



NINK

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Faction: Writing the Historical Mystery

BY KAREN HARPER

I have always instinctively written faction. Published regularly since 1982, having worked with seven publishers and ten editors, I may stray for a while, but I always return to writing this blend of fact and fiction. I also write “pure” fiction and love doing it, especially my contemporary suspense novels for Mira Books.

Looking back, however, my first books, although marketed as historical romances, were faction—in this case, factional biographies of such real figures as Mary Boleyn, Joan of Kent, the Scottish Duchess of Hamilton, and Georgian actress Sarah Cibber. Even when I moved toward writing fictional central figures, I included secondary characters such as George Washington and Benedict Arnold. One way or the other, I’ve been hooked on faction.

Although I’m usually too busy and too practical to analyze why I do things or why something works

or doesn’t work, I was recently asked to give a talk on *Writing Faction: The Historical Mystery* for The Renaissance Academy of Florida Gulf Coast University. In stopping to think deeply about what is faction, why and how I write faction, I was forced to consider some findings I hope will benefit my fellow authors.

Since I taught writing for years both at the college and high school levels, my teacherly approach was to first carefully define what faction is. The term was evidently coined by Alex Hailey to describe his blockbuster generational saga, *Roots*. The best working definition I’ve come up with is that faction is a story with one or more real central characters as well as a factual setting and/or event. Faction is usually historical but could be contemporary, although that would entail concerns which I’m not going to deal with in this article.

To better define what faction is, first let’s clear up what it is not.

Faction is not just using a real

setting. Randy White in his mystery *Captiva* writes in the front of the book, “Sanibel and Captiva Islands exist but they are used fictitiously in this novel.” The author perhaps wants some license to change the facts within his real setting. He wants to use the cachet of the setting, which he loves and knows well, but not set himself up for the letters of complaint we’ve all seen, which say something like, “But there isn’t really a marina next to that gas station as you said on page 41.”

Faction is not revisionist history, such as novels about what could have happened if Hitler had conquered England or the South had won the Civil War.

Faction is not a roman à clef, which is based on real people and events but purports to be its own story. A current example of a roman à clef is *Intern*, based on the Gary Condit/Chandra Levy tragedy.

And, lastly, faction is not a novel which includes

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

There has been much discussion on the various writers' loops about the Wal-Mart "Words are Your Wheels" literacy program. Wal-Mart provided the following statistics:

- ▼ 50 million Americans cannot read or comprehend above the eighth-grade level.
- ▼ Existing literacy programs reach less than 10% of these people.
- ▼ The U.S. has a high dropout rate of 29% compared to 5% in Japan and 2% in Russia.
- ▼ The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that illiteracy costs businesses in the U.S. \$225 billion a year.
- ▼ 60% of prison inmates are illiterate.
- ▼ Almost 50% of adults who receive welfare are illiterate.
- ▼ Almost 75% of those who are unemployed are illiterate.
- ▼ Children of unemployed parents are five times more likely to drop out of school.
- ▼ Almost nine out of 10 juvenile offenders are illiterate.

With the unnerving synchronicity these things sometimes display, about the time the Wal-Mart notice hit my e-mail inbox, the January 6 issue of *PW* and the February issue of *Locus* landed in my mailbox.

PW features a cluster of seven articles, including one titled "It Starts With Literacy," focusing on declining unit book sales and industry initiatives to find new readers. *Locus* offers its annual statistical review of publishing for sf, fantasy, and horror. The figures show more books are being published every year (in terms of numbers of titles), which is nice. But what shook me was the continuing decline in sales of genre magazines like *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The troubling thing about this decline is that short stories often serve as an entry point for readers too timid to tackle a full-sized book. If the magazines aren't generally available, how are those potential new readers going to get their start?

All this was in the back of my mind as writers on a variety of loops plunged into discussions of the Wal-Mart initiative, literacy, and what it all meant to us as writers who want to make a living selling our work. One thing some folks missed, I think, was that the Wal-Mart figures, like all statistics, didn't necessarily give a good picture of the situation. In particular, they don't reveal the less-than-grim facets of the problem, and they don't even hint at the possibilities for action.

The biggest over-simplification in this case is the stark word, "illiterate." Unlike pregnancy, where you're either pregnant or you're not, people are not either literate or illiterate. And that means there's no one easy solution to the problem.

