

April 2004 Vol. 15, No. 4

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

# Bishop's Lodge Retreat -Revitalizing the Writer: An Overview

### BY RUTH GLICK

Imagine a writers' conference with time out for horseback riding, aromatherapy, massages, and shopping trips to stores selling exotic silver and



turquoise jewelry. Unlikely in New York. But at the recent Ninc retreat at the Bishop's Lodge in Santa Fe, it was part of the mix.

It may be impossible to please all of the writers all of the

time. But the majority of the comments I heard from participants were positive—with a few complaints thrown in for seasoning.

As Kathy Chwedyk said, the relaxed atmosphere of the retreat was designed to "feed your inner artist—the girls in the basement—or whatever you want to call it...It offered a way to keep the muse alive—aspects of the writer's life that are just as important as a New York business conference."

Brenda Hiatt added, "I went to the retreat totally burned out and came back feeling rejuvenated."

The spectacular mountain scen-

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# Finding Joy in Your Writing After a Tragedy

### BY SHARON DE VITA

As writers we're fortunate to spend most of our professional time dealing in joy. The joy we get from the simple pleasure and process of writing and telling "the story," the joy we get knowing our stories have been sold, and then the joy our readers give us by letting us share our precious stories with them.

Like most of you, I knew from a very early age I wanted to be a writer. I never questioned the fact that I had...people—characters—running around inside my head constantly talking to me, urging me to "tell their story." It was just a normal part of my life, and I assumed everyone had these strange characters and voices in her head.

But somehow, growing up, I sensed that telling my strict Irish Catholic father that his only child was *hearing* strange voices in her head would have been the equivalent of announcing I wanted to grow up to become the Queen of England! And since I'd already made *that* 

announcement at eight—and almost gave my poor Irish father a fatal heart attack—I never really talked about this wonderful dream I had.

It took me almost 18 years, but I was finally fortunate to win a national writing contest and sold my first book to Silhouette three weeks later. My long-held dream had suddenly become a reality.

In the 18 years since, I've written 28 books for Silhouette and a nonfiction hardcover that was optioned as an NBC Movie of the Week, made bestseller lists, won awards, and enjoyed the wonderful friendship and camaraderie of editors and other writers all over the world. And I've enjoyed every blessed minute of it, reveling in the absolute unmitigated joy I derived not just from the writing, but from actually seeing "my stories" in print.

I'd always taken so much of the writing process for granted. As my current agent is always telling me: "Sharon, this comes so easy for you." She's right, it *had* always come

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## Novelists, Inc.

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## ■ The President's Voice ■

# Revitalized and Looking to the Future

I'm just back from Santa Fe and deeply gratified at the reactions of the attendees. I can't begin to tell you how exciting it was to have the vision Cathy Maxwell and I had when we started planning a year ago spring to life before my eyes. Cathy's speaker choices were magnificent; you'll hear more about them in this issue and in future conference reports. Laura Baker once again stepped in when Ninc needed her, contributing endless hours of hard work to help me pick up the reins the last six weeks. We both have been thrilled by the response of those with us at Bishop's Lodge for a truly special time. The retreat concept Cathy premiered is one that attendees were very enthusiastic about repeating, and knowing that makes the time invested by the three of us feel absolutely worth it. It was an honor to be a part of a magical experience.

Now on to business concerns.

Your Board has been busy on your behalf. The latest effort involves correspondence with Harlequin Enterprises regarding the latest boilerplate contract. The new option clause that alarmed so many has been removed, but we have singled out two other issues of concern on which to focus. One regards royalty rates for electronic editions of books. The second has to do with reversion of rights and the definition of out of print.

In Santa Fe, Donna Hayes, Isabel Swift, and Dianne Moggy met with Advisory Council rep Barbara Keiler, President-elect Vicki Lewis Thompson, and me for a brainstorming lunch to talk about the boilerplate. They offered revealing explanations about the cost of producing ebooks and noted that ebook royalty is apparently still under discussion at Harlequin. If there is any change in the future, they assured us it will be retroactive for contracts being signed now. We also tossed around ideas for continuing to improve communications between Harlequin and its authors.

This effort is in addition to Ninc's letter of concern to the William Morris Agency regarding a clause entitling the agency to rights in perpetuity to works originally sold by them to publishers. Ninc has joined other writers' organizations, including Romance Writers of America, Science Fiction/ Fantasy Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and the Authors Guild to alert their members to this clause and its possible ramifications.

One other piece of news: since member expectations clearly indicate a desire to alternate retreat-style conferences around the country with business-oriented conferences in New York, the Board voted to hold the next one in NYC in spring 2005, and I'm pleased to announce that Ken Casper has agreed to be our conference coordinator. Many of you know Ken, and those of you who don't have a treat in store. Attendees in Santa Fe might have noticed that he's already making a list of intriguing workshop ideas and lining up speakers (I found him deep in discussions with Daisy Maryles of *Publishers Weekly* as Daisy waited for the shuttle home.)

It's never too soon to volunteer to help him, and I'm sure he'd be glad to hear any workshop ideas you have. Contact him at littleoaks@juno.com. Thank you, Ken, for stepping up to the plate for Ninc!

– Jean Brashear

## Cont. from p. 1

easy for me, and regretfully, perhaps, I'd never really realized it or truly appreciated it. The joy, the voices, the stories, and the characters were as much a part of who I was as my blue eyes. The need and desire to write was as strong as the urge to breathe. I couldn't ever imagine doing anything else, nor could I ever imagine my life without these voices, characters, or this joy.

And then one night the joy fled, chased away by the reality of an unforeseen tragedy that no mother could ever prepare for: my only son and youngest child died of a heroin overdose at the age of 21.

The moment I received that horrific phone call, life as I knew it was over. Every ounce of joy I'd ever felt fled, replaced by such a profound sense of grief and sadness I didn't think I'd ever find my way out of it again. For the first time in my entire life, everything in my world went eerily...silent. The voices, the characters, the writer's *instinct* that I'd just assumed would always be there like my blue eyes disappeared like little more than a puff of smoke.

And it's been a very long, lonely, arduous journey trying to find my way back to that joy of writing again.

But it's my hope that somehow, something I've gone through during the past 24 months might be able to help someone else going through their own personal tragedy or professional crisis.

### Stress as Part of Life

Psychologists have said that three of the most stressful life events for anyone are: the death of a spouse, the death of a child, the death of a parent.

I agree. But because we are writers, and, therefore, far more acutely in touch with our emotions, I believe any one of the above life stressors can have a much more *profound* effect on us than on others—not just emotionally, but physically and psychologically as well.

When a death or any tragedy touches our lives, it affects us tremendously. Because we are writers, it can also deeply affect our careers. Grief is not an overnight process, nor is shock, and they go hand in hand during any tragedy. Neither follows a schedule or a timetable. Yet most of us live our lives on timetables or deadlines which can be totally destroyed by a sudden, unexpected—or even an expected—tragedy. A sudden death in the family, a hurricane that levels our home, or a car accident that incapacitates us can all wreak untold havoc on both our personal and professional lives.

But if our *professional* life is not handled correctly during this time, it can adversely affect not just our career, but every other area in our life.

## Practical Matters on a Professional Level

When a death or any kind of tragedy touches you, you won't be thinking clearly. Whether it's an unexpected shock, as in the case of my son, or is expected, it doesn't matter *how* or *when* it happens, our response is the same.

Grief is universal and has five separate and distinct stages: first is denial, then anger or resentment, the third is bargaining, the fourth is depression, and finally comes acceptance.

As you go through the initial stages of grief-whether from a death or some other life-altering tragedy you will also probably be in shock. What you need more than anything is to be surrounded by people and professionals you trust implicitly. Understand and expect you will be totally vulnerable on every level. Your emotions will be raw, you will be in such pain, thinking coherently is nearly impossible and making decisions that affect your career is definitely not a wise move. That's why you absolutely need someone around you who you trust implicitly, someone who knows you and what you want done.

My son passed away in the evening. I was at my home 3,000 miles away, writing a lecture I was to give at a conference three weeks later. When the phone call came, it seemed as if time and my world suddenly stopped. Everything and anything on my professional agenda went completely out of my mind. Nothing seemed important. Thankfully, my husband—who is a retired career military officer and now known as the "Patron Saint of Crazy Women"—was with me and held my hand and my heart throughout this entire ordeal.

The first thing you need to do is notify your agent or your editor. Either via phone call or e-mail. Whichever you can handle. If you can't handle either, have that trusted person in your life do it. This is where the implicit trust comes in. I had just signed a new fourbook contract the week before my son's death, and my first synopsis was due during the time I'd be in Chicago for my son's services. Thankfully, it had already been written and sent to my agent. That same evening, my husband helped me compose an e-mail to my agent, notifying her of what had happened, asking her to notify my editor, and letting her know that I'd be flying home to Chicago early the next morning. I also requested that she make absolutely certain she forward my completed proposal to my editor-in my absence-so that I didn't miss my deadline since I'd never missed a deadline before. My agent assured me she would.

