



NINK

September 2003
Vol. 14, No. 9

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

“The Trick Is To Keep Breathing”

When I was about two years old, I started to throw a tantrum one day...and suddenly keeled over in a dead faint. My alarmed parents took me to the doctor. To their relief, he told them nothing was wrong with me besides a volatile temper; when I got really angry or

ents got so accustomed to this that they'd casually say to my horrified grandparents, “Oh, don't worry, she'll be fine,” as I toppled over.

I eventually got tired enough of fainting that, as the doctor predicted, I started remembering to *breathe* when I got upset. (And I am not unaware of the wistful nostalgia with which, even now, my parents talk about that brief period of my life when I used to pass out rather than share my displeasure with the world.)

However, though the habit is broken, its impulse lingers with me to this day. Whenever I get really upset or angry, I tend to get dizzy or black out briefly, my head swimming, until I remember what I learned all those years ago: The trick is to keep breathing.

During the late '90s, I experienced a period of writing paralysis on a contracted novel which lasted nearly eighteen months. Then the novel turned out to be, oops!, over 1,700 MS pages, so it took me more

than two years to write it once I finally got back in the saddle.

Among other things, my long battle with burnout and this book caused me considerable financial stress. I've neglected to marry well (or at all), and I don't have any skills besides writing. My previous profession, before entering this business full-time at age 25, has been accurately described as “vagabond.” I was never lazy and I always found ways to survive; but “novelist” is the only professional qualification on my résumé. And during my thirties, still under contract, but broke and desperate, I discovered just what a disadvantage this background is when searching for ways to pay the bills.

While trying to work my way out of burnout and through a massive, complex, very overdue novel, I struggled almost every month for four years to pay rent and buy groceries. I had no idea it would be so hard to get a job—or even an interview for one—without any traditional experience, references, or qualifications. In fact, out of the eight *bookstores* I applied to, only one even deigned to interview me.

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**LAURA RESNICK IS...AND EVER SHALL BE...
NINC'S OWN IRREPRESSIBLE**

COMELY CURMUDGEON



upset, I forgot to breathe—and consequently fainted on the spot. There wasn't a cure for this, the doctor said. I was just going to have to learn through experience that the trick was to keep breathing. So my parents took me home and waited for me to outgrow this phase.

For the next six months or so, every time I got furious or aggrieved (which was often, go figure), I opened my mouth to vent my wrath...and my eyes rolled back in my head as I passed out. My par-

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

PLAYING FOR THE MAGIC

In my family, we like to play cards. Rummy, mostly, especially if my mother's playing (and then we have to play by her rules, no exceptions), but we'll settle for Go Fish! if the younger generation's involved, or any of a half dozen forms of solitaire if we can't drag anyone in to play with us.

I'm not a very good card player, not even at Go Fish!, because I don't pay enough attention to the game or the fall of the cards, which means that I don't win nearly as often as I otherwise might. Not winning has never bothered me, however, because I don't play cards in order to win.

One thing *has* bothered me, though. In fact, it's bothered me a lot: I couldn't shuffle.

Oh, I could divide the deck in two, then flip the two halves so that their edges layered together, but then I was stuck. If I wanted to get those two layered halves to make a tidy whole, I had to pick them up, tilt them on edge, then thunk them on the table a few times, patting and tapping and patting until they finally, clumsily, slid into place. Of course, that approach meant everyone around the table could see what the bottom card of both halves was, but that wasn't the real problem.

The real problem was that my family thought my inability to shuffle was funny. It became a standing joke, actually, and everyone was in on it: Anne can't shuffle, snicker, snicker, snort.

If they were feeling particularly mean, or I'd just been exceptionally clumsy, even for me, they'd make a point, when their turn came to shuffle, of making those cards behave. And they'd grin while they did it, too. *Frrriiiip!* The cards would fall into place. *Tap!* And without lifting the deck from the table the two halves would become one tidy whole.

The worst, though, was when they'd pick up those layered halves, then make them arch upward as if forming a bridge, then snap back down so that each card suddenly, magically, lay squarely atop the one underneath. *Snap snap snap SNAP!* and the deed was done. Easy. Nothing to it. And then my loving family would give a self-satisfied little smirk while I ground my teeth in frustration because I couldn't do it, too.

Often, I'd try to imitate them. It never worked. Most of the time I ended up with an unwieldy lump of cards that then had to be tapped and thumped. Some of the time I dumped whole clumps of cards on the table and had to start over. And every once in awhile there'd be a brief Delay of Game while I played Fifty-two Card Pickup after the whole deck exploded in my hands. But no matter what I did, I could not make those cards arch and snap.

It looked so simple, too! It *was* simple, darn it! Even my smirking family admitted it was simple. See? *Frrriiiip! Snap snap snap snap SNAP! Frrriiiip! Snap snap snap snap SNAP!* And there you were, with a perfectly shuffled deck, ready to go.

The more I failed, the more I wanted to figure out how to make those cards arch, then snap into place. And the more I tried, and failed, the more frustrated I got.

The thing is, my family didn't know how they did it, either. They just did it.

They could show me what they did. They could do it—over and over and over. But they could not break the process down into steps so I could understand how it was done, or figure out what I was doing wrong. So I kept thumping and tapping and they kept friiiping and snapping, and that, it seemed, was pretty much that.

Until one night a couple weeks ago.

It was a game of rummy, and when my turn came to shuffle, I decided to give that *arch/snap!* thing another try. But this time, instead of focusing and trying hard, for some reason I kept on talking. And because I didn't focus or try too hard, I almost got it. It wasn't quite there yet—more a *shnup* than a *snap*, really—but that didn't matter because I... Almost...Got It!

I swear, for a moment my heart stood still.

I tried again. Nothing. Same old disaster. But this time, somewhere at the back of my consciousness, there was a lingering sense of how the trick worked, a feeling that lay more in my hands than my head.

While the play went on, I tried to grab hold of the edges of that feeling, tried to be more aware about how the trick *felt* rather than how it *worked*. My next turn to shuffle, I tried it again. *Shnup*. But it was a *solid* “shnup,” not a thunk, and for me, that was real progress.

Once again the play went around and eventually it was again my turn to shuffle.

Feel! I told myself. *Let it go!*

Frrriiiüüip! Snap snap snap SNAP!

My heart stopped a second time. My breath caught in my chest. My grin was so wide my jaw almost fell off. *I did it!*

I tried it again.

Frrriiiüüip! Snap snap snap SNAP!

Oh, my saints and stars! Glory, hallelujah! Moses wept and the angels sang! I DID IT! I HONEST TO GOD ACTUALLY SHUFFLED THE CARDS! TWICE!

I was so excited, I kept on shuffling and shuffling (*Frrriiiüüip! Snap snap snap SNAP! Frrriiiüüip! Snap snap snap SNAP!*) and laughing like a loon. And then my family took the cards away.

But I...DID...IT!

And I can *still* do it. Just about every time I try, in fact. The amazing thing is, it's easy! Really! All I had to do was let the third and forth fingers of each hand relax a little, to not hold so tight or fight so hard, then to apply a little pressure and let the cards go. And do they ever go! All these years I've been thinking it was the way I held my thumbs, the force I put on the back edge of the cards, or how much I'd overlapped the cards to begin with. Not once did it ever occur to me that I failed, over and over again, because I was forcing something that couldn't be forced when I should have been holding it lightly, then turning it loose to work its magic, instead.

