

# Novelists' Ink Novelists' Ink Novelists' Ink

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

## Sea Change

BY ETHAN ELLENBERG

I don't spend a lot of time thinking about the past, but the radical change in the position of the author in today's world has emerged in my daily awareness with renewed force. I don't look back fondly or sadly, just with amazement at how different an author's lot is now.

In the recent past, prior to the emergence of the Internet, the author had little contact with the public. Very little was known about them. What was known, was usually limited to a paragraph-sized author bio on the back of a book. Many authors, particularly of paperback books, never met the public at all. Books that were heavily promoted did cause the author to have some public contact, though it was often limited to book store signings and similar events. Rarely would a novelist of any kind attract the attention of any media, particularly television or even radio. Authors did get fan mail and they answered it, but the meeting between an author and a fan was a rare occurrence. Authors' books were in the marketplace, authors were not.

For good or bad, those days are gone forever. Today, the author is in the marketplace. Nearly every author has a website and this invites serious public contact. Authors can be contacted directly by fans, newsletters, reviewers, journalists, they are essentially exposed with little mediation between them

and their fan base. What does this change mean to authors?

First, let's just look at the life of an author. It's not enough to write a good book anymore. A whole new raft of obligations and skills seem to be required. Writers have a reputation for being shy, insecure, and reticent. Aren't their powers of observation and their ability to work long hours alone some of the essential ingredients in their make ups that are key to their success? What happens when a whole class of people who would normally eschew self promotion feel like they have to do just that? I can tell you from the personal experiences of some of my authors it can be a difficult transition.

In addition to that there is simply the increased work load. Don't authors have enough to do? Now, in addition to your daily dozen pages, you've got to maintain the website, answer emails, and originate promotional schemes. I've spoken to top selling authors who've told me they have hired help just to answer emails. An author's chief job is to turn out a good book, but now they have a whole new raft of obligations. I doubt anyone is really happy about it.

There is an upside however, an upside that has slightly but significantly altered the traditional relationship between the author and the publisher. It used to be that the publisher stood between the author and the public. Now the author is in full public view.

*Continued on page 3* ▶

**INSIDE:** *President's Voice: Those Who "Get It" ...2, A Keepsake Dilemma...4, Bits...5, 8, 13, Accentuate the Positive Update...6, First Person: Zen...7, Crayon on my Keyboard: Wanted: An Ivory Tower...9, Introducing...11, In Review: Plot and Structure...12, NYC Conference Update...13, The Girls in the Basement: Naked in Front of Readers...14*

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## President's Voice

# Those Who "Get It"

You know you're in serious deadline avoidance mode when you make an appointment with the dentist. And you don't even have dental insurance. So off I go for my 10 a.m. session with a Steve Martin look-alike (think *Little Shop of Horrors*) although I have not a thing drastically wrong with my teeth. What can I say? It beat staring at a blank screen.

These days, as some of you might know, you don't spend much time with the dentist during a dental appointment. Instead you get cozy with the hygienist, who in my case is named Heidi. And did she have a treat in store for me – Deep Cleaning.

There I am with the slobber-sucker dangling from the corner of my mouth and the chair at full tilt, and Heidi the Hygienist starts to chortle. "Now we'll have some fun," she says. "Mmph," says me. Heidi giggles. "Well, I'll have fun. It might not be quite so much fun for you."

No, really?

Thereupon Heidi begins to work me over. If this is making any of you squirm in your seat, feel free to skip to the last paragraph, where I promise not to talk about anything dental, but instead give you some really cool news. But my point about Heidi is that she had a frickin' blast digging debris out of my mouth. She could barely contain her excitement. "This is so rewarding," she'd cry after each excavation.

She was so into it that she gave up lunch in order to finish the right half of my mouth before she turned me loose. By this time my blank screen looked a whole lot more inviting, so I told her I couldn't come back to do the other half until . . . oh, maybe 2007. I was on a tight deadline, you see. Hey, did I know this avoidance schtick was going to hurt?

I could see that my reluctance had wounded Heidi to the quick. She looked exactly the way I feel when an editor turns my favorite idea into mincemeat. And I was strongly reminded that writers aren't the only ones who want to be valued for what they do. They aren't the only ones who whoop with glee when the work goes well.

I'm sometimes guilty of thinking non-writers just won't get it, but I'm here to tell you Heidi would. So would anyone who loves his/her work with a passion. The difference could be that writers have to love what they do because satisfaction might be the only payoff. That makes us special, but there are others who are equally devoted to the job, equally special – hygienists and taxidermists and IRS agents . . . okay, maybe not IRS agents.

So I made the second appointment for ten days later, and you would have thought I'd given Heidi a million-dollar advance. She was so excited she twirled on her stool, which unfortunately was

tangled in the line for the slobber sucker still tucked in the corner of my mouth . . . . But I'll heal. And Heidi's joy was worth it. Mostly.

Speaking of joy, it's with extreme joy that I tell you we have awarded the 2005 Ninc Conference Scholarship, and I can't imagine a more deserving recipient. This scholarship will do everything we hoped for by providing a nurturing, career-enhancing opportunity to someone who could use a break. Those of you who have donated to the Linda Kay West Fund in both Linda's name and Cheryl Anne Porter's name can rest assured your money is being put to good use. Hey, maybe writers are extra-special, after all.

— Vicki Lewis Thompson

*E-moved lately?  
Remember to update your  
email address at the Ninc  
website.*

## Sea Change

*Continued from page 1* ▶

Despite the increased work load and the burden of being a semi-public figure, what does this profound change mean to the author?

