



# NINK

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

## *Eternal Reserve*

BY ETHAN ELLENBERG

A group of papers recently crossed my desk that reminded me of the permanent or eternal reserve that many publishers keep on individual books. I suspect that few authors are aware of this, but it's a serious issue that affects almost every author.

The root of this problem is that many publishers keep a tiny but permanent reserve against returns. This should not be confused with illegitimate practices regarding the reserve for returns that less than reputable publishers have employed. This eternal reserve, as any of the publishers that utilize it will likely argue, is a legitimate accounting practice. And, if the permanent return is tiny and not fixed, it can be justified. If it is not, it is an egregious use of the reserve concept and a serious way of depriving authors of royalty income.

First, some background: I have been on both sides of this issue. Prior to becoming an agent I worked in the contracts and royalty areas for two of the largest publishers. In my first job I actually had access to and spent some time with

the large royalty books that housed the companies' royalty records. (Yes, the hand-entered books that held the royalty records.) In these books you could follow the royalty records of titles that had been in print for 20 or even 30 years. I remember reviewing books that hadn't had a return in five or even ten years. These were customarily

### ***Publishers have the right to protect themselves from paying royalties on unsold copies.***

“dead” books, long out of print. Sometimes a return came in, but rarely.

Even on these titles, a permanent reserve was usually kept. The reserve would often be 50 books, period. From the author's point of view, you can make the case that no permanent reserve should be kept. When a book is essentially dead—let's say three years without a recorded sale or return—even the final or permanent reserve should be liquidated. However, a publisher could legitimately argue that returns are received even ten years after a

book is dead and so they shouldn't be forced to pay royalties on books that could be returned.

From where I sit, this is a coin toss—both sides can make legitimate claims. As long as the publisher must absorb returns for credit, it wants protection from paying royalties on these unsold copies. If no returns are imminent by any

common sense measure, authors should be paid royalty income that has in all likelihood been earned.

In my capacity as agent, I have several clients with long, productive careers. I have full access to their royalty records and there are times when I review them. Even though there is obviously a smaller collection of authors, the patterns of sale are similar to the ones I saw as a publishing house employee. After the active life of a book, years could go by with no activity—no returns whatsoever. Sometimes a return or three would pop up.

The fact is that nearly all books follow a similar pattern in their publishing lives. Ten-year-old books, with no new shipments, don't sud-

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# THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE...

## HELLO...AND GOOD-BYE

I'm not quite sure how it happened, but 2003 is almost gone. I swear I lost a few months in there someplace, but I can't quite say where, or how. All I know is that this year went whizzing past, and here I am, spinning in its wake.

This is my last column, and my last official chance to offer a resounding Thank You to all the folks who kept Ninc going in this, its 15th year of serving its writer members. Ninc couldn't exist without the hard work and dedication of all its volunteers, and in this respect, 2003 was no different from previous years: we had a *lot* of great volunteers!

First, my deepest thanks to my fellow board members: Jean Brashear, who on January 1 will take over as president. She's going to be superb! Ann Josephson, who has given yeoman's labor in converting Ninc's financial records to a new, more effective and professional accounting software system that will provide future boards with better, more detailed financial records. Ann has even agreed to hang in there for a second year to ensure that all the kinks in the new system are smoothed out! Karen Harbaugh, who has served as secretary and record keeper despite the distractions of frequently failing e-mail and computers and the interruptions provided by life in general. Olivia Rupprecht, whose incredible hard work was evident to all in every wonderful issue of *NINK* this year. Julie Kistler, who began the year as our Advisory Council rep and gallantly led the Site committee that got us Bishop's Lodge in Santa Fe for next year's conference. And Barbara Keiler, who graciously stepped in when Julie had to step down. Thank you, all. You've been a wonderful team and it's been a privilege to serve with you.

To our many other volunteers who work just as hard, but often without the recognition they deserve: Brenda Hiatt-Barber, who runs NinCLink (and, honest! she wants a better list serve system as much as you all do! Miracle Workers please apply!); Neff Rotter, who regularly collects and posts information about members' upcoming books on the Ninc website; Julie Kistler, who has kept Ninc's agent pages up-to-date; Diane Chamberlain, who, year after year, gently reminds those of us who are in danger of being dropped from the roster to send in those overdue renewals; and Peggy Webb, who has served as assistant editor for *NINK*. A special thanks to Kathy Lynn Emerson, who, as head of our Membership committee, has shepherded in new members for the past three years. Kathy has reached the mandatory end of her term, and we'll be sorry to see her go. Fortunately, Lillian Stewart Carl has agreed to take her place, so we're lucky there! Thank you, Lillian! Another special thanks goes to Judy Gill and Jan Scarborough, who have been quietly working away assembling an anthology of gems from past issues of *NINK*, a project for which we hope to find a publisher in the year ahead. And let me not forget all the wonderful people who wrote the columns and articles that make *NINK* so special. The pittance we pay you doesn't begin to recognize the importance of your contributions!

My thanks to Ninc's employees and contractors, without whose professional services we'd have a much harder time running the show: Sandy Huseby, doughty publisher of *NINK* and essential supporter of overworked

editors; David Brooks, our central coordinator, who keeps our office open, the paperwork flowing, and manages our member database, to boot; and Craig Johnson, our webmaster, who Knows All. Thank you!

This year was a little different from its predecessors because we didn't have a conference. As you all know by now, in an effort to counteract declining conference attendance, last year's Board voted to move the annual Ninc conference from the fall to the early spring. What appeared on the surface to be a fairly simple change, wasn't simple at all. It required revisions to the Bylaws, adjustments in our planning and scheduling, and a lot of administrative bits and pieces that we discovered had to be changed along the way. (We're still finding little things that we hadn't taken into consideration.)

In the spirit of trying something new, Julie Kistler and her Site committee, with the support and encouragement of the inimitable Laura Baker, found us superb accommodations in the historic Bishop's Lodge near Santa Fe. And then our Wonder Woman of a conference coordinator, Cathy Maxwell, created a program that focuses on renewing the creative soul within us rather than on the traditional business-oriented schedule offered in previous conferences. I confess, I loved the site and the concept of a spirit-renewing retreat, but when Julie and Cathy announced that they were basing their room block reservations and conference budgets on having 75 paid attendees, I quailed in my boots. *Seventy-five paid attendees?* Clearly, they'd gone mad! Too many margaritas had made them lose touch with reality—we'd had a hard time getting a hundred-plus folks to pay for New York, and New York-based conferences have traditionally been by far the best attended. Where did they think we'd get 75 people to pay for a *retreat*???? I crawled under my desk and whimpered every time I thought of it.

Well, I'm happy to say that I was wrong and they were right: We passed the hundred mark by the first of November, and registration is still climbing. In fact, we've booked all available rooms at the Lodge and Cathy has now had to arrange additional accommodations and shuttle transportation at a nearby hotel (and at a great price, too!). Santa Fe is going to be a smash success, and it's all thanks to the vision, hard work, and dedication of Cathy and her trusty assistants, Laura Baker and Barbara Samuels, and their growing team of volunteers who are coping with all the behind-the-scenes stuff essential to pull it off. A truly heart-felt thanks to all of you. You're incredible, every single one of you!

### **The year ahead...**

A hearty round of thanks is also due the brave folks who stepped forward to take on the task of running Ninc in 2004. Jean Brashear, as this year's president-elect, will take over the job of president, of course. The other positions filled by this year's election are:

President-elect: Vicki Lewis Thompson

Secretary: Jaclyn Reding

Treasurer: Ann Josephson

Jan Nowasky, aka Lorraine Heath, has bravely volunteered to be the next editor of *NINK* and is already hard at work because her first issue, which arrives in members' mailboxes at the beginning of January, has to come together in December. Thanks, Jan! You're a brave soul, and we're grateful! Barbara Keiler has agreed to take on another year as Advisory Council rep, as well, so they're all set to go come January 1!

The voting for the 2004 Nominating committee members was *very* close and required some careful repeat counts to be sure of the results. In alphabetical order, the members for next year are:

Laura Baker

Kathy Lynn Emerson

Pat Gaffney

Merline Lovelace

Terey daly Ramin

A huge vote of thanks to *all* those who volunteered to run for these essential positions in Ninc. The organization wouldn't exist without the hard work and support of folks like you! So...congratulations! And welcome to 2004, which is just around the corner!