Two weeks after returning home from the funeral, while writing thank you notes, I happened to e-mail my editor to ask the correct spelling of another editor's name and learned that my editor had *never* received my proposal which was now two weeks late.

I felt as if I was about to go into meltdown. I simply couldn't handle one more emotional crisis. I was still too raw and still too emotionally depleted. Thankfully, my husband vetoed my first, irrational instinct which involved ripping the agent's eyes out with rusty fish hooks—see what I mean about not thinking

clearly—and saw to it that my proposal was sent directly to my editor that day. In that agent's defense, she claimed to have mailed it. Unfortunately, my editor never received it. I felt that the agent should have followed up and confirmed delivery, but since she did not, I was both embarrassed and unduly stressed about something that should have never happened.

# Professional Responsibilities and Appearances

If you're on the board of any organizations, in charge or responsible for any committees, have your trusted someone notify them and request an immediate emergency leave of absence. You will not be able to make coherent decisions for yourself or for others for at least three to six months so don't even try.

As writers, we tend to schedule our speaking engagements, book signings, and conference attendance around our deadlines. If you have anything scheduled on your professional agenda for the ensuing three to six months, cancel it immediately. You can always attend at the last minute, but *canceling* at the last minute puts undue stress on others.

When my son died at the end of January, I was scheduled to host an annual conference here in Tucson for five other writers three weeks later. I was also scheduled to speak at a conference in April, the RWA National conference in July, and another conference in October, and then, of course, there were those deadlines.

Fortunately, the Tucson conference I was hosting was with five of my closest, dearest writing friends, and they insisted on flying to Tucson just to be with me. The April conference had been planned a year in advance, and I knew if I cancelled at this late date, it would wreak havoc on the conference organizers, so I went through with it, but within the first two minutes of my

workshop—for the first time in 20 years of public speaking—I'm embarrassed to admit I burst into tears at the podium, but I got it together and continued albeit a bit shakily.

Unfortunately, I believed that by July I would be fine to speak at RWA National, only to discover in early June that I could still barely put a coherent sentence together without crying, so there was no way I could get up and speak in front of a crowd. I had to cancel with less than a month until the conference. Fortunately, one of my friends agreed to take over my speaking slot, so it wasn't the disaster it could have been.

Whether you think you'll be able to handle a personal appearance, a lecture, speech, book signing, or whatever, don't count on it. Cancel and then reschedule if necessary, but don't put undue pressure on yourself or on others who are counting on you, pressure that will only add to your stress at this time.

### Contracts, Publishers, etc.

Okay, what I'm going to say now will sound like blasphemy to every working writer, but I would strongly recommend you not engage in any contract negotiations at this time.

You're not in a position to accurately judge how long the shock and grief are going to last or the exact toll they will take on you either physically or emotionally. So you're not going to be able to accurately predict when, professionally, you'll be able to return to the "you" you once were and agreeing to a new contract, or new deadlines, or new responsibilities at a time when you're emotionally devastated is not going to help, nor is it a wise move. Everyone's different. One writer told me that when her mom died, she couldn't stop writing simply because it was the only way she could escape the

For me, I simply *couldn't* write. My trusted characters and voices were

gone, and the world was eerily silent in a way it had never been before. I didn't know what to do or how to fix it. Worse, I wasn't in any kind of emotional state to *try* to fix it.

Which brings up my next point: during any kind of personal or emotional trauma, you will be apt to make snap or irrational decisions based on emotions like grief, anger, or pain, decisions you might regret later.

Don't do it. Do not make any major decisions regarding your career at this time. Whether it's about firing or hiring an agent, agreeing to a new contract, changing publishers, agreeing to write an additional book, or telling your editor you never liked those purple streaks in her hair anyway. Whatever it is, don't do it. Do not make professional decisions when you're emotionally depleted and unable to think clearly, decisions that can have a long-term, adverse affect on both you and your career.

It was over a year before I had some pebble of sanity back, and at that time I did fire my agent. It simply had to be done. I knew I couldn't continue to deal with someone I couldn't trust to look out for my interests or keep her word at a time when I was far too emotionally vulnerable to do it for myself. But had my husband not initially intervened, I might have done something rash-remember those rusty fish hooks-in a manner that I would always regret and perhaps made an enemy that was not necessary. When I did fire the agent, I did it professionally and in a calm, rational manner with no regrets.

Don't make professional decisions you can't change or correct or might regret.

## Handling Deadlines

Since I had just signed a new contract before my son passed away, I knew I had to come home from the funeral and go right back to work. I had no choice. I'd agreed to the contract, and I honor my professional commitments—no matter what.

So I came home, went to my office every morning as if everything was

normal, and sat in front of my blank computer.

And cried.

Because not only had I lost my only son, but I'd apparently also lost my ability to write. The eerie silence continued day after day after day, and it not only terrified me, it also paralyzed me simply because I couldn't imagine my life going forward without either my son or my writing.

My long-time editor, Tina Colombo, whom I've worked with for years and adore, called about two weeks after my son's death to say that she'd gotten the proposal I'd sent in and approved it, but they were going to push all my deadlines off by several months. At the time, I didn't even think to question her as to why. I was iust too relieved.

My sigh of relief probably was heard around the world, because I still hadn't told anyone except my husband and two grown daughters that I couldn't write. I was terrified to actually say the words aloud, let alone to my editor.

Now, I realize that my editor and publisher were giving me time to grieve and heal when I didn't even realize I needed that time. I will forever be grateful to them for their kindness during such a difficult time.

Looking back, I should have had my husband call my editor, tell her what was going on, and request an extension. But again, I wasn't thinking clearly, and it quite simply never occurred to me. Plus, I was embarrassed at what was happening to me. I've always been a writer. Always. It's not just what I do, but who I am. I got through the death of my mother, father, and brother during a three-year period in my early 20s without missing a keystroke, but losing my son was something...so huge and so horrendous I couldn't function on any level, and I was quite simply ashamed to admit it.

So during this time, rely only on people you implicitly trust, do not make any major decisions affecting your career, and don't be afraid to be honest with people if you're having a difficult time. Ask for an extension if you need it and don't apologize for taking the time you need to heal.

## **Understanding Physical and Emotional Changes**

A recent medical study published in Reader's Digest stated that mothers who lose a child have a 50 percent greater chance than their male counterparts of developing a serious illness. Like I've stated before, tragedy affects everyone differently. I have always been super-hyper, full of energy, talking a mile a minute, very gregarious, and extremely prolific. I've also been underweight my entire life. But at 51, when my son died, I gained 35 pounds and went from a size eight to a size 12 in less than a year, not because I was eating, but because I wasn't. I lived on Coke, Excedrin, and cigarettes, not a healthy diet on any occasion, but especially not when going through grief. I also developed various other physical ailments, and for well over a full year, I couldn't sleep, which certainly wasn't conducive to writing.

Finally, my husband insisted I talk to my physician who prescribed sleeping pills. Now, I have to be honest here. I have always been violently opposed to both alcohol and drugs simply because I'm not sure where this 'gift" of creating comes from, and I'm far too scared to do anything that might screw up my brain and perhaps alter that creative process. But I did finally get so utterly exhausted, I caved in and started taking the sleeping pills under my physician's supervision. Sometimes I still do.

When you're in so much pain the temptation to do somethinganything—to lesson that pain is nearly overwhelming, and drugs and alcohol seem like a handy, easy fix. Don't even think about using or abusing either. And if you find yourself doing so, you may not even realize it until it becomes habit or addictive. I didn't realize I was living on sugar-laden Coke until I went to the doctor, and he announced I'd gained almost 30 pounds. I was still too numb to be horrified. So be aware of your own vulnerabilities, especially during this time.

## The Pros and Cons of Publicity

As writers, promoting ourselves, our books, and our names is an integral and important part of our professional lives; however, the publicity we've courted offers us no privacy protection when it comes to our personal lives. Because people think they "know us" from our books, pictures, or interviews, it allows for a false sense of intimacy. If you are known locally, nationally, or internationally and you suffer a personal tragedy, I guarantee you the press will come looking for you.

My son's death from a heroin overdose sent shock waves through the small, upscale suburban community where we'd lived. I had never lied or hid the fact that for the last four years of his life my son was a heroin addict. Nor had I ever hid the details of how he became a heroin addict. (At 17, three months shy of his high school graduation from a private Catholic prep school, my son was asked by an acquaintance at school if he wanted to "try" some heroin. My son, wanting to fit in, wanting to be accepted, wanting to be "macho," and being 17 and male and...stupid, said "sure.") Three months later when he came to me and told me he was in serious trouble and addicted to heroin, it was already too late. My son had entered a nightmare where death was the only escape.