Well, it can have some intriguing benefits. The author, in a certain limited but important sense, is not quite as dependent on the publisher as they used to be. Authors have mailing lists of their own fans that they can service regardless of who their publisher is. With their websites, authors have their own mini-promotion and publicity departments pushing their books and providing accurate publication information. Just as the vast Internet marketplace gives other people access to authors, authors have a much greater chance of being able to access the marketplace. They can run their own promotions. They can maintain a "presence" even when a book is not on sale. As they change publishers and as their careers grow and contract, they can represent themselves directly to the public.

Nothing like this has even remotely existed before and it's only in its infancy. I wouldn't hazard a guess at exactly how this profound shift is going to play itself out, but I will say this—this represents a sea change in the life of authors and authors have to seriously think about how they are going to handle this new environment.

First, they need to decide how they're going to handle their semi-public status on the purely personal level. Second, they need to decide how they're going to handle running a small business that may include a lot more work and expense beyond manuscript creation. Third, they're going to have to track the changing dynamic of how this sea change will continue to

grow and evolve. What they do and what their publisher does for them has been altered and it's truly only the beginning.

I want to conclude with one more important thought. You don't have to do it. While it's true in non-fiction publishers are virtually insisting on authors becoming self promoters, it's not quite true in fiction. You don't have to have a website. You don't need to run promotions. You can still be as shy as you want. Why do I say this? I say this because the book is still the thing in fiction. The truly compelling story is way more important to a publisher than the truly compelling self-promoter. I know something about writers and I know some of you will never want to play this game. As a businessman, I can also say that at some point authors may have to say no to the demands put on them so they can stick to job number one, writing a great book. That also is a valid choice.

In a secret, sneaky way one of my heroes is an author of mine who refused to give her publisher a publicity photo. I don't have the luxury of going back to my garret, but you do. Just write a great book while you're up there and quit emailing Amazon five star reviews of your own books. When you finish that book, I've got an agent I'd like to suggest. His name appears on the byline of this article.

*Ethan Ellenberg heads his own New York based literary agency and is particularly active in commercial fiction, including romance and women's fiction, science fiction, fantasy and suspense. Submissions are welcome; guidelines can be found at [ethanellenberg.com](http://ethanellenberg.com).*

# A Keepsake Dilemma

BY JULIE ELIZABETH LETO

Today, I did something horrible. Something that would bring terror into the souls of the most stalwart writer—I started to clean my office. No, I wasn't procrastinating the end of a book. In fact, I'd just finished. On the eve of each of my last four deadlines, I'd promised myself I would clean my office before moving onto the next book, but things never quite worked out. Galleys would come, we'd take a trip, I'd take a few days catching up on a month's worth of soap operas then—BAM!—I had a deadline again.

***One, I already supported the author by buying the book in the first place.***

This time, I had incentive. My husband.

My husband is a wonderful man and I love him. But he's a Virgo. Anyone who is a Virgo or knows a Virgo understands that many times, this particular sun sign can be, well, neat. Organized. Anal-retentive (and I say this in the most loving way). Usually, he leaves me alone when it comes to my domain, but when outdated computer peripherals and boxes start spilling into the hallway, he has to draw the line. I'm okay with that. If not for his Virgo personality, I'd never clean anything.

So I started with the toughest job—going through my books. Hi, my name is Julie, and I'm a bookaholic. I can say that here because most writers I know are bookaholics, too. I think the politically correct term is bibliophile, but the bottom line is that I often buy more books than I can ever read. I love books, I love authors. I support authors by buying their books. I

once made the mistake of counting my To Be Read pile and was depressed for days. Unfortunately, because of my taxes, I also know how much I spend on books every year. It's scary.

Now, it's time for me to part with books that while I'd love to read them, reality is slapping me in the face with a big fat, Get Real sign. Others I've read and loved—but maybe they aren't quite qualified for my keeper file. Keepers, to me, are books I intend to read again. Let's not discuss the probability that will ever happen, okay? I need some fantasy in my life.

Going through the TBR and the already-read piles, creating stacks to ship to the library, the used bookstore or voracious reading friends is relatively easy...until I come across the books I can't bear to part with. Can I?

The keepers? No, they are safe, tucked in my closet. My own books? No, those I inventory and will use to run a new contest on my website. The books that cause me great angst are the books I've bought from other authors, autographed to me.

Some I've read. Some I haven't. But the thing is, my name is on the title page, most with wonderful, personal inscriptions. At the time I bought these books, I shared something very personal with the fellow author on the other side of the pen. I could probably tell you something special about each and every person who ever signed a book for me.

But reality is looming like my Virgo husband on the other side of the hallway. I cannot keep all these books!

Yet how can I part with them? What would happen if a friend went to the used bookstore and saw my personalized books sitting on the shelves? I'd be horrified and embarrassed. Or worse, what if I give the books away to readers and they end up on eBay, creating profit for some entrepreneur, but not for the author? Short of finding someone I trust named Julie to share them with, what do I do?

The library is a good option, right? Except that

most libraries treat paperbacks like recycled goods, left in a bin at the front entrance, free for the pickin' of anyone who walks in off the street. Garage sale and Flea Market nightmares enter my mind.

I have a serious problem. And I know other authors do as well. I mean, many of us are friends. We truly care about one and another and our careers. Over the seven years I've been published, I've rarely run into incidents of true professional jealousy or back-stabbing (we won't talk about the years *before* I was published). So what do I do with these books?

It took a lot of thought and chocolate, but I decided two things. One, I already supported the author by buying the book in the first place. I showed up at the signing, usually stayed a long time chatting, or often, was signing right along with this author. They already received the sales benefit of my purchase. Two, these books aren't doing anyone any good sitting on my shelves. The author has no idea if I treasured or trashed her work... only I know that I treat these books with great conscience and care.

