

Novelists' Ink Novelists' Ink Novelists' Ink

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Dumped: When bad things happen to good writers

BY NANCY HERKNESS

Dumped. It's an ugly word for an ugly experience. "For the first six months, I wouldn't, couldn't tell anyone. Then I started hearing about more authors who'd had the same experience," one author said after being dropped by her publisher.

In the computerized, numbers-driven world of publishing, more and more authors are suffering the misfortune of not having their option books bought by their current editor. Some even endure it more than once. However, it is possible to survive and even thrive after being released by a publisher. "The bottom line is that getting dumped can be the best thing that ever happens to your career. It can just take a while before you realize it," says a writer who now has six books under contract at two publishers.

The most frequently cited rea-

sons for being dropped are weak sales and loss of the purchasing editor, events which often occur in combination. Without an enthusiastic editor working as an advocate for the books, they are often packaged and marketed poorly, leading to disappointing sales results. In some cases, entire lines or imprints fold, leaving books homeless.

Unfortunately, editors seem loath to deliver the bad news; it's common for authors to submit multiple proposals and receive multiple rejections before finally deciding to try elsewhere. "I really don't understand the reject-till-they-give-up game," says one author. "It seems to waste time all the way around, and editors are always complaining they're overworked."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Laura Resnick (*Disappearing Nightly*, Luna, 12/05) reports that Silhouette released her "plainly in writing.

They handled it the way a publisher should handle it: they were clear and courteous, treated me with respect and professionalism."

Editors sometimes are more willing to be honest with agents; several writers learned of their fate that way. One reports hearing the truth from another editor at the same publishing house.

A drawn-out, rejection-filled "dumping" undoubtedly contributes to the emotional baggage that comes with being dropped. Lillian Stewart Carl (*The Secret Portrait*, Five Star, 4/05) summed up her feelings succinctly: "Devastation. Depression. Desperation." Barbara Keiler/Judith Arnold (*The Fixer Upper*, Mira 7/05) reported, "A lot of anger, bitterness, and angst. Some panic. Occasional bursts of optimism that this might turn out to be a good thing, forcing me to rethink my career and reassess my goals." Kathy Lynn Emerson (*Fatal as a*

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President's Voice

Unlicensed on the Information Superhighway

I hate to break it to you, but your prez is driving on the information superhighway without a license. Oh, sure, I toss around highly technical terms like download and upload. I've even been known to ask, with great *savoir faire* (a French term suggesting everlasting coolness) the extremely provocative question, "What's your url?"

Fortunately I overheard somebody else ask that question before I tried it out as cocktail chatter, because otherwise it would have come out, "What's your earl?" But the bottom line is that I have no idea what I'm asking, really.

Yes, yes, yes, I know that what you get back in response is the person's website address, or addy, another highly technical term I bandy about at will. I also know that to be considered a player you'd better grab yourself a url. I'm completely convinced that the un-url people will end up eating the dust of the url people, which is why I got me one. But I have no clue what url stands for. You could tell me it stands for Unregulated Raunchy Licentiousness and I would totally believe you.

I am also one of those people you do not want sending you a picture over the Internet. Trust me on this one. I've had requests, and while I would love to be the kind of web-savvy person who zips cute little snapshots of mutual events right from my keyboard to yours . . . I'm not. If I send you a picture, it'll take approximately three days for you to download it, at the end of which time you'll have something that, when opened, is liable to scare the kiddies.

All of these revelations are mere chump change, however, to the most shocking admission of all, the one that might make you start thinking impeachment. Save your energy. The election's over and I'm now officially a lame duck, so you only have to put up with me a couple more months, and then it'll be the holidays, and nobody gets excited about impeachment proceedings over the holidays. Of course, once you hear what I'm about to say, you may decide it's never too late to get rid of the dead wood and pitch me out on my ass.

Here it is, the secret I've been keeping from you since January. If you have a weak heart, you might want to stop reading right now. If you continue, I won't be responsible. Ready? Are you sure? Okay. I have dial-up.

I know. I should be ashamed of myself. And it gets worse. This is how pathetic I am. I bought a computer with wireless capability and I was all excited as I pictured myself prancing around my house, choosing to email here, there . . . everywhere! Look, ma! No strings! I don't know how I imagined it would work. Maybe I assumed the computer would communicate telepathically with the telephone wires in the wall. I didn't know that in order to go wireless, you have to use cable.

You must wonder how I've managed to run this organization at all. Well, the truth is, I don't run it. Others prop me up and make me look good. Propping works out so great, in fact, that the Ninc Board decided we could use more of it. We've hired an accounting firm in Manhattan,

Kansas to handle the increasing complexities of our organization. It should be obvious to you by now that increasing complexities aren't my thing.

Enter Varney and Associates, who will take over some of the treasurer's responsibilities as well as the Central Coordinator duties. We hope that lightening the treasurer's load will mean we'll actually find willing volunteers for the job and can retire the thumb screws. Also, in making this change we're bidding a fond farewell to David Brooks, who has served us so loyally for many years. David has agreed to help us with the transition through the end of December, which is typical of his good nature. Thank you, David.

And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go see if I can attach this document to an email for our talented NINK editor, Annette. Cross your fingers.

*Yours in cyberspace,
Vicki*

Publishers Weekly Discount

Ninc Members can subscribe for \$149.00. That's \$76 off the regular subscription rate. To subscribe call: 800-278-2991. Be sure to mention Novelists, Inc. to take advantage of the discount.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Ninc's Central Office has moved. You'll find the new contact info in the NINK masthead, but here it is again, in bigger print. I don't know about you, but I can always use bigger print. VLT

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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:

Brenda Beagley, LaFox IL
Anne Hearn (*Anne Mallory*),
Menlo Park CA

Tracy Green (*Tielle St. Clare, T.L. Sinclair*), Anchorage AK
Candice Proctor (*C.S. Harris*),
Kenner LA
Karen Sandler (*Karen Anzalone*),
Cameron Park CA

New Members:

Adele Budnick (*Adele Ashworth*),
Flower Mound TX
Patti Olszowka (*Patti O'Shea*),
Minnetonka MN
Leslie Wheeler, Cambridge MA

Sherrilyn Kenyon (*Kinley MacGregor*)
Spring Hill TN
Lenora Nazworth (*Lenora Worth*)
Shreveport LA

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

Dumped

Continued from page 1



Fallen Woman, Pemberley Press, 9/05) said, "Having been dropped by a major publisher leaves scars. For almost two years, every time I worked on a new book or short story, I had to fight off the conviction that I was wasting my time, writing something no one (or at least no one in New York) could possibly want to buy." "It was a time of soul-searching, feeling very humble, and trying to slowly find my way to what I would do next," one author said. C. H. Admirand's feelings of failure kept her from attending her local writers' group meetings for a year.