Sounds a lot like writing, doesn't it?

How often do we find ourselves pounding our heads against a wall in frustration because we can't figure out how

to make a scene work, or how to get from B to D in our story, or why our characters do what they do in spite of us? And how often do the answers come when we least expect them, nudging at the edges of our consciousness when we're doing the dishes, or fixing the lawn mower, or, sometimes, on the point of giving up entirely?

In our calmer moments, we know that the magic comes when we don't try to force it, when we're open to its presence and are, maybe, just a little more willing than usual to accept that whatever comes is perfectly all right even if it isn't exactly what we planned for, worked for, or expected. Sometimes we only catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of our eyes, but that glimpse is enough to give us hope and open us up to seeing more and more until, finally, we have the whole of it.

It comes when we just plain stop getting in our own way by trying too hard.

Most important still, it comes because we never, ever, EVER give up. Even if it seems crazy to keep on trying. Of course, knowing that doesn't make it any easier to trust the magic the next time we run into a wall. But I have an edge, now. Next time I'm trying to bludgeon my story into submission, I'll remember what I learned the other night while playing cards: Relax and go for the feel.

Frrriiiüüip! Snap snap snap SNAP!

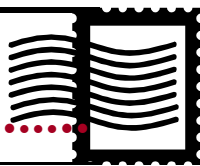
Ballots for the 2004 Ninc elections are included in this month's newsletter.

Please vote. It's important. Remember: You're not only voting for the officers who will serve on the board in 2004, you're also voting for the members of next year's Nominating Committee, who will be responsible for drafting candidates for the Board and the Nominating Committee for 2005.

Because we have no conference this year, we won't have an Annual General Meeting, either. Our Bylaws require us to have an AGM whenever we have a conference, but don't specifically require an AGM if we don't. Since we couldn't think of an effective, reasonably priced way to hold an AGM that would draw enough members to make the required quorum and allow everyone to participate who wanted to, we will simply carry over any business to the AGM to be held in early March next year in Santa Fe.

(Actually, I did suggest that the Bahamas in December might be a good place for a meeting. Of course, if not enough members joined us to make a quorum, your hard working, dedicated Board members would have been forced to retire to the beach, rum punch in hand, to recover from the shock. But we're tough. We could have faced that challenge if we'd had to. Alas! The other board members are either more lacking in creative vision than I, or a lot more fiscally responsible, because they nixed that idea right off the bat. Darn it.)

— **Anne Holmberg**



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

Enduring Membership

I received a delightful surprise when my name turned up on the list of Novelists, Inc. members who have maintained their memberships since August 1989. In addition to being in the company of many old friends from Washington Romance Writers, I felt privileged to find my name among so many excellent fiction writers (and next to the name of Barbara Keiler, whom I first met through *NINK*).

The newsletter also contained an article on “Burnout Bites.” I am not the victim of “burnout” *per se*, but over the years I have gained appreciation for the kind of focus and dedication that is necessary to produce a novel-length work of fiction, which I have not tried to do for several years. In the meantime, I have continued to look for ways to “flex my creative muscles.” These have included writing lyrics for songs for an annual political satire show in Washington that each year raises about \$100,000 for a local charity. Six years ago, I also helped start a small consulting company and now spend much of my day writing in support of a federal program that provides U.S. schools and libraries with discounts to help them get—and stay—connected to the Internet. I’m still gathering string for the “next novel,” and one day hope to be writing another one. In the meantime, I appreciate the opportunity to “stay in the loop” through my Novelists, Inc. membership.

— Sara Fitzgerald

Continued from page 1



However, I did get some work clerking in that bookstore during Christmas one year. I also served drinks at the Renaissance Festival one summer. I participated in a focus group for hair care products. I got a part-time telemarketing job; and I quit in tears during my second week, after the third person in a row that day screamed vicious insults at me over the phone.

In fact, it didn’t take me long to discover that *even writing* offered better day-job opportunities to someone like me than jobs I couldn’t get for wages which were an upside-down ratio of my time usage. So I sought all kinds of writing work in addition to the massive fantasy tome I was wading through. My wonderful friends at Tekno Books gave me a lot of short story assignments. I wrote some work-for-hire stuff under a couple of untraceable pseudonyms. I sold material to one or two e-publishing outfits which (wait for it!) paid advances. I accepted a ghostwriting job; don’t ask, ghostwriters can’t tell (and, besides, I got dropped from the project before long). I wrote this column. I also wrote a *SFWA Bulletin* column, and I pitched articles to the *Romance Writers Report*.

In other words, to avoid being evicted from my apartment because of my long dark struggle with *In Fire Forged*, I wrote some things I loved writing, some things I didn’t particularly like writing, and even one or two things that frankly made me feel as if the industry was unzipping and saying, “Get on your knees and open wide, Laura.” (Sorry about the imagery.)

The Trick Is

Well, when you’re writing pseudonymic work-for-hire in secret and thinking, “How did this happen to me? I swore I would get out of the business before I would do this;” and your fantasy novel is two years overdue and nowhere near finished on page 1,213; and your agency is telling you that your fantasy career is “in real danger of collapse;” and you’re aware of a general assumption everywhere you go that any novel as long as this one must be a piece of sluggish, self-indulgent drivel that any publisher is bound to deem unpublishable even if you *do* ever finish it; and it seems increasingly unlikely that you’ll ever work in this business again after this debacle; and you *still* don’t know how you’re going to scrape together the rent that’s due next week... The trick is to keep breathing.

Lest you find this so depressing you’re about to slash my wrists *for* me, I’ll cut to the chase: The publisher accepted the book with what appeared to be (under confusing circumstances) enthusiasm for its contents. The first volume, recently released with great packaging (which I fought for every step of the way), has been very well-reviewed; and sales don’t appear to be killing my career. The second volume is due out in December, and I’m back under contract for two related books.

But delivering that MS was not the end of my struggle against keeling over in a dead faint.

I wrote a substantial proposal (six chapters) for a novel close to my heart which I hoped would get me under contract in my old genre, romance. After five rejections which described the work as “too

To Keep Breathing

left of center,” “too wild,” “[contains] non-genre elements,” and even “distasteful” (that’s Mrs. Resnick’s little girl, folks!), my agent concluded that I had no business trying to work in the romance genre, and we had a bit of a falling out. Meanwhile, it would be another six months before anyone in New York confirmed that I even still *had* a career in the fantasy genre. I kept submitting the romance novel on my own for a while, but no one would touch it with a ten-foot pole. So I sucked it up, signed to do some work-for-hire, and asked for an advance on my advance so I could make rent the following week.

And I decided that I was never again going to keel over and lie there on the floor. This was the last time.

After I delivered *In Fire Forged*, the next 22 months of the manuscript’s life were such an unmitigated nightmare that I wholeheartedly embraced a private decision to leave the business. Although my agent made a deal with the publisher for two more books and a nice raise, my experiences at that house were so consistently demoralizing that I became convinced that anytime something with my name on it passed through there, it was company policy to unzip and piss on it.

In retrospect, I believe this was mostly (though not exclusively) due to several factors which have since been eliminated from the equation. However, for many months, I regularly had ample reason to say, “Look, if *this* is what it’s like after they start paying moderately good money, if *this* is what I’ve spent a dozen years working towards, then I WANT OUT. I would genuinely

rather not publish books than live like this.”