What's the best thing I can do for these books? I decided that getting them into circulation is best. Giving another new reader a chance to discover the brilliance of my fellow authors, even letting them read how thoughtful, kind and wonderful these authors are in their inscriptions. But I'm not going to go the used bookstore route (sorry, it's too money-grubbing) or the library (too hit-or-miss). Instead, I'm giving them to a neighbor's mother. She's an avid reader and reads three to five books a week. When she's done with the books she buys, she passes them along. To friends, co-workers, neighbors, nursing homes, wherever she thinks the books will be read and appreciated.

Am I passing the buck? Maybe. But by following this route, I know that at least one reader will give these books a chance and that instead of sitting on my shelves, booklovers like me will have discovered the works of authors I care about, even if we only met once at a booksigning. I'm not ashamed to have my

## ***Two, these books aren't doing anyone any good sitting on my shelves.***

name inscribed on the title page—in fact, I'm proud.

So, for anyone who ever met me at a booksigning and was generous enough to buy a book of mine, I hereby give you my express permission to pass it along to a friend, even if you never cracked open the cover. If you can pass along my book to a reader who will give me a fair shot, then you've done me a great service, above and beyond. \*

### ***NINK Note:***

Looking for loving homes for your hate-to-part-with-'em-but-the-TBR-stacks-are-driving-me-out books? Consider these places also: hospital waiting rooms, medical offices, cancer infusion centers. Medical staff, patients, caregivers all are potential readers of your books.

And if you're obsessive-compulsive about the journeys of that book you give away, register it at [www.bookcrossing.com](http://www.bookcrossing.com) for unique i.d. number and track its treks.

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

Why? They wanted to test PublishAmerica, who has been in the news lately concerning whether it is a traditional publisher or a vanity press. The book was broadly and badly written on purpose. PublishAmerica is on record suggesting science fiction and fantasy writers produce lower quality work than other fiction writers because they aren't required to have believable storylines or ordinary characters.

Yes, you guessed it. ATLANTA NIGHTS was going to be a bright star in the PublishAmerica firmament in December, but rejection came in January after the hoax was disclosed.

***BITS Compiled by Sally Hawkes***

## **Revenge of the SciFi Writers**

Some thirty science fiction writers put together a proposal for ATLANTA NIGHTS, purported to be about the sizzling night life in Atlanta.

# “Accentuate the Positive” Update

BY PAT MCLAUGHLIN

In the May 2002 *NINK*, I wrote about tracking down scientific efforts to explore the effect of positive psychology. At the time, I said something about “pending studies.” Well, some results are now in, and these results can provide tools for those of us trying to accentuate the positive in order to reap its benefits. What benefits? Perhaps the two most important to us are that studies have shown that people with positive affect (that’s psych-speak for happy/optimistic) can increase their creativity *and* they live longer.

In a report titled “Happiness Interventions That Work: The First Results,” Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D. (one of the leaders of positive psychology, past president of the APA, and a psychology professor at Penn) reports on research he has done with Tracy Steen, Ph.D.

The research, designed to test what they call “Happiness Interventions,” used the random assignment placebo controlled test (RCT), in which random assignment determined a volunteer’s assignment to one of five interventions being tested or to the control (placebo). Seligman notes that this was the method used to validate Valium and Prozac, as well as cognitive therapy and systematic desensitization.

Using established emotional state assessment, they tested 576 volunteers before each was assigned one of six interventions (including the control placebo). They were then re-tested at specific intervals after they had used the intervention for one week.

**H**ere are the six interventions volunteers were assigned to:

## **Intervention 1: The Gratitude Visit**

Write and present a letter of gratitude to someone the volunteer had never properly thanked.

## **Intervention 2: Three Good Things**

Each night for one week write three good things (big or small) that happened that day. For each thing listed, write about why this good thing happened.

## **Intervention 3: You at Your Best**

Write about a time when the volunteer was at his or her best. During the week, examine what personal strengths were used in that “at your best” time and how to use those strengths in other areas.

## **Intervention 4: Top Strengths**

Take the Values in Action Signature Strengths Survey ([www.authentic happiness.com](http://www.authentic happiness.com)), write top five strengths, and “use these strengths more often and in new ways.”

## **Intervention 5: Using Your Top Strengths**

Expanding on No. 4: After learning top five strengths, volunteers received detailed instruction on how to use the strengths in new ways. They were asked to use their strengths in new ways every day for one week.

## **Intervention 6: Placebo**

Write an early memory every night before bed for one week.

Now, here’s what we really want to know. What worked and what didn’t.

The placebo (No. 6) and simply finding out strengths (No. 4) gave volunteers a quick happiness boost, but they quickly reverted to previous emotional states. Writing the story of you at your best (No. 3) showed benefits for two weeks before slipping back.

But the other three showed longer benefits. Volunteers assigned to the Gratitude Visit (No. 1) intervention tested as significantly happier and less depressed for a solid month after the one-week trial.

The big winners, though, were Three Good Things (No. 2) and Using Your Top Strengths (No. 5). Volunteers who had used either of those for one week were still testing as significantly happier and less depressed three months later. That’s as long as they’ve studied them so far, so benefits could last even longer.

My practical side notes that No. 5 calls for detailed instructions on how to use those strengths in new ways, which first requires finding someone to give you those detailed instructions (and most likely paying that someone) and then having to do the work of actually *using* those strengths in new ways. Hmmm.

But Three Good Things is easy, free (we all have paper and pens lying around, right?) and, hey, we only have to do it for a week once every three months to have the benefits! Okay, I doubt the Ph.D.s would agree with me on that, but it makes sense to me.