### **More New Members!**

Ninc always has room for new members. We *need* them! They bring in new ideas, new energy, and new perspectives that help keep Ninc vital and strong. If you know any author with at least two books already published who might be interested in joining Ninc, please steer them our way. Application forms and details on qualifications for membership are all on the public pages at Ninc's website, [www.ninc.com](http://www.ninc.com), along with information about Ninc and the many benefits of membership. We'd love to have them!

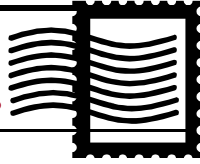
### **And now, at last...**

My own personal and very heartfelt thanks to everyone here for the opportunity to be involved with Ninc. I've learned a lot in my ten years of membership, but more important, I've made friends who have enriched my life in ways beyond counting. I'm very grateful for each and every one of you. Thank you! This truly is a great place to be!

(And if anyone ever sees the summary results of the 2002 Adult Literacy Survey anywhere, let me know, will you? I've been wanting to do a follow-up to my column on adult literacy, but...)

— **Anne Holmberg**

## LETTERS TO NINK.....



Even in this online age—with Ninlink—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.

### In This Moment

In the Nov. newsletter, Barbara Samuels' "Be Here Now" article from her "Care and Feeding of the Girls in the Basement" series was beautiful. Although I do not do journaling, it really moved me. I have spoken to a cancer care group and senior citizens about writing to help them get through tough times, and this idea of "in the moment," (or actually "in this moment") is surely a topic that anyone could benefit from. Besides being a marvelous exercise for casual writers, it would also be a great tool for professional authors getting into our characters' heads, either before beginning a new book, or even while writing it. This "little" article is definitely a big keeper.

— Karen Harper

## 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:**

Janet Woods, Kardinya WA Australia  
Doris Rangel, Victoria TX  
Pat White (*Patricia Mae White*), Sammamish WA

### **Renewing Members:**

Pamela Muelhbauer (*Pamela Bauer*), St. Michael MN  
Patricia Potter, Cordova TN

### **New Members:**

Inglath Cooper, Penhook VA  
John G. Hemry, Owings MD  
Shirley Tallman (*Erin Ross*), Eugene OR  
Lynn M. Turner, Kentville, Nova Scotia

**Ninc has room to grow...recommend membership to *your* colleagues. Prospective members may apply online at [www.ninc.com](http://www.ninc.com).**

## Eternal Reserve

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denly return 500 or 1,000 copies. In fact, I can't remember even moderate amounts of returns for an older book (for many books this would be at least three years post first publication). If a book is very active, with new shipments, that is a different story. In that case, the book will behave essentially like a recent title and substantial bursts of returns are possible.

Despite these patterns that anyone who tracks royalties knows, many publishers do use an eternal reserve. It is a controversial, debatable practice, but it is legitimate. But, what happens if the permanent or final reserve is abused? What if it is more than a token reserve or if it is completely disconnected from any common sense notion of how books are returned? In these instances, the publisher is simply failing or refusing to pay royalties.

One such practice that greatly concerns me is a permanent reserve that is set as a percentage of gross shipments. Even a 1% permanent reserve could deny substantial royalty income to an author. Let me give you an illustration. During the initial publication of a book 100,000 copies are shipped and the publisher establishes a standard 1% permanent reserve against this shipment,

***Authors have the right to be paid full royalty income on a timely basis and not be subjected to methods that unfairly deny them income.***

so that's a 1,000 copies. Depending on the book's sales, the permanent reserve isn't visible or operative, but subsumed in the traditional reserve and most likely would not have an impact on the author's royalties. But what happens five or even ten years out? What happens when in the prior five years only ten returns were received? Why would 1,000 copies need to be held in reserve when the publisher can be confident that it will not receive even 100 returns?

Let's continue to work with this example. What if the permanent reserve wasn't as tiny as 1%—say 3% (3,000 copies) or 5% (5,000 copies). The numbers grow more and more absurd. A reserve is not supposed to function in this way. Let's examine how the reserve is really supposed to function. In our example, we've shipped 100,000 copies and let's say that 50,000 are reported sold. The publisher

## Bits 'n' Pieces

Compiled by Terey daly Ramin

knows they're sold—they've been paid for them, the large accounts have actually given the publisher sales figures from individual stores. Now the potential pool of returns isn't 100,000 copies, it's 50,000 copies. Of those 50,000 copies, let's say 40,000 have been returned and credited. Now our 3% of shipments or 3,000 copies is actually a reserve against 10,000 "unknown" copies. It's no longer a 3% reserve for returns, it's now a 30% reserve for returns. And, as the number of "unknown" copies decreases, this percentage steadily increases.

Obviously, a reserve set by a fixed percentage of net shipped is an unfair practice. A reserve should never be fixed; it should be based on actual experience. Publishers that employ a permanent reserve with a fixed rate based on gross shipments aren't really using a reserve against returns at all, they are simply not paying authors royalties on every book sold, as promised in their contracts. It may be 99% or 97% or 95%, but it's not 100%, and in some cases this can amount to a significant loss of income to the author.

The reserve for returns will continue to be an area of contention between authors and publishers. Publishers have the right to protect themselves from paying royalties on unsold copies. Authors have the right to be paid full royalty income on a timely basis and not be subjected to methods that unfairly deny them income. The clearest path to moderating this tension is for publishers to increase the flow of accurate, timely sales information to authors so the legitimacy of the reserve can be openly and objectively judged. Authors must accept that there will be instances where the publisher can legitimately delay payment of royalties until it's clear that the books have actually been sold and will not be returned.

Last word—a reserve based on a permanent fixed percentage of books shipped is inconsistent with sound accounting practices and unfairly denies authors royalty income. **NINK**

*Ethan Ellenberg has led his own New York-based literary agency for the past 18 years. Ellenberg notes: We are eagerly seeking new clients in all genres of commercial fiction. Additional information and complete submission guidelines are available at [ethanellenberg.com](http://ethanellenberg.com). Please follow our guidelines carefully.*

### YOU KNEW SOMEONE WOULD FIND IT...

and so they have—they're pretty sure. <g> Yep, that's right. Psychologists from the University of Toronto and Harvard University have identified *one* of the biological bases of creativity. Yeah, like we writers haven't known it existed all along. Of course it's linked to mental illness...but I suppose we really shouldn't be too surprised about that either, given Faulkner and Hemingway and Van Gogh and all those other creative minds who've gone before... But I digress. The study, pubbed in the September *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* says most people's brains shut out a lot of environmental stimuli that the brains of creative people don't. This is called "latent inhibition" and defined as "an animal's unconscious capacity to ignore stimuli that experience has shown are irrelevant to its needs." Testing has shown researchers that creative types like us have low levels of this "latent inhibition." "This means that creative individuals remain in contact with the extra information constantly streaming in from the environment," says co-author and U of T psychology professor Jordan Peterson. "The normal person classifies an object, and then forgets about it, even though that object is much more complex and interesting than he or she thinks. The creative person, by contrast, is always open to new possibilities." They used to think not screening out stimuli was simply psychosis, but not anymore. Now they think—properly utilized and controlled—that it may contribute to original thinking. Peterson states: "If you are open to new information, new ideas, you better be able to intelligently and carefully edit and choose. If you have 50 ideas, only two or three are likely to be good. You have to be able to discriminate or you'll get swamped." And Carson says, "Scientists have wondered for a long time why madness and creativity seem linked," then continues, "It appears likely that low levels of latent inhibition and exceptional flexibility in thought might predispose to mental illness under some conditions and to creative accomplishment under others." And back to Peterson: "We are very excited by the results of these studies," says Peterson. "It appears that we have not only identified one of the biological bases of creativity but have moved towards cracking an age-old mystery: the relationship between genius, madness, and the doors of perception." **more...**

## *The Comeback Kid*

# *“Writer Overboard”*

### **BY VICTORIA THOMPSON**

A wise writer friend once shared with me her philosophy of life. She said she used to believe that your ship only comes in once, and if you missed it you were out of luck. Life experience had taught her differently, however. She'd come to realize that the ship came in many times. If you missed it once or twice, or even if you'd managed to jump on it and then fallen off, eventually it would still come back around again. In other words, you'd always get another chance if you were willing to take it.

Many people already know the story of how I fell off a couple ships and managed to catch another in my career. Some of them have been encouraging me to tell that story for the benefit of those who don't. So here goes....