Less than a year after my son's death, while I was still merely just trying to get through each day, a reporter called. She said she was doing a story on writers and wanted to interview me. It was only later that I learned that was a ruse, and she was really writing a story about my son's death. When I learned the truth, I was horrified that someone would try to exploit this tragedy and refused all comment. The reporter then started calling my friends, acquaintances, and even other writers, as well as my daughters.

My youngest daughter, who is an entertainment attorney in Los Angeles, called the reporter and asked her to please cease and desist, because she was causing us all a great deal of pain. The reporter stated she

was merely exercising her First Amendment rights and that since I was a "public" person the public had a right to know this information. With no cooperation from our family, unbeknownst to us, the reporter went down to the county coroner's office and obtained copies of my son's death certificate and his autopsy report.

Reading about my son's death on the front page of a newspaper, along with intimate details of his autopsy report was devastating. I wasn't a "public person" at that time, merely a grieving mother, and I'm sorry that reporter simply couldn't see or understand the difference.

So be prepared for the intrusion of the press. My feeling is the safest bet is "No comment," but then you run the risk of having things written about you or your loved ones that are both incorrect and extremely painful. Know the risks before you make a decision, and then again, listen to your trusted advisors to make the correct choice because remember you won't be thinking clearly, and this is one subject where it's far too easy to let your emotions get away from you.

## People Say the Darndest Things

Death, or any other kind of lifealtering tragedy, tends to make other people extremely nervous and uncomfortable. Psychologists state that it's simply because when faced with their own mortality, or the possibility of their own life-altering tragedy, people are embarrassed at their relief that it's you and not them. It's a normal human reaction, but it tends to make even our dearest friends say things they wouldn't normally say, things simply said for lack of knowing what else to say.

At my son's wake, the mother of one of his friends came up to me, gave me a hug, and gushed: "Why, you poor thing. You must feel like such a failure as a mother." Now, I'm certain she didn't mean to be hurtful or cruel. Notice I say now. At the time, my first instinct was to search for those rusty fish hooks. Thankfully, my husband and my two daughters, who never left my side, made sure I didn't do anything to this poor woman I'd later regret. My husband just stepped forward, shook her hand, thanked her for coming, and ushered her away from me very quickly.

The truth is people don't know what to say when something awful happens to someone they know. So sometimes they say something totally inappropriate, not out of meanness, but simply human discomfort. You will hear a lot of comments that will startle you and yes, even hurt you, but remember no one is deliberately trying to be cruel. It's their own sense of discomfort that causes people to say inappropriate things. Try to remember that. And if someone says something that has you sucking air, take a deep breath for calm and say nothing. You'll never regret it.

## Returning to the Writing Life

After I returned home from my son's funeral and my editor had pushed back all my deadlines, giving me some breathing room, I still continued to go to my office every morning and sit in front of my blank computer.

And I still did nothing except sit there and ... cry.

There were only two things I'd ever wanted in my entire life: to be a mother and to be a writer.

I simply couldn't accept or face the fact that I had apparently failed at both. I felt so crushed by grief and sadness, I couldn't think, let alone create.

Day after day, my husband would come into my office midmorning, see my tear-stained face and the blank computer screen, put his hands on my shoulders, and say: "Honey, why don't you take a break?"

I was doing little more than torturing myself. And the clock was ticking. I heard nothing but that clock, inching closer and closer to my deadline due dates, knowing I had nothing to show

So now, along with the grief and the pain, panic was setting in. Finally one evening as my husband and I sat outside on the patio, I said the words I didn't think I'd ever say: "I'm going to retire. I simply cannot write anymore." What I didn't add was that I wasn't even sure it mattered anymore.

I think that scared my husband more than anything I've ever done or said, and he finally asked me to please consider seeing a therapist, something I'd refused to do since I truly believed that I was strong enough to get through this on my own. My son was gone, I couldn't write, and I didn't think a therapist would be able to change either. So what was the point? But to make my husband happy, I finally agreed to see someone.

I saw the therapist for a total of five sessions before I finally began feeling better. The first thing he told me was to stop pushing myself to write. The more I pushed, the more elusive it became. I was expecting my life to go back to "normal" when in fact I was going to have to redefine what "normal" would be without my son in the future.

As I calmly explained the facts of life of a working writer and that there was simply no way I could just...not write these contracted books, not if I still wanted to have a career, he explained that while I'd lost the "voices and characters," those things I'd always thought were instinctive to every writer, I hadn't lost my years of experience or my practical knowledge of how to write a book. He reminded me I'd spent almost a decade as an Adjunct Professor teaching writing, so it wasn't as if I'd lost all my practical knowledge or experience. He encouraged me to use both to try to write my deadline books.

And I did.

Slowly, carefully, taking more time to write one book than I previously had to write three, I began my contracted books, writing for the first time without the voices and characters guiding my path. It was rough; it was tough and at times excruciating. Other people-normal people-were right: writing was hard. I'd never realized it before, never realized that when other writers complained about how difficult the process of writing was, this was what they were talking about. There was no joy in this, it was merely... agony, like pulling a tooth for each word, and I wasn't having much fun.

Since I've always written under my own name and have written for only one publisher my entire career, I've always felt an enormous sense of loyalty and responsibility to make certain every book I turn in is the best it can be. Fearing it might not be only added to the sense of panic that was now growing.

I made it through the first book, with my husband reading every single word to make sure it sounded like one of "my" books before turning it in. I asked my editor to please read it carefully to make sure it had everything it was supposed to because my confidence and my judgment were totally gone.

After I turned in the first book, I started and finished the second and then the third, doing each one in the same manner, telling myself to just rely on my experience and my knowledge: they hadn't abandoned me. When I reached the final book, I realized I was exhausted both physically and emotionally in a way I'd never before been writing a book.

I've quite comfortably written four to five books per year for the past decade, but after three books, I was wiped out and requested another month extension which my editor graciously granted. After a month of just resting and reading, I finally wrote and turned in the last book on my contract and for the first time in a decade did not already have a new proposal written or submitted. A year ago that would have terrified me, fearing that I wouldn't *get* another contract. Now, it merely felt like a...relief.

## Being Honest With Yourself-And Everyone Else

After I turned in that last book, I decided to come clean with my editor, and in an e-mail simply told her the

truth. I needed some...time. I'd come home from the funeral, gone right back to work, and it was now catching up with me.

What I didn't tell her was that I was still seriously considering retiring because I couldn't imagine going on this way. It was just far too painful. But I did finally tell my daughters, who arrived unannounced on my doorstep within two weeks. We spent a wonderful week together, laughing, talking, and reminiscing, and finally one evening as we sat outside on the patio, my youngest daughter brought up the subject of writing. Although she's a lawyer, and my other, older daughter is a college professor, all of my kids are writers at heart and all were published before they were sixteen-including my son-so they understand that special need all writers have to tell a story and be read.

My girls encouraged me to just take some time off, but to not *think* retirement. To do what my husband had been encouraging: to just write for myself, for the "joy." I finally confessed to my girls that there was no longer any joy, no pleasure, that writing had become simply a painful, arduous experience. Just one more thing I had "to do" to get through a day, and feeling this way, I didn't see any other option *but* retiring.

I've never been a quitter. Ever. It took me 18 years to get published, and I never once gave up. After I was published, I went five years without selling a book and never gave up then, either. But now, life and I had changed, and I didn't know if I had it in me to overcome what to me was something so... horrific it had altered every single aspect of my life.

My daughters left, and I decided my husband and I were finally going to have a "normal" life—whatever that was. We went out to dinner, to the movies, and did things I guess "normal" people who don't write do. I had resigned myself to being "retired" and simply didn't even bother thinking about writing, nor did I even bother going into my office except to get another book to read.

I owe a special thank you to Janet Evanovich. I can't tell you how many nights I lay in bed, laughing through my tears, as I read one of her Stephanie Plum books. Since I was now "retired," my husband went out and bought me every single Plum book starting with the first. Reading those books allowed me to do something I never thought I'd do again: laugh. But it was a very long time coming.

I thought I was comfortably ensconced in retirement and tried very hard not to even think about writing, but a funny thing happened on the way to my retirement. One night, about a month after my daughters left, my husband was sleeping, and I was lying in bed reading, and I must have dozed off because this...voice woke me up.

"You know, a woman's life would be a lot simpler if you could just rent a man by the hour...like bowling shoes."

I was startled awake, both giddy and terrified. Giddy because for the first time in almost 18 months the world was no longer silent, and terrified because I feared I'd imagined it.

When my husband woke up the next morning, he was alarmed to find our bed empty. He wandered into my office to find me at my computer.

"Honey...uh...what are you doing?" he asked nervously.

"Writing."

"Writing...what?" he asked, trying very hard not to grin.