Meanwhile, I sought ways to keep myself sane. Among other things, I sold my oft-rejected romance novel to a small press because I desperately needed to deal with someone who treated me and my work with respect. And it was a wonderful experience! But not a career solution, since there’s no real money in small press.

Things reached such a nadir for me in fantasy that, on two separate occasions—even knowing it would mean instantly giving up my apartment and looking for a pizza-delivery job—I asked my agent to withdraw everything I had under contract or in production with my fantasy publisher. Not because I enjoy poverty or melodramatics, but because (I reiterate) I’d rather not sell a book at all than see it treated the way I saw this one being treated. The writer must always protect the work; it can’t protect itself, after all. And it was high time to start protecting *myself*, too, because the stress was turning me into a wreck. (Towards the end of this period, for example, I experienced so much chronic psychosomatic pain that I could no longer turn my head left at all or use my left arm well.)

Fortunately, all of that is water under the bridge now. Ever since my request to be assigned to a different editor was implemented, not only can I turn my head and use my left arm again (in fact, the pain disappeared completely within 48 hours of getting the news, and it has never returned), but my experiences at that house immediately improved beyond all recognition. In fact, it feels as if I’ve gone to a different house; or as if this house has mistaken me for a different

writer—one whom, in contrast to all my previous impressions, they’re not actively *sorry* to have under contract.

So I’ve risen from the ashes yet again, and things are going so well right now that I almost feel guilty being curmudgeonly. (*Almost*, I said.) I’m being paid reasonably well by a house where I now have a feasible working relationship, in a genre where I now have a well-received new novel and a potential future. I’m excited about everything I’m writing these days. If I happen to write any more romance for personal satisfaction (since I can evidently get no career benefits out of writing it), at least I have a good relationship with the small press which published the distasteful (and well-reviewed) romance novel that no major house would buy. And, of course, I have the pleasure of outlets like this column for venting my wrath without blacking out.

So my professional life, so long a source of demoralization to me, is very good these days. As a writer, I’m (wait for it!) *happy*.

But the trick really *is* to keep breathing, and the events of recent years have too often made me feel suffocated, gasping for air in a smoke-filled room. Not because of the work itself; but because of my precarious reliance on it as my sole possible means of survival. When I got unhappy enough for long enough, I realized the time had come to explore additional professional possibilities; and I made choices that appeal to me enough that the sudden (and, frankly, unexpected) advent of good times hasn’t changed my mind about the plans I made.

So, while maintaining my fiction commitments ▶▶▶▶

Keep Breathing

▶▶▶▶ (which deadlines currently take me through autumn 2004), I am now starting a full-time Master's degree program in journalism, paid for by a research assistantship; after my coursework is over, I plan to go on a funded overseas internship. I don't know what the future holds; but I'm getting paid to acquire education and experience in something that interests me, and this strikes me as preferable to falling back on telemarketing again.

I'll have to work hard to maintain so many professional and academic commitments at the same time, of course; but I'm used to working hard, and it's all work that I'm excited about doing—which is a wonderful position to be in! Unfortunately, though, there are some commitments I won't be able to maintain, and this column is one of them; so I've resigned. This is the last rant from the Curmudgeon. The space I've been allotted by *NINK* for the past three years will hereafter be filled by a new and different column. Privy to inside information, I know what it is, and I can't wait to start reading it!

I appreciate your taking the time to read "The Comely Curmudgeon" ever since Terey Daly Ramin invited me to start writing it in March 2000, and I particularly appreciate the comments some of you have written to me about it over the past few years. I'd like to thank the various presidents and editors of *NINK* for the support they've given this column (Hi, Olivia!) and to express my admiration and appreciation for how hard they work on behalf of Ninc and *NINK*. Ninc's members and various friends-of-Ninc have also all made writing this column a pleasure which

I am sorry to give up now.

So, as my final curmudgeonly commentary on the slings and arrows of this iniquitous and most brutal vocation, I urge you to remember: When your unpaid bills keep piling up while New York claims your check has "fallen between the cracks;" when your manuscript is rejected by every house in the free world; when your

of the imagination, and we were built to go the distance. The trick is to keep breathing.

Laura Resnick's current releases are The White Dragon: In Fire Forged, Part One and Fallen From Grace (w/a Laura Leone). The Destroyer Goddess: In Fire Forged, Part Two will be released in December. Currently under contract through her

A Parting Request...

Now that my enjoyable years as a *Nink* columnist have come to a close, I hope to find an opportunity to see the collected Comely Curmudgeon columns packaged in book form. I suspect that my efforts to market this collection will be helped enormously if I can provide potential publishers with advance endorsements for the book from working novelists, editors, and agents.

To this end, I'm putting out this cry for help! If you've enjoyed the Comely Curmudgeon's rants, whether you're a novelist or an industry professional who happens to get *NINK*, please consider sending me a cover quote for a collection of these columns at: LaResnick@aol.com.

When sending your comment, please include your name as you would like it to appear in print, and a log-line about yourself (ex. award-winning author of seventeen novels; ex. literary agent; ex. Senior Editor, Lavish Books; etc.).

I will sincerely appreciate your contribution. And if I do get a book out of the columns, I promise a free copy to everyone whose quotes the publisher actually uses. (The rest of you can get your copies by mugging those individuals.)

— **Laura Resnick**

"fan" mail accuses you of being an ignorant toad attempting to destroy the foundations of our society; when aspiring writers vilify you for not "helping" them in accordance with their demands; when your agent won't return your calls, when your publisher dumps you, when reviewers publicly trash your novel with snide insults, when market winds make you freeze like dry ice as you stare at the blank screen... *Breathe*.

We are the endurance athletes

twentieth novel, Resnick is also the author of 50 short stories, one nonfiction book, a number of articles, and one other opinion column. She recently became a Master's student at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University, where she's attending on a Knight grant and trying to adjust to getting up early. You can find her on the Web at: www.sff.net/people/laresnick.

The Indies Make Good “Booksense”

Richard Howorth is a man who wears two hats—and wears both of them well. Not only is he the founder and owner of Square Books with three locations in Oxford, Mississippi, but he is also mayor of the city, a position he has held for two years.

This native Mississippian prepared himself for the role of bookstore owner with an apprenticeship at Savile Bookshop in Washington, D.C. In 1979, he and his wife Lisa came home to open a bookstore which has played host to such literary luminaries as Jon Krakauer, Jeanne Ray, Greg Iles, and Larry Brown. In 1986, his peers in the book industry honored him with the Haslam Award.

A strong advocate of independent bookstores, Richard served 11 years on the board of directors of the American Booksellers Association. He was elected to two terms as president and chairman of the board, the first Mississippian to hold those offices. He says his experience with ABA gave him the confidence that he might be effective as mayor of Oxford.

NINK: How do you juggle two careers?

Richard Howorth: The mayor’s job in Oxford is full-time, so presently that’s where 99% of my attention goes. We have an experienced and excellent staff at Square Books, under the leadership of Lyn Roberts. Lyn and I communicate once a week or so about various matters.

NINK: While many independent bookstores are closing, you recently added a third, Square Books, jr. What prompted your decision to have a for-children-only bookstore?

RH: Actually, independent bookstores have stabilized in an otherwise highly volatile industry and soft economy. They have held a 15% market share for the last three years. We have wanted to open a children’s-only store for ten years, and the timing and location finally came together.