The authors of "The Executive Summary Of Adult Literacy In America: A First Look At The Results Of The National Adult Literacy Survey," put it this way:

Many past studies of adult literacy have tried to count the number of "illiterates" in this nation, thereby treating literacy as a condition that individuals either do or do not have. We believe that such efforts are inherently arbitrary and misleading. They are also damaging in that they fail to acknowledge both the complexity of the literacy problem and the range of solutions needed to address it.

The document summarizes results from a 1992 literacy survey of 26,000 adults from across the U.S. (the results for the 2002 survey are not yet available). (<http://nces.ed.gov/naal/resources/execsumm.asp#litskills>)

Even though it's yesterday's news, the summary is still worth reading. It analyzes participants' literacy in three different areas: "prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy." There were five levels in each literacy area, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 being the highest. (The Level 1 and 2 prose tests, for example, used a newspaper article of about the length and grammatical complexity of an article in *USAToday*.)

According to the summary, between 21 and 23 percent of the participants, who represented 40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in the U.S. in 1992, fell in the lowest skill level. Between 25 and 28 percent (representing another 50 or so million adults) fell in Level 2. What that means is that slightly less than half of the adults in the United States—90 to 95 million people—may struggle with some of the basic analytical and computational skills that those of us in Ninc take for granted.

But it doesn't necessarily mean they can't read!

Some of the 40 to 44 million people who fell in Level 1 are truly illiterate—they can't function at even the most basic level of reading and math. But they're *not* the majority. Twenty-five percent were immigrants who were just learning to speak English. A third were 65 and older, people who grew up at a time when you didn't need a high school diploma to get a good-paying job. Twenty-six percent had physical, mental, or health conditions that limited their functional abilities. Nineteen percent had visual difficulties that affected their ability to read print. Nineteen percent!

And that's only one part of the mix. Several years ago, I trained as a tutor with the adult literacy program in my community. The basic training was geared to tutoring adults with little or no reading ability, but I ended up tutoring literate people, many referred by their employers, who were having trouble dealing with technical, work-related material. These folks could *read*, they just didn't always have the technical or analytical skills—or enough confidence in their own abilities—to make sense of what they were reading. Regardless, they were still classed by their employers as "illiterate." (Sadly, in at least two cases the problem wasn't the students' lack of skills at all, but the truly awful training materials their employers had foisted on them.)

So, what does all this have to do with those of us in the publishing industry who wonder how we're going to find the new readers we need to keep our industry strong, healthy, and profitable?

It means we have to take a closer look at all those literacy statistics being waved in our faces. We need to understand the issues behind the statistics before we can talk about solutions.

It means—surprise!—that nothing's ever simple.

It means understanding that just because 50 percent of Americans can't read or comprehend above the eighth-grade level doesn't mean they're incapable of reading anything at all. (And, frankly, eighth-grade reading levels indicate a pretty darn good grasp of English and the written word.)

It means that sometimes reading ability isn't the problem at all, and that gaining more readers may involve solutions that aren't *reading* solutions. If a fourth of the people who can't operate beyond Level 1 are non-English-speaking immigrants (using the 1992 survey's figures, that's over 10 million adults!), the solution may be to translate and publish our books into languages they *do* speak and read. If nineteen percent (8 million people!) can't read because they can't even see the print on the page, then maybe we're talking more large print editions more readily available at lower prices. Or helping folks pay for cataract surgery or decent glasses with up-to-date prescriptions. Or making more computer readers available through libraries and lending services for the elderly suffering from, say, macular degeneration. (It's a mistake to assume that more books on tape would be a solution—I can't be the only person who falls asleep while listening to them!)

It may mean working harder to get books—entertaining, well-written books—into the hands of people who, through any number of reasons, have come to believe they "don't read." Harry Potter got thousands of kids reading who hadn't been reading before. The right book can work wonders in changing people's perception of themselves as non-readers, and that goes for adults as well as children.

The survey I've cited focused solely on adult literacy. Juvenile literacy concerns are just as serious and, in many ways, far more troubling. But as with adult literacy concerns, it's important to remember that there is no one root cause of the problem, and, thus, no one easy answer.

Then again...

