Selection. Click on Change Button Image. Choose one you’re not using (I use the hour glass for Timebreak because somehow it makes sense to me. But then, I use the musical note for my letterhead and I’m tone-deaf, and a happy face for the address of one of my editors, the red heart for another, and the little pink pig for my ms format).

Click on Modify Selection again. Choose Default Style and the button you’ve just selected will appear on the toolbar minus the text.

Select Close.

The Record Macro box appears on your blank Word document.

Type Shift 8, Tab; Shift 8, Tab; Shift 8.

Click on Center Justify button. Hit Enter. Click on Left Justify, and Tab.

Click on Stop Recording (the little black square in the Record Macro box. Clear the

page by doing Select All and delete. What??? You don’t have a Select All button on your toolbar? For shame! You can put it there by going to Tools>Customize>Edit>Select All, dragging it to your toolbar and choosing Modify Selection, etc. as above. (I use what looks like an open book with lines on it.)

[Editor’s note: You *should NOT* do the Select All and delete if you’ve created the macro in the middle of your work-in-progress.]

But back to the macro stuff: Once you’ve deleted what’s on your screen, click that new button and see if your new macro runs. If it doesn’t work right, or you want to change it in any way, go to Tools>Macro>Macros and scroll down till you find the one you don’t want. Come on, you can do it. You just gave it a name, didn’t you? Delete it and start over.

Note: There is an “edit” function that I’ve never messed with. I figure once I find a system that works for me, why screw around with something I don’t understand? (I have a techie friend who’s forever cautioning me with exactly that advice, only he’s not quite as polite, “screw” being a five-letter-word instead of the four-letter one he prefers.)

Have fun! (This is a Good Thing To Do when you need to make sounds like you’re writing so your family won’t know you’re just goofing off.)



Fantasized

BY LAWRENCE
WATT-EVANS

When I set out to be a writer, back in 1974, I didn't particularly care what *kind* of writer; I just knew that I wanted to make my living by stringing words together. I'd already sold a few feature articles to a small-town newspaper, back in high school, and I hadn't specialized; I'd written about fast food and neo-paganism and underground newspapers and anything else that caught my fancy. So when I started seriously trying to write fiction, I did the same thing; out of the first two dozen short stories I wrote and sent out, a few were mysteries, a few were "women's fiction" aimed at *Redbook* or the like, a few were attempts at sophisticated humor, but most were science fiction, fantasy, or horror, because those were the fields I knew best. I started work on several novels, including a mystery, a gothic romance, a fantasy, and a science fiction story.

The stories that got something more than form rejections were pretty much all science fiction or fantasy, though. I think one of the mysteries got a scribbled comment at the bottom of the rejection from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, but that was about it. And the first one to actually sell was fantasy.

I finished two of the novels and sent them out, and the fantasy novel sold; the science fiction novel did not.

A sensible person would have said, "Okay, I should write fantasy." I wasn't sensible. I rewrote the SF novel, and continued to work (rather half-heartedly) on assorted mysteries and romances and the like.

I wasn't totally stupid, though; I kept writing fantasy, as well.

And the fantasy kept selling, while the other stuff... well, it mostly didn't. I did manage to publish half a dozen SF novels before my agent pointed out that they sold about half as many copies as my fantasy and were therefore dragging down my standing with my publishers. I took the hint, and stopped writing book-length SF under my own name. I did go on to write a bunch of tie-in novels for everything from *Star Trek* to *Spiderman* under another name, though, just for fun.

And I still refused to be a one-trick pony; I wrote a horror novel—just in time for the collapse of the horror boom of the '80s. It didn't do well, despite decent reviews, and it was clear to everyone, even me, that I shouldn't try *that* again any time soon.

At least, not as Lawrence Watt-Evans. Nobody cared

what I wrote under other names.

And I *still* wouldn't give up my determination to vary my output. Everyone said I was a fantasy author, but fantasy is a very broad field, and can overlap others. I sent my publisher a proposal for a big fat novel that was fantasy, but which also deliberately included a lot of SF and horror motifs, and political intrigue.

They bought it—in fact, they turned it into a trilogy. But then they didn't know what to do with it, couldn't decide whether to package it as SF or fantasy, and it was a disaster. I had to change publishers.

Before realizing that I'd be changing publishers, I had sent my agent a baker's dozen of proposals for novels I wanted to write, all of them different from what I'd been doing for the past decade or so. By the time he'd read through them all the extent of the trilogy disaster was becoming clear, though we weren't yet sure whether I'd be moving to a different publisher. He phoned me to explain that under the circumstances I needed to come up with something really commercial, something that publishers knew how to sell—and *none* of the thirteen fit. They were all too eccentric, too far out of the fantasy mainstream.

I had just been reading an annoying fantasy novel by someone else, a big, fat, very successful novel that I thought had a lot of inept elements mixed in with really good bits, and thinking about how *I'd* have done that story. With that fresh in my mind, in five minutes, over the phone, I made up a new plot, and my agent said that *that* one he could sell.