"I don't know," I replied, because I didn't. "But I'm not going to stop." And I didn't, not for the next three months. Nearly round the clock I stayed at my computer, afraid to stop, afraid this wonderful character would go away. Day after day this story spewed out of me like a volcano that had been capped much too long. It wasn't something I was writing for someone, not an agent, editor, or publisher. It wasn't something I even worried about selling since I didn't even have an agent at that point. I wasn't writing for anyone else, I was writing for me, and it took awhile before I realized somehow, someway, when I wasn't looking, the joy had

**> > >** snuck back into my life, brought alive again by a character-a woman-not very different from me who was simply trying to get through her day dodging and darting around the problems life threw at her.

And for some reason she'd chosen *me* to tell her story.

That was almost six months ago. I finished the book in record time and decided to stick my toe in the water and see if I could get an agent to represent this book that wasn't a romance, wasn't a mystery, but was something unlike anything I'd ever written before. I knew the title almost from the moment I first heard Ellie's voice: The Estrogen Posse.

The first agent I sent it to—a very well-known respected agent, mind you - told me that in spite of my being a best-selling, award-winning author of 28 books, she'd be embarrassed to represent me. I'll admit her comments sent me reeling, and my confidence dropped to zero once again, but I decided to keep trying and finally found an incredibly wonderful and supportive agent who not only loved the book, but loved my style. We worked together on revisions, and as I write this, that book is currently at nine publishing houses.

When I sent the final version to my agent, I'll admit I was terrified, because once I finished that book the world went eerily silent once again. I worried that this was a fluke, a one-time shot, and I might not ever be able to write another book again.

But this time, I tried not to panic. I'd realized something in the months since I'd decided to "retire." I'd realized that there was no way I could have gotten back to the joy until I had gone through and processed all the grief and shock. Maybe it had taken me longer than most, but it's a process you simply cannot predict or schedule. As I stated earlier, grief and shock have their own timetable, and we simply must follow the path it dictates. I'm sorry I didn't know that earlier. I think this is the simplest and most profound advice I can share with anyone: you can't find that joy again until you process the grief and shock. And you need to understand that so you don't drive yourself...crazy like I did.

### **Redefining Normal**

It has been almost two years since my son died, and I finally feel as if I'm finally getting back to "normal," or what the new normal will eventually be although I'm not quite there yet.

There is and always will be a huge, gaping, aching hole in my heart. I still have good days and bad days, or "Joey days" as my husband calls them, when the sadness envelopes me and the tears won't stop, but they don't knock me off balance as much anymore.

In October, for the first time in over two years, I was able to attend and speak at a writers' conference. I still have trouble being in crowds, or speaking in public, and I don't know why because I've been speaking and lecturing for over 20 years. So the October conference was a huge victory for me. Yes, I was scared. Yes, I was shaky, but I did it, and maybe this summer I'll even be able to attend RWA National and be in a huge crowd without crying.

I still haven't lost the 35 pounds I packed on, but it's just far too superficial for me to worry about when there are so many more important things in my life. In time, I'm sure I'll start a diet and exercise program, but I'm just not ready yet, and during the past two

years, I've learned to do things only when I'm ready.

Most of the physical ailments I suffered through are now under control, and I'm just about ready to finally start a new romance proposal. It's remained a scary thought simply because the world had gone silent again.

But last month, my husband and I went away for a weekend, and as I was standing in a noisy, crowded casino in Laughlin, Nevada, trying to pretend I was having a good time, I heard this woman say:

"He said he wanted to be friends. How was I supposed to know friends wasn't the only **F** word he was interested in?"

I don't know who she is or what her problem is, but apparently she has a story to be told.

And I guess she's chosen me to tell it.

Ah well. I guess retirement is going to have wait just a little bit longer, because for now, after almost two long horrific years, the...joy, that wonderful incredible feeling you get from "telling a story" is back filling my aching heart and nourishing my soul, and this time, I'm far too appreciative and grateful not to savor and enjoy every blessed joyful minute of it!

Sharon De Vita is a USA Today bestselling, award-winning author of 28 books of fiction and nonfiction, including one that's been optioned as an NBC Movie of the Week. She and her husband, retired Colonel Frank Noland Cushing, "a/k/a the patron saint of crazy women," now reside in Tucson where snow has become just another four-letter word. She has three books coming out in the next 12 months and is happily listening carefully to every voice she hears.



#### **Changes – Agents and Editors**

Natashya Wilson is the new Associate Senior Editor in charge of Bombshell beginning March 1. Science fiction and fantasy editor Amy Stout is joining the L.

Perkins Agency, working out of Los Angeles. North Point editorial director Rebecca Saletan has moved to



Continued from page 1

ery, the clear New Mexico air. and the Southwestern atmosphere of

the Bishop's Lodge all contributed to the feeling of rejuvenation.

The sessions themselves were a mixture of the inspirational and the traditional. Monday morning began with a blessing from Marcellus Bear Heart Williams, 85, a multi-tribal spiritual leader of the Muskogee Nation. That evening. Elena Avila, RN, MSN, Curandera amazed her audience with a hands (well condor feather, actually) on demonstration of traditional Aztec healing techniques.

Taking advantage of the New Mexico setting, the program also featured talks by bestselling writers Tony Hillerman, George R. R. Martin, and David Morrell who live in the area.

The usual writers' conference fare leavened the mix. Daisy Maryles, executive editor of Publishers Weekly, discussed the current state of the publishing industry. A high-powered team from Harlequin-Silhouette updated retreatgoers on the company's ambitious plans. And Steven Axelrod discussed authoragent contracts.

Retreat-goers took advantage of other choices as well. In addition to the spa and horseback riding, many enjoyed the tours of New Mexico sights like Bandelier National Monument. In the casual lodge atmosphere, others felt free to relax or write in their rooms. And the public areas were crowded with Ninc attendees enjoying simply getting together with each other. The lodge opened a private bar on the ground level for attendees. Strangely, the main lodge bar closed at ten, leaving those who came early to the retreat with nowhere to go until the conference officially started.

The relaxed attitude was summed up by new member Robin D. Owens who said this was her first Ninc event. She liked the atmosphere because it "allows me to give myself permission to sit around and write or relax. In a conference I'd feel like I'd need to focus more on business to justify the expense." She felt the spa was a "once in a lifetime experience."

One comment I heard several times was that the "night owl" sessions were the best part of the retreat. I enjoyed them, too, and wished we could have more sessions, not just in the evenings, where writers could get together to talk and share experiences.

Joyce Ware said she loved the Southwest and her deluxe Bishop's Lodge room. She was typical of many participants who were very happy with the venue and the retreat atmosphere but wanted a more business-oriented conference every other year.

Pam Browning told me just the opposite. She'd like to have a retreat every

Shirley Hailstock said she appreciated not having any responsibilities at the conference—and the chance to hold discussions with writers at her level.

Pat Rice called the conference "fun." But she was another participant who would want a more business-oriented conference every other year.

On the other hand, Pat Ricks liked having "fewer agents and editors and more focus on us as writers."

For participants like Patricia Pinianski, the Southwest-oriented sessions added immeasurably to the retreat atmosphere. Yet she also appreciated the mix of business sessions. Like others, she would have liked a less packed day on Monday-with some down time in the middle of the afternoon.

Most of those who attended loved

the Bishop's lodge. Cheryl Zach called it beautiful. With a great spa. She also had fun riding the horses. But she summed up the opinion of several participants that there were "way too many steps." The flights of steps, combined with the high altitude, had many participants huffing and puffing. She also pointed out that the food at the lodge was expensive with no alternative for participants without a car.

Roberta Gellis thought "the retreat atmosphere was fine...I'm not looking for an editor or an agent. I came to see people I haven't seen." Like many, she thought the lodge was "gorgeous," but she saw the altitude as a problem. And she wasn't particularly interested in the spiritual aspects of the program.

Everybody I talked to had positive things to say about the retreat. Some would have liked a slightly different mix of sessions. Some would have liked more choices-perhaps business versus spiritual renewal tracks running opposite each other.

But the real success of the conference was the chance to get together with writers and share our good and bad news, our creativity, and our energy.

Lynda Ward summed it up very well on Ninclink. "The thing that impressed me and moved me the most was the warmth and friendliness of everybody there, their candor about their own problems, and their encouragement and confidence that even the most stalled of careers can be revitalized." She called the retreat-goers "a very special group of people, indeed."

As Rebecca York, Ruth Glick writes romantic suspense, often with paranormal elements. Her April Harlequin Intrigue is Out of Nowhere. Her story "Burning Moon" will be published in the anthology Cravings in July.



Harcourt, where she'll become editor-in-chief of adult trade, effective June 1. Denise Marcil Literary Agency will share administrative offices with two other agencies: Don Cogdon Assoc. Inc. and Dunham Literary Inc. Maura Kye will begin building her own list of clients with Denise Marcil Literary Agency, 156 5th Ave., - Bits Are Filed by Sally Hawkes Suite 625, New York, NY 10010



Recaps of individual sessions at this year's Ninc retreat will continue in upcoming issues. If you missed the moment, here's the first debriefing – fresh from Santa Fe conference attendees. ED.