Yet no one quit.

"As always, needing money kept me going," Laura Resnick said. "I'm a full-time, self-supporting writer, and I have hungry creditors." When asked if she had continued to write, Barbara Keiler said simply, "Of course I kept writing. It's what I do." Another author admitted wryly, "After spending twelve years learning how to write, there's nothing else I'm qualified to do and I'm too young to retire."

Many authors felt liberated and wrote the book of their heart, frequently selling those books later. "I took the advice of a well-published friend who told me to just write something I wanted to write, with no thought for the market or even selling it," said one author. "I did that, and it sort of cleansed away some of the bad stuff because it was the first time in a while I'd written anything without feeling as if my editor were peering over my shoulder, waiting for me to make a mistake."

Writers often changed direction in what they wrote, some drastically, some in more subtle ways. Nina Gettler describes her current work-in-progress as "still a historical, still set in Europe, still complex characters. I've always been pretty good at writing sexy stuff, so I decided to make it sexier. I guess that's writing to the market, although it wasn't a hardship." Lillian Stewart Carl "kept trying slightly different approaches to my usual romance/fantasy/mystery/history blend." One author began writing erotica under a pseudonym, saying, "I enjoyed the challenge of writing something so new, and something that's pretty contrary to the real me. I also enjoyed the freedom of it." Some romance authors moved from series to single title and vice versa.

Few people "wrote to the market." Instead, they analyzed what made their books distinctive and tried to develop marketing angles to highlight those strengths. Laura Resnick "made a conscious decision to discover what kind of fiction and audience suited my voice and sensibility better than where I had been focusing," and wound up emigrating from romance to fantasy. One author says she "studied the line I'd picked and tried to give them the hooks they wanted. I did enjoy the learning process, and yes, it worked. I ended up selling in another genre but kept my darker voice." Another writer completely revamped her website and created a tagline that would identify and set her work apart from other authors'.

An alternate approach was to seek new publishing venues. Kathy Lynn Emerson reports that

in 2002 she went to Bouchercon, the largest mystery fan conference, with the single goal of investigating small presses. "What's happened since has been great for my ego. New York editors might not have wanted my books, but more than one small press did. The cut in income has been painful but not fatal." C.H. Admirand went to an e-publisher, but found the editorial input so heavy-handed that she withdrew her book from publication. The author who branched out into erotica finds that her income from that genre is now almost comparable to her mainstream work.

Having been burned once, many authors say they no longer feel comfortable working with only one publisher. "My career experiences have ensured that I'm not a fan of writing for just one house," Laura Resnick says. "I currently have two publishers, and I prefer it that way." In choosing a new agent, one writer commented, "What I want from an agent is a strategy to make sure my work is diversified enough that I'm never again dependent on a single publisher."

Interestingly, most people who had agents changed them after they were dropped by their publisher, although one author conceded that "no agent can save your butt if the publisher is determined to dump you." Agents were often sympathetic after the fact, and another writer said hers was "invaluable to me during this time, in terms of keeping my spirits up, telling me over and over again that I was a fabulous writer."

However, many authors felt their agent should have been aware of the situation and warned

them sooner. One writer said being dropped was a sign that her career was stagnating, a problem her agent wasn't addressing.

When authors changed direction in their writing, their current agent often did not like the new work and discouraged submitting it. A few agents demanded that their authors "write to the market", something most were reluctant to do. As a wise writer says, "If you write to the market, you'll always be chasing it." Once the rejections began to accumulate, some agents lost interest and left submissions languishing on editors' desks. In almost all cases, authors felt that switching agents ultimately helped their careers.

Getting the next contract took some writers a few months and others as many as seven years with many people reporting "piles" of rejections. The hard truth is that some authors have not yet found another publisher for their work. However, everyone agreed with Lillian Stewart Carl that it took "sheer stubborn bloody-minded perseverance" to succeed.

"The smartest thing to do is analyze all the factors that may have contributed to [your] flat sales. It is of the utmost importance that you be proactive and not reactive if you are dumped. Craft a new marketing approach for yourself. Immediately start writing a fresh proposal to sell elsewhere. And remember that it's not the rejection that matters—it's how you handle it," says a multi-published author. "Write and submit. Write and submit. Write and submit," one veteran writer advises.

Authors thought they could have done a few things differently after they were dropped. "I wish I was better at networking," one said. "I feel isolated." Lillian Stewart Carl comments that she

should have "turned out more material and focused a little more tightly, so that each book was similar enough to the last that marketers wouldn't gag on it." One author believes she stayed with her old agent for too long, saying she ought to have made a change sooner. Many echoed one writer who says she shouldn't have "spent so much time beating up on myself. All that negative thinking is counterproductive and keeps you from seeing the opportunities when they show up."

Despite rejections, uninterested agents, orphaned books, and poor sales, these authors remain optimistic. In fact, one mark of a professional writer is the tough-minded determination required to keep working and submitting, no matter how many rejections pile up. A willingness to change and grow is another quality true professionals possess. One author as-

serts, "What I know now is that if/when my career fails again, I'll get back on the horse. I'll reinvent if I have to. I'll figure out what to do next to stay in the game."

Writers also continue to crave an audience. Kathy Lynn Emerson speaks for everyone when she says, "There is only one thing of which I am absolutely certain: I will continue to write novels and stories and, somehow, get them out to readers."

Nancy Herkness would like to thank the authors who shared their experiences with such honesty. Their courage is inspiring. The author of A Bridge to Love, and Shower of Stars, Nancy is currently looking for a home for her third book. If you have questions or comments about this article, please email nancy@nancyherkness.com.

Bits'n'Pieces

Funds are available for writers affected by Hurricane Katrina. For more information, email

Ms. Brett Harvey, Executive Director of the American Society of Journalists and Authors at execdir@asja.org .

Help for Libraries

The Texas State Library Association is collecting funds to help rebuild libraries in Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi: <http://www.txla.org/temp/DisasterRelief.html>.

The American Library Association is reporting progress from the library sites: <http://www.ala.org/ala/online/hurricanekatrinanews/katrinanews.htm>.

The Louisiana State Library set up a growing set of links to various relief web sites: <http://www.state.lib.la.us/links/>.

Bookstores Destroyed

News about bookstores and other businesses are slowly being reported in the week after Katrina. The first confirmed destructions are the Bookends bookstore in Bay St. Louis, MS, and Pass Christian Books in Pass Christian, MS.

Compiled by Sally Hawkes

GUNK

BY LAURA RESNICK

Writing is like yoga.