Stay tuned...this and other studies continue.

*Pat McLaughlin, writing as Patricia McLinn, has had twenty books published with Harlequin/Silhouette, with two more to be released in 2005.*

## *Zen in the Art of Writing*

By Ray Bradbury

BY ANNETTE CARNEY

Ray Bradbury (although he's blissfully unaware of it, lucky man) has been one of my writing mentors ever since the day I saw him speak for the first time. I was twelve.

Mr. Bradbury was apparently a good friend of our Junior High Principal, Mr. Smith. Each year, while I was in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, Mr. Smith would drive out to the beach, pick Mr. Bradbury up, and chauffeur him to our suburban Junior High School.

I never saw anyone hold hundreds of squirming adolescents spellbound for so long.

He wasn't flashy. He wasn't—if memory serves—even all that funny. At least not in that frantic, Beavis-and-Butthead way favored by today's cell-phone lugging, instant-messaging teens.

He was spellbinding.

One of my most distinct memories of that horrid period known as Junior High was of an assembly where Ray Bradbury spoke. He held court on a bare auditorium stage, regaling us with—well—*stories*. He was mid-anecdote when the recess bell cut him off. He and Mr. Smith held a whispered conference. Mr. Smith stepped up to the microphone and announced that Mr. Bradbury was willing to stay during recess for any students who wanted to listen.

No one left. Not one single kid out of the several hundred there chose Fritos, candy bars, or time on the playground over spending a few more precious minutes in the presence of an amazing storyteller.

That's when I realized writers have power.

Which is probably why my yellowed, disintegrating copy of *Zen in the Art of Writing* is still the book I turn to most often for inspiration.

As you can imagine, if you know anything about Bradbury's work, this is in no way a how-

to. *Zen in the Art of Writing* is a slender manifesto about The Muse. It's about how writers see the world differently, about how we should celebrate and revel in that difference. About how we should protect it.

It's also about how to grow it, page by writing page.

And boy, does he mean Page with a capital "P." He's a huge believer in volume. Writing making better writing. I'd go so far as to say it's his First Law. According to Bradbury, showing up for the practice pages makes us better writers. Quantity will create quality, he insists. That's a lesson I've been guilty of losing sight of in this time-is-money world, where every proposal needs to sell before the story gets written.

Bradbury sees writing practice as no different from the way musicians practice for performances or athletes train for game day.

Here's a tiny snippet of his take on the importance of writing daily:

*...Not that your style, whatever that is, would melt out of shape in those few days.*

*But what would happen is the world would catch up with and try to sicken you. If you did not write every day, the poisons would accumulate and you would begin to die, or act crazy, or both.*

*You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you.*

Don't know about you, but I'm convinced! If attaching fingers to keyboard and pounding out thousands of words a week will help me write like this, I'm on it.

He approaches writing with such a seductive mixture of seriousness and wonder that he simply makes me want to write.

To me, it's in sharing (and honoring) the subconscious processes of creativity that Bradbury really shines. Take this, the opening of his chapter on The Muse:

*It isn't easy. Nobody has ever done it*

## First Person: Living the Review.....

# ZEN AND ME

▶ *consistently. Those who try hardest, scare it off into the woods. Those who turn their backs and saunter along, whistling softly between their teeth, hear it treading carefully behind them, lured by a carefully acquired disdain.*

*We are of course speaking of The Muse.*

And that's just for starters.

Intertwined with wonderful anecdotes about the creation of some of his most famous works, Bradbury quietly weaves, well, a Zen philosophy about writing. Just like he promised.

*Work. Don't think. Be still. Work.*

A lot harder to do than it sounds. If only the evil Internal Critic were the only villain attacking our work. Time, money pressures, kids, the laundry, #\$\$%! computer viruses striking at deadline; it's a wonder we get anything done at all.

According to Bradbury, if we can just be still long enough, the characters and the stories will reveal themselves. He sounds strikingly like Stephen King talking about his writing process. Both men talk about "discovering stories," about letting conscious and subconscious ex-

periences meld together in some mystical way until their superb works emerge.

I've been waiting for a long, long time for that bus to come along. In the meantime, what I do find quite valuable is the reminder that doing whatever it takes to feed The Muse can only help. Part of what Bradbury reminds me is that it doesn't matter how silly, bizarre, or down right strange that may seem to other people, it's my Muse, and my process. Whatever works.

But that's the sticking point.

Even Bradbury admits throughout this collection of essays, all he can do is offer his own experience. It's certainly immense.

So to wrap up my writing pages for today... Don't look to *Zen in the Art of Writing* for specifics. Bradbury doesn't provide them: no exercises, plotting charts, or character questionnaires. What he does supply is inspiration by the bucketful. If you're having one of those times when The Muse refuses to come out of hiding, he might just provide the kick in the butt you need to fall in love with your inner writer again. \*

## Bits'n'Pieces

Borders or Waldenbooks outlets. The change will begin March 2005. Inventory will be handled by Borders/Waldenbooks in April. AMS reported it was only breaking even on the \$95 to \$100 million agreement, while Borders claimed it had only been a temporary outsource until the service was manageable in-house.

## AMS Stops Mass Market

Advanced Marketing Services will no longer be the supplier of mass market paperbacks for either

## Free Press Release Service

Try [www.PRWire.com](http://www.PRWire.com) for free or low cost PR. The release should be tied to a specific event as a tie-in to your book, not just that the book is being released. You'll be requested to donate \$10 to \$80. [Thanks to Fran Baker for the tip.]



# Crayon on my Key board

## *Wanted: An Ivory Tower*

It started with a writing how-to book reminding me that a writer who is serious about her craft writes every day. Every Day. Every Single Day.