I was one of the lucky ones. I wrote my first historical romance in the early '80s when that genre was just hitting its stride. I accidentally sold it to Zebra Books without really knowing what I was doing. They only paid me a pittance, even by publishing standards, but they knew how to market those puppies, and they sold a whole lot of my books. Before long, I was making a comfortable living and planning ways to become even more successful. By an odd twist of fate, because I knew so many writers from my years volunteering in various writers' organizations, I happened to realize that the next hot genre was going to be romantic suspense (or whatever name you call it). This doesn't sound so amazing in 2003, but ten or so years ago, it was genuinely prophetic. Like most prophets, I had

to endure skepticism—mostly from my agent, who insisted I shouldn't waste my time writing a romantic suspense because no one would publish it. She was right, of course, because at that time no one *would* publish it. Romantic Suspense was as dead as a doornail and everybody knew it. But every writer I knew either wanted to write it or was trying to write it, and we all wanted to read it, and these writers all told me to let them know if I found a publisher who would buy it. Women who were the same demographic as the readers who would buy the books all agreed it was a concept whose time had come, so I was right, and I knew it. I knew what The Next Big Thing was going to be! How many times does that happen? This wasn't just my ship coming in. This was knowing the ship was on its way and having the opportunity to take a tug boat out to meet it so I could be on it already when everyone else was trying to jump aboard.

So what do you think I did? I wrote a romantic suspense novel, of course! I wrote more than one, actually. By the time I'd finished the first one, the first few incarnations of the “new” genre had begun to appear. I sent the reviews to my agent to prove I'd been right, and she started sending out my manuscripts. And my proposals. And more proposals. I got glowing rejections. Wonderfully flattering rejections. Amazingly complimentary rejections. But only rejections.

That was okay, though. I still had my career as an historical romance writer. I'd just keep writing the suspense stories on the side until one

clicked. Unfortunately, I hadn't noticed that oil spot on the deck. From out of nowhere, my publisher told me my sales weren't good enough and they weren't going to give me a new contract. Before I knew it, I'd slipped and fallen overboard the USS Historical Romance.

Remember Murphy's Law, where everything that can go wrong does? I had two kids in college then, and I couldn't get arrested on Publisher's Row, so I had to get a real job. One where I had to wear pantyhose and stuff.

That was okay, though. I was still working on proposals. Sooner or later one of them would sell, and I'd be a full-time writer again. Then one of my suspense novels got optioned by a Hollywood producer. The option got picked up by ABC. They wrote a script. One of the Gen X actresses with three names was interested. Surely now a publisher would buy it! But the bimbo who ran ABC for about 15 minutes back then didn't like it, so the movie died, and the book has now been officially rejected by every major publisher on the face of the earth.

That was okay, though. I was still churning out proposals. I tried my hand at more suspense, woman in jeopardy, and humorous single title mainstream. My agent pointed out that one of the stories I'd churned out could easily become a traditional mystery and be developed into a series. Ewww, I said, I don't want to be stuck writing the same characters over and over! [Note: several years ago, I wrote an article for *NINK* called “The Thirteen Dumbest Words I Ever

Said.” Those were the words.] I kept on writing proposals. And I kept on getting rejected.

That wasn't okay, of course, but it did teach me humility and patience and all those other character traits that only develop when you're miserable. So I was ready when The Call finally came. The call was from my agent, who wanted to know if I'd like to try my hand at writing a mystery series set in turn-of-the-century New York City with a midwife heroine for Berkley.

Well, now, I'll have to think about this for at least 3 seconds. *Yes!*

Let me pause right here and explain that I'd set one of my more recent historical romances during this time period. My daughter was attending NYU and living in Greenwich Village, where I'd often visited her. I'd also bought books on the history of Greenwich Village to read just for fun because I was interested. And did I mention my day job was working for the March of Dimes? Several of my key volunteers were midwives or obstetrical nurses. Considering all of this, you might believe that being offered this series was Kismet and would explain why I was so excited about writing it. Just between us, though, I would have been equally as excited if it had been set in Ethiopia during the last Ice Age and the heroine was a potter. And was I still worried about being bored writing the same characters over and over in a series? Not on your life. In fact, I now found the prospect comforting. It may not have been the kind of ship I'd been expecting, but this one was slowing down for me, and I jumped on board.

Once again, I was one of the lucky ones. Lots of people lost their publishers in the Great Historical Romance Downsizing, and not all of them found another home. I had found a publisher who not only gave me a chance to write a good book but did a fabulous job of packaging and promoting it. The Mystery Genre is a completely different world from Romance, so I had to get used to new things, but most of them were good

things. The small print runs were a shock, but the books stay in print and get reprinted regularly. The first book in the series, *Murder on Astor Place*, got reviewed in *Publishers Weekly*—and it was a good review! A couple of booksellers called me to say how much they loved the book. Kathryn Falk called to ask if *Romantic Times* could feature me in the first edition of their *Mystery Magazine*.

Things got even better with the second book. *Murder on St. Mark's Place* was nominated for an Edgar Allen Poe Award by Mystery Writers of America. As my agent reminded me over and over, This Was *huge!* I'd written 20 historical romances and nothing good had ever happened. Two mysteries, and I'm nominated for an Edgar. Remember those 13 dumb words? Only now did I realize just *how* stupid they had been.

As a veteran romance writer, I love a happy ending, but as we all know, this story won't really be over as long as I'm able to write. The most I can have now is a happy interlude aboard the Good Ship Berkley Prime Crime, but I'm enjoying it thoroughly

for as long as it lasts. I just learned that the sixth book in the series, *Murder on Marble Row*, will be coming out in hardcover next May. Picture me sitting on the first class deck, sipping vintage champagne.

I also like stories with morals. Remember the car commercial that said Life is a Journey, Enjoy the Ride? Well, the Writing Life is a cruise. The wise writer friend who shared her philosophy with me all those years ago was right about those ships. They do circle and come back again. Even if you miss one, the next one might be even better. It was for me. So what's the moral? The next time you land on the deck of one of those ships, hang on tight. **NINK**

*Victoria Thompson is the author of 20 historical romances and five historical mysteries. Her most recent book is Murder on Mulberry Bend. She's also the Director of Development for the Presbyterian Homes, a job she loves so much she doesn't even mind wearing pantyhose. (And thanks to my wise writer friend. You know who you are, Joann.)*

## Bits'n'Pieces

**AGENT NEWS...At William Morris...**Alan Kannot, longtime executive VP and COO of William Morris's East Coast office has left the company to form a multimedia-marketing firm. In his place, Wayne Kabak and Cara Stein will serve as co-COOs. **And California's Creative Artists Agency** has signed a lease for 15,000 square feet of offices at Fifth Avenue and 21st Street. Word is former William Morris theater agent George Lane is expected to run the new branch, but according to the NY Post CAA East is having trouble getting people to relocate from Los Angeles.

**THE PUBLICITY GAME...**It appears the growing tendency among publishers is to tour breakout authors prior to publication, sending them to meet with buyers and jump-start buzz. Stuart Applebaum from Random House says, "It's book publishing's version of the DJ tour that musicians have done for decades to get that all-important segment to play their soon-to-be-released records on the air." The *Wall Street Journal* article that supplied the Applebaum quote also noted, "Pre-pub tours often involve first-time novelists, a tough sell under any circumstances, and mid-list authors who seem poised to hit the next level of success." So I guess those things about meeting with buyers that we've been telling each other throughout the years...those things are true.

— TdR

# *Romance Novels: The Fruitcake of the Literary World*

**BY CHERYL ANNE PORTER**

It was a slow day, and I was reading this newspaper article on fruitcakes. You're already starting to worry about me, aren't you? Anyway, I was reading along—when suddenly it occurred to me that fruitcakes and their perception in the culinary world are much like that of romance novels in the literary world. It's true, and all we can do is laugh. So let's look at this: How many common traits do romance novels, their writers and readers and their perception in the market place, share with fruitcakes?

▼ People are very reluctant to admit they have a fruitcake in the house. Same with romance novels.

▼ People will deny—in front of a firing squad, mind you—having ever bought a fruitcake. Same with romance novels. I don't know the figures on the fruitcake industry, but where does that billion-dollar-a-year romance industry figure come from, if no one ever buys them? I find myself very perplexed by this.

▼ However, I do know that the fruitcake industry is huge and thriving. Ubiquitous, even. Yeah, fruitcakes are everywhere. So are romance novels. And yet...no one ever bought one, ate one, or read one? People, I am becoming very suspicious here. Something is rotten in Denmark...and it ain't the fruitcakes.