It's also like sex, cooking, parenthood, opera, war, gardening, and conjugating French verbs. But we're going to go with the yoga analogy today.

In my yoga class, my teacher tells me to think about my rib cage, my thigh muscles, my spine, my breath, my gaze, my ankles, my mouth, my cheeks, my hands, my balance, my toes, my belly, my kidneys, and The Universal. She also, at the same time, tells me to clear my mind and think of nothing. Then she tells me to stand on my left earlobe.

I'm sure the obvious parallels to writing are instantly apparent to you.

Both everything and nothing is going on at once. In my yoga practice, I seek to achieve a simple purity, a place of no expectations or worries... which cohabits with the interlocked complexity of a world-embracing wholeness—while also striving to put my calves in the creases of my elbows and levitate. (No, I'm not even close to achieving that pose.)

Writing a novel is a combination of craft and art, precise objectivity and organic instinct, academic discipline and freewheeling deep play. It requires a master carpenter's flair in using a large toolbox of learned skills, including plot and structure, pace and transitions, prose and dialogue, character development and subtext, grammar and vocabulary, and so on. Writing a book demands research skills, thousands of decisions and judgment calls, patience and persistence, and a long, detail-oriented commitment from the author, who is the endurance athlete of the imagination. On top of all that, you've got to have a *story*, as well as a passion

for telling that story. Additionally, there must be a commercial or "universal" component to this work, a reason that tens (or hundreds) of thousands of total strangers will spend their money and their time to read your book.

Finally, before you can stand on your left earlobe or levitate as a novelist, so to speak, you have to be able to concentrate and focus. No one has ever managed to write a novel while thinking about something else the whole time.

This is where purity comes in. Simplicity. The void which your talent and imagination fill, just the way my yoga teacher is always telling me to fill my lungs while trying to touch my toes to the back of my head. (No, I have not even got a toe off the ground yet.)

Yoga teachers and yoga books say over and over that the most important part of yoga practice (and, as it happens, the one that many students tend to undervalue or even skip) is *savasana*, which means (rather unnervingly) "corpse pose." As it happens, this is my very favorite pose, and I have no trouble holding it for up to fifteen minutes at the end of class. That's the pose where you just lie there on the floor and rest. Now *this* is my kind of yoga!

When I was brand new to yoga, I thought I was really *good* at lying on the floor like the dead. I thought that this was one pose I had down pat from the very start. However, now that I have reached a point in my practice where I can do one or two of the easier upside-down poses without falling on my head *every* time, I have begun to realize the truth about *savasana*: It's a LOT harder than it looks.

For the first minute or two of *savasana*, I am totally immersed in my pose, just grateful to be lying there

doing nothing. For that time, I am simple, pure, a void, a clean channel through which The Universal flows.

But then I recover my breath and remember where all my body parts are, and before you know it... I start thinking about my grocery list. Or the infuriating e-mail I got just before leaving home for yoga class. Or what I need to write that day. Or my dwindling bank account. Or the IRS. I wonder if I'll get a parking ticket, because the meter always runs out about twenty minutes before class is over. I think about the notes I should prepare for a new workshop I'm supposed to give in three months. I think about my deadlines. I rehearse the conversation I want to have with my editor that afternoon. I start writing dialogue in my head for an upcoming scene in my manuscript.

I do everything but *savasana*. Everything but soak up my own energy in a place of mental peace and stillness.

It is in practicing *savasana* that I discover over and over how loud and persistent are the voices in my head. Even the really mundane ones, like, "Get milk. Buy bread. Phone your mother."

These voices are an example of gunk. (No offense intended to my mother.) The challenge of *savasana*, the discipline practiced in this pose, is to eliminate gunk.

Gunk gets in the way. It's a roadblock on the path to enlightenment. In fact, gunk stops all *sorts* of things from functioning. Gunk once did so much damage to my spark plugs that it cost me nearly \$700 to fix the problem. (My mechanic advised me not to let them get so gunky again.) Gunk makes my garbage disposal malfunction. Gunk got into the plumbing system of my previous apartment building, and two plumbers spent about 36 hours tearing my walls apart, removing my toilet, filling my bathtub with sewage, and running noisy mechanical equipment through the building's pipe system from the vantage point of my dressing room.

I'm going to go out on a limb and say that gunk is bad.

Gunk is also the voice in your head that says: "This book sucks." Or: "I have no talent." When you chew yourself out for not having written a full "X" number of pages that day; when you're distracted from the work in progress by worries about what reviewers will say about it as a finished, published novel; when the fear of rejection paralyzes you to the extent that you can't write; when you can't focus on your work because you're so demoralized by another writer's seemingly overnight success or by a disappointing response to your previous book... That's gunk.

Gunk is the roadblock we erect between ourselves and our goals. It stands between me and the focus I need to work on a book.

It's hard to write around gunk. Gunk clogs the channel, it muddies the stream, it fills the void with that sticky substance that traditionally belongs on the floor of a taxicab. When gunk invades your thoughts, it invades your

writing space; and, thus, a place that could be infinite in its light and liberation suddenly becomes a small, dark closet that you're stuck sharing with a barnyard animal that hasn't been washed in quite some time.

My yoga teacher often reminds me that I am perfect just as I am, and that perfection is not static, but ever-changing. I'll be different next year than I am now, but I'll be perfect then, just as I am perfect now. (Yes, I know this New Agey, pseudo-Eastern, mystical jabber seems strange coming from me, of all people; but humor me and just go with the metaphor for now.) If I can't even get my toes off the floor today, let alone bring them to the crown of my head while melting my heart toward the ground, that's fine; toes-on-floor is who I am today. It may not be who I am tomorrow (although, realistically speaking, it's probably *exactly* who I'll be tomorrow), but it's who I am today; and today I am exactly who I'm meant to be. Tomorrow I'll be exactly who I'm meant to be, too. And I will only be toes-on-head girl when I'm ready, when that's who my perfect self is meant to be.

My point, and I do have one, is that the mental disciplines taught in yoga are about eliminating gunk. When everyone else in class is holding a beautiful balancing pose that I, toes-on-floor girl, can only achieve by employing the modification of leaning my butt against the wall, this is who my frigging perfect self is today. To compare myself negatively with others, or to fret about when (if ever) I'll be able to do the pose without resorting to this frankly unattractive use of the wall to help me... Well, that's gunk.

Gunk says to me, "You look stupid right now. Aren't you humiliated?" And: "You could have this pose by now if you weren't too lazy to come to class more often!" And: "You're too fat for this pose." Note that gunk often contradicts itself from sentence to sentence: Could I get this pose if I came to class more often, or am I too fat to get this pose at all? There is no answer, because gunk is not a logical premise, it's *gunk*. Its sole function is to clog the channel, to block the path, to get in my way.