NINK: What factors contribute to the success of your bookstores?

RH: Selection of books, atmosphere of the store, and service provided by booksellers. Those are the main ingredients, and have always been what we have focused on. Promotion is important, and we are constantly working to find new, innovative ways to connect books with customers. Of course, new books often inspire us to do that.

NINK: What are the benefits of being part of the Booksense Consortium?

RH: Booksense has been a terrific thing. In the effort to differentiate, in the mind of the public, independents from chains, Booksense essentially takes all the incredibly various characteristics of independents and gives them a unifying brand, which seems counterintuitive. Booksense boils down those characteristics to the following: passion, community, character, personality, and commitment. Booksense promotes those elements to readers who identify similarly with the slogan, “Independent bookstores for independent minds.”

Books, writing, and reading are incredibly important to our society, and it is immensely important that they not be reduced to sheer commerce—which is not strictly what chains do but is a direction for which they have a greater propensity than independents, owing simply to the corporate structure of chains.

On a more practical level, there are cooperative advertising advantages, a national gift certificate program, an ability to introduce a broader range of lesser-known titles and authors with a smaller amount of advertising dollars, an e-commerce program, pooling credit card rates, and all sorts of ancillary programs and effects that trickle down to a Booksense store’s bottom line in a substantial way.

Booksense has been a brilliant and unique program that has given great substance to what often had been previously regarded as “independent bookstore rhetoric.”

NINK: How does having a literary community influence bookselling?

Conversely, how does bookselling influence a literary community?

RH: Let me count the ways. Louis Rubin, the North Carolina English professor, author, editor, and founder of Algonquin Books, once told me that “no one much buys books other than writers.” Not really true, of course, but some truth in it. A literary community, which I define broadly to include not just writers or poets or English teachers, but readers of all sorts, simply creates a larger community of people who talk about books and reading.

A writer or a good reader in my town is like having another bookseller on the staff. Publishers often call the most valuable marketing technique “word of mouth.”

Not only are more books introduced to the local market, the market is enriched by the distinct quality of those books and their authors. In other words, a bookstore is defined by its community, and the books that go on our shelves and into our customers’ hands are therefore different from those of any other bookstore, anywhere. Logically extended to the national community, if there are many such diverse bookstores, then the expression of writers as well as the choice provided to readers is amplified and enhanced.

NINK: How do you choose which books to hand sell?

RH: The ones I read that I enjoy, and the ones that have been read by people I know and rely on or trust, which is a lot of people, including strangers, sometimes. When a reader tells you about a book he or she is passionate about, it is often credible and convincing.

NINK: What are the most effective ways to do that (hand sell)?

RH: Keep your ears open and read as much as you can, but don’t finish what you know you don’t like so you can move on to something you do. Sometimes reviews help, but most often it’s simply what I call the fine, clear tone of genuine enthusiasm. Then it’s just a matter of communicating that to others. You have to work those ideas down to two or three short

The Buzz in the Biz.....

▶▶▶ sentences, because often a customer says, “Nahh, not interested in that. What else?” Then you have to move on to your next recommendation, while trying to pry from the customer what exactly he or she is interested in. It’s a balancing act between playing to the customer’s interest and forcing the book you think might work, being mindful of the fact one never wants to sell a book a reader isn’t going to like, because selling a book successfully is what brings him—or, as we all know in the book business, her—back.

Then you have to translate those ideas and expressions similarly into other vehicles, such as the store newsletter or what are called shelf-talkers, cards we stick in books on display that have a handwritten blurb from a bookseller, or sometimes someone else. We actually work pretty hard to get these shelf-talkers right, conveying, again, that clear enthusiasm. The real fruit of handselling comes from doing it in such a way that your customer then does that word-of-mouth thing outside your store, driving others into the store for the same book.

All of this is part of what makes bookselling so much fun.

NINK: Publishers don’t promote every book equally, and sometimes really good books go virtually unnoticed. How might an author effectively promote his book with independent booksellers?

RH: There is no formula that I know of. I have seen a lot of things tried that didn’t work, and some things that did. This is probably not what an author wants to hear, but it sort of has to be done one book at a time, one reader at a time. Find a reader who is enthusiastic about your book, have that reader—preferably someone outside the family and definitely not Mother—convey the enthusiasm to a bookseller.

When someone comes up to me out of the blue and says I read a book that’s really interesting, I listen. But if someone says to me, hey, I wrote a book I want you to sell...well, this sounds harsh, but I have about 30 thousand books sitting on the shelves I’m already trying to sell. Why is yours special?

Often a letter is effective. Communi-

cating through writing is what writers do best. Often if I receive a letter (it doesn’t have to be on fine stationery, it can be a plain Xeroxed piece of paper) that has some genuine credit to it, I’ll pay attention.

We deliberately try to discover books, because it’s fun and also because we love to strengthen our store’s identity by making unexpected books successful. I love it when we sell 200 copies of a book that some other place has never heard of. I also love to find out about a book we never heard of that some other store sold 200 copies of, because, hey, something’s going on there. Again, this is what makes bookselling fun.

NINK: What prompted you to publish your newsletter, Dear Reader? When did you first publish it? What impact does it have on book sales?

RH: We have issued a newsletter of some form or another since the store opened. (Bookselling is as much an act of desperation as it is of love.) I used to type them on a typewriter, cut and paste images, have a printer simply copy them, and address them and put the stamps on myself. Every dang one. I started out doing four a year. When my wife and I began having children, we were lucky to get out maybe two a year. We’ve been calling it *Dear Reader*, I don’t know, maybe 12, 15 years.

Computers—well, I don’t need to tell anyone how computers changed life. Last I counted we mail out about 6,000, once every two months. The mailing list is built by our Constant Reader Club, which rewards regular customers with an accrued-purchase discount on books and keeps them on the mailing list, if they choose to receive it. If a person has not bought a book from us in the past 18 months, they fall off the mailing list, which enables us to keep the mailing list clean. Our Nov-Dec issue is a holiday catalog, done in color on slick paper.

Staff writes all the copy and we’ve got one dude, Jamie Kornegay, who is possessed, and he does all the layout on desktop. It’s a whole lot of work and expensive to maintain, but it’s fun, keeps our name in front of our customers, includes our events calendar, and does what we love to do most—tell people about our favorite books.

NINK: What changes have you seen in the book business in the last ten years?

RH: Whew. The whole world has changed so much in the last ten years, and the book business maybe a little more than the rest of the world. Technology, the economy, corporate conditions and the stock market—there are so many external changes that have caused the book industry to change. The heartening thing about books is that the way they are created—writing, I mean—is an indestructible, unchangeable thing. I further believe that the physical object, the book, is one of few perfect inventions, like the bicycle or sailboat. Show me all the e-stuff you want: to be on my couch with a good book on a cool fall day (okay, I like football, too) is life at its best.

But to answer the question more directly, the biggest changes have been consolidations in publishing, the roll-out of the chains (which expanded the square footage of bookstore space by four but did not expand the gross sales of books at all), the reduction of independent bookstores, and migration of blockbuster bookselling to deep-discount, non-bookstore, big-box retailing. This last event has further created a tendency for publishers to gamble huge advances on huge print runs that don’t earn out, meaning huge losses, which are compensated by laying off editors and others who historically have created successes out of “little” books. Consequently there are a few books that set records for high sales, but a rapidly diminishing number of “modestly” successful books—those that sell 50,000 copies, which as any author can tell you is a lot. Frustrating.