This Sunday's paper carried a short, unattributed article about a new ABC reality show called "All American Girl." According to the article, "Contestants sing, dance, swim, ride bikes, toss basketballs, and run an obstacle course." (Wow! Does that sound like great entertainment or what????) They also participate in some sort of Q&A to show just how sharp they are (or aren't). Again according to the article, "One woman names San Francisco as the nation's capital. Another identifies U.S. border countries as 'California and—don't tell me the other one—but I know it's in Europe.'"

Mind-boggling answers like those don't necessarily indicate a problem with illiteracy. Some of those contestants may simply not have the brains of a pickled herring.

— Anne Holmberg

Writing “Faction”

Continued from page 1



namedropping of the rich and famous—or poor and infamous, for that matter. A novel set in New York City which has Donald Trump, former Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and CBS anchorman Dan Rather as mere walk-ons, but develops none of them as characters, is fiction, not faction.

One of the best definitions of faction I've seen recently was by author Thomas Fleming, whose new faction novel, *Conquerors of the Sky*, is about the American aviation industry. He says his writing “mingles private lives and public figures.” (Tom Deignan interview, *Publishers Weekly*, Jan. 20, 2003). That is very much what I am doing with my *Queen Elizabeth I Historical Mystery Series*. The writer must create private lives while being true to the core of the public characters. More on this later.

As a very practical professional writer, I would also add that faction is writing which strives to both entertain and educate. Legions of readers are out there who like that blend. Faction is a “subgenre” of fiction which is selling quite well today. To give an idea of the breadth of possibilities, here are a few works of faction which have been well-reviewed lately. Some are inspired by literature, some by history.

Bestselling mystery author Nevada Barr's new book, *Flashback*, combines a modern fictional mystery with a character and event from the past. In this book in her series set in national parks, Barr focuses on the imprisonment of Dr. Samuel Mudd, who set John Wilkes Booth's broken leg after he shot

President Lincoln.

Other recent faction books include *Dating Hamlet: Ophelia's Story*; *Adele: Jane Eyre's Hidden story*; *As Above, So Below: A Novel of Peter Breugel*; and *Oscar Wilde Discovers America*, which “is not so much about the celebrated Irish wit as about the black valet who accompanied him on his 1882 coast-to-coast American tour. Not much is known about the actual valet, but [the author] imagines him as...” (*PW*, Nov. 11 2002.) And there is that truth/fiction line which each author must establish in his or her own creation.

Children's factional literature reviewed lately includes *Taking Liberty: The Story of Oney Judge*, *George Washington's Runaway Slave* and *Fruitlands: Louisa May Alcott Made Perfect*.

These are extremely imaginative stories, which use fact as both foundation and springboard. They are not in any sense “knockoffs” any more than Shakespeare's work was. The bard, in those pre-plagiarism lawsuit days, used many sources that were not his own, but look what he did with those initial plots. Has anything written ever been completely, truly original since God created man—and “He made man in His own image.” But as the Comely Curmudgeon would say, I digress.

The area of faction I'm most interested in and want to focus on here is the historical mystery. In 1997 when I got the idea for writing a mystery series with Queen Elizabeth I as the amateur sleuth, I knew four fine Tudor-era mystery series were already being published. However, because the queen herself was either a minor character in these or wasn't on

stage at all, I thought with the dynamic monarch herself as a hook for the book, I would venture into what was already somewhat busy waters.

Obviously, not all historical mysteries are faction. The classic Ellis Peter's Cadfael books and Anne Perry's two Victorian mystery series are fiction, not faction, and they have set high standards for all historical mysteries.

So why write historical mystery faction? What are the pros and cons? The cons include that the author cannot fly as free if using a real person. A writer must at least stay true to the core of the characters in the chosen time frame, even if this surprises readers. George Washington cannot be portrayed as a drunk, though he could be shown to be inept. His early handling of the Fort Necessity fiasco showed he once had a long way to go as a military leader. Benedict Arnold can be portrayed as a hero, for he was once, before he made a lot of bad decisions.

Besides the fact it's attractive to acquiring editors and readers today, faction has some other major benefits. Once an author has chosen an era and characters, it gives a factual framework on which to start building fiction. Faction also encourages the streamlining and shaping of events (plot) for dramatic effect.

A recent faction novel which has received a lot of publicity is Conn Iggulden's *Emperor: The Gate of Rome*. Jackie Pray in her *USA Today* review (Jan. 16, 2003) states that, “in a helpful endnote, Iggulden acknowledges taking liberties with the historical record and indicates where he has

streamlined events for dramatic effect. And the effect is dramatic. Iggulden...is a grand storyteller..."