▼ People will deny having tasted a tiny bite of a fruitcake, much less having eaten an entire slice of one. Same with romance novels—people have peeked and pondered and

looked for the sex scenes...but never read an entire one, for heaven's sake.

▼ People poke fun at fruitcakes all the time. They even use the word as a derogatory term for a nutty person. Same with romance novels and their readers. Bodice rippers. Those smutty stories. Trashy books. Eye-rolling prose. Well, you get it. Shoot, even some of our readers use those same words as they're buying our books. They hate fruitcake, too. Just ask them.

▼ Fruitcakes are extremely durable. They would have made a great weapon in the Middle Ages (think "catapult fodder"). Nowadays they serve as doorstops, boat anchors, and a way of threatening your kids ("If you don't stop hitting your brother, I'll make you eat this entire fruitcake that Grandma, whom we now hate, sent us.") One comedian said there is only one fruitcake in the entire world...it just gets passed around to someone else every year. "Oh, no, Betty, it's our year to have the fruitcake." Same with romance novels—all those people who hate them (if asked publicly) read them voraciously and pass them along to their friends. Romance novels are always in circulation.

▼ No one really knows what all goes into the making of a fruitcake. Not really. I mean, you can be given the recipe, the ingredients, the cookware, the state-of-the-art kitchen, and the time to make one, but the danged thing will never, ever look like it does in the cookbook picture. That's because the ingredients can be varied and improved upon according to the

baker's personal taste. Yeah, I know: Same with romance novels. They all get lumped together under one big huge umbrella, and yet the ingredients in each are as varied as the talents of the authors who write them.

▼ Everyone loves to hate fruitcakes. It shows how smart you are. How cool. Totally hip. "No, sorry. Hate fruitcake. Never touch the stuff. Totally lowbrow. Anyone who would eat a fruitcake would howl at the moon." Same perception with romance novels, their readers and writers. I almost didn't have to tell you that one, did I?

▼ Fruitcakes are trotted out at Christmas and totally derided and trashed for about a month. Same with romance novels on Valentine's Day. Come February 14, trot out the romance writers and ask 'em the same old trite questions about sex scenes and where do you get your ideas. My answer? "I live in a brothel." (I don't, Mom! Just kidding!)

▼ The fruitcake market has been around forever and is a huge industry with healthy sales and a quality product. Sound familiar? Insert "Romance novels" for "fruitcakes." And yet, no one buys fruitcakes (romance novels) and the people who make them (write them) must be as nuts (perverted) as their cakes (fans, books).

▼ It's almost a funny joke—like some kind of pun that makes you groan—to have a fruitcake sighting in someone's house. Same with romance novels, right? Now you're catching on.



Everyone I've ever met who's never, ever even tried to write a romance novel, or any other kind, seems to think they could produce a quality one in an afternoon. I tell them: "Then go do it, you (expletive deleted)." Actually, what this fruitcake-hating moron doesn't realize is s/he's just given us a compliment. Here 'tis: Our books are so well written that, to an outsider, it looks easy to do. So is ice-skating. I mean, if that tiny girl in the Winter Olympics, who makes it look so easy, can do it, anybody could just strap on a pair of skates and get out there and compete internationally, right?

OK, now I'm just getting snippy.

▼ Fruitcakes (romance novels) are a very misunderstood food (genre). People would even argue with you the designation that they are food (literature). People eye fruitcakes (romance novels) somewhat askance...and see it (them) just sitting there on the shelf or the counter...and look around to see if they're alone—and then grab up a nibble (book) and eat it (read it) hurriedly, quickly throwing it down and feigning innocence the moment they think they might be discovered.

▼ Still, fruitcakes. There is no way in heck you are ever going to convince a fruitcake-hating person—typically someone who has never, ever tasted one but has heard everyone else say they're awful, so firmly believes it must be true—to try one. You can talk until you're blue (or red) in the face...but s/he isn't going to try it. They're awful, nasty things. Everyone says. S/he doesn't need to try it. S/he knows. Uh, same with romance novels, you think?

So, OK, I'm out of ammo now—or bullet points, at any rate. That's all the ways I can think of that romance novels and fruitcakes are alike. You know, it's funny, because now if you hear someone trashing fruitcakes, and you're a romance writer and reader, you have to defend

the fruitcake. You just have to. Yes, I will visit you at the asylum.

True fruitcake story: I was at my Mom's this last Christmas. One day, and to my utter horror, the woman pulls a fruitcake from out of *the back of the refrigerator*, y'all, and says to me: "Hmm, I didn't know that was in there. It must have been in there since last year." *Since last year.* (This is me now: Yes, it's a big, totally-packed-full refrigerator. ET could live in there, and we'd never know it.) Then she says: "You want to try a bite to see if it's still any good?" (I know, I know...was it ever?) I said, very evenly yet with a smile: "No, Mom, you go ahead. You try it."

The tacit *I dare you* hung between us in the air. She looked at me, no doubt thinking about her will and her jewelry and therefore my motivation. I believe this because she said, "All right, I will. But if I die I'm leaving the good jewelry to your sister." This didn't scare me. I've beat my sister up before. I can do it again. So I said, "Fine." Anyway, Mom—very bravely, totally a martyr to the cause—opened the fruitcake, sliced off a thin piece, and nibbled it. I waited. She smiled, brandishing her treat. "Hey, this is still good. I knew it would be."

Need I say more? By the way, she keeps her copies of my romance titles on a bookshelf out in her garage.

So, have I convinced you? Is the fruitcake now our official dessert? Should it be served at all our functions? Can we have pins shaped like fruitcakes? Can it be our logo? On our Web site? Can we have an outreach fruitcake chapter? A fruitcake reception at our conference? Please?!

Oh, a rumor: (Insert here the name of any romance publisher) announces they are moving their headquarters to Claxton, Georgia and Corsicana, Texas. Guess why. **NINK**

## Bits'n'Pieces

**OKAY, SO I LOVED THIS ONE...** Want to promote your newest book? Try it the way author Julie Hilden did. She asked her landlord for permission to drape a banner of her book cover on her apartment building. With "the help of a friend and a guy from Craig's List" it took about \$1,300 to create and put up the banner. "Ego gratification: priceless (kidding!)." Hilden suggests, "There's no reason other writers couldn't do the same, and I'd love to see, someday, a city of book banners."

**THE DIY GENERATION ON TOUR—AND GAINING RECOGNITION...** According to *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* self-publishing is a badge of honor among young people and not a last resort: "The DIY attitude among young writers, cartoonists, and zinesters is propelling a mass of material into bookstores, over the Internet and onto your coffee table without ever passing under the nose of an editor at Knopf." It might do us experienced oldsters well to sit up and take notice because watching the recent attrition and consolidation rates of our top-line publishers, these youngsters may not be a passing faddish-statement, but the wave of the future. Labeling themselves the Perpetual Motion Roadshow three young writers are part of a seven-city tour that showcases their work: readings, performances, storytelling, and general mayhem throughout the U.S. and Canada. The Roadshow has traveled five times with a different DIY cast, each time selling their work and each other's like snake charmers. The show is both sales pitch and literary event, and if we oldsters don't watch ourselves, these impatient kids—these modern day beatnik types <g>—may just figure out how to do us oldsters one better and put us out of our jobs...  
— TdR

## ***This could be the start of a beautiful friendship....***

Brian Terwilliger, owner of Terwilliger Productions, is one of the new breed of filmmakers—energetic, enthusiastic, multi-talented, and very young. At the age of 27 he has already racked up an impressive list of credits: first assistant director on the feature film *Sordid Lives* with Olivia Newton-John and Beau Bridges, and production manager and first assistant director on several national PSAs with Richard Karn (Al from “Home Improvement”). Most recently he worked with visual effects for the summer action/adventure *The Core* and the soon-to-be-released *Big Fish*, a Tim Burton film based on Alabaman Daniel Wallace’s remarkable book of “mythic proportions.”

But the project dearest to Brian’s heart is the *Van Nuys Airport (VNY) Documentary*. Combining his filmmaking expertise with a life-long love of flying, Brian officially launched his project in early October of this year. With three full days of production in the can, he is turning his dream into a reality.

**NINK:** Brian, before we talk about the *VNY Documentary*, tell me about the movie, *Big Fish*. When will it be released?

**Brian Terwilliger:** Limited release this December and wide in January or February, 2004. The trailers are currently playing in theaters and on the Internet.