And he did, to my present publisher, Tor Books.

I had, I thought, learned my lesson. I would write fantasy novels. They would not be excessively strange. I would deliver a novel every year or so. If I *must* write books in other genres, I would do so under other names, or through the small press.

I should probably mention that short stories were no problem; nobody cared that I was selling short SF, short fantasy, short horror, short humor, and whatever else caught my fancy. It was only *books* where expectations ruled and I had to stick to what I was known for.

I thought I had learned.

Ha.

I started off with a stand-alone novel—the one I'd plotted on the phone. Then I wrote the first volume of a trilogy. Then I revived an old series I'd started fifteen years earlier and temporarily abandoned, then came the second volume of the trilogy—I didn't want to work on one series non-stop, I wanted to alternate, for the

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But it's all heroic fantasy, and surely, that's narrow enough!

No. This spring I learned that it isn't. When the time came to negotiate the next deal, my publisher

informed my agent that this alternating-series stuff had to stop. It confused the chain buyers, and since one series sold better than the other, it was dragging down sales of the more successful series. They wanted the next contract to be for *one* series, uninterrupted. That's what works. That's the way mystery writers have been working for the past decade or two, and that's how fantasy works now, and it's probably where most of the other genres are heading.

Oh, I can end the series and start another whenever it's appropriate, but they want a steady supply of series books, and nothing else.

So I finished the trilogy, killed off the revived series, and am now starting on a new series, with a contract for the first three volumes. And they don't want any new books out there by Lawrence Watt-Evans that *aren't* part of the Wizard Lords series. It didn't used to work this way. Even just a few years ago, it didn't work this way.

My agent says that it's because of several factors. The bookstore chains and the collapse of most of the independent paperback distributors in the 1990s consolidated the book-buying market, making the chain buyers hugely influential. It used to be that if a particular store or distributor didn't want to carry a book it didn't much matter because another would take up the slack, but nowadays, if Barnes & Noble won't carry your book, you—and your publisher—are screwed.

And computerized tracking of book sales means that the chains know better than ever just what sells, and that's what they want more of. With a series, you can look at sales of the last few books, extrapolate a curve, and have a very good idea what the *next* one will sell—so they want series. They're predictable, and they do sell.

It's all very reliable, but it sure takes some of the fun out of being an author. I don't want to do the same thing over and over, endlessly.

And of course, I don't need to. I can write anything I want—so long as I use different names. My agent tells me that several of his clients are resorting to this, and that he estimates roughly half of the “new” writers entering the SF/fantasy field are actually old writers, whose careers have collapsed, trying to start over.

I've already used three different names in the course of my career, for various reasons. It may be time to haul the other two out of mothballs, and maybe come up with

more. I'd thought I might need one for each genre, but now it looks as if I'll need one for each *series*.

And of course, I'll need to maintain the series for Tor, and fit anything else in around the edges, in my spare time. I've typically written a novel every eight months, and Tor wants one a year, which leaves me with three or four months a year I can use to work on other stuff, to keep myself fresh.

I can do that. I think. I don't think I should *need* to, but the world has this perverse habit of working the way it works, rather than the way we want. So I can haul my alter egos, Nathan and Walter, out of the attic and put them to work.

In a way, it'll almost be liberating—Nathan and Walter don't need to live up to anyone's expectations the way Lawrence does. I can write anything I want, if I use other names. I could even try my hand at romance or mystery again.

But first, I've got this three-book contract to fill...

Bits'n'Pieces

AND JUST SO WE GET OUR HP FIX FOR THE MONTH

So you thought Hillary Clinton's book was released at the beginning of June in an astute plot to let everyone know why she's still married to Bill and therefore get her ready for a bid for the presidency? HAH! Speculation by this writer makes it an astute marketing ploy to get her book out and on the bestseller list ahead of the fictional Harry Potter. Of course, the ploy didn't work, since advance orders for *Order of the Phoenix* already number in the tens of millions. Hillary isn't the only one displaced by Harry. Britain's queen can't be too pleased that Harry's mum, writer J.K. Rowling, is now a good deal wealthier than the royal. But that's not all. According to the real-life mum of Daniel Radcliffe, who plays HP on the screen, Daniel will continue to portray the student wizard despite rumors to the contrary and persistent talk of his poor academic performance. She says, “It is all rubbish.” Her denials are confirmed by movie insiders who say Daniel is contracted to star in the fourth film, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

— TdR

Review—Writing in Flow

REVIEWED BY ANNETTE CARNEY

How much control can a creative writers have over their muse? That's the intriguing question Susan Perry sets out to examine in her book, *Writing in Flow: Keys to Enhanced Creativity* (Writer's Digest Books, 1999). The book is a result of her doctoral research on the psychology of writing. She interviewed 75 poets and fiction writers, most published, in an attempt to learn how writers attempt to get into (and stay in) that trance-like place where time melts away and our best writing takes place.

What Perry discovered, unfortunately, won't be a surprise to any experienced writer. While the feeling of being in that focused, energized mental space where stories practically write themselves seems to be universal among artists of all kinds, the experience itself varies in every way imaginable.