It is certainly this impact on the reader we all strive for. And, in writing faction, the makings of a plot and dynamic characters are greatly laid out for the writer to shape and dramatize. I could not have found a more exciting and compelling life than that of Elizabeth Tudor. I have only to use my imagination to enhance and expand the facts to take advantage of that.

Another great benefit of writing faction is that it gives the author a unique point of view, perhaps even a voice, through which to present the work: Adele's, Breugel's, Eleanor Roosevelt's, Amelia Earhart's (in the faction novella, *I Was Amelia Earhart*). One of the things my readers have found compelling about my Elizabethan novels is that the books are an extended character study of a fascinating woman as well as a mystery series. Yet because I wanted to broaden my canvas, I chose not to use first person with only the queen narrating. Most of the story is from her third person POV, but I also use several key nobles and servants to reveal the richness of Tudor life and present the murder, its discovery, and resolution.

The following are tips I would give for writing a series or a single-title historical mystery. (Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* is a prime example of a stand-alone, since Teddy Roosevelt as NYC Police Commissioner helps solve the crimes.)

(1) Let the setting and era and key characters choose you; be sure you are passionate about the era and its personalities.

(2) Strive to convey the tone of the times, not necessarily reality. If I were true to Elizabethan language, my dialogue would sound like Shakespeare's. Try to

capture the feel of the era with a few phrases or key words. The queen says, "Say on," not "Go ahead." Her guards cry out, "Make way for the Queen's Majesty!" not "Get out of the way!" And don't get caught up in weird spelling to try to convey precise dialect. Suggest it; don't belabor it.

(3) As in any strong fiction, treat your setting as character. Don't just assume setting can be mere backdrop for your faction. P. D. James says all her mysteries begin with setting. I have found that I must describe Merrie Olde England very differently for my factional series than I would if I were writing a fictional "charming castle, countryside, and crumpets" cozy. My castles must take on Gothic overtones. Elizabeth must react viscerally to the Tower of London where her mother was beheaded. To the queen, Westminster Abbey is not only a place of celebration and ceremony, but a family cemetery.

Any suggestions I would offer on character in faction get into that awesome arbitrary line between fact and fiction, research and license. In writing faction, an author has a large continuum on which to draw his or her dividing line. The "free rein" end of the continuum reminds me of actress Meryl Streep's comments in an interview after her Golden Globe award. When asked if she had studied the life of the woman she portrayed in the film *Adaptations*, she replied, "No. I didn't want to know about the real person on whom the film was based. I didn't want to be tied to the truth—I wanted to be free."

Or to return to bestseller Nevada Barr, when asked if she stuck to the facts when writing the historical part of her dual-narrative mystery *Flashback*, [the author] said facts are something she "played pretty fast and loose with." (*Taking On History's Mysteries* by Dorman

T. Shindler, *PW*, Jan. 27, 2003.) Yet Ms. Barr stresses that she used key elements of character and events.

At the other end of the continuum, I stick quite close to what I research about Queen Elizabeth. I use court records of where she was when and what major events were occurring; if I set a book at Whitehall Palace the week after her coronation, that's where she was then. I also use her health records, so if she is recorded as having a bad cold then, I use that. In *The Queen's Cure*, I followed her battle with smallpox to the day and tied that to the murder mystery.

How much research must a writer do to create a historical mystery or a series? A lot, but then how the author uses that is wide open. Author Colum McCann has written a recently released faction novel called *Dancer*, which is based on the life of Rudolf Nureyev. McCann has nothing in his background relating to Russia, let alone ballet. Nor, according to a *PW* interview by Adam Dunn (Jan. 13, 2003), did McCann interview those close to Nureyev.

The author says, "I thought my duty was to imagine him, but imaginative expression is not an excuse to shirk research." McCann's preparation for writing the book took him all over Russia to the sites Nureyev knew so that he could experience what his key character saw, and, hopefully, felt. McCann says, "This arbitrary line between what's real and what's not real is a very interesting thing to me."

Precisely, and each author must discern and establish this line in his or her faction—a creative act in and of itself. NINK

Karen Harper's most recent books are The Stone Forest, nominated for the Mary Higgins Clark Award, and book #5 in the Queen Elizabeth I Mystery Series, The Thorne Maze.

The Buzz in the