**NINK:** You were visual effects plate coordinator. What does a plate coordinator do?

**BT:** Part of the job entails doing measurements on the set during filming to ensure that the elements added

in post production can be done to scale. You must have detailed parameters of the shot. If you have a computer-generated (CG) image inside a live-action shot, you need to figure out how far away the CG object will be, what the focus should be, lighting, etc. Say a person is sitting on a bench and you intend to put a CG bird next to them...you need to know how far the camera is to the bench, the angle of the camera to the bench, lens height, focal length, shutter speed, time of day, etc. The correct information enables you to replicate the scene inside the computer so the visual effect matches. If you don’t figure it out on the set you can never go back and figure out what you did. You can only get information when you shoot the plate.

**NINK:** What is a plate?

**BT:** The plate is what you shoot, minus the element which will be added later, i.e. the visual effect.

**NINK:** After *Big Fish* you started production on the *VNY Documentary*. Why did you choose this particular subject?

**BT:** Since I was a little boy I have loved airplanes and aviation. I grew up attending air shows and collecting posters and books about aviation. My childhood aspiration was to become a pilot.

I never lost my love of aviation, but when I was a teen I became interested in the film industry and started pursuing production classes in school here in California. Also, I met people in the industry and gained valuable experience working with them.

I used the money I made in film production to pay for flying lessons. I

was 19 at the time. Within nine months I soloed at VNY, and six months later I had my private pilot’s license at the age of 20.

Although I love flying, I am happy to keep it as a hobby, not a career, because I love what I do in the film industry. It enables me to fly. Currently I am part owner of a Cessna Skyline 182 at the Van Nuys airport.

**NINK:** In addition to your interest in flying, what motivated you to film a documentary of VNY?

**BT:** The only thing I like more than flying is sharing flying with other people. To date I’ve taken more than 118 different people up in the plane. Through my experience at VNY I’ve learned some of the amazing history of this airport. The famous last scene from *Casablanca* was filmed there.

Many distinguished, record-setting, and celebrity pilots flew out of VNY, including Amelia Earhart who broke a world speed record from there in 1929. Harrison Ford, John Travolta, Sydney Pollack, Michael Dorn, Lorenzo Lamas, and Patrick Swayze all fly their own aircraft out of VNY.

Great, one-of-a-kind planes are hangered there, including the last of the first-ever personal jet aircraft and a 1930 Stinson Detroiter, which is now 73 years old. Only two exist today. Because of the plane’s rarity and the prohibitive cost of insurance, only two licensed pilots in the world are allowed to fly it.

The airport is turning 75 in December of this year. Its history, people and aircraft are unique. It’s the

busiest general aviation (GA) airport in the world. (GA includes all flying except commercial and military.) They have everything from Piper Cubs to privately owned fighter jets (not armed).

No documentary has ever been made about VNY. As I taxied I would tell my passengers about the history and point out the airplanes and airport features. In February of 2000 I came up with the idea to tell the story on film,

**NINK: How did you get started turning that idea into a reality?**

**BT:** I began making calls and inquiries about getting historical footage, but I didn't have the resources and the time to pursue the documentary on a professional level until late 2001. Since then I've worked steadily to get this idea to fruition. I've met all kinds of people trying to secure funding and garner support for the documentary. Over the last six months, support has snowballed. I currently have more than 60 people involved with the documentary in some way—interviews, investments, service, lending old footage, etc.

**NINK: Who are some of the people you've interviewed?**

**BT:** Legends like Clay Lacy who has more flight hours (50,000) than any other pilot in history, and celebrity pilots like film director/producer Sydney Pollack who has been flying for more than 40 years and owns a Citation X, the fastest non-military jet in the world.

Clay flew for United Airlines for 40 years, and holds 29 world records, including the fastest time around the world from Seattle to Seattle in a Boeing 747. He does aerial photography and filmed the aerial sequences for *Top Gun* as well as other movies. He has also filmed the U.S.A.F. Thunderbirds, the Navy Blue Angels and Air Force One.

**NINK: Did you film the documentary with the same kind of camera used in *Big Fish*?**

**BT:** I used a high definition (HD) camera, which was the same camera used in the most recent *Star Wars* movies. HD is a digital format with a wide screen image which allows you to have several times the resolution of a TV camera. Rather than originating on film, the HD allows you to transfer to film or broadcast on television with very high quality. I used a 1080i 24P 16:9 camera, which was donated by Panavision. That donation gave the documentary a really big boost. We were able to shoot eight interviews, plus aerial footage of stunt planes, all within 72 hours. That officially started the documentary in early October, 2003.

**NINK: How long will it take you to finish?**

**BT:** It will take approximately six more months. I have more interviews, more documentation, and more historical research to complete, but the project is officially under way. Just last week the company I set up to produce this documentary became official, complete with a dedicated bank account, which allowed me to accept my first check from my first investor.

I'm shooting the documentary in pieces as I get the money for funding.

**NINK: Is that the norm?**

**BT:** Yes, it's typical. Independent projects are often funded this way. My credentials (pilot as well as filmmaker) have been a big selling point with investors who view me as someone who is not only very enthusiastic but also clearly qualified to make this documentary.

It's a story I can't tell without the help of other people—the seasoned pilots who have been around 50-plus years, the celebrity pilots, the service people, the air traffic controllers, the people who so graciously lend equipment and old footage, the investors, and a very talented and dedicated production crew.

I still need additional investors. I'm actively looking for people who want to participate and profit in the

*VNY Documentary*.

**NINK: What do you and your supporters hope to achieve with the documentary?**

**BT:** I'm passionate about this airport, and I want to do my part to preserve its history as well as secure its future. First, we want to complete the story, then to be able to share it with others. Sharing the riches of our airport will be a real treat.

**NINK: What are your plans for promotion and distribution? Where can we see the documentary?**

**BT:** You can follow the status of the film on our Web site ([www.VNYdocumentary.com](http://www.VNYdocumentary.com)). The Web site has many behind-the-scenes shots as well as information about the documentary.

Beyond that, when we have a final product, we hope to market to broadcast TV, cable (Discovery Wings), the History Channel, DVD.... We can't sell the documentary until it's finished, so I really can't tell you where it will be.

**NINK: What's next for you, Brian?**

**BT:** I don't know what's next. I'd like to think that once the VNY project is finished I'll have the opportunity to explore other topics—airports or otherwise—in documentaries. I'd like to find something else that captures the imagination, an interesting and rich story I can capture and share.

**NINK: Thank you, Brian. With your passion and persistence I've no doubt you'll soon discover another wonderful story.**

(There have been two interesting developments to this story: 1. The sculpture Brian created from an old propeller blade has been so much in demand, he's hired craftsmen to make more. You can view his propeller art at [www.propellerart.com](http://www.propellerart.com) 2. There is already talk that Brian's *VNY Documentary* will be submitted for an Oscar.) **NINK**





# Revitalizing the Writer...

## Over the Top!

*We're all full at Bishop's Lodge.* Never in our wildest dreams did we think we could do this. So, the next step is to set up an overflow hotel so that everyone who wishes to come to the retreat may. We've chosen Fort Marcy Hotel Suites—[www.fortmarcy.com](http://www.fortmarcy.com)—located not far from Bishop's Lodge.

Fort Marcy has one- and two-bedroom suites complete with full kitchens. We set aside a room block of 20 rooms and will have scheduled shuttle runs between Bishop's Lodge and Fort Marcy from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. The room rate extended to us is \$109 per one-bedroom unit and \$119 per two-bedroom unit. There is an indoor pool on-site and a Fort Marcy health club located two blocks away from the property that you can use for a nominal fee. They also have a complimentary "expanded" continental breakfast.

Our goal is to have everyone at Bishop's Lodge, but we felt we needed to make plans in case of a total sellout of the Lodge so everyone who wishes to attend the retreat can be included. Ninc member Eve Gaddy is matching roommates. Contact her at [egaddy@cox-internet.com](mailto:egaddy@cox-internet.com) with your preferences (smoker/nonsmoker, arrival/departure, number of roommates preferred, etc.). Put "Ninc" or "roommate" in the subject line.