Gunk comes from me and no one else. Everyone else in class is too busy trying not to fall on their noses to pay any attention to what *I'm* doing (and anyone unfocused enough to be watching me is certainly not mastering her own pose anytime soon), and my teacher is enthusing with apparent sincerity about how beautiful my pose is. So my self-made gunk is the only thing standing between me and perfection just-as-I-am, butt against the wall and all. And one thing I've learned by now is that I won't ever achieve my pose while gunk is in my way. Progress in my yoga practice is only possible *without* gunk. (I fell on my head quite a few times before learning this.)

Similarly, I can't write a good chapter, a strong scene, a powerful climactic event while gunk is saying to me, "This material sucks. This book's not as good as the last one. You should be writing faster today. You should have written more yesterday. You're screwing up." And so on.

GUNK



Even gentler gunk is still counter-productive: “What will readers think of this book? What will reviewers say? Will I win an award for this book—or even be nominated?”

When I’m thinking about all that gunk—about how lazy and disappointing a writer I am, or about whether I’ll be lauded and admired for my breathtaking work of staggering genius—what I’m *not* doing is getting my toes off the floor, let alone bringing them to the crown of my head. I’m nowhere near standing on my left earlobe, never mind levitating. Because I am not thinking about the *story*. I am not focused. I’m not centered fully on the work at hand. My channel is clogged. My creative space is full of the foul stuff that those plumbers pulled out of the wall of my apartment building after 36 traumatic hours last year. Gunk is in my way.

Happily, though, since gunk originates here—no middleman, no waiting!—I can *eliminate* it here, too.

Some of the most common ways that writers have told me they eliminate gunk are remarkably similar to what we’re taught in yoga class. When asked about clearing gunk off the road of creative productivity, Robin Graff-Reed, author of seven historical romances (most of them written as Robin Wiete), who recently completed her PhD in clinical psychology (and therefore these days gets a *lot* of questions along the lines of, “How can I make the bad man go away?”), recommends that we cultivate positive affirmations, eliminate negative self-talk, and steadfastly avoid comparing ourselves unfavorably to others.

“Positive affirmations” doesn’t mean saying something like, “I am a wealthy, world-famous, wasp-waisted bestseller” if you’re not; that’s not positive, that’s just plain silly. It means reflecting affirmatively on what’s truly positive about you. For example, “I am an accomplished professional.” (If you’re in Ninc, then that’s obviously true.) Or: “I’m a good writer; I have readers who enjoy my work and are looking forward to the next book; I’ve completed previous novels and can complete this one; I am happiest when I’m writing steadily.” Eliminating negative self-talk means *not* saying things like, “I’m not really an accomplished professional, I’ve only published two books, and neither of them was that great.” An example of unfavorably comparing yourself to others would be: “Betty Bigshot started her career at the same

time I did, but she’s sold more books and is making bigger advances. I should be where she is.” Hey, if you’re concentrating on Betty’s pose, then you’re not focusing on your own pose; and that’s going to get in the way of your achieving it.

Prolific romance novelist Katherine Garbera says, “I have a list of affirmations that I keep posted next to my computer, and reading through them always helps to put me back on track. I also go back to the books I’ve written that I really liked everything about, the characters, the story, the writing process... That puts me in the right mind-set to write.” She adds, “I also take time to remember the things I know are my strengths and focus on those.”

Focusing on your strengths is like focusing on your breath; it’s a centering technique. It starts pulling everything into alignment and creating a calm space where your pose can flourish, where your creativity can run free. My strengths as a publishing professional include persistence, endurance, and versatility. My strengths as a writer include structure, characterization, dialogue, action, and humor. The more I remind myself that I have these strengths, the stronger they are able to get.

I seldom experienced gunk as a young writer. Despite a lot of career problems, I was consistently pretty prolific and productive. So I was unprepared when gunk blocked my path later on in my career. I didn’t even recognize it until I was already neck deep in it. The floor of my creative taxicab became so sticky that I couldn’t move. I was like a mouse stuck in one of those horrible slow-death traps. I went eighteen months without being able to make progress on a book that was under contract and, needless to say, increasingly late. Several factors contributed to this situation, but gunk was certainly one of them.

Katherine Garbera says one of the ways she keeps the creative path clear in a difficult situation is to look at herself and her writing and ask, “What can I control?” At my nadir, I finally did this, too—and decided that gunk was one of the things of which I could take charge. I could start focusing on my pose and my breathing. I could work on silencing the distracting, destructive chatter in my head. I started using positive affirmations for the first time in my life.

I did this in tandem with another creative survival technique advocated by Ninc member Lynn Miller, who’s published a number of books as Meg Lacey in addition to spending many years as a producer and media writer. As Lynn says, you can make choices to set yourself up for accomplishment rather than for failure. She points out that sometimes big goals get in the way of small goals, of the step-by-step things we can accomplish on the path that’s heading in the direction of our larger goals.

During my period of gunk-filled paralysis, I repeatedly set myself up for failure. For example, I kept setting daily page-count goals of five, seven, ten, or 15 pages... at a time when I hadn’t been able to write even ONE page

for many months. This was plainly self-destructive, and yet I kept doing it. Then I would castigating myself for failing, for being a loser, for screwing up, for endangering my career. I'd accuse myself of laziness and self-indulgence. I did this over and over. I kept doing it even though it should perhaps have become apparent to my perfect self after a year of not accomplishing anything that these habits were not working out well for me. (But, as already noted, I have to fall on my head a lot to learn these things.)

So after about 18 months of this, I finally decided to set myself a goal that I knew I could achieve. Indeed, a well-trained poodle could have achieved it: I set a goal of working on the book for three hours per day, five days per week. Of course, I *could* have set a goal of working on the book nine hours per day, seven days per week... but I had fallen on my head enough by now to realize that that would just be setting myself up for more failure and would therefore be unproductive.

By "working on the book," I mean that I had to focus on it for three hours. If that just meant reading and re-reading the 60 pages that I'd written before entering my death spiral a year and a half earlier, or reviewing my notes and my outline, or staring at the screen and trying to think of one new sentence, that was perfectly acceptable. As long as I did this for three hours, I was meeting the goal I had set, I was *successful*. And during that time, I couldn't check email, answer the phone, go to the mailbox, or make a grocery list. Those three hours were sacrosanct, devoted totally to focusing on my pose and my breathing.

Moreover, my deal with myself was that every single time I achieved this goal, I *had to* congratulate myself. I had to say positive, affirming things: "You focused on the book for three hours today, Laura! Well done! Way to go! Good job! You're achieving your goals! You're swell!" (Mind you, I said all this *silently* to myself; but I said it.)