## **Tony Hillerman: Building Books without Blueprints**

#### BY PATRICIA WYNN

All right. I begged Lorraine to let me cover Tony Hillerman's talk, and he was every bit as kind and gracious as I knew he would be from reading his novels. For the few who might not have read them, he is the author of the Navaho Tribal Police mystery series, featuring Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee as detectives.

The main point Hillerman wanted to get across was that each writer needs to find his "own way to do it." He got lots of advice when he was starting out and most of it turned out to be wrong for him. He was told that every author outlines his books, and he struggled to outline the first three. Then with Listening Woman, he "came to his senses," and found that ideas came to him in the process of writing that would never have found their way into an outline. In case they would help any of us, however, he did pass on some of the little pearls he's been given by other successful authors. From Elmore Leonard: "The secret to writing successful books is to leave out all the stuff the reader skips."

On the business side, he said to be careful picking an agent and told

us a few horror stories, including his own. In his first book contract, he unwittingly gave away perpetual rights to his work, so he had to "buy back the creatures of his own creation."

On the creative side, his rule is that he has to like what he's writing himself. You can't write for the market; however, you can be guided by the market you are writing for, and he said he is. When he's writing, he has one or two particular readers he keeps in mind who are better educated and more intelligent than he is. The only things he knows better than they do are his plot and his story's subject matter. He never writes down to them, but writes up, not going so far as to lapse into Greek, but doing his best to measure up.

Years ago, at a Ninc conference, Jennifer Blake gave me the best advice I ever got, which she may have passed on from someone else. She said, "Find a setting and make it yours." Hillerman has done this perhaps as much as any author I know. He said, "Start with a landscape you want to use—even a city landscape. Find one that's interesting, and let the readers see it."

Asked about the inspiration for

his characters, he gave examples of how a sheriff he had known and respected became the basis of Joe Leaphorn's character. When his story called for a younger, less sophisticated policeman, he modeled Jim Chee after the college students he was teaching at the time. A man he met on a plane was changed into a female for Finding Moon. His villains tend to reveal his prejudices, he said, which can be useful. Most of his went to Exeter and Ivy League schools.

In constructing his mystery plots, he tries to choose crimes that will make his characters go look at a ceremony or a particular cultural aspect of the Navaho, Hopi, or in the next book, Utes.

On the subject of screenplays, he said you need to kill the book, then take a little piece of it and write the screenplay around that. He has only complained about one thing in the PBS versions of his books—that they cast Louisa, the brilliant anthropology professor and down-to-earth friend of Joe Leaphorn, as a redheaded bombshell who lusts after every man she meets.



#### Looking For Some Place to Go . . .

The Writer's Digest/ShawGuides Directory to Writers' Conferences, Seminars and Workshops http://www.writersdigest.com/conferences/ features 1470 upcoming conferences [A nod to Mary Kennedy for posting this on Ninclink.]

## **David Morrell: Priming the Writer's Mind**

### BY PATRICIA WYNN

This NY Times bestselling author of First Blood and The Brotherhood of the Rose was such an excellent speaker, the audience didn't want to let him end the session. He started by looking at what our task as novel writers is. It is more than just writing 20 pages per day for 30 days to get a book, as many non-writers ("civilians" he calls them) believe. On the other hand, because he considers writing a "perishable skill," he believes it requires daily practice or the skill will be forgotten. He once took five months off, only to find that he had forgotten how to write and had to spend a month relearning how.

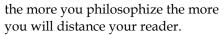
It was 12 years between the publication of *First Blood* and the movie based on it, during which his sales and advances declined. Then suddenly it went to #3 on the *NY Times* list. He attributed that success to luck, saying that many better writers never make it. We are in an exceedingly competitive business. As in other businesses, there is a merit to mere survival. He said we have to decide whether we are in it for the duration or quit.

As a professor he asks his students why they want to be writers, then disabuses them of the notion that writing will bring them money or fame. Given the slim chances of getting either, we have to ask ourselves why we want to do this. The motivation has to be self-fulfillment. He said that when you make a choice about what to write, remember that you are a finite being. You are going to die. Your time has to count. Don't chase trends. By the time you chase one down, it will be gone, plus you will get a reputation as a follower. "It is better to be a first class version of yourself than a second rate version of someone else."

You have to have a set of values to carry you through a long, difficult career. His personal rule—there has to be something about the book that is fulfilling, that makes him a better person. This is his key to staying fresh. It may be as simple as enjoying the research he did for the book. But if he can't find a reason, he does not write it. He said our task is to stay fresh not only in the composition but in the revision, when we have to trick our minds into reading our work as if we were someone else. His other suggestions include:

- 1) Take weekends off and experience the world. This is important for distance
- 2) The other five days of the week, take a rigid approach to work. Ritual is everything.
- 3) Remember that we are entertainers. Write only what you believe





- 4) Look for metaphors. He believes that the books that last are based on metaphors.
- 5) Be sure to ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?" A new book must be a voyage of self-discovery.

A helpful tool he uses is to treat his computer like an alter-ego. He pretends it is asking him questions about the book he's planning, and he types the answers. This gives him practice and a written record of his thoughts. He finds it more productive than running his ideas by friends, since "civilians just don't get it" and can react in ways that stifle his creativity. These dialogues with his computer become lengthy letters to himself. When revising, he pretends that he is someone else, usually one of his two most insightful critics. To aid in the role playing, he never revises at his writing desk, but somewhere else in the house/office. Having different locations and different rituals for writing and revising help him get the distance he needs to gain objectivity on his work.

Patricia Wynn left the retreat relieved to know she wasn't alone and happier than ever to be Mistress of Pemberley (Press).



#### **Critiques R Us**

Recent discussions on Ninclink for a critical reader started with one author seeking assistance with a current manuscript. Pat Rice is investigating a critique exchange among Ninc members. The logistics of how this would be done are at a very early stage. If you have comments or questions, contact Pat Rice at **readers01@aol.com**.



# George R. R. Martin: A Man With a View...Or Several

### BY BRENDA HIATT

In the early 1970's, George R. R. Martin began publishing the short stories that eventually earned him three Hugos, two Nebulas, a World Fantasy Award, and a Bram Stoker Award. His first novel, Dying of the *Light*, appeared in 1977, followed by Windhaven (with Lisa Tuttle), the ground-breaking Fever Dream in 1982, and The Armageddon Rag in 1983. George later worked on the 1980's revival of The Twilight Zone and the memorable TV series Beauty and the Beast, as well as the successful shared-world series of Wild Card books. In 1991, George began work on what has become his critically acclaimed, bestselling fantasy series, A Song of Ice and Fire, the first book of which led to George's fourth Hugo.

In this question-and-answer session, moderator Anne Holmberg, began with questions gleaned from Ninclink subscribers who were unable to come to the retreat, followed by questions from the attendees. Paraphrases of the questions and George's answers follow, since I wasn't fast enough to write down every word—though I certainly wish I could have!

What are some of the differences between television scriptwriting and novel writing?

In George's opinion, scripts are easier because they only require two skills: good dialogue and a good sense of structure. Novels, obviously, require these along with several other skills. Scripts don't necessarily require great prose, as he discovered reading scripts by some very bigname scriptwriters. Where scripts are harder is in the Hollywood politics involved. Legions of people want input into the process and the final product, which can be frustrating and stressful for many writers, and making it a very different experience from novel writing.

# Did you have any down points in your career? If so, how did you overcome them?

"Of course I had down points," George said. The biggest turning point in his career, which led to his involvement with Hollywood, involved a door closing and another opening almost simultaneously. George had a successful first novel, and the second and third did even better. Then his fourth, The Armageddon Rag, tanked, despite awards and great reviews. No one wanted book #5. But that same "unsuccessful" fourth novel was optioned for a movie, and George was flown out to Hollywood. (He mentioned, as an aside, that the worlds of TV and feature films are two separate worlds, where most TV people are trying to break into films.) There, he met with Phil DeGuere, who was hoping to revive *The Twilight Zone* and convinced George to write a script—which resulted in George being hired onto the staff of the show. This, of course, led to more connections—and more success—in Hollywood.

# What did/do you consider your main strengths—science fiction or fantasy—especially when you got back to novels in the early '90s?

George wanted to stress that he never pitched outlines, only ideas or chapters, since he hates outlines. He had a few free months in his Hollywood schedule and started a couple of new novels—Avalon, set in his previous SF world, and Game of Thrones. Then Hollywood intervened again for a while. Later, he pitched both ideas, along with a couple of other partials in drawers, and the fantasy, Game of Thrones, garnered the most interest.