On the plus side to the overflow possibility is that we are able to extend a dynamite room rate for a month longer. The cut-off date for the room block at Fort Marcy is February 1, 2004. When you register for the retreat, Laura Baker, our registrar, will give you the information you need to book into the overflow hotel if you can't get into Bishop's Lodge (whose cut-off date is January 5, 2004)

*Also, because of our numbers,* we are going to make some changes to Tuesday night's open house. The logistics of moving people back and forth to Laura Kinsale's has become overwhelming, especially because this includes those who purchased the spouse/guest package. Our goal in planning the event was a relaxing, wind-down time. We had envisioned retreatants taking advantage of Tuesday afternoon's built-in free time to tour, write, and/or disappear into the spa. Then we would meet for an open house/light sandwichy meal-type affair that was casual and relaxing. A last time to mellow out and say farewells to those leaving the next day.

We'll still keep to that vision but it will probably be held at Bishop's Lodge. We're mulling over ideas now and will have more information in the next newsletter.

*Finally, please don't hesitate to book a tour.* The descriptions are on our Web site or in the registration pamphlet. If you need more info, contact me at [revitalize@ninc.com](mailto:revitalize@ninc.com) and I can mail or fax you information. Those interested in booking time in the Bishop's Lodge spa should contact them directly—and soon!

Thank you again for your fabulous support.

— **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](mailto:registration@ninc.com).

Name:

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Address:

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E-mail

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Phone

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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.*



## ***Ho, Ho, Ho Hell***

### **DEAR ANNETTE:**

Halloween's over, and we're creeping toward that time I dread again...the holidays. Each year I dread the season more and more. Suffice it to say, I grew up in a very dysfunctional family. It's only November, and I'm already feeling a panic attack coming on at the thought of spending so much time with my relatives. I feel like it takes months to pull my self-esteem out of the basement after a week's visit with my kin. Any suggestions?

**Signed: Scrooge**

### **DEAR SCROOGE:**

Boy, if there's anything that could sink someone into a deep winter funk, it's got to be spending time in close quarters with a group of dysfunctional people who could tear your heart out with a single comment.

As it happens, I *do* have a few thoughts that might lessen the pain this year. Mostly they involve planning (and where possible, outright evasion). Unless you've been doing lots of therapy, and have a really strong support system in place, this is *not* the time to try making big breakthroughs with your relatives. Extricating yourself from toxic family patterns takes a lot of work—and no small amount of practice and unpleasantness. It'll take the whole year, believe me.

But for now...

1. *Keep quiet.* If sarcasm, pessimism, and just plain mean-spiritedness are part of your jolly family gathering, I'd recommend giving the group as little fodder to chew on as possible. When I'm in a group I don't feel safe in, I don't

talk a lot about myself. This makes me popular—and saves me the pain of having my life picked apart by well-meaning but clueless family members.

2. *Anticipate the worst—and plan for it.* You know your family's patterns—and trust me—they're not going to change in the next three weeks. Spend a little time imagining likely unpleasantries, and have excuses ready if you need to bolt. You can't control other people's behavior, but you can often anticipate it, and maybe lessen the impact.

3. *Disassociate.* Yes, I'm serious. A little disassociation can be a healthy thing, especially when your family isn't. It takes some of the hurt out if you can turn a painful situation into something less immediate. What I mean is, if you can (at least for a millisecond) step back from an interaction and try to identify a relationship pattern, it'll make that jab about your so-called writing career sting just a little less. Really.

Understanding the typical roles played by people in dysfunctional families can help give this kind of emotional distance. If nothing else, it'll be entertaining to assign parts to the different players.

There are a couple of highly generalized roles family members seem to fit into:

*The Hero/The Good Child:* Pretty self-explanatory. This is the child who is nine going on 40, who excels, is ultra-responsible, and often, competitive. The role of the good child is to bring self-esteem into the family, allowing parents to prove they're good parents and good people. As adults, Hero Children tend to take on too much responsibility. They run things, but often without much joy or satisfaction. They often have a hard time letting others help them.

*The Scapegoat/Problem Child:* The problem child acts out the tension and anger the family tries to deny. This is the child the family feels ashamed of. Scapegoats often turn into adults who flit in and out of the family group, or become the family members who seem to spend much of their time in crisis.

*The Clown or Mascot:* this is the happy-go-lucky child who takes responsibility for the emotional well-being of the family by making everyone laugh. As adults, family mascots often enter helping professions, and even as adults their role is to distract people and change the subject when things get too tense. They're the ones who are never serious, who will deny that any of the family interactions are upsetting or uncalled for.

*The Lost Child:* This child escapes the family tension by becoming invisible. They daydream, fantasize, read, or watch a lot of TV. They deal with reality by withdrawing from it. They often become writers or actors. As adults, they tend not to be joiners. While they are less likely to simply drift in and out of the family like the scapegoat, they are

often quite good at maintaining their emotional aloofness while surrounded by others.

Seeing how you, your siblings, parents, and various stray relations fit the above patterns can help make the situation less painful. I think there's a lot of mileage and healing to be gained from identifying childhood roles, and

being aware of the ways those roles affect us as adults.

— **Annette Carney**

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



## ***Sticky Notes from the Edge***

— **Cheryl Anne Porter**

# ***What Writers Want For Christmas***

A spaceman suit. A new doll (*not* a real brother or sister) that talks, wets, and poops and has its own wardrobe. Roller skates. A red wagon faster than anyone else's. That big Barbie head you can put enough makeup on to make her look like a Bubblegum Princess and then can totally ruin her hair with different colors and cuts. A light saber. A bicycle. Publishers who are paid only when we are and by the same confounding accounting process as we are, one which no one understands, not even the dudes who devised it.

A new fur (fake or real, whatever your tastes are), all the new cartoon videos and a bunch of new comics. New under-the-armpit-sized underwear and red fuzzy bedroom slippers (OK, now who has not yet got those from your mother who swears you don't have any but should?). And new bras four sizes too big and, for the guys, a jock strap three sizes too small (these would be from your sister or brother, of course). Oh, yeah, Santa, and really fix it where "reserves against returns" comes out of publishers' money not writers'. Just for added fun, take it out of the marketing and sales departments' salaries. Talk about watching some nervous people get busy then! I mean seriously—aren't we told that when they buy our books the emotional risk is on our side but the financial risk is all on their side? Well, by Santa, let's see some proof of that.

Some things I know writers (at least this one) *don't* want are that Voice Recognition Software (Dragon Speak, indeed); anything new from Windows; changes to AOL; power surges; fires in Cali-

fornia, followed by the inevitable rains and mudslides; hurricanes in Florida and, again, California; tornadoes in Oklahoma, etc. Seriously. All these annoying software and geological occurrences only make our deadlines harder to achieve. Fix this, Santa.

Oh, yeah, Santa Baby (May I call you Santa Baby?) something else I'd like you to look into. I think it's about time. We writers get caught up in all the self-promotion hoop-la: should we do this, does it do any good, how do we know what does any good, etc. OK, we're told that only the *big name* writers even have a promotion budget and the rest of our books are just thrown against the wall to see if they stick (i.e., attract an audience on their own and surprise the publisher that you're any good). This is called the spaghetti test. Gosh, Santa, have your little reindeer poop on that practice, OK? I say why buy a book (career) you won't even promote? Sigh. It makes me want to break into the eggnog, which I hate. Of course, if we're running around like little blind mice in the dark, self-promoting and spending our own money, who doesn't have to do it? That's right—the people standing around the eggnog table laughing.

*The author would have you know she's just kidding about the publisher stuff. What she's really worried about are things that could actually happen, such as the underwear and those red fuzzy slippers.*



BY LAWRENCE  
WATT-EVANS

The writers' guidelines for science fiction magazines often warn would-be contributors to avoid over-used, hackneyed plots and reliance on surprise endings—which annoys and confuses a lot of beginners, who don't know which plots are over-used and hackneyed. The examples editors usually give are deal-with-the-devil stories, or tales about the last two survivors of some disaster who turn out to be named Adam and Eve, but there are plenty of others.

These are so trite, so hackneyed, that it's almost impossible to get such stories into print.

"But how," the beginners wail, "are we supposed to know which plots are *verboten*, if they *don't get published*? We haven't seen them!"

Well, there's something to be said for this position. In conversations with would-be SF writers I've tried to calm them down and tell them not to worry about it, that you can use any old plot if you do it well enough.

In fact, I eventually formulated this into a law, and in that form it's been circulated online and elsewhere for a decade or so, a fact in which I take considerable pride. Watt-Evans' Law of Literary Creation says, "There is no idea so stupid or hackneyed that a sufficiently talented writer can't get a good story out of it."