Well, after about three weeks of success, I got really daring and increased my daily-time goals to four hours per day. Then five hours. Finally, one day, after having sat with that book for so long in the positive, pressure-

free, I-am-perfect, I-am-exactly-where-I'm-supposed-to-be-in-my-journey-today mode that I had created for myself as a last-ditch resort... I finally felt able to write a few sentences. After several days of this, I could even write a few paragraphs. My writing productivity gradually increased until one day I realized that I'd written nine pages that day. After another week or two, I no longer needed to set achievable time-goals, I was simply going into the office and writing away on a regular basis—the way I used to do, before gunk got in my way. I was standing on my left earlobe and levitating!

I had gotten past the obstacle in my path. I had managed to eliminate the gunk. It's a lesson I've never forgotten—which is important, because gunk is always trying to creep back into my creative space. (Actually, even my yoga teacher gets distracted and falls on her nose every so often.)

There are many possible variations on how gunk strikes a writer. It may not occur as paralysis or burnout. Perhaps gunk turns one writer's process into something so painful it affects her personal life or her health. Perhaps another writer's gunk keeps her stranded in writing material that no longer satisfies her; or perhaps gunk prevents her from taking the risks she wants to take with her work. (It took me a while to push enough gunk out of my way to attempt my first upside-down pose: "I'll fall; I'll look stupid; I can't do that; I don't like being upside-down; I'm scared; I don't know how.")

There are also many variations on how to move around, past, through, or over the gunk blocking a writer's path. I've cited in this article some of the techniques that have worked for me so far, such as positive affirmations, setting achievable goals, eschewing negative self-talk, focusing on your strengths, and avoiding comparisons with others. Since gunk is both insidious and sticky, I will continue seeking new ways to overcome it. And I hope that other writers confronting gunk will share some of their discoveries with me.

Laura Resnick is the author of 20 books, more than 50 short stories, and dozens of articles and columns. Her next release is Disappearing Nightly (Luna Books, 12/05).

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Duo-logue

“It’s Just Business...,” Part 2

Pat: Let’s see, where were we? Oh, yes. Julie was saying she follows her gut, and sometimes, that means ignoring everyone else’s opinion.

She said that could be scary, but what part of this business isn’t scary? And I said no part of the biz isn’t scary except the post-Ninc-at-Night sessions chocolate buffet at the Ninc Conference.

Okay, now that I’ve shaken off the sugar high from just thinking about that, we’ll continue.

As I said at the start, I seem to be dragged into speaking up by some part of me (could be my gut) that just won’t let things slide by. And that has developed over my career. For you, was it a conscious decision to take a hard-headed businesswoman approach to your career? Did you have that approach before you sold?

Julie: Yes, I believe I did. I was unpublished for nine years and I have to think that my hard-headedness kept me going. Good businesspeople do not let a little thing like failure get in their way. They adjust. They learn. They try again. Then I got a big shot of confidence after I sold my first few books—and a great deal of that confidence came from surrounding myself with people who believed in me, including my editor and my plotting partners. Then later in my career, my agent.

And then my new editor and my new publishing house. That support is crucial. I’ve only once worked with an editor who didn’t give me that support, and frankly, I couldn’t get away fast enough. It was a hard and dangerous risk to take. But it was ultimately a good thing because writers don’t need more reasons to be crazy. Staying sane is a big part of who I am. It’s always a very thin line. But I’ve had this conversation with my first (and still current) editor and she insists that I’ve had this attitude from the beginning—and frankly, she has proof, since I fought with Harlequin over the penname issue on my first contract and actually didn’t sign until we’d found a happy compromise.

I actually negotiated my first contract. I didn’t kiss their feet and sign.

I’d memorized the Harlequin boilerplate contract prior to selling and when I didn’t understand something, I called Legal and asked them to explain. I

refused to sign a few things that came later on because I knew they weren’t good for me. And yet, I still sold books. I had reasonable explanations and concerns for not bending. They respected that, ultimately.

I knew I had to establish from the beginning that I was smart and savvy and I do think it made a difference in a positive way.

I grew up in a family that ran a small business—in fact, we still do. When you’re running the show, you have no one to pass the buck to. That model was in my life since I was born. My mother is a businesswoman and frankly, I figure if I can deal and negotiate with her (something I’ve had to do all my life) then I can probably broker peace in the Middle East. She’s tough!

Pat: It’s interesting that you say both that you hate the businesswoman aspect and that you believe in yourself as a businesswoman. Did you have both the belief and that hating all along, or was one there from the start and the other grew?

Julie: When I was teaching, I hated having to drop the bomb on my students. You know, be a hard-ass. Who wants that? But I knew I had to put my foot down because if I didn’t show them who was boss, I lost control. High schoolers smell fear—and so do publishing houses. So I guess I’ve always had this push-pull. I have to be the hard-ass now (in a professional and reasonable way) or I lose control.

And we have so little in this business. How can you willingly give up more?

Pat: Some people might say because it’s not worth beating their heads against a two-mile long brick wall in the hopes of hitting one or two spots where there’s a gap.

But, because I’m an inveterate devil’s advocate, I’ll turn around and also say that just because we can’t control the business doesn’t mean we should give up trying to deal with it. We can’t control the weather, either. That doesn’t mean we stand out in the rain and cold and heat. We find shelter against the weather, and we try to make that shelter as effective and comfortable as we can.

Julie: Exactly! That’s a perfect metaphor. I get very exasperated with authors who time after time, get screwed and yet, they do nothing about it. You’re worth more than that! You need to believe in your work and in your worth. And you need to

be flexible so you can find a publisher and editor who appreciate that in you. I'm not saying everyone has to be like me, but you should at least give it a try every now and again. You might like it.

I think the fact of the matter is this—as women, or simply as artists for those of us who are not of the female persuasion—acting like a businessperson is not what we're trained to do. But like it or not, you have to do it. If you don't, you put yourself at risk of being walked over without knowing it. Now, at least, when I'm walked over, I know about it. And I can, hopefully, negotiate something else to make those shoe-marks on my back easier to bear.

Pat: Oh, got to interrupt here to plug a fabulous book that touches on this: *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever. Despite the title, the book makes clear that not only women don't ask, and that not only women suffer the consequences of not asking. It's a real eye-opener.

Okay, end of commercial. Returning you now to your regularly scheduled column.