Perry has divided the book into three parts. In the introductory section, "An Ode to Flow," she chronicles the experiences of writers like Sue Grafton, Diana Gabaldon, Jonathan Kellerman and Nancy Kress.

Some writers spoke of flow states that lasted days, or even weeks, when in a fever of white-hot creativity, they produced whole books. More writers described flow states that last minutes or hours before evaporating.

In the second section of the book, Perry gets to the meat of her research—quantifying what she learned about being in that altered state from the 70-odd writers she interviewed. From their responses, she has culled what she calls, "Five Keys" to entering flow while writing. After eavesdropping on endless Ninclink discussions, it didn't surprise me a bit to see that even within each of her key areas, writers differed dramatically in their own perceptions.

The first key to entering flow is related to finding a reason to write. Essentially, a reason to sit one's butt down day after day, week after week, and work. Some writers she interviewed found inspiration simply in the doing. Some were inspired by the thought of making a living, yet that same thought paralyzed others.

The other keys involve things like finding ways to loosen up and to focus on the work. Again, topics most of us have figured out how to accomplish.

Of the five keys she discusses, I found the last, what Perry calls 'Balance Among Opposites,' to be the most intriguing. In this section, writers discuss their varying needs for control of the process (or, in the case of some writers their desire not to feel in control).

The one universal I found was in this section. Even the most control-freak author Perry interviewed

acknowledged that getting into flow involves letting go of control over what happens after the writing. Thinking about the uncontrollables (marketability, rejection, reader reaction) stops creativity cold.

In the final third of the book, Perry makes practical suggestions about how to coax flow to happen on a more regular basis. Essentially these tricks are ways to muzzle that damned internal critic that pulls attention away from the work at hand. She comes up with plenty of useful suggestions that clearly work for accomplished writers.

I could see *Writing in Flow* being of value to writers who feel like the magic has died in their own writing processes. In the end, though, her work only serves to reinforce what those of us with a little experience already know...

We're on our own.

I would definitely recommend *Writing in Flow* to inexperienced writers struggling to grab onto that slippery little gremlin we call The Writing Process. But, while it was nice to eavesdrop on some celebrated writers talking about their work, I found little in *Writing in Flow* that I didn't already know. I'm not sure other experienced writers would find much new material, either.

Annette Carney is busy trying to get into the flow long enough to get past the sagging middle of her current WIP, a historical romance, when she's not doing her day job as a psychologist.

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WE ARE TURNING CARTWHEELS . . .

Novelists Inc. is proud to announce that Ninc 2004 will be a retreat held March 7, 8, and 9 at the wonderful Bishop's Lodge in Santa Fe, NM. The theme is "Revitalizing the Writer" and Mystery Grand Master Tony Hillerman will keynote. Other guests who have agreed to join us are Harlequin Publisher and CEO, Donna Hayes, a publishing entrepreneur committed to offering new lines, and best-selling writer Laura Kinsale. Laura will share with us her thoughts on her recent hiatus

from publishing and what it means to be jumping back in the "game."

Plans are still in the works. The retreat will feature everything we love about a Ninc conference such as the Night Owls, but our focus will be on the writer—on us . . . and on empowering us. We are also attempting to schedule an **optional** fourth day on the 10th to take advantage of the many storytellers and writer/mystics in New Mexico. Registration forms, a schedule, and bios will be in the newsletter and online as soon as we have managed all the details. We will post more info on the web as the program firms up. Check at www.ninc.com/confer/ for the most current news.

Please, this will be one retreat you won't want to miss. There is magic in New Mexico. Santa Fe has been a nurturing and spiritual home to artists for decades. It's a fitting place for the members of NINC to meet and revitalize.

We hope you can join us.

Please note, Bishop's Lodge only has one hundred and eleven rooms. It is a world-renowned resort with a literary pedigree. For centuries, the site was chosen as a place of great spiritual power, first by the natives and then by the missionaries. In 1851, the first Bishop of Santa Fe, Jean Baptiste Lamy built his private retreat, which still stands today as part of the property. His adventures are the basis of Willa Cather's classic novel *Death Comes to the Archbishop*. After the bishop's death, the land was acquired by the Pulitzer publishing family and turned into a resort in 1917.

Take a moment and check out the beauty of this location at www.bishopslodge.com. Every room is unique with fifty percent of them having wood burning fireplaces. The amenities are first class and the price they are offering us is a deal--\$128/double per night. This price includes \$9 per room for parking and fitness center for all room occupants. There is a small additional cost for three or four to a room.

We hope we don't, but there is the possibility that we will sell out for this retreat. If you plan on attending, please make your reservations well before the January 5th date when we have to turn unsold rooms back to the resort. **Reservations under the NINC code will not be accepted until you are registered for the retreat.**

For questions, contact Cathy Maxwell, Retreat Chair, revitalize@ninc.com

This retreat is going to be great!

— **Cathy Maxwell**

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