(When I first said that, on the old GENie network, my fellow fantasy writer Raymond E. Feist promptly responded with Feist's Corollary: "There is no idea so brilliant or original that a sufficiently untalented writer can't fuck it up." This was, I note, the only time to date I have ever seen the always-polite Ray Feist use the word "fuck." Sometimes no other word will serve as well.)

So I have something of an investment in the idea that you can make a decent story—not necessarily a *good* one, but a decent one—out of any premise. I maintain that often, you can make a silly or outdated idea work by just looking at it in a new way—and over the past 20 years I have sometimes been moved to try to prove it. I have yielded to the imp of the perverse, and have often written stories entirely because someone said they couldn't (or shouldn't!) be done.

For example, on one discussion group SF readers talk-

# *The Imp of the Perverse*

ing about childhood favorites like *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet*, or *Miss Pickerell Goes to Mars*, started bemoaning the "fact" that there's no way anyone could ever again sell a story about two kids building a spaceship in their back yard—readers nowadays are just too sophisticated for such a thing.

"I could write one," I said. "And I could sell it to *Analog*, too." (*Analog*, one of the oldest of the science fiction mags, is famous for insisting on accurate, believable science.)

They scoffed.

So I wrote a novelet called "Science Fiction" in which two kids build a spaceship in their back yard—but they live in an orbital colony, where all you need to do to launch a ship into space is drop it through one of the emergency airlocks. Nothing wrong with the science there. *Analog* bought it—though I still remember the rather stunned expression on editor Stan Schmidt's face when he realized he was going to buy a story about, yes, two kids who build a spaceship in their back yard.

Or there was the fantasy editor who complained about contributors sending things that weren't even remotely appropriate, things that weren't even fantasy stories, with titles like "My Mother and I Go Shopping."

So I wrote a first-person story about a fellow who takes his aging mother out to run errands once she's no longer fit to drive, and upon following her directions down various odd side-streets he discovers that she does most of her shopping in the land of Faerie, paying for magical goods with things that the Fair Folk don't have, like aspirin. I called it, of course, "My Mother and I Go Shopping."

That one didn't quite work out, though—I sent it to the magazine, but a different editor opened it, took one look at the title, and rejected it unread. Ah, well; I sold it to an anthology instead.

Another editor remarked that sometimes he could tell from the cover letter that he wasn't going to buy a story, and gave an example where an author bragged that his story combined literary theory with chaos theory, and referenced works by Ursula K. Le Guin, Stan Lee... I don't remember the whole list anymore, but it was a challenge to that imp of mine. My story "Remembrance of Things to Come" includes everything that was in that cover letter, as well as having a title that's an unholy blending of H.G. Wells and Marcel Proust, and it sold just fine.



The editor of an anthology called *Grand Illusion* made a small slip in the guidelines. The book was to be entirely about things that are not as they appear, but he warned that he did not want to see any stories about a character picking up someone in a bar who turns out to be vampire, werewolf, elf, alien, serial killer, and Elvis.

I'm sure he meant "or," but he really did type "and." I couldn't resist—but *The Ultimate Alien* paid better, so "The Pick-Up," in which we discover that Elvis was actually an alien elf who had been bitten by both a vampire and a werewolf, and then faked his own death to make it easier to carry on his murderous career as a serial killer, appeared there rather than in *Grand Illusion*.

Sometimes I don't actually deliberately defy the stated guidelines, but I still write things for perverse reasons. I like a challenge even when it's not set by an editor.

For example, I was once looking at the art show at a science fiction convention, and a woman nearby exclaimed in disgust over a display of a dozen or so pictures of cute little kittens and cute little baby dragons playing together, chasing butterflies, sleeping curled up together, etc. Not only were the pictures excessively saccharine, she pointed out, but there aren't actually any stories about kittens and baby dragons that these could be based on.

The imp smiled, and I decided to remedy that lack. "Mittens and Hotfoot" was a kitten-and-baby-dragon story so saccharine I published it under a different name so as not to sully my reputation—but it got published.

And the first time I ever wrote a story for the "Young Adult" audience was because the editor of a YA anthology of vampire stories said she wanted good, solid traditional vampire stories—but because it was YA, they couldn't involve sex or violence.

I was boggled. How do you tell a traditional vampire story without any sex or violence? Isn't that what vampires are about?

It was a challenge, so I wrote a story about a teenage vampire trying to talk his victim into cooperating, first at a shopping mall and then at a beach party. In a moment of even greater perversity than usual, I called it "It's My Body and I'll Die If I Want To." The editor bought it but insisted I change the title, so it wound up as just "Richie."

Titles—sometimes I'll write a story just because someone came up with a stupid title I like. Someone said you couldn't write a story called "I Have No Mush and I Must Cream," for example, parodying Harlan Ellison's classic "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream." So I wrote a story about a robot being programmed to serve breakfast to bed-ridden patients in a nursing home...

But like "Richie," it came out too serious for the absurd title, so it was published as "Teaching Machines."

"Pickman's Modem," riffing on H.P. Lovecraft's classic "Pickman's Model," got to keep its title, though, and has been reprinted several times.

Another story was written to fit a title for the anthology

announced as *Beneath the Tarmac*, but there I was double-crossed. This was a horror anthology about a haunted airport in Texas, supposedly built atop the site of some sort of atrocity by Aztecs or Comanches—I don't remember all the background details anymore. At any rate, the guidelines made several suggestions for using Indian ghosts, perhaps attracted by blood from shaving cuts in the men's room, and said that despite the title we needn't worry too much about what's actually beneath the tarmac. These were just suggestions, we were reminded.

So I took the title as literally as possible, but deliberately avoided the Indians and blood sacrifice angle and everything else in the guidelines. I wrote a story about the dinosaurs whose bodies had become the tar in the tarmac returning from the dead and eating one of those guys who guides the planes to the gates. My title was "Beneath the Tarmac."

And they bought the story, but changed the title of the book to *Deathport*, ruining my attempt to have the title story.

Which might be just as well, since it wasn't a very good anthology—something like half the stories had bloodletting scenes in the men's room, those darned Comanches and Aztecs were everywhere...

At least my story was different.

In fact, all in all, that streak of perversity has served me well—I do wind up writing stories that are different by taking what I've been told not to do, and finding a way to make it work. Maybe they aren't always brilliant, but they do stand out from the crowd.

Because really, it's all in how you look at it—and there is no idea so stupid or hackneyed that a sufficiently-talented writer can't get a good story out of it, even if it means turning the whole thing on its head.

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# ***The Care and Feeding of the Girls in the Basement***

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

## **The Belly of the Beast**

### ***Writing sucks.***

That's what I want to tell the young woman who has lately been emailing me about the writing life. She's wretchedly talented, poor girl, and although she thinks she's going to be a lawyer, I predict she'll dump it and start writing by the time she's thirty, if not before.

Poor dear.

I'm dating someone who thinks writing is glamorous. Even though he's been dating me awhile and sees what it's like, he persists in this romantic ideal of What A Writer's Life Is Like. He envies the "freedom." He's positively dazzled when someone approaches me to have a book signed. He can't get over the externals of it: That I get letters from readers. That my books get reviewed (even badly) in newspapers. That the whole thing is tinged with a rosy glow of glamour. He loves to go along to book signings and lurk in the stacks, watching me talk to readers.

And yeah, there are some great things about the writing *life*. Yesterday, I slept late because my clock clicked off in the middle of the night and it was a cloudy, cool morning. Me and the cats snuggled deeper into my big, comfortable bed and stayed there until we damned well felt like getting up. This morning, I've just made myself a latte, and I'm ambling into the work at 9:30. Last night, I visited a book group who treated me like visiting royalty (I have achieved goddess status in Pueblo, thanks to a book I set here—nobody has *ever* set a book in Pueblo, except Damon Runyon, and everybody thinks it took place in New York, and besides, he wrote it a very

long time ago). And this afternoon, if I actually get my column done, I can quit early and go to the movies.

### ***The writing life is great. It's the writing part of it that's a pain in the ass.***

At the moment, I could happily be almost anything else—a waitress at least has some contact with the outside world (although I'd probably end up dumping plates in the lap of the first snotty bastard who gave me a hard time). A counselor can see progress in some of her clients. A secretary gets to have lunch out and puts on nice clothes most days. I *like* nice clothes. I particularly love shoes, and would like to wear some knee high boots and tights and a shortish skirt to work. I think it would make me feel alive.