Yes, I'm serious about my writing. During the past ten years, I've had to use the "catch as catch can" approach to my writing, while having babies, relocating (three cross-country moves), and dealing with hubby's frequent travels (and lengthy stays) into dangerous parts of the world. Life feels more settled these days, though, and I'd really, really like to see my writing become a more prominent part of my life. I even have an agent now. If I can just get a couple of proposals into her hands, there's hope for a contract.

So, I made up my mind. This year, I plan to write Every Day. Every Single Day.

Then there's reality. Two versions of it, in fact, both under five feet tall. Both call me "Mommy." Reality, both versions of it, make me realize ten pages a day might not be realistic.

Okay. I'll settle for two pages a day. Non-negotiable. I *will* accomplish this. Every Day.

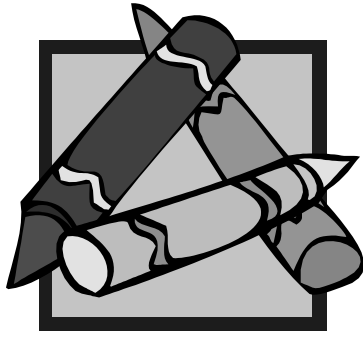
**Day One:** Both realities go to school today. This is my chance. I'm determined to make this work. I settle at my desk, and open the word processor file. The first half hour is a struggle, but by lunchtime, I've done it. 500 words. Whew!

**Day Two:** One reality is at school today, but as the other is in school only part time this year, it's home with me. Lego provides entertainment for the moment, so I sneak down to my office. First step: email. It's been fifteen hours since I checked it last, so I'd better make sure no one is waiting for my input on something. (My best fiction is the stories I tell myself.) Nope. Just the usual routine stuff. A couple of interesting conversations on my favorite

loops, but I'm exercising restraint today. Once I've reached my 500 words, I can . . . "Mommy, I need a snack." Okay. A snack should be worth another half hour of solitude. Pretzels and apple juice delivered, and back to my desk. I open the story file and wait for the lovely haze of creativity to enfold me as it did yesterday. Waiting . . . waiting . . . my heroine needs a crisis to show her the strength which will resolve the final story crisis. Hmm . . . thinking . . . thinking . . . "Mommy, how do you write my name? I did the first two letters." Oh really? Little Reality's teacher and I have talked more than once about how to get LR to practice writing. LR's life skills definitely rank ahead of my career aspirations. So I spent time talking about letters, shapes and sounds. Then it's lunchtime. And that's how the day went (leaving out the details which involve bodily functions and impossible-to-answer questions). However, in fits and starts, I did manage to get 400 words put together. Not quite my goal, but close enough.

**Day Three:** Both Realities are in school today. I'm trying something different. Other writer friends rave about the effectiveness of writing in a coffee bar. I'm going to give it a try. The café latte turns out to be less than I would have liked, but in an hour, I have four pages of story. That's double my goal! So this is what euphoria feels like!

**Day Four:** Hubby needs our only vehicle today, so I'll be writing at home. The youngest Reality is going to a sitter's, and I will be alone. I'm truly tempted to just sit and savor the sensation. I love solitude. I love silence. Oh yeah, I also love writing. A steaming cup of homemade latte in hand, I settle into my recliner with my laptop. I open my file, and glance over yesterday's work. I still like it. So . . . what's next? Hmm . . . what is my hero's ▶



▶  
weakness? The overflowing laundry basket reminds me that the family needs clean clothes. I'll toss a load into the washer while thinking. In the process of gathering the various piles of discarded clothing which protect my carpet from unnecessary wear, I find a pile of wet towels in the downstairs bathroom. Detailed investigation reveals two (soggy) plush toys underneath.

I detect the imagination of the smallest Little Reality, an imagination which all-too-often seems linked to a mess that requires my intervention. I'm thinking perhaps these toys were used in recreating swim lessons, but I'm pretty sure there's a twist which is beyond my current imagining. (He later tells me that the "critters" had to jump in the ocean to get away from the T-Rex that wanted to eat them. I knew there was more to it than I first envisioned.)

In cleaning up that mess, I realize the meager amount of counter space in my kitchen has become invisible under yesterday's dirty dishes. It will take only ten minutes to empty the dishwasher, and another 15 to fill it up again. Then I really will get back to my story. I go into my office to turn on my desktop computer, only to discover red squiggly lines around the perimeter of my keyboard.

Resisting the urge to scream at the violation of my sacred space, I put my memory into rewind. When did I leave the office door unlocked, thereby inviting vandalism by the beloved, adventurous LR? Somehow, by day's end (which for me, is when the older LR returns from school) my word count hovers well below 100.

**Day Five:** I was awakened this morning by the small voice of the older LR. "Mommy, my tummy hurts." Oops. Past experience warns me that a bucket will be needed SOON. I manage to get the littlest LR off to school in between trips to the other LR with disinfecting wipes, clean bowls, and soda crackers. This LR is definitely more self-entertaining than the younger one, so there's hope for getting some work done. It takes

most of the day, but I do it. 523 words for today.

The weekend intervenes here. I finally get the laundry done, get the LRs to their swimming lessons, and keep meals and beverages coming for hubby, who has decided this is the time to commence a couple of DIY projects. Need I mention neither of my computers even gets turned on for duration?