NINK: From a bookseller’s perspective, what is the current state of the book business?

RH: While troubling trends are in a sort of holding pattern, with no new countercycle in motion that I am aware of, there are plenty of success stories in publishing, writing, and bookselling.

With regard to independent bookstores, I am optimistic that new urbanist trends—rebuilding neighborhood and small town economies—may create opportunities for small independents to start up anew. On the other hand, I do not see

many new young people opening bookstores. A few, but not many.

Great books continue to see daylight from large and small publishers. Technologies enable two and three-person publishing outfits to start up. Large houses are having trouble with returns and low sales numbers, some of which has to do with the soft economy overall.

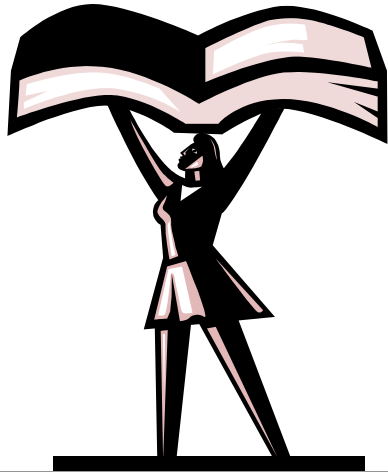
It's a mixed bag. The problem is,

the world's in a mess. Despite our advanced technologies and capacity to communicate, there is war, nuclear threat, political turmoil, and environmental failure, including the ongoing destruction of plant and animal species.

Whatever problems the book business has are small. The recent complete breakdown of the music industry is disconcerting, but its cause is understand-

able and does not transfer to the book industry. It will be interesting to see what new models develop in music. Books and reading remain of critical importance to society, and the business is relatively stable.

But a book...what a lovely thing. What on earth beats a good book? And how could I ever fail to convince someone of that? **NINK**



"Revitalizing the Writer" Bookings Halfway to Goal!

At the end of the first two weeks of registration (the time I'm writing this), the retreat has already hit the halfway mark to meeting its goal of 75 retreatants. We anticipate registrations will keep coming in at a brisk pace. A big thank you to all who have signed up early. Your response is gratifying to the committee. We hope we surpass our registration goals and can add even more to the discussions and activities of this retreat.

Bishop's Lodge is excited about hosting us. The staff includes numerous readers (and some writers) who can't wait to meet their favorite authors.

There is still plenty of room for retreatants. We can easily accommodate double our goal number. For those who have not signed up yet, the registration information and forms are posted on www.ninc.com.

Thank you again, Ninc, for such a strong, positive response to the Santa Fe retreat!

— **Cathy Maxwell, Conference Coordinator**

Joining Us in Santa Fe? Sign Up for Tuesday, March 9 Optional Tours Registration

Please use this separate registration form for these tours and note the deadline of **February 16**, when the registration must be **received**. Make checks payable to **Novelists Inc** and mail to: **Laura Baker, 12301 Cedar Ridge Dr. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87112**. Contact Laura with any questions: registration@ninc.com.

Name:

Address:

E-mail

Phone

Tour:

Bandelier National Monument \$65

Abiquiu Afternoon \$65

High Road to Chimayo \$45

**Walking Tour of the
Santa Fe Historic District** \$10

Please note: We have a cancellation deadline with Cynthia, which is based on a minimum number of people registering for each tour. Your check will be returned to you if we must cancel a tour and, hopefully, you can reschedule for another.



Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

This Explains A Lot

Jeff Mauzy and Richard Harriman (neither of whom I know nor have heard of; they'd probably say the same thing about me and my other personality)—have this quote in *Creativity, Inc.*: “You will discover very little creativity in yourself without the discomfort of confusion, uncertainty, anxiety and ambiguity.”

Well, all I can tell you is their ambiguity in word choice confused me and left me feeling uncertain of their meaning, which resulted in some anxiety.

You didn't think I could do it, did you?

Anyway, I read their quote and came to the same logical conclusions you did, which are: Why did it take both of them to say that? And: In order for them both to get credit, did they actually have to speak in unison, as they would if reciting the Pledge of Allegiance?

OK, word choice. In particular, discomfort. The discomfort of seeking creativity. How...tame it all seems, somewhat on a par with sitting on a hard bench. That's not the creativity I know, which is more akin to sitting on a vertically positioned hard nail. No, if Jeff and Richard (by the way, don't you think Jeff now wishes he'd gone with the more formal Jeffrey since Richard didn't go with Dick?) really wanted to get close to the blood-shedding experience of making one's living being creative, they would have used a more emphatic term or phrase such as, oh, I don't know, “daily gut-twisting awfulness.”

Read that into the quote in place of “discomfort.”

Starting to make a little more sense, isn't it?

I could draw a parallel, and in fact will, between their use of “discomfort” in this context and that of those clowns who say labor pains cause a person some discomfort. You will agree with me when I say only those women—and men, to be fair—who've never experienced labor pains would call them “discomfort.” Ha. People, they tear the freakin'...stuff...right out of your body, causing one to scream and curse and strike out indiscriminately as if possessed of a moderate-sized demon. Of course, being cut off in traffic can have the same effect. So can writing.

This brings us to a consideration of confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, and ambiguity. Actually, I'm so far gone in this being a writer thing that those four mental maladies are now my daily comfort, if not my muses. I don't know when it all turned around and became true, but now I get fretful only in those rare and gleaming moments when I'm not experiencing them. I'll suddenly sit up and say: “Hey, I'm feeling happy and content and focused and certain of myself. What's going on?” Desperately, I look around. “Dear God, can it be that I'm—oh, say it's not true—sober?”

Like I said, this explains a lot.

The author would have you know she had made the decision to answer all rhetorical questions asked within her hearing.

Bits'n'Pieces

IN HARLEQUIN NEWS...Sharon Hails, late of Sher Distributing, assumed the new post of director of sales, direct retail as of 11 August. She'll be based out of the New York area and oversee Harlequin's sales efforts through bookstores and jobbers.

HARPERCOLLINS REALIGNMENT, NEW LINE, ETC...Lots of stuff going on at HC these days including some straightening up and “realignment” designed to create “smaller, more accountable teams,” according to division president and publisher Cathy Hemming. They've also got a new trade paperback line, Dark Alley. Described as a “line of suspense books,” there are plans to release 6 – 10 titles per year, both original works and re-prints. David Roth-Ey, will be the editorial director of Dark Alley.

AND AT PENGUIN...As of September 2, Tracy Locke, late of Henry Holt, assumes the title associate publisher of Penguin Press, the new Penguin imprint headed by Ann Godoff. Locke will be responsible for the imprint's marketing and publicity efforts. Penguin Press's first books are due in January.

Filed by Terey daly Ramin



Slaying the Green-Eyed Monster

DEAR ANNETTE:

Like everyone in Ninc, I've had my share of publishing success, but nothing to the heights I aspire to. My problem is this: the longer I go without a new contract, the more spiteful I feel about acquaintances' writing successes. Early in my career, I was truly happy for fellow writers. Lately I can hardly pick up a book without being hypercritical. I hate being a sour Bitter Betty but I can't seem to stop myself. In public I make all the expected, pleasant comments, but truly cheering on my fellow authors has been beyond me for longer than I'd care to admit.