Instead, I'm stuck here, wearing thick socks and a pair of jeans designed for comfort and my hair tied up in a scrunchy because if I allow myself to put it in anything resembling a style I would let people see, I'll run away into the world on some urgent pretext like oh, buying safety pins.

I'm here, trapped by my own design, in the dead silence that I must choose how to fill. Sitting before a blank screen and a flashing cursor. Everything has to come out of my brain, and frankly, I don't feel I have much of a brain.

You know where I am, don't you? I'm adrift in the belly of the book, having sailed far enough away from the starting shore into the vastness of Story that I can no longer see land behind me, and there is so much journey ahead that I cannot see the far shore, and do not expect to for quite some time.

I'm writing. Day in, day out. Sometimes, all I see is gray ocean, for endless, endless miles. I feel isolated on the journey, stuck in my little boat with the provisions that seemed so cheery and real at the outset, so full of optimistic hope.

## **At the outset of a novel, it always seems it will be such an adventure.**

There is such a sense of promise, a wavery vision with a few sharp clusters of plot points to keep it from blowing away. I seem to have a stage, before the journey starts, when I'm digging through a toolbox of craft, admiring this or that, wondering how I might use metaphor, theme, dialogue, viewpoint. I always tuck in a little-used one, just in case the need comes up. I also love sorting through my colors. Each book seems to have a palette of its own, and one of the great pre-journey periods is finding the tubes of paint I'll use. Turquoise and silver and red for this one, shiny acrylics. A pastel crayon of soft pinkish-purple, a tube of iridescent glitter.

## **Prewriting is a glorious time, ripe and robust.**

It's the time I most feel like an artist, when I'm humming to myself and building a collage without questioning the girls, when I'm full of play and possibility. This time, the collage ended up being quite an assemblage—a hatbox complete with lights meant to imitate neon, and a model car, a turquoise Thunderbird, circa 1957. (I was originally going to make it a '62, but my brother was horrified that I'd use a great car, and then downplay it like that, so what the heck—it's the Classic Classic, and I found that model the day I decided, so obviously it was Fated.)

In the prewriting stage, I choose music for the soundtrack, too, and it's never what I think it will be. This one is particularly weird and I'm sometimes embarrassed when people come to the door and catch me listening: 1950s country western songs I haven't heard since I was a child. Crooners on the cable music channel. Neil Diamond's *Tap Root Manuscript*, the African side, which makes me remember being eleven and embroidering pillowcases with tubes of colored ink, a line from one of the songs: "And you shall come/ to hear our song/before it fades away."

Fun, I think, starting out. Accepting orders and the list of supplies from the girls in the basement without thinking too much about why they'll want...uh? a gallon of French Vanilla interior wall paint? Plastering tools and mud?

Whatever. At that gilded stage, I'm like a bride planning a wedding, not really worrying about what those vows really mean. In sickness and in health? Sure, sure. No problem. Till death us do part? Can do.

Inevitably, the sense of possibility buoys me through the first part of the book. Usually through the first third, maybe to the halfway mark, if I'm lucky. Only to the quarter-mark if I'm not. There have been some extremely grim journeys where I lost sight of the shore five minutes after leaving and didn't see land again until the last chapter.

It doesn't seem to matter to the books if I have a sense of possibility or feel that I'm headed off to the mines to spend the day chipping a single useable sentence from granite (I know—mixed metaphor. Sue me.) I'm not sure how the girls feel. I really wonder what the hell they're doing at times like this. Where are all the directives? Where are all the little bubbles of inspiration? I suspect they had some big party (to which I was not invited) and they're sleeping off the hangover while I wrestle with it.

Back to the present. Where I am lost in the belly of the book. I'm slogging away, day after day. It feels like I've been dropped into a basket of multi-colored twine and have to untangle it all, and the job looks fairly hopeless at the moment. I can get up at six, drink my coffee and feel optimistic about what I'm doing, give myself a pep-talk, take a nice walk and get a renewed sense of vision, and come back to slog away for five hours of bloody damned hard work (I know, I know—I'm swearing like a...sailor) and discover I've written a grand total of six pages. Or five. How can I only have written a page per hour? How could anyone??

## **Yeah, writing is such a great job.**

Yesterday, I called a friend and said without preamble, "I'm lost. I have no confidence. I need you to remind me that I've done this before and I can do it again." She said, "Oh, good! I can help you with this because I had this crisis yesterday!" Between us, we've probably written fifty or sixty books. It never gets any easier. Every single time, there you are in the belly of the beast, lost and alone. It's like dying. Someone can hold your hand while you do it, but you have to do it alone.

But my friend had talked to a friend of hers, and she had remembered how to get through the miserable middle and she reminded me of all the tricks. In case anyone else (who us?) is swearing a lot and feeling seasick, I'll put them down here. Your mileage may vary—use what you can and throw the rest to the sharks.

The first thing is to remember it's only a book. It's a freaking *book*, not the cure for cancer or a shipment of supplies that will save a hundred starving orphans for one day. No one lives or dies if a book is good or bad. Not even me, or you.

If I write a bad book, what happens? Is my career over? Maybe. More likely, it won't be that bad and somebody will see that it's bad and help me fix it. That's what editors are for, after all.

And the truth is, it's probably not that bad anyway. It might be hard work, sure. And there are things that are making me crazy because I'm wrestling with a narrative structure that's tricky for me, but I'm pretty sure eventually I can make it work out in a way I'll love in the end. I'll be happy with it and even secretly tickled.

Which leads to the expectations game,





▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ which is usually what makes the belly of a book more miserable than it needs to be. If I write only for myself and the girls, and never think about anybody else, it's as much fun as making my collages or painting my living room walls the color of a pumpkin—who cares? It's mine, and I did it my way, and if you don't like it, there's

the door.

This is the part my friend and I discussed seriously yesterday: the voices in our minds when we were struggling. Who was I trying to please and feeling as if I was failing? I was able to identify about ten of them: the nasty reviewer who thought a device in my last book was “amateurish;” a teacher who has serious rules for writing (many of which I break all the time); a reader who hadn't liked one of the characters in an early stage.... the list goes on and on. It even included a part of me that's slapping me every time I write a sloppy sentence, or at least rolling eyes over that clumsiness here and there. The voices were all negative or difficult and I was listening to them and second-guessing every word I put on the page.

As a result, the flow—the magic, the joy—was lost.

By the end of that phone call, I was breathing freely for the first time in two weeks. I had a sense of possibility again. I am a commercial fiction writer and I make my money like this, which means I have a deadline to honor and I have to show up at the page.

But I'm also an artist and the girls in the basement want me to remember that I'm doing this book for me and them first of all. I'm writing a book I'd like to read, about people who intrigue and interest me. It's also fun to identify one reader who will also take pleasure in this particular story—for my last book, it was definitely my oldest friend, who would get the inside jokes. For this one, it's my mother. She'll just get a kick out of some of the things I'm doing here. And this draft, I don't have to have perfect language or perfect beats. I can sketch in transitions and lurch along with big marks highlighted in color [DO IT BETTER HERE] and be completely obvious. There will be time, when I make landfall on the other side of the journey, to polish it all up.

## ***It's something I have to remember every single time.***

Luckily, I'm a well-seasoned (and salty-mouthed) sailor now. It is hard to trust that the whole thing will turn out all right, but mostly, it does. Eventually. Day after day, I put words on the page, and day after day, they add up. Sometimes, I get a pleasurable surprise—a little bit of knowledge the girls hand up, or an image that ties it all together—and I know, eventually, I'll land on the other shore again. As I have before. As I will again.

Oh—and the girls do know what they're doing. Those plastering supplies? The French Vanilla wall paint? I was truly, deeply, painfully stuck one day last week. I could not see my way through the tangle of plot layers I'd set up, and in frustration, I put on some music, pulled out the plaster and started fixing cracks on my stairwell. I did such a fine job, I decided to paint those walls, and the living room walls, too. I was singing along to *Tap Root Manuscript*, and bam—there was the answer to my problem. It was so obvious I'm embarrassed to admit I didn't see it without all that angst, but it wasn't something that could be solved with a left-brain approach. The girls required some absolutely right-brained activity, and once they got that part of my brain working, the answer was plain.

## ***And hey—the living room looks great, too.*** NINK



### ***Bits 'n' Pieces***

***CONGRATULATIONS TO NINC'S PULITZER PRIZE NOMINEE...Carolyn Hart's wonderful Letter From Home has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Now is that neat, or what? You go girl! We're all proud! — TdR***

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