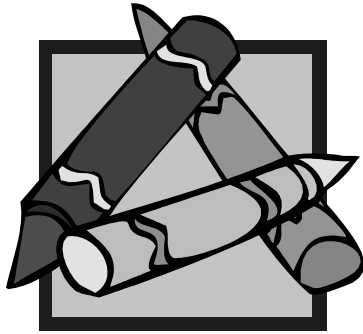
**Day Six:** I'm not even going to try working on anything at home today. I pack up my laptop and head for the downtown purveyor of my favorite brand of cappuccino drinks. Three blocks shy of my destination, my van decides to play toboggan at a red light. The plastic front of my van forcibly meets the steel bumper of an older model pickup. The policeman rules the accident an unfortunate result of yesterday's blizzard, but my writing day is consumed with contacting insurance, visiting autobody shops, and trying to get my shattered nerves back into the tranquil zone.

**Day Seven:** I'm not leaving the house today. I can make a better latte than that overpriced vendor downtown anyway. I glance at my story file, but inspiration seems to have gone into hiding. I struggle for an hour to come up with words that don't bore me silly. I feel about as creative as yesterday morning's oatmeal. My imagination still feels completely overtaken by replays of the accident. Of course, in the replays, I can pinpoint any number of seconds where I could have done something different which would have prevented the collision. Note to self: refer to Police Report # 4732-05 which states the accident was caused by weather.

A nap feels like the best way out of this mental quagmire. Two hours later, I awake feeling both soothed and optimistic. My laptop sits nearby, the screen showing the words and ideas I've painstakingly accumulated in the past week. I skim over my accomplishment. Hmm. Not bad. Although, I think I ought to give a bit more explanation for why the heroine reacts so strongly to her brother's drunkenness. I begin typing, and the girls in the basement are obviously ready. Paragraph after paragraph gets handed to me, and I just write down what's on the cue cards. The creative haze is so thick I don't emerge until I hear the LRs at the front door. I quickly save the file and check my word count. 1768. Wow! A couple of hours like that make the frustrations of the past week almost worth it. (The accident in the van doesn't count.)

So that's the way my New Year's Resolution is playing out. It's frustrating, exciting, boring, challenging . . . the adjectives just pile up. (One of the girls downstairs just loves adjectives, so I always have an abundant supply at hand.)

I feel nothing at all like the Serious Writer whom I



aspired to be at the beginning of this column. The Serious Writer would get those 500 words every day, no matter what. Neither dirty dishes, nor water cooler malfunctions, nor presence of Little Realities would keep her from her appointed mission. I'm pretty sure Ms. Serious Writer also has an ivory tower to which she retreats when she wants to write. I'm guessing she has a bevy of domestics who manage her Other Life while she's in the tower, so that all she has to do at day's end is descend from the lovely haze of creativity to preside over her orderly, sparkling home and interact lovingly with her offspring and spouse.

Since I haven't been able to find an ivory tower in my price range, much less one already equipped with efficient domestics, I'll just continue muddling along. Some days I'll meet my goals. Other days, merely getting to bedtime with my sanity intact will be challenge enough.

I've learned something from my muddling. While my daily goal is a useful tool for giving my writing a place of importance, it is not a measure of my worth as a writer. I am a writer, even on those crazy days when I don't get anywhere near my crayon-embellished keyboard.

Still, an ivory tower (with an ocean view) would be lovely.

— *Janelle Schneider*

## 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:**

Kathryn Caskie, Waterford, VA  
 Kathie DeNosky, Herrin, IL  
 Christie Golden (*Jadrien Bell*), Loveland, CO  
 Rosemary Heim, Minneapolis, MN  
 Wendy Hilton (*Corinne Everett*), Vienna, VA  
 Sarah Hoyt, Colorado Springs, CO  
 Tracey Lyons, Clayton, CA  
 Ashley McConnell, Albuquerque, NM  
 (returning member)  
 Sandy Parks (*Sandy Moffett*), Melbourne, FL  
 Diane Perkins (*Diane Gaston*), Burke, VA  
 Phyllis Irene Radford (*Irene Radford*), Welches, OR  
 Matilda Rodrigues (*Delilah Dawson*), Elk Grove, CA  
 Crystal Stovall, Tulsa, OK  
 Karen White, Atlanta, GA

### **New Members:**

Kimberly Bahnsen (*Kylie Brant*), Charles City, IA  
 Wendy Ferguson (*Wendy Douglas*), Anchorage, AK  
 Diana Pharoah Francis, Dillon, MT  
 Yasmine Galenorn (*India Ink*), Bellevue WA  
 Mary Glazer (*Mary Lennox*), Blue Creek, OH  
 Bonnie Hamre, Spokane WA  
 Jackie Hyman (*Jacqueline Diamond, Jackie Diamond Hyman*)  
 Brea, CA  
 Karla Massey (*Diane Whiteside*), Centreville, VA  
 Jeffery McClanahan, (*Anna Jeffrey, Dixie Cash*),  
 Granbury TX  
 Kim Jacobs (*Maddie James, Kim Whalen*) Versailles, KY  
 Jamie Sobrato, Fort Irwin, CA

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

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## *Plot and Structure*

By James Scott Bell

REVIEW BY JANELLE SCHNEIDER

The title seems a little prosaic, but the subtitle is more intriguing. “Techniques and exercises for crafting a plot that grips readers from start to finish.”

Okay, I’ll be honest. I’m not sure I would have read this book if the author hadn’t mentioned me in the acknowledgements. (Really and truly—on the page facing the Table of Contents.) I’ve read quite a few how-to-write books in recent years, all of them promising me that elusive “something.” I’ve enjoyed reading them, but I’m still not sure if I gleaned any real “take away” value.

This book is different, and not just because it has my name in it.

Bell is not only a lawyer who is glad to have found a different way to earn a living. He’s a writer who has studied story, both in book form and in screenplay form. If you want an expert on story structure, he’s the guy to ask. He’s also a writer who knows how to communicate effectively with writers, as evidenced by his regular column in *Writer’s Digest Magazine*.