— *Green-Eyed, and Hating It*

DEAR GREEN-EYED:

Envy? Been there. Do that still, on occasion. A pretty nasty place to be, isn't it? Not only do you get to experience an emotion none of us is proud to own, but as an added bonus, you get to beat yourself up for feeling that way.

First, please remember that *everybody* goes through phases of envy. In just one large study, 78% of workers admitted feeling envious of coworkers' successes. Let me repeat that. 78% of respondents in a study outright *admitted* feeling envy. Having done my share of psychological research, I've gotta think the other 22% were either brain dead or didn't care to be truthful.

And, just so you know, we writers may be a particularly vulnerable group. Again, according to research in the workplace, envy seems to crop up most often:

- ▼ When supervisors (read editors) appear inconsiderate, inconsistent, or unfair in their judgments.
- ▼ In self-motivated employees with a strong sense of work ethic.
- ▼ In situations where jobs have highly visible measures of success attached.
- ▼ In people working in small offices where success and failure are more visible than in large, impersonal settings.

I don't know about you, but this sounds scarily similar to the working conditions in *my* home office.

Okay, so you're experiencing a strong bout of professional envy. You can use it to your advantage. I'm not kidding. Envy is like a pebble in your shoe. It's a sign something's rubbing you the wrong way.

I think envy is often about fear. Fear that we won't reach our professional goals. Fear that there's not enough success to go around. And ultimately, fear that we're not good enough or deserving enough.

Figuring out what you truly envy may not be as obvious as

you think. The first clue: Envy is about *you*, not the other person. Take some time to poke around a bit, however uncomfortable the self-examination may be. Try looking for patterns. Who exactly do you envy? Is it just other writers, or are there others in your life? And perhaps more importantly, what *exactly* is it you envy about them? Once you get past the emotion itself, a pattern should become clear, and that pattern will tell you something.

If you have a hard time sorting through it, here's an exercise. Pick three people you envy and write down at least three specifics you covet about each. Now pick three people you admire and do the same. Most people find patterns in the things they admire and envy that give clues to qualities or behaviors they can aspire to. Once you can see what your goal is, creating a plan of action shouldn't be hard.

But be prepared.

You may discover you're envious of things you can't have. When that's the case, facing those emotions is often the key to diffusing them. A friend of mine struggled with infertility into her early 40s. She eventually had two beautiful children but is, to this day, envious of women who easily became pregnant much younger. For her, that ain't gonna happen without a time machine. To banish her envy she had to do some deep soul searching, acknowledging the pain and uncertainty and unfairness of infertility, emotions that were too painful to handle at the time she was trying to get pregnant.

However you tackle the problem, the biggest danger with ongoing envy is allowing yourself to become a victim. It's easy to do. Instead of using envy as a tool to better ourselves, we slide into a place where we decide life's not fair, they didn't deserve the success we so desperately want, so they suck and oh, poor us.

If you take some time to poke around the painful wound that envy is, though, you'll actually end up the stronger—and by far the wiser—for it. Just, whatever you do, please don't be ashamed for feeling it. You're sure not the only one.

You can "Ask Annette," in strict confidence, at one of these contacts: e-mail: annettecarney@sbcglobal.net, fax: 775-746-4560; phone: 775-323-0445.

Bits 'n' Pieces

PERSONNEL NEWS, NAL...I'd wondered where she was while at RWA Nationals and now I know: Former NAL executive editor Audrey LeFehr has joined Kensington as Editorial Director. President Steve Zacharius said, "Audrey has proven herself through years of genre and bestseller publishing with authors as diverse as Eric Jerome Dickey, Patricia Gaffney, and Virginia Henley, and we're looking forward to taking full advantage of her expertise." And We Regret To Announce that August 1 was Hilary Ross's last day at NAL/Penguin. Hilary was in the business for decades and had spent the last 20 years editing NAL/Signet's Regency line and working with an amazing number of bestselling authors well before they hit the lists. She is a phenomenal editor and one of this writer's favorite dinner companions — even if that was only one dinner. We wish her exceedingly well.

— **TdR**



BY LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS

I write fantasy. Out of my 35 completed novels 21 are fantasy, including all the successful ones and all the recent ones. I like fantasy, I enjoy it immensely, and I don't particularly want to work in any other genre at this point. I'm happy to be a fantasy writer.

Now, if only everyone knew what "fantasy writer" means!

You might not think it's exactly hard to understand, but that hasn't been my experience. At parties or other events where most of the attendees are neither writers nor avid readers, when people ask me what I do for a living, it's not unusual for me to answer, "I'm a science fiction writer," just because that's less likely to need explanation.

This is a problem I assume romance writers or mystery writers don't have. Everyone understands what a romance is, or a mystery novel, but fantasy, despite the success of J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, seems to have eluded some people.

Frankly, I don't understand this. I don't remember a time when I didn't know what "fantasy" meant in terms of fiction. I would have thought it was obvious, especially once *The Lord of the Rings* hit it big back in the '60s, or after Ballantine/Del Rey started putting "fantasy" on the spines in the '70s—stories of magic and adventure. All the same, I've run into scads of people who had no idea what I was talking about when I said I wrote fantasy.

Of course, there are lots of people who have trouble with the whole concept of meeting authors at all—I assume that's common to writers in all genres. I'm sure much of the membership of Ninc has had the experience of saying, "Yes, I write for a living," and being asked in response, "Have you had anything published?" As if there were a way to make money as a writer *without* being published—and if there is, would someone please tell me? It might save us all a lot of hassle.

(And then there are all those other annoying questions, like what name you write under, and why haven't they heard of you, and where can they find your books because surely you don't mean they're at Borders or Barnes & Noble, and how much did you have to pay your publisher...)

But it's even worse if you say, "Yes, I'm a fantasy writer." At least once I've been asked, "So how do you make money if you just fantasize about writing?" (I don't think he was joking; if he was, it was a phenomenal deadpan.)

And more than once, "I write fantasy" has been greeted with, "Oh, for *Penthouse*?"

(I suppose it's slightly reassuring that at least these people do know those lurid letters *are* mere fantasy.)

So I started saying, "I write fantasy—you know, dragons and wizards and the like." I thought that was pretty foolproof.

Ha. Then the annoyingly common response was, "Oh, for kids?" (Harry Potter hasn't helped with this part.)

My Own Little Fantasy World

Well, I know a lot of my readers are teenagers, but that's not the market I'm officially aiming at. "No," I reply, "adult fantasy..."

"You mean for *Penthouse*?" And we're back to that, the mention of dragons and wizards notwithstanding—the word "adult" seems to be hopelessly contaminated.

Even when we get it straight that I write fantasy novels for grown-ups, people are often confused—they didn't know there *were* such things, other than *The Lord of the Rings*. I have no idea how they've managed to miss one of the most popular genres out there; I suppose they simply never look at books. Or perhaps because it's generally shelved with the science fiction, they never noticed it—they assumed that the section labeled "Science Fiction – Fantasy" was just letting buyers know that science fiction is fantastic stuff.

But then there are the people who have noticed it and *think* they know what fantasy is like. "So you write about elves and unicorns?"

Well, no. I've written short stories about unicorns, but I've never yet put one in a novel. I did throw in a few elves in the background once.

"I thought only girls liked that elfy-welfy stuff."

I don't *write* "elfy-welfy stuff." Mind you, I can't deny the elfy-welfy stuff exists, but it isn't the whole of the fantasy genre, by any means.