Julie: I have that book in my TBR pile and hope to get to it soon. We can all use all the help we can get. This business is hard and I don't expect to win all the time. In fact, if I kept score, I'd say I don't win all that often. But in the long run, I feel very comfortable with my career, with my relationship with my publishers and editors, with the path I'm traveling. I don't understand why people don't treat this as a business. There's simply no other way to look at it. That's what it is! We sell a product. In ways, we are the product.

Pat: I can see several reasons people might not treat this as a business.

First, we've both acknowledged we don't like the business part, and I suspect we're far from being alone. And some folks are more successful at avoiding—and feeling no regret/guilt/whatever about avoiding—things they don't like than others.

Second, and to me far more compelling, is an issue that goes back to the phrase, "It's just business." Because our profession is not just business, it's also art/craft/creative. If focusing on the business interferes with the writing, then it might actually be a good business decision to hand all such issues over to your agent, recognizing the risks you might be taking, but also knowing that without the writing to bring to the table, you aren't going to be in the business at all.

That's definitely one of the reasons I wish I could close my eyes to those things coming at me. I know it can disrupt my creativity. First, it eats up time. But more importantly for me, it switches the gears in my head from Creative to Practical.

And that switch from Creative to Practical is dangerously easy for me. Reversing it, going from Practical to Creative is much more difficult. I would love to find a way to make that happen faster. Absent that, I try to shut out

influences that will trigger the Creative to Practical shift. I don't succeed much, but I do try. (Again, it's those eyes that won't stay closed.)

Julie: You're 100% right. Switching gears from Creative to Practical is a painful process. So now, I have to build in time for this sort of thing, the same way I build in time for my galley and to do promotion.

Not too long ago, I had a situation that disrupted my life for a good three weeks, maybe longer. I couldn't write a word until the situation was resolved. This was not good and it's something I'm going to have to work on, but I know other authors who can and do deal with both at the same time. I'm figuring it's just another form of discipline and professionalism. I'm sure I'll get the hang of it eventually. Having a great agent does help. I highly recommend that, even for the most ballsy of writers. My agent is fabulous at letting me vent and then handling certain situations for me. Some I have to handle myself, for various reasons, though usually with her support and encouragement. Either way, I'm damned glad to have her in my corner.

Pat: I totally empathize with those lost three weeks. Ah, yes, The Writer Who Was Eaten by The Business.

That's another reason the phrase, "It's just business" bugs me.

And then there's one more reason:

How come that phrase is never used when someone's giving us good news? When they offer us a multi-book contract, isn't that also the result of a business decision? Because they think everyone will make money from the deal. No publishing house is buying our proposals as a personal favor or out of the goodness of their hearts. They wouldn't be in business long if they did. So the good news for an author isn't charity—it's also business.

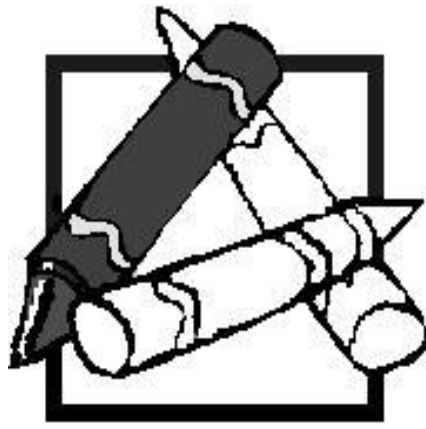
No matter how hard or soft we might think our heads are when it comes to business, maybe that's something for each of us to remember.

I'm making a note right now to remind myself of that every month. And to get Julie to give me periodic pep talks.

USA TODAY bestselling author Julie Elizabeth Leto sold her first book in 1998 and has since sold over 20 projects to three publishers. In her new series for Simon & Schuster (starting with Dirty Little Secrets, 6/05) starring kick-ass Latina heroine Marisela Morales, Julie is able to channel all her hard-headed, tough-girl tendencies without getting into any trouble. Sort of.

Pat McLaughlin, writing as Patricia McLinn, whose head is bruised and battered but unbowed from hitting it against brick walls, has a December release from Ninc-member Fran Baker's Delphi Books. The Games tells the interconnected stories of three women during the Winter Olympics – 16 days that can make careers, break hearts, and change lives.

**Crayon
on my**



**Key
board**

Lessons Learned from a Summer of Chaos

BY JANELLE CLARE SCHNEIDER

Written on her first day of non-chaos

The Little Realities are off to school. I can't believe how much I miss them! I mean, what's to miss about a constant litany...

"Mommy, she hit me!"

"Well, you kicked me!"

"I'm hungry!"

"I'm bored!"

And so on and so on.

Makes me realize that while their words and their behavior come close to sending me around the bend, I still treasure their persons. They add so much to my world.

That's Lesson #1.

The Little Realities are an inextricable part of my heart. When they were babies and dependent on me for everything, I lived and breathed this sense of being totally bound up in their happiness. As they've grown and become more independent, though, the bonding has felt less intense. I assumed I'm "just a baby person."

On June 23, their grandparents took them away for a month, since dh and I were living in a B&B until we got possession of our new house. The first two weeks were, well, lovely. I had no one to think about all day but me. I napped. I read. I relaxed. (I also spent a large portion of each day out and about taking care of the myriad details involved in relocating a family.)

By the end of the second week, my heart was saying it was time to get my babies back with me. My head knew this was folly, not to mention impossible, but my heart wasn't listening. July 5, I left for a writer's retreat in Denver, Colorado. The night before, I lay in bed, tears pushing at my eyelids, telling my husband, "It just feels so wrong to be going away when the children aren't even here." (Don't bother looking for the logic in that statement. There is none.)

I was reunited with my Little Realities on July 21. I spent the first week just basking in their presence. After a solid month with grandparents, they'd picked up some habits and behaviors I could have lived without. Nevertheless, simply being with them was bliss.

Lesson #2 - Creeping Bookitis has its price.

(Thanks to Mary Jo Putney for putting a name to this ailment.)

Those of you on Ninclink will remember my request for information on where your books reside when the traditional locations are just too full. This came out of my adventures in moving.

In Kingston, my office was in a huge basement room. There were daylight windows, but the room still is, and always will be, basement. So, when we bought the house in Cold Lake, we were delighted with its large main floor room, which Normals would use as a dining room. Not for one moment did either the dh or I envision a table in this room. He saw a desk and a computer for me. I saw the desk and the computer, for sure, but I also saw bookshelves. Maybe not as many as I was used to, but still, bookshelves. To my delight, we were able to afford to retire the beat-up shelves I've been using for 15 years and invest in new, matching units. Matching bookshelves do something for my soul that only another organizational-obsessive could appreciate.

Then came the Moment of Truth. I unpacked box after box of books. I'd made it about one-third of the way through when I realized, They Are Not All Going to Fit!! Okay, deep breath.