# Your books are dark by epic fantasy standards. Has that helped or hurt your career?

George concedes that his books are successful, but he doesn't know if that is because of or in spite of the dark elements. The *Wild Card* series got darker and darker and sales did eventually decline, so there seems to be a limit to how much darkness readers will accept. Still, he feels strongly that you have to tell the story that's inside your head without



Mysterious Press/Warner Books announces the 1st Sara Ann Freed Memorial Award for a first mystery novel. http://www.twbookmark.com/mystery/saraannfreed.html

### Author's Guild Now Building Free Websites for New Members-

For a limited time, the Authors Guild is building websites for new members at no charge. The full featured sites can include lengthy book excerpts, author photos, book cover images, event listings,

letting the market get in the way...too much.

Did your science fiction readers follow you to fantasy? Did the cover help?

Yes, though it was much more common years ago for readers (and writers) to move back and forth between SF and fantasy. Now writers are encouraged to stick with one or the other to build a career. In the case of Game of Thrones, Bantam put a classic fantasy cover on the ARC, then the higher ups decided that the book could appeal to non-fantasy readers as well, so commissioned a new cover with a foiled, bestseller look. Unfortunately, this lost a lot of fantasy readers, who didn't recognize the book as fantasy, while the bestseller readers mostly didn't want fantasy. The book didn't do nearly as well as expected—George's second career crisis. Fortunately, they put a traditional fantasy cover on the paperback edition, which then sold very well. For the second book in the series, they compromised on the hardcover, giving it foil but also an inset with fantasy artwork, as a signal to fantasy readers. That book did very well, so the compromise apparently worked.

Do you expect to see more fantasy on TV? If so, do you think anything will measure up to the quality of *Beauty and the Beast*?

Yes, George definitely expects to see more fantasy, though historically TV hasn't done very well with it. A lot of fantasy is being pitched right now, though, in the wake of the success of *The Lord of the Rings* 

movies. As for quality, there are many, many variables. *Beauty and the Beast* was actually designed to raise the bar on quality, but when it didn't get the ratings the network hoped for, one exec was heard to say, "Well, we tried quality, and that didn't work." What success BATB did have surprised a lot of people.

You kill a lot of your characters. When you do that, do you feel it?

Absolutely. Fiction is about emotion—not "ideas" as has been said about science fiction. Since George has to "become" each character to an extent to write that character effectively, he equated killing a character to killing a little piece of himself. Still, he kind of likes doing it, if only because he hates to be predictable. Knowing that a character might die ratchets up the suspense for the reader, which is a good thing.

(Comment) All of your characters are very human, with flaws as well as strengths, so that even the villains are sympathetic.

George says that J.R.R. Tolkien had a great influence on his writing, as on many fantasy writers. But he feels that many epic fantasy writers have missed some of Tolkien's most important lessons. They pick up on the big, external battles between good and evil, but miss the crucial internal battles. Every hero has the potential to be a villain, and every villain has some hero in him. George has also been influenced by historical fiction and is glad to see it coming back after a dry spell in the market.

Should there be a horror genre,

or should it be labeled as dark fantasy or something else?



No, George doesn't think there should be a horror genre, but he doesn't think much of the other labels, either. When horror was at its most successful in the early '80s there was no real horror genre—it was shelved with general fiction. George was a founding member of Horror Writers of America but, over his protests, one of HWA's early goals was to create a horror genre with its own section in stores. HWA succeeded, which George believes contributed to the collapse of horror.

Are there any plans to release *Beauty and the Beast* on DVD?

George doesn't know, though he believes the market would certainly support it. Republic Pictures still has the rights, so feel free to pester them to do so.

How can you wean fans away from a favorite character when you feel it's time to move on to other characters' stories?

Uh, kill him? Barring that, George suggested using the favorite as a secondary character in future books.

Has not outlining ever been a problem?

Yes, George says that his current book is a year and a half late partly due to the difficulty of keeping all the details straight in a series of linked books. In fact,



and links to online bookstores. See www.mignoneberhart.com for general format, although changes can be made at an author's request. Regular hosting is \$6.00 per month. Book authors and freelance journalists who already have their own sites may move them to the Guild server and pay the same hosting fee.

**Trying to contact a Harlequin editor in Toronto or New York?** Here's the basic structure for e-mail: FirstName\_LastName@harlequin.ca. So it's Natashya\_Wilson@harlequin.ca



he intended to start this book five years after the

end of the last one, skipping over the intervening years, but that turned out to be a nightmare, necessitating flashbacks and explanations that slowed the story. Finally he scrapped the idea and started over—moments after the last book ended.

# Can you give us ANY idea when your next book will be finished?

George really, really expects to finish it this year.

# How *do* you keep things straight?

George keeps files, on and off his

computer, as well as countless scraps of paper. However, as the series continues (and age advances), he's having to go back more and more often to check details in earlier books. Luckily, one of his fans has put up a detailed website about his earlier books—and it's searchable! This has been a great resource.

# Can you comment on U.S. vs European sales?

George has found his U.S. sales to be better, though that's not true for all authors. Jack Vance, for example, is the fantasy darling of the Dutch and does fabulously well in Holland. Others have amassed great followings in various other countries. An aside on the timing of U.S. and overseas publication: The British have become very good at "crashing" a book into quick release

if they expect it to be a bestseller. With online/worldwide retailing, this allows them to "steal" sales from other markets. For this reason, J. K. Rowling had to write into her contracts that her books would be simultaneously released around the world.

I'm sure I didn't manage to capture George's humor in this synopsis (we laughed a lot!) but I've at least tried to share his insights on the industry and the writer's life, in light of his long, successful (and continuing) career. Thanks, George!

Brenda Hiatt was grappling with burnout after tight deadlines for her Avon historicals, but left the Ninc retreat feeling rejuvenated. Now to see whether that translates into the best book she's ever written!

## Steven Axelrod: Author-Agent Contracts: Pros and Cons, Perils and Pitfalls

#### BY PATRICIA WYNN

Through his close association with Ninc from its earliest days, Steven Axelrod has earned our collective respect, so he was the ideal agent for this session. His aim was to clarify the agent-author relationship and to address the difference between authors' and agents' concerns, which are not always the same. He handed out an example of his agency agreement, the agent clause he uses in

publishing contracts, the agent clause for agreements negotiated by subagents (foreign sales), and the recent Ninc Position Paper on the new William Morris clause.

He does not use an agency agreement with an established author. This is because existing pros already understand the agent-author relationship. The agreement he uses with new authors is simply to lay out the relationship so there will be no misunderstanding. The agreement is

straightforward. Because of author concerns in the past with "good agents gone bad," Axelrod includes a provision for split payments. And since he encountered reluctance on the part of publishers to go against an existing agency clause, even when the former agent was definitely AWOL, he altered his standard agency clause to allow split payments at the author's request. The only problem with this, he said, is that authors' checks are larger, and if



#### Readers Offer Tip for Ads: Describe the Book

TheBookReportNetwork.com co-founder and president, Carol Fitzgerald, got "fed up" with print ads that didn't really describe the books offered, "... we saw ad after ad that we felt did not convey a strong selling message for the books being advertised." The answer, an

they are above a certain amount, they typically follow a different track and arrive later than the agent's. With split payments, he has no way of knowing that the author has not been paid.

An agency agreement should specifically exclude an option book if the sale is made after the term of the agreement, even if the option book was discussed during negotiation of the contract it satisfies. Discussion centered on one clause in Axelrod's contract, in which he claims a commission for any sale of rights to any of his clients' writings, even after the term of the agreement, for which the initial sale of the U.S. book publication rights was made by him during the term of the agreement or the standard six months after notice of dissolution.

His argument was that agents spend a great deal of money and time sending books to foreign agents, updating these agents on the success of the U.S. book, notifying film producers of the books they represent, etc., and that it can take years for the rights to be purchased. In one case foreign rights were purchased for a book he represented two years after the book's author had fired him.

Even with *NY Times* bestsellers, the sales seem to trickle in over a period of years. Ninc members expressed concern about agents who do nothing to sell sub-rights and the open-ended nature of the clause and asked if he would consider a "sunset clause," limiting his rights to a commission to five years. He said he

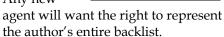
probably would.

Asked what happens to our books after they are sent to foreign agents, he said he really didn't know. The agents in other countries are best left alone to work their markets, since business in every country is conducted differently. The U.S. agent can keep sending bulletins and support information, which he does. He noted that the author is generally happy to let him handle the foreign rights on books he has sold. The income from them is never great for the work involved.

Discussing the Ninc alert on the William Morris clause, which says the agency shall be the author's sole and exclusive agent for the term of copyright of the work rather than the traditional term of the agreement, Axelrod made a few points. One was that with the e-book clauses in today's contracts, there will rarely be any reversion, so the selling agency would likely remain the representing agency anyway.