Neither is "farm-boy defeats the Dark Lord," which some people assume is the standard plot. In fact, I can't think of *any* fantasy novel except Lloyd Alexander's wonderful children's series about Taran the assistant pig-keeper where the hero is actually a farm-boy who defeats a dark lord.

But people have their prejudices, as every romance writer knows, and aren't really interested in discarding them. They'll assume my protestations that my fantasy isn't like that are just futile attempts to hide the truth, that I'm just another hack turning out simple-minded quest stories where the good guys, with their elves and unicorns, seek out the talisman of power in order to defeat the evil wizard that threatens the happy pseudo-medieval land.

So I tell them I'm a science fiction writer. That pretty much everyone understands—though there was the one woman who thought I meant I was a screenwriter, since she was utterly unaware that science fiction existed anywhere but the movies. This was when I lived in Kentucky, two thousand miles from Hollywood; she apparently didn't consider the distance a problem.

Science fiction has percolated far enough into the mainstream that in general, people who haven't read any science fiction no longer assume they know everything about it; pretty much everyone at least realizes that it isn't all the same story retold endlessly.

The thing is, I *don't* write science fiction anymore, really. I used to, but for the past dozen years I've mostly stuck to fantasy. It feels a little like lying to say I'm a science fiction writer.

For awhile in the 1990s, after my one and only horror novel was published, I tried saying I was a horror writer. That didn't work all that well; people knew what it meant, or thought they did,

but the follow-up questions and comments weren't much fun. "Do you know Stephen King?" was usually the first one. Then would come the remarks about how nasty and unpleasant horror is, and how sick I must be to write about stuff like that, and had I been abused as a child?

Worse, some would start asking my wife how she could stand living with someone who could write that creepy stuff.

Or worst of all were the ones at the other extreme, who didn't see anything unpleasant about it at all and who I thought were seriously creepy. Saying I wrote horror marked me as a kindred spirit with whom they could share their hideous gory fantasies.

I went back to saying I wrote science fiction, even though I don't—if I admit to writing any genre at all, and can't get away with, "Oh, I freelance in the publishing business."

I've heard romance writers complain (justifiably) about having their work dismissed as repetitive, trashy, formulaic, worthless, or pornographic simply because it's romance, but at least everyone knows what romance is.

Well, once people understand what you're talking about, fantasy is also dismissed as repetitive, trashy, formulaic, worthless fluff, all just cheap imitations of Tolkien, often by people who haven't actually read any—but I will concede that at least, despite all the half-naked barbarians on the covers in the fantasy section, usually the only people who call it pornographic are the ones who think "fantasy" just means the stuff in *Penthouse*.

I suppose I should be grateful for that much!

A final footnote, though—it's been reported that some stores are now separating fantasy from science fiction and giving it its own section. It's been noticed that fantasy sells significantly better than science fiction, and booksellers are hoping that it'll sell even better if buyers can *find* it. Presumably this will raise public awareness that the genre exists.

My days of lying about what I write may, at last, be nearing an end. **NINK**

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:

Susan Grant, Rocklin CA
Susan McBride, Brentwood MO
Cynthia Rutledge, Lincoln NE

New Members:

Marthe Arends (*Katie MacAlister*), Snohomish WA
Deborah Chester (*Jay D Blakeney, Sean Dalton*),
Norman OK
Doranna Durgin, Flagstaff AZ
Jennifer LaBrecque, Dallas GA
Sharon Lee, Unity ME
Karen Templeton-Berger (*Karen Templeton*),
Albuquerque NM
Bonnie Tucker, Sugar Land TX
Linda Warren, College Station TX

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

Bits'n'Pieces

NEW AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION PUBLISHER & KENSINGTON... Author and bookseller Carl Weber's new publishing house, Urban Books, will be represented worldwide by Kensington, which will not only handle distribution but all subsidiary rights sales. Weber's house will release its first title in November and follow up with one trade title per month thereafter. The success of hip-hop fiction inspired Weber to found Urban, about which he says, "A new generation of African American readers has emerged. They're seeking more drama-filled stories. What we're trying to do is fill that void." Weber assures readers Urban Books will do "stories of proud, strong people surviving in hard times." — **TdR**

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Brenda Hiatt-Barber	BrendaHB@aol.com
Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@attbi.com

The Care and Feeding of the Girls in the Basement

BY BARBARA SAMUEL



When I was a child, I used to imagine the writing life in terms of vague, watercolor paintings. I would live alone in a cottage by the sea (where I would find this sea in Colorado never came up). It would have a thatched roof and roses climbing up a trellis, and I'd scribble by day, and read by night, and walk an agreeable dog along the beach in the afternoons. It would be a civilized little life. Peaceful. Full of intrinsic rewards. I would get letters in the mail from fans all over the world, and once in awhile, someone (probably a young girl) would seek me out and I'd give her tea and cookies while I inspired her to go forth and Write.

The reality is somewhat different.

When I was asked to take over Laura Resnick's column spot, I had to chuckle. If there is an opposing word for "curmudgeon," that's me. (My son suggested the Oracular Optimist or the Helpful Hippie. Um, no.) I also knew immediately that this was the chance I'd been looking for to talk about the realities of the writing life, and commercial fiction writers as artists.

Yes, the A word.

Commercial fiction writers are a sturdy lot. We know the job, we get it done. We're smart, savvy, often quite business-like. We understand that books need readers, that the market drives demand, and we do what needs to be done to fit

ourselves and our visions to that market in the best ways we can.

We often know, to the day, how long it takes us to get a book written, according to what it is, who wants it, how much research it will require. We get up in the morning and go to our computers and get to work with clock-like precision, knowing that the job isn't about waiting on inspiration, but about regularity and showing up. We know, as many other writers do not, that creativity is best fueled by a full stomach and a stack of ordinary bills marked *Paid*. We understand the bottom line, and we know how to meet it—often with a grace and beauty that surprises us.

We're also artists. As a group, commercial fiction writers are highly uncomfortable with the designation of "artist." We roll our eyes. We have no illusions about writing to save the world or correct some social ill, or making sweeping political statements or indictments. Not for us the artistic wailings of taking ten years to write a book. Now, admittedly there are books that are so complicated, so deeply researched and intricate that ten years might be needed (*The Lord of the Rings*, complete with its own language, comes to mind.) But mostly we hear these stories and think, "What? You couldn't do it in two? How could eight years make it that much better?"

But we are artists, like it or not. We're quite different from other people. We all have certain things in common, lots of them, and most of them set us apart from the rest of the world. I took a poll on a dating service and discovered that only 7% of men found my personality type one they'd adore (a fact only slightly mitigated by the fact that I would also only find 7% of the male population to my purest tastes). I suspect most of us would find similar results, having tried to survive in the big world all these years as loners and observers and geeks in some form or another. (C'mon—how many people do you know, outside our circle, who can recite the entirety of *Romeo and Juliet*, or catalogue every forensic clue known to mankind, or answer a question like, "What was served in Almacks?" Or, for that matter, even know what Almacks is?)

Sorry to be the one to break it to you if you've been resisting, but you don't end up here, scribbling away for a living when you've got one of the best brains on the planet and you could have a decent retirement and a regular paycheck and maybe even a savings account that could tide you over for a year in dry times if you were not absolutely driven to do this. Nobody is that masochistic. You're writing books because you can't *not* do it. You didn't end up here by accident—you were marked at birth and driven to it, and here you are, doing it and pretending you're just a business person with a weird career.