I'd known ahead of time there would be some overflow, so I'd insisted a large storage unit be put in the huge master bedroom. There's plenty of space in this room for hubby to function without ever having to acknowledge the presence of The Books. (Just as there's enough room for me to function without having to acknowledge the presence of The Television.)

However, you know you have too many books when, upon opening yet one more box of your treasures, you experience, not delight, but an almost uncontrollable urge to swear. As in, "Oh, *&%\$!, what am I going to do with these?" Simply leaving them in a box is unacceptable. If I can't access them easily, there's no point in having them, and yet parting with them isn't even an option. (Yes, I do make life hard on myself, more often than not.)

Thus, the advent of bookshelves in the closet of the sewing room. My fellow Ninclinkers saw no problem with this solution. Dh still isn't convinced, but then, they're not his books, nor is it his sewing room. So there.

Lesson #3 - Chaos can have surprising results in creativity.

Throughout all the mayhem, I've awakened from naps with scenes in my imagination. I've figured out that wip #2 needs to start at a point completely different from what I'd assumed. I now know what the heroine's backstory is in wip #3. I don't know whether it's a result of having been away from the stories for several months, or what. I just know that I know what happens next, and it's a thrilling feeling.

Lesson #4 - Friends make chaos so much more bearable.

My writers' loops have kept me sane during all this. I

haven't been able to keep up with posts as I'd like, particularly since I was without Internet access of my own for six weeks. (One interesting aspect of living in a remote small town is that nothing happens instantly. We ordered Internet access, and received the installation two weeks later. Can't be in a rush around here!) Still, when I've dipped into the chatter, even for just a few messages at a time, I've been reminded that my life isn't entirely boxes and jousting with bureaucratic minions who must not have ever moved in their entire lives. Ever. (Ooops, sorry for the rant. Back to the topic.)

Lesson #5 - There's nothing like a lake view to make chaos bearable.

I got to watch the sunrise this morning, the brilliant colors of the sky reflected in the water. I'm beginning to be able to read the moods of the lake. Just watching the waves sorts out the chaos that gets imbedded in my brain.

Conclusion? It's been a tough summer, but it's been so worth it!

Janelle Clare Schneider wrote this column from her freshly painted, bookshelf-lined main floor office which provides a view of the lake, at least until someone buys the lot behind hers and builds a stinkin' monster house on it.

Bits'n'Pieces

Times Goes Funny for Fiction

Genre fiction still remains the Rodney Dangerfield of fiction, even as it gets a

new section in the *New York Times Magazine*—"The Funny Pages." The section will contain, "The Sunday Serial," approximately 14 weekly installments of a commissioned work. The first serialization will be a new work from Elmore Leonard.

Pegasus Books Takes Wing in 2006

The house will launch in the second quarter of 2006 with commercial fiction that focuses on crime novels and mysteries as well as nonfiction titles in history, biography, and popular culture. The driving force is former Avalon senior managing editor Claiborne Hancock as publisher and editor-in-chief. Pegasus is forecasting 20 books in the first year. Launch authors include Martyn Waites (*The Mercy Seat*) and Frédéric Lenoir and Violette Cabesos, (*The Angel's Promise*).

New Los Angeles Times Book Review Editor

After four months of suspense, the *LA Times* announced that author and literary critic Davie L. Ulin will be the new book editor. Ulin was one of 25 candidates for the job and starts to work in October on the Sunday Book Review and daily reviews.

50 Year Old Bookstore Retires

Kepler's Books and Magazines in Menlo Park, Calif. closed in early September 2006 after 50 years of service. The independent bookseller has been struggling since 2001.

Google Goes to the Continent

Despite some resistance, Google Print is going to be available in Western Europe—expanding into France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. Until now the program has been limited to English-language books and English-speaking countries.

Google Library Project Stumbles

The project to scan the collections from Harvard, Stanford, and University of Michigan has stalled. Publishers and other copyrights holders will be given the chance not to include their works. AAP still thinks this isn't enough protection and doesn't address the concern of members that the entire project constitutes a violation of copyright law.

Character Names to Aid Free Speech

Stephen King, John Grisham, Amy Tan, Dave Eggers, Michael Chabon, Nora Roberts, Daniel Handler (aka Lemony Snicket), and other authors each auctioned off a character's name on eBay in September. The money raised will go to the First Amendment Project to help protect free speech rights for writers and artists.

Bidders were warned that the character with their name may have "dubious morals."



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

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

Bearing Witness

I read something recently that said one of the biggest reasons we want to have a mate is so that there is always someone to bear witness to our lives. It struck a most profound note with me, not as a partner (though I do see how that might be true) but as a writer. In some way, I think we're all writing to bear witness to our lives, and to the lives around us. We're recording the stories for those who can't, capturing the truth of time and relationships and the flow of humankind in the early 21st century.

I have had the flu for several days, the result of not listening and not listening and not listening to my body when it said "I'm tired. I'm TIRED." So it said, "I AM TIRED!! LIE DOWN RIGHT NOW!" And it was the kind of mindless virus where nothing makes a lot of sense. I happened to make little notes when things occurred to me, so I could capture them later. This is the list:

Andrea
Virgin of Guadalupe
Lost cats
Oranges
White cheese
Silver teapot
Running
Bad cold
New York City, chess, riding the subway
Marie/Hawaii
Black silverware

It's all about fresh starts. It's a huge period of transition for me and my family, and simply because of the ages of the children, I'm observing the fresh starts of a lot of young people. Watching their excitement and fear, their bravado and bluster.

A few days ago, I received an email from an enormously talented young writer. She's a friend of one of my sons, and I happened to pick up a bound copy of some of her short stories in his apartment last spring. The voice was so strong on the first page that I instinctively tucked it close, and asked permission to read it. Ian said, "Sure. She bound the stories so she could get some feedback, so that's the only rule: you have to give her some."

I promised. Since the writer was 22, I imagined the work might warrant a note or two, but not much. Arrogant, I suppose, but like all of you, I've read a lot of aspiring writers over the years. You get a little jaded.

But I sat down with Andrea's work one afternoon and peeled through the entire collection. Her voice beguiled me, seduced me, made me laugh, made me angry. I wrote to her immediately and said only, "This work is publishable and you must submit the stories."

She emailed in return and we discussed the best places for her to try, and she sounded encouraged, thanked me, and that was that. I decided she might not be ready to submit, or she didn't believe me, or maybe she just didn't have time.

Instead, I think she was just a little bit shy with the writer mother of one of her good friends. Her email this afternoon was jubilant. Not only did she submit all 14 short stories to various markets (and had so far collected two rejections), but she sold the title piece to a very tony literary magazine for actual cash.