In the past five years, I’ve read anything I could get my hands on that would teach me about plot. McKee’s *Story*, Vogler’s *the Writer’s Journey*, etc. I gleaned a bit from each one. But it’s *Plot and Structure* that seems to have put it all together in a format I can use.

He starts out by addressing the fact that some writers like to figure their stories out before they write, and others like to write whatever the story tells them that day. With respect for both, and for those who fall somewhere in the middle, Bell explains that every story has a plot, and thus, learning the techniques of building an effective plot can only make any novel better.

He also talks about the difference between literary fiction and popular fiction, without denigrating either, and points out the role of plot in each.

### **The LOCK System**

According to Bell, all plot variations can be condensed into the simple LOCK system—Lead, Objec-

tive, Conflict, Knockout. For those of us who have been published several times, this seems like a restatement of the obvious. However, he takes it one step further with a discussion of structure, or as he puts it, “timing—where in the mix those elements go.”

This is what has always left me puzzled. Act One, Act Two, Act Three—why would anyone want to split a perfectly good story up into pieces? Inciting Incident differs from Main Conflict how?

Bell states it this way: The beginning tells the who of the story. The middle is where the character struggles with something or someone. The end is the resolution. A disturbance starts the story. A doorway propels the character into the struggle and a second doorway get him or her to the resolution. Ahh, much less mysterious than I’d thought.

He goes on to talk about ideas and how to decide which ones are worth pursuing, what makes scenes effective, and how to keep readers turning the pages.

My favorite part of the book is where he discusses “plotting systems.” Acknowledging again that some people prefer not to “think out” the story before writing it, he gives variations of his “systems” which will work for OPs (Outline People) and NOPs (Non-Outline People). He even described a way of using file cards in plotting that made me think it might just work for me. (I have a friend who uses file cards extensively, and every time she talks about her system, I feel numbed by detail. Bell’s system makes me want to try it.)

Bell finishes with discussions on plot patterns (such as mystery, romance, fantasy) and revision. Even his list of “common plot problems” contained elements I haven’t seen in any other list, and gave me some “aha!” moments concerning my own story.

*Plot and Structure* is now at the top of my list of “Books to Recommend to Other Writers.” I’m sure I’ll return to it often, and not just because the author is a friend. His conversational style makes me feel like I’m consulting with a writing coach who not only knows his craft, but loves it. If nothing else, his enthusiasm helps me find the motivation to face the keyboard one more day. \*



Graphic by Laura Hay

## Empower the Writer April 7 - 9, 2005 New York City

There are always a few stragglers. That's why we've extended conference registration until **March 15**. Check the website: [www.ninc.com](http://www.ninc.com) for quick and easy online registration.

**Warning, warning!** The really "cheap" hotel rooms may be gone by then (Sorry, but procrastination has to have some consequences!), so you might want to see if someone already registered at the hotel has "room to let." You can find out what's available by contacting Eve Gaddy at: [egaddy@cox-internet.com](mailto:egaddy@cox-internet.com).

**And here's another reminder:** If any of you, *even those not attending the conference*, have any burning

issues you'd like raised with members of our five elite panels, here's your chance. You can either bring up your questions/comments/concerns on our link:

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*See you all in the Big Apple*

## Bits'n'Pieces

## HarperCollins and Smithsonian

HarperCollins has signed the Smithsonian Institution to a long term deal, forming the Smithsonian Books imprint. The new imprint will be released this fall, with Joe Tessitore, publisher of HC's Collins division. They expect to publish 75 adult titles in the next year, and children's and Latino titles beginning in 2006. The target is 100 titles annually.

## Warner Goes Trade

Warner is introducing its own female-oriented trade-original list. The imprint, called 5 Spot, will retail for \$12.00. Insiders describe the books as funny and smart with oodles of attitude, targeting the woman who is exactly like that. Novels, as well as narrative non-fiction, and something described as pop-cult-y are on the list.



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

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

## *Naked in front of readers*

I'm sitting with a reporter in a favorite restaurant of mine. He's good, this guy. Likes books. Likes writing. Knows his job. He's made me laugh, disarmed me twice, and surprised me into more honest answers than are usual. And the question he asks next is not particularly unusual these days.

You're divorced, he says. Has that made it difficult to write romances?

For one long, long moment, I'm silent, thinking over all the dozens of answers I could give. It's a direct and probing question I could refuse to answer, but it's honorable. I'm a woman, writing relationship fiction. My relationships and my attitudes toward them are bound to influence the work.

So I think.

And think.

Take your time, he says, and dips his spoon into the Atomic sundae he ordered.

What I think is, *here it is again, that nakedness business.*

I took it as a sign to explore this idea here, in the column. Not toward anything definitive, just some musings.

Start with this: a reader came to one of my book signings with thirty books, a lovely present, home cooked food, and a card. Anyone who has written for very long has had this happen, a loving fan who has read everything you've written shows up at a signing, bearing gifts.

What often freaks me out is how eerily pleasing those gifts are. Things maybe even my family wouldn't know I'd like so much. A particular book of paintings, a card showing a certain landscape, a plate of cookies I don't think anyone knows are my favorites.

Except that they've shown up in about 60% of my books, being eaten by someone.

The body of a writer's work is an extraordinarily revealing thing. We don't necessarily like to think about it, and the fact that so much is revealed in our work could probably be paralyzing if we spend too much time with it. Maybe I'm stirring things up by writing about it here. I don't know. It's been on my mind, however, and sometimes musing about a subject helps bring it into focus.