Before you reject this idea, before you start squirming and trying to get back to the spreadsheet that tells you how many pages you need to write today, stop. Just go with me for a minute here. Think about what you do. You sit alone in a room and make things up all day long, every day. You create worlds and human beings. You decorate the rooms with furniture and the gardens with plants and cast sunlight or clouds or nighttime vistas for them. You make up human beings with distinctive facial features and quirks of behavior, with particular wardrobes and accents and hopes and dreams and entire histories—thousands and thousands of details. All of it comes out of your head.

Do you have any idea how miraculous that is? Of course you don't. You do it all the time—probably have been since you were quite small and had your first imaginary friend. It's easy for you (well, easier some days than others, certainly), so you don't value it.

My concern is that I see writers slamming into burnout and exhaustion in very quiet, tragic ways that can be attributed to two things: 1. The market-driven world we must please as artists is not supportive or understanding of the artist's delicate nature. Nor should it be. Business and art have never been particularly comfortable bedmates. 2. Because we are an orderly, competent lot—mostly good girls and guys—we tend to discount that artist nature, so it goes unloved and uncared for until the writer slams into a life crisis or a career crisis and can't move, or moves only with great agony.

By learning what things make an artist unique, by learning about the special needs of the artist inside each of us and the ways to honor that artist, maybe the next writer who slams into a wall and needs to figure out how to get back to the work will be able to do so. Because one of the other things I know is that writers are born, and life gets hollow without doing what we were born to do.

As for my qualifications for this: well, no Ph.D.s in psychology or anything impressive like that. I have not had a particularly dramatic life as an artist. But I had a bit of luck, early on: I was born into a family that reveres creativity.

I admit it—I am one of 27 writers who is, as Susan Wiggs puts it (she's one of the others), the Adult Child of Normal Parents. No trauma, no particular drama. I was raised in the suburbs. My parents drove a station wagon. We sang rounds in it when we drove up the road to my grandmother's house for Thanksgiving. We all sat down to

suppers of Hamburger Helper and meatloaf and spaghetti and pretty much any other kind of stretching-one-pound-of-hamburger-meat-over-six-people kind of dinner you can imagine. Every night, we took our assigned spots because otherwise everyone would argue over who got to sit next to what and who according to the fight of the day. We had to answer questions like (and I am not kidding), "What was the highlight of your day, Barb?" My parents were married astonishingly young and have stayed together 45 years. They didn't drink, didn't beat us, played pinochle in kitchens blue with cigarette smoke. We were expected to be responsible for our actions, encouraged to be president or nurses or writers—whatever we thought would make us happy.

It was a working class world where all the big stuff came out of books. Creativity in all forms was respected and celebrated. My father loves music with a fierce passion and he's the one who taught us to sing together. Books were everywhere, on every surface, and everyone in my world read something with great passion. My father shelled out his lunch money more than once when the Scholastic book club flyer came home (a fact I naturally did not know until later). My mother is a dreamer, a seamstress and a painter and the original book-a-holic. My grandmother is convinced that all of her three children, all ten of her grandchildren, and now the uncountable great-grandchildren, are all geniuses in some form or another. It was her job to seek out that Genius in each of us and set it free.

I learned as a child how to live an artist's life, but that life fit no stereotype I've ever seen. The longer I spend in the world of working artists and hear of their unsupportive childhoods, the more deeply I appreciate the blessing of my own.

The cornerstones of living a good writer's life are simple.

You have to have some order, a daily routine, so you can feel good. You need to have some beauty and music and get outside. A lot. You need plenty of sleep and probably a nap at least for 20 minutes sometime during the day. You need good healthy food and some time alone and room to wander. You need Sacred Space and Sacred Talismans—a cigar box is best to store them in.

Good conversations are a must, to stimulate our broad, wild imaginations. There must be someone to praise and celebrate the emerging work, someone to see that spark and fan it and insist that it must be tended. A few toys are a must—pastel crayons and a fresh, clean sketchpad, maybe, or a collection of seashells and glue and yarn, a fishing pole or a sailboat, or maybe even just an ankle bracelet with bells. And there's a lot to be said for a good notebook and a trip up the road once in awhile, just to shake up your point of view, step outside the normal world and look at it from another direction. One needs the news, but only in small doses. And a pet, for pure unconditional love, is not a bad addition to any writer's life. (Ever notice how many animals we





▶▶▶▶ have among us?)

The truth is, no one, not psychologists or ministers or even our own group, particularly understands the process of how things are created. Long ago, I stole a term from Steven King, “the girls in the basement” to help me define the process for myself, to understand what—or rather who—I’m taking care of when I try to live a good writer’s life. I had to put a name to the Muses, and “the girls in the basement” nailed it.

The girls in the basement are the ones who do the work of writing books. They put them together, fight it out among themselves, hand up the pages to me as we go. My job—my whole job—is to make sure they get the tools they need, to see to it that they’re well-cared for, make sure I’m providing a good body and environment for them to work in.

There’s a crew of them. I used to think there were only three teenagers, raising hell. And there is one for sure—Hilary, who hates her name. She’s a skinny white girl who smokes in the alley and whistles at boys riding bikes on the street. She’s pierced and tattooed and she’s always dyeing her hair some new color. She drinks shots of tequila straight, loves color and loud music and new things. She’s the one who loves my travel, so she can absorb whatever I happen to see. She likes me to take chances and be brave and scare myself.

Lately I’ve been noticing that there’s a motherly woman who looks a lot like my friend Lynn, who goes to church at the AME and works with lost children. She preaches long wisdom and self-control and is the one who glares at the clock and says, “It’s time to go to bed.”

There are others down there, too. I don’t always know who is working on what, but I do know that I can trust them. If I do what they tell me to do, they go to work and hand up my pages to me. Not always in easy or sublime ways—I sometimes think, actually, that they work on a strict, Need-

To-Know security system and I’m the last person on the list. Or else they think it’s hilarious to play tricks on me, that they’re down there snickering when I think I’m writing a book about one thing, when they’ve been handing me up the clues all along, and they howl with delight when I finally get it. Like the last person to get the joke in a room.

I’ve learned how to take care of them. That doesn’t mean that I’m a great writer, or even a good one, just that I am one, and I know it, and in general, it’s kept me healthy and sane and producing over 15 years, even a couple of really nasty ones there for awhile. That’s what I’ll be writing about over the next few months—how to take care of the girls in the basement. You can call them something else. You can rename the entire process if you like. It’s yours, after all. You don’t have to proclaim yourself as an artist and I’m not going to tell you the spreadsheets are a bad thing (in fact, I’d like to have one—I just never seem to figure out the software!) or that you should be writing Important Things, because we are writing important things. Really important things. My goal is just to keep us healthier, celebrating our lives more. Hope you’ll come along. **NINK**

Bits'n'Pieces

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO... Phyllis A. Whitney who turns 100 years old on September 9, 2003. A reliable source assures me she enjoys receiving messages through her website, www.phyllisawhitney.com.
— **TdR**

NINK, a publication of Novelists, Inc.

An Organization for Writers of Popular Fiction
P.O. Box 1166
Mission KS 66222-0166

Publishing Services by Huseby Agency, Ltd.

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