Her name is Andrea. She wrote about the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is a big favorite of mine, in case no one ever noticed. I lit a candle to her when two of my cats disappeared recently, and I despaired of their return. But more on that in a minute.

August was a pretty busy month in the Samuel household. I returned from Reno on a Sunday and picked up my eldest son and his girlfriend (and the earthly goods they dragged from a summer spent working in Oregon) the very next day.

It was technically a visit only through the first week, when his girlfriend was here, when we did sightseeing, ate lots, and did the usual catching up. The rest of it, Manchild and I were focused on sorting through all his stuff, the things accumulated in the basement and garage from childhood, as well as the towering number of boxes he and my father drove back to Colorado following the finish of his undergrad days in Missouri last spring. We did all the sorting because I—free at last—am moving and he had to be in New York to start graduate school at the end of August, and if I didn't make him, he'd leave it all for me.

I also looked at apartments with the other child, who was both jubilant and worried, and therefore, bouncing off the walls like some mutant, oversized Rabbit/Tigger critter. We found one. I helped the pair of roommates negotiate a lease, get their utilities turned on, arrange for help moving.

Then things kicked into high gear. Within five days, I:

- sent eldest child to New York City for grad school
- settled youngest child in his first apartment (with black towels and black dinnerware and black accessories; I genuinely thought he'd outgrow this obsession with black. It appears he has not.)
- moved my own possessions, three cats, and two dogs 60 miles north back to my hometown, where I've been practically living for the past three years. Right in the nick of time, as it happens, since the humongous surge in gas prices would have prevented my driving back and forth very often at all, even in my tiny car.
- fine-tuned the first 100 pages of a rewritten manuscript and mailed them to slightly nervous editor.

It should be no surprise then, when I tell you that for the past five days, I've had the flu. Standing in the old house in Pueblo on Wednesday, dealing with the last of the moving issues, it moved in on a buzzy wave of fever and knocked me flat. I managed to crawl back to Colorado Springs before completely losing it, but within five minutes of arriving, I was in bed, crashed.

Where I stayed for several days thereafter, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping. Every time I'd surface, I'd be amazed at how many more hours I'd added to the total. 20 hours of the past 24, 30 of the past 36, etc. The total ended up being something ridiculous, 89 of 120 hours spent dead asleep, or very close to it, lying in bed. It wasn't possible to do anything else. I couldn't even open a bottle of Gatorade by myself.

Now, this might not be a surprise to some of you. I do understand people sometimes fall ill with viruses and go to bed, but I am not one of them. While I adore lying around on a couch, reading and eating penny candies

(Sixlets, say, or Kits) burning the afternoons away, that's laziness, and a choice, not being rendered immobile by some external force.

I start to decline, like a cat: "No, no, save that chicken broth for someone who is going to live...." I had to cancel a hike. I didn't do any running for a week! It's now September and the summer is sliding away and, pretty soon, we'll have to put on coats to be outside, and if I have to be inside at all, it only seems I should be writing on any number of projects that have been capturing my attention lately.

Speaking of cats, that's the other thing. You know how they are (speaking of resistance to change). They huddled under the bed for three days, refusing to come out to even eat ("No, no, save that turkey for some other cat, one who will.... Oh well, I guess I could manage a small bite.") So all was well.

But one day, two of them dematerialized. Poof! Gone. I could see the marks of their feet on a window with a little roof, and the evidence of them losing their grip on said window, but no broken cat bodies lay below.

It's a big house. I figured they were hiding. I took more cold medicine. Slept another marathon.

Cats had not appeared. I started to get seriously worried. And guilty. What sort of cat mother was I? I lit candles to the Virgin of Guadalupe, crawled back into bed and cried properly cat-like tears.

Last night, I dragged myself out to meet my hiking buddies for the traditional après-hike meal, even if I had to forgo the good part. We ate hearty gouda and beer soup, and I drank a hefty ale, and talked. I could tell these friends of mine about the big changes that were going on—my sons are grown up and moving out! My eldest is going to live in New York CITY! and I'm both excited and nervous for him; as happy as I am to be moving, to embark on this new chapter, I needed to be able to say, "Oy!"

When I returned home, two cats had rematerialized, as if they'd simply been lost in some dusty, slightly sticky wrinkle in time. I kissed them properly and they allowed it for a moment, then got back to being cats.

This morning, I was recovered. Just like that. I have a nagging little cough, and it will be a week or two before I can do my long run again, but I got out and walked the dogs in the sunny, sweet September morning, and felt energized once again.

I needed my close buddies to bear witness to my life in this season of enormous change.

And I write books for the same reason, really. I need to bear witness to the lives around me. To young writers selling their first pieces, to young men heading out into life on their own terms. One girl I know went to NYC and is now pining for Hawaii. My son fell in love with—of all things—the chess hustlers in Washington Square Park, and is drunk, drunk, drunk on casebooks. My younger nattily arranged his black table settings to match his Asian-themed dishes, and bought bamboo accessories. ▶



The Girls in the Basement . . . Bear Witness

And I drove up the highway last week, seeing a slip of gray cloud falling into the valleys of the Front Range, revealing in ways that are not always visible, the layers and layers of mountainside, and I thought,

“Home. Finally.”

Fresh starts. Bearing witness. Every time we start a novel, it’s a fresh start, and a way of bearing witness. It’s also a surprising new adventure, one that will keep a heart supple and young if we let it.

Begin again.

Barbara Samuel thinks perhaps the fever-inspired “white cheese, oranges, and silver teapots” could be a good poem if only she could remember the rest.

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL!

After extensive discussion, research, and careful weighing of all variables, the Ninc Board and the Conference Committee have voted unanimously, and with great joy, to go to New Orleans as planned in 2006! We’ve spoken to the Hotel Monteleone representatives, and we have every confidence that they will be ready for us. We’ve also authorized a site visit in February (before Mardi Gras) for Pat Roy, Conference Coordinator, and Brenda Hiatt Barber, 2006 Ninc President, so that we can be assured everything is in place.

Early Bird registration has been extended to October 15, and we urge everyone to Recapture the Magic, in the truest sense of the word, in New Orleans March 30-April 1. Our 2004 President Jean Brashear gave us a rallying cry when she said, “It’s history in the making! We’ll never have a chance to see anything like this again in

our lifetimes.” We’re writers, not tourists. It may be no accident that Barbara Samuel’s column this month is titled “Bearing Witness.” It is what we do. Come to New Orleans in 2006 and together we’ll Recapture the Magic!

**Vicki Lewis Thompson, 2005 Ninc President
Brenda Hiatt Barber, 2006 Ninc President**



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