A writer I know, with whom I spent many an hour early in our careers, had a difficult childhood. She'd

managed to move on, grow up, find a new and satisfying life, had married happily and raised healthy, sane children (quite an undertaking!), and wrote wonderful novels. We started out about the same time, held each other's hands, supported each other's efforts to stretch and grow.

One thing I always found intriguing was her similarity to my very, very private mother, who could no more write books about herself than voluntarily pull out her own fingernails. It intrigued me that my friend was a writer, that she'd managed to overcome that need to be private so she could pen her books. She's a very good writer, incisive and clear and clean, with a juicy, dark imagination I enjoyed very much.

Often, reading her books, I learned things that helped me put the pieces of her into shape and perspective. Every time I commented on it, she gave me a little uncomfortable laugh. Very perceptive, she would say.

Not really. I knew her, and in reading her books could put the rest of what she had not said into the gaps. The more I read, the more I knew her. The more I spent time around her, the more I saw how her books showed me her life.

Barbara Keiler says that we write our easy books first. I would agree, and add that each book requires a little more excavation, which scrapes away a little more protection, and a little more, and a little more, until there you are standing there in front of readers with your naked everything showing for anyone who cares to look. It takes awhile to sink in, how much of you is out there, and then some reader shows up with those cookies, that quilt, that perfect photograph.

Then it hits you. The girls are going to require everything you are. Sooner or later, you'll cough it all up. And yes, some of it will be obscured, and most of the time, there will be no apparent link to you or anything anybody knows about you, but it's there, nonetheless.

At that moment, we all end up making a choice: go forward, knowing we'll have to start some deeper and deeper excavation? Or halt, circle, write the same book over and over again until the day we die? Or move forward, and ignore the fact that if anyone wants to put it all together, there you are, scattered like a trail of gingerbread crumbs across your books?

My friend has given up writing for the most part. My theory is that she hit the spot in her work that was going to require excavating into a layer she couldn't bear to visit, so she quit.

A perfectly honorable choice.

The interviews I've had to do for the new book have stirred up the question for me again. Unlike a lot of writers, I'm not uncomfortable in interviews. I understand and enjoy the process, and as we all do, I've figured out a line of pleasing patter, a drape to keep me safe, focus attention on the *books* and dance around the

life/art questions. Life and work get tangled up at the best of times, and when certain events of one's life seem to be reflected, however thinly, in the work at hand, mostly the reporters ask some version of the inevitable questions: where do my life and work intersect?

The answer is so easy and dull that a reporter could never do anything with it: everywhere, at every moment and every point in the living and the writing. Of course. We all know that. Writers live, experience, observe; then come back to the page to record or reflect what life revealed. Each writer does it differently. One shapes life to a comedy of manners, another constructs an argument of medieval darkness; another spoofs it all, another etches out grim narratives of serial killers.

The form doesn't matter. Doesn't matter how far away from your own real life you get, either. Our lives, thoughts, dreams, visions, opinions, are writ into all that we do. It's impossible to avoid it. My discomfort with certain questions has had me grappling with this idea for several months, and I've tried to write this column on nakedness three times.

Where do life and art intersect?

It's not always as obvious as it may seem, although there is some fun to be had in the factual angles of things. One of my sisters loves the insider angle of recognizing certain stage sets and animals as factual, the cross-stitch hanging on a character's wall that also hangs on my own, or the dogs and cats who are always written whole cloth into my fiction. (If there is an animal in any book, it is a real being. Though many have passed on, it pleases me deeply to give them a little bit longer life by letting them live on the pages of a novel.)

And often, as we all know, it's exactly the opposite: readers mistake the character's life for the writer's life. This is greatly exaggerated if you write first person, I've discovered. In one of my novels, a character returns home to Pueblo after twenty years to make peace with her father. A woman who has known me since 1981, *in Pueblo*, wanted to know how I liked living in New York City all those years.

Um. I didn't live there.

This particular book proved a challenge on this level because it was first person, set in the same city in which I live, and was about a woman roughly my age, lots and lots of people thought it was a True Story. It was sometimes flattering, sometimes funny and touching, and sometimes exasperating. The character is an Italian-American, part of a very tightly-knit Sicilian community in town, and I had more than one incident wherein a Sicilian from the group asked me who my family was.

Um. I'm not Italian.

(This might have gotten me in some trouble if I hadn't managed to get it right. I actually had one man say, Yes, you are. I left it at that. You know, if ▶



# *The Girls in the Basement . . . naked in front of readers*

► Tony Soprano tells you that you're Italian, you just say okay.)

I'm never lived in NYC, never had a gay best friend die of AIDS, never went to Central High School, am not Italian and am not even a native of Pueblo. Now this is an insular, closed town, and my readers loved the book. They felt the truth of it, and thought that meant it was my truth.

Which we, as writers, know is not where the real truth of a book lies. Not in facts or details of culture or any number of other things we have learned to observe and reproduce.

What was true in that particular book was that I was grappling with the untimely deaths of good people. Death in general, which was creeping into my life. I was grappling with a little bit too much loving family and the transition of children growing into themselves and

away from me. All of it poured into the book.

Where did life and art intersect there? With fathers and sisters and Pueblo. I'm comfortable with that.

What I'm less comfortable with is the long, long pause between the good reporter who asked his probing question, and the time of my answer. Did getting divorced change the way I looked at happily ever after romances?

I incline my head. I think, I say, finally, what I believe is all right there in the books.

He smiles. Good answer.

*Barbara Samuel has an aunt who chased a bartender to Las Vegas in 1960, and that's the truth. For more on her newest book, check out her website at [barbarasamuel.com](http://barbarasamuel.com)*

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