The other, however, was that if authors seriously object to this clause, they need to object loudly and be firm. He suggested enlisting the help of the Authors Guild and RWA (which has already been done). That failing, he said, affected authors would have to weigh the importance of this clause with their overall relationship and decide which was more important to them. In other words, they should consider whether or not to fire their agent. He could guarantee that if the agency did not believe it would lose anything by insisting

on the clause, it would continue to insist. Any new



Someone asked the perpetual question — would he ever consider negotiating the size of his commission. He has asked other agents how they feel about this, and their responses have confirmed his decision to say no. Asked if this wasn't price fixing, he said it wasn't because the agents did not get together and set the commission. It was market determined. In other words, they can charge it and get it, so they do. Lowering the commission has not given anyone a competitive advantage. This has been probed thoroughly by anti-trust investigators, at great cost to the agents, and dropped for the reason he gave.

Someone said they thought agents should be licensed and bonded because they essentially serve as legal reps, but he pointed out that the cost of that regulation would come out of the authors' pockets, and that it would lead to state professional fees and taxes that again the author would end up footing.

Individual authors asked about problems they were having, and Axelrod, as always, was good enough to share his advice. \*

Bits'n'Pieces

online poll with 955 responses in three weeks to discover what readers think is the single-most important feature in a book ad. Responses to "What would you like to see in an ad for a book to help influence your decision to buy it?"—90% - Description of the book; 50% - Quotes from review; 47% - Seeing a cover photo.



BY LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS

My daughter Kiri is studying art in Florence this year, and when we asked about travel arrangements for the Christmas break she said, "I love Italy and I hate flying coach. I don't want to come home—why don't you guys come here?"

We couldn't think of a good reason not to, and we'd always wanted to see Rome, so we said, "Okay," and started making our plans. The entire family spent two weeks in an apartment we rented in the suburbs of Rome, and then Kiri and I spent another three weeks wandering around Europe together. One of the big advantages of being self-employed is having the freedom to take a month off like that.

One of the disadvantages, of course, was that I had no income for that month, but hey, you can't have everything.

Anyway, we visited Rome, Florence, Bologna, Milan, Venice, Barcelona, and Paris, and I got to see first-hand any number of things I'd only read about before, or at most seen in pictures.

You know something? It's not the same.

There are things about even the most famous places that don't seem to get mentioned in books, or shown in movies, or that aren't clear from maps. I don't just mean the obvious stuff—photos not doing artwork justice, or conveying the actual feel of a place, or whatever. I mean simple basic facts.

For example, the fact that most of the ruins in Rome are made of brick.

Maybe it's just me, maybe I somehow just missed the obvious, but I'd always thought of all those big Roman ruins as being *stone*. I mean, the ruined castles and abbeys I saw in France and England and Germany on previous trips to Europe were all stone. The Roman gate in Trier was stone. But no, all the big baths and palaces from Rome's imperial era were built of brick. Many of them had marble veneer originally, but that's mostly long gone, and what's left is brick, thousands of tons of good red brick.

Somehow, despite studying a semester each of

# Arrivederci, Roma!

architectural history, Roman history, and Roman law, as well as minoring in art history, I'd missed that.

And then there's the city's geography. I've seen lots of Hollywood movies where the Emperor watches chariot races in the Circus Maximus, and they never once showed a realistic view of the imperial box. You always see the tiers of seats, and open sky above—but the Circus Maximus is wedged into a valley between two hills, and one of those hills is the Palatine, and the imperial palaces are on top of the Palatine; in real life, if you looked across the chariot track at the imperial box, you'd see the emperor's palace atop the cliff just north of the Circus, towering over everything. If you go to the Circo Massimo, as it's now called, the ruined palaces *still* loom over everything.

The ruined *brick* palaces.

Which means that if the emperor wanted to watch the chariot races, all he had to do was step out on his own balcony and look down. I'd always assumed he had to walk or ride a few blocks, but no, the Circus was literally in his back yard. That's just not how I'd pictured it.

There were things like that all over Rome, things I thought I knew that just weren't the way I'd envisioned them, or weren't where I thought they were, from the Forum to the Vatican.

And then in Barcelona — well, most of what I knew about Barcelona came from reading about Antonio Gaudi. I knew it was the heart of Catalonia, and had once been the capital of the kingdom of Aragon, but that didn't mean much to me. Mostly I just thought of it as a big city in Spain.

It came as a shock to discover that the street signs and store names there aren't in Spanish, but in Catalan. Practically *everything* was in Catalan. The address I had for our hotel was in Spanish; the street signs were in Catalan, and Catalan is not as much like Spanish as I'd thought. Finding the hotel—well, we managed, but it was a challenge.

For the entire time we were there, there was just one reminder after another that we were in Catalonia. The National Palace, the big art museum, isn't the Spanish national anything, it's the *Catalonian* national palace. The people of Barcelona don't consider themselves Spanish; they're Catalan.

"But it's in Spain!" I thought. Ha. There are political posters scattered all over the city announcing, "Catalonia is not Spain!"

That was just the start. I went on to discover that most of what I thought I knew about Antonio Gaudi's creations, such as the unfinished church of La Sagrada Familia, or the Parc Güell, was wrong, and that Barcelona had some truly astonishing medieval treasures, such as the Cathedral of St. Eulalia, that I had never heard of.

(It came as some relief to read George Orwell's memoir about the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*, on the flight home and learn that he lived in Barcelona for six months without ever discovering the Cathedral of St. Eulalia at all—he says he visited the cathedral, but his description is of La Sagrada Familia, not Santa Eulalia. At least I didn't miss finding it entirely!)

Or moving on to other cities, we discovered that Milan has the most amazing collection of streetcars, some of them dating back to the 1920s, all still in regular use—in a single evening we saw cars from eight different decades carrying passengers. Why doesn't anyone ever mention this?

And did you know Bologna has *two* leaning towers, rather than Pisa's one? Admittedly, they aren't leaning as spectacularly and are far less ornate, but the one that got finished is ninety-seven meters, much taller than anything in Pisa. (One was leaning far enough that construction was halted at forty-five meters because it was obviously going to fall over if they kept going. It's been standing there unfinished for more than eight hundred years.)

Then there are the dozens of arcades that line Bologna's downtown streets—I've never seen them mentioned in stories or shown on TV. And there's the unfinished Basilica of San Petronio, with its half-built marble facade, that no one's heard of. Somehow Bologna doesn't turn up in fiction the way Rome and Venice do.

Having mentioned Venice, let me say that Venice is staggeringly weird. It did live up to its billing—which was, after all the other cities, perhaps the biggest surprise of all. It really is just as strange and picturesque and haunting as it's supposed to be—and it's a complete maze. We got lost every time we set foot on the streets there.

And after seeing all this, I find myself wondering how anyone could ever dare write a story set in a real place he or she hasn't visited.

I mean, it happens all the time; I've done it myself. Check a few maps, maybe talk to a native, and give it a shot. If the story needs a scene in Brasilia or Benares, you aren't about to hop on a plane and go halfway around the world to check it out; you fake it, right?

Somehow, though, I think I'll be more cautious if I ever do it again. There are all these things in Rome and Barcelona and Venice that anyone who *has* been there would know about, but that I somehow never saw mentioned until I went there. It would be so easy to get something simple and basic wrong.

I probably *have* gotten something simple and basic wrong when writing stories set in Moscow or Quebec or wherever.

And I'm greatly relieved now that I mostly write fantasy. No one can ever tell me I've gotten the details wrong in a country or city I made up! I can describe strange customs or gigantic ruins or elaborate architecture, and no one can contradict me if I say I'm talking about Dusarra or Ethshar. If I write about Rome, a million readers can nitpick every detail.

Even if I'm writing a story set in the real world, it's easier to make up a place than use a real one, whether it's Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Superman's Metropolis, or my own Diamond Park, Maryland. You can give it whatever features you need—streets, rivers, caves, cliffs, ports, buildings—without worrying about accuracy.

But on the other hand—if I write a story set in Rome now, then my trip becomes tax deductible as research! Shucks, just writing this article might be enough. While I'll never be chastised for getting the description of an imaginary city wrong, I won't be able to write off the airfare, either.

And if you do describe a real place, and get it just right—well, is there any better way to draw a reader into a story than to show him a setting he already knows? That flash of realization—"I *know* that place! I've been there, and that's just how it is!"—is glorious, and the writer who can bring it about has won a fan's heart.

But get the setting wrong, and the reader will fall right out of the story.

It's a tough choice, isn't it? \*

# Bits'n'Pieces

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#### Bookmarks, postcards,

**etc.** [Supplied by Lorraine Heath on Ninclink]

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## PW Editorial Calendar 2004–Upcoming Issue Features & Supplements:

- 0.00	
4/5	Science Fiction/Fantasy
4/19	Mystery
5/10	Canadian Publishing Supplement
7/5	Romance
7/19	Fall Children's Announcements
8/9	Adult Fall Announcements
8/16	A Guide to Regional Trade Shows
10/18	Mystery
11/1	Year in Books 2004
11/8	Romance



# Getting in the Groove

#### **Dear Annette:**

I've got the usual 3+ jobs so common to us Ninc members (family, outside career, writing). My precious writing time is often chopped up: an hour while the kids are at karate, an extra half hour while dinner cooks, etc. I feel like I waste a lot of useful time trying to call up the Muse. Any tips for getting into the mood faster?

Signed: Seeking the Groove

### Dear Seeking:

Ah, getting into the flow. I wish I had the corner on THAT market. I don't have anything ready to bottle, unfortunately (still working on it), but I do actually have some ideas.

Flow, as it's most often called in the psychological literature, has been studied for decades with regards to athletic performance. The ways writers get into—and all too often out of—flow have begun to get research attention as well over the past few years.

The upshot of the research so far seems to be that flow is an elusive animal that people experience in very different ways. *Hoo boy, big surprise there, huh?* 

The other result of the research is that flow can be called up more often by applying consistent rituals. Luckily for us, flow appears to come more easily and predictably when people have rituals regarding their writing.

Who would have thought that the baseball player who refuses to change his nasty socks while he's in the middle of a homerun streak may not be so nutty after all? I'm not going to suggest that you stop changing your underwear. Unless, of course that works for you. But I'd keep that kinda quiet...ahem.

Whether we're talking about athletes, CEOs, or writers, rituals create conditions that help to silence the left brain and access the right. And that seems to be the key to getting into flow; silencing the internal critic and existing entirely in the present moment, focused on the present task.

Rituals come in two forms, the practical and the superstitious. Practical rituals have to do with writing at the same time every day because that's the time that works in your schedule or always writing at your desk because that's where the computer is. Superstitious rituals include things like using only your lucky pen or writing only while seated in front of a south-facing window staring at a full moon when Mercury is in retrograde. Nothing practical about them, but they help because, well, because we *believe* they do.

The fascinating thing is that whether your rituals are practical or not doesn't seem to matter. They all work. Silly or not, rituals are clearly effective in helping reach flow states. There seems to be something about using the same number 2 pencil on the same type of newsprint or sitting in front of the same monitor rubbing your lucky pink rabbit's foot that seems to help create brainwave patterns conducive to enticing the Muse.

The following are some ideas for calling up the Muse:

- 1. **Be persistent and consistent.** Whatever sort of ritual you create, resolve to apply it consistently for awhile (a few weeks to a month) to give it a chance to work. Research on habit-breaking suggests that 30 days is the magical number for creating permanent change. Whatever system you create, resolve to hang in there for awhile.
- 2. **Create a writing ritual for yourself.** Make it crazy. Make it mobile, so you can work in the van at Little League practice.
- 3. **Include a mental ritual.** Calling up the Muse involves quieting your mind. It means trying to silence the inner critic so the Muse can think.

Self-hypnosis can be quite effective for some people. I'm actually experimenting with using a self-hypnosis exercise to increase my productive writing time. I occasionally have an unexpected 45 minutes to write when a client stands me up. I'm working on using a very specific one-minute self-hypnosis/visualization script to quiet my mind and help me shift from Dr. Annette-mode into writing mode more quickly. So far, I have to say, I think it's working.

4. Add a physical component. Get a lucky pen, a magical composition book, a laptop, or for God's sake, at least an Alphasmart. I'm not kidding. The company hasn't gone public yet, so I don't have stock, darn it. This is an utterly unrewarded endorsement.

Robert Olen Butler describes writing his first several published novels during the long train commute to and from his office. He used the same type of pencil each day and says that after awhile, just the act of stepping onto the train got him into a writing state because that was the only place he actually wrote.

That's where my portable Alphasmart keyboard comes in. I got my Alphie over a year ago, thinking I'd use it once in awhile so I could sit out in the backyard and write. It didn't take long before I was composing more on it than at my computer. For a long time, I couldn't understand why my lovely new flat-screen Macintosh sat unused, while the black-and-white minikeyboard with the 2x6 inch LCD screen saw daily action. Then it hit me. I do lots of things at my computer. I check e-mail. I surf the web. I do my accounting for my therapy practice.

There's only one thing I do on my Alphasmart. I write.

It's standard advice for people with insomnia to suggest that they stop doing anything in their beds except sleep. I'm wondering if the same advice might apply to us writers. It's not practical to suggest that we do nothing at our computers except write, but trying to come up with some sort of compromise might help coax the Muse out of hiding more quickly.

Whatever ritual you create, why not make it fun? Go ahead. Be a diva. The research will back you up. Writing only on bubble-gum scented Hello Kitty stationery with a purple glitter pen may actually be a legitimate road to stardom.

Annette Carney, Ph.D is a Marriage and Family Therapist with 15 years experience. 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.



# Print on Demand on Trial in St. Louis

Lighting Source and Ingram are ordered to pay \$15 million for patent infringement. The companies are immediately appealing the verdict. The companies claim On Demand Machine Corp. doesn't have a valid patent, so there was no infringement. An appeal would likely be decided within a year after it's filed. Lightning Sources claims it won't raise prices to customers [Amazon or others] as a result.

The service was first developed by Harvey Ross in 1990 so that "a customer could enter a bookstore kiosk, type a book title into a computer and access a synopsis, sales and other information before clicking on a command that would produce a printed, bound and covered book within minutes." It's ironic that the On Demand Machine's attorney, William Cunningham, has stated the settlement is "considerably" more than royalty payments that would have been due under an authorized license. \*\*

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## 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:**

Judy Duarte, San Luis Rey CA Jolie Kramer (*Jo Leigh*), Beaver UT Felicia L. Mason, Yorktown VA Deborah A. Rather (*Arlene James*), Mansfield TX Roxanne St. Claire, Satellite Beach FL

### **New Members:**

Karen Alarie (*Karen Anders*), Centreville VA Emilie Rose Cunningham (*Emilie Rose*), Durham NC Dianne Despain (*Dianne Drake*), Indianapolis IN Doreen Roberts Hight (*Kate Kingsbury, Doreen Roberts*), Tigard OR

Gail Martin (*Gail Gaymer Martin*) Lathrup Village MI Suzanne McMinn, Granbury TX Joanna Novins, Stamford CT Gail G. Ranstrom, St. Augustine FL Lilles Slawik (*Lucy Monroe*), Olympia WA Laurin Wittig, Williamsburg VA

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



# Sticky Notes from the Edge

Cheryl Anne Porter

# If It Ain't Funny, How Come You're Laughing?

So I had driven about half the way home through Tampa (last July, right after RWA's New York conference) from my new doctor's office...when it finally hit me. I was like "WHAT?!" Right in the middle of midday traffic and a few hand signals (Like: no, you go first), I turned my car around and drove right back to her office. Her assistant—a charmingly smart-aleck male whom I adore (but who likes Carol—my best friend and now caretaker—better)—took one look at my face and put me back in an examination room. This could not be; what the hell was I doing in an oncologist's office? That didn't apply to me.

Turns out, yes it does. Explained the fatigue, weight gain, and inability to, well, do most everything.

There I was, playing it all cool, asking her...so, uh, just how many of those six to eight months you mentioned earlier have I already lived? It seemed important, you know, trying to smile, look unaffected, and not think about my baby grandchildren. Damn. I'd been given a CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH, y'all, six weeks before this. Six weeks. She looked at me, said you're a person, not a statistic. Let it go. As long as there are medicines to treat you, we're going to use them. She said, along those lines, she was going to make me sick as hell for a long time, but thought she could save me. The woman wasn't kidding. The cancer is sitting there nicely, but the chemo is like Apaches on a war raid

Of course, it makes one sick as hell by killing the good stuff, too, so I've had (or got) it all.

So get to the funny parts, Porter; right? I don't know if it's funny, but it's certainly triumphant for me: I didn't lose my hair. My doctor says that's the first question every female asks her: Will I lose my hair? No. I can't have it colored (not that I ever did...ahem) either, but what has thinned, y'all, has come back in black and curly! So...nyah! Let's see...oh, yeah, I have lost over fifty pounds in four months. The other day, I put on a pair of old jeans, zipped them up, took a deep breath—and they darned near fell to the floor!

My skin didn't turn yellow; it tanned (like the Indian I am), which makes my teeth look whiter. I tell you, I am smoking!!! (as in hot, not Marlboros) People who don't know what's going on with me are like Wow! Girlfriend, what have you been doing? There's no sense embarrassing them, so I just tell them I'm living right—with God and good friends. Like you. I count on you and love every one of you. Once I can write again (this has taken five hours, instead of my usual two), I'm going to put out that book God wants me to write.

But in the meantime, I did this much. And that's what counts.

Oh yeah, something funny. Too much ammonia in one's body can give one hallucinations. You guessed it. You should have seen everyone's face at breakfast the other day when I announced I was General George S. Patton and this was Christmas Morning. That was fun—and won me a free trip to the doctor's...who saluted me and gave me a lollipop. See? It's not all bad!!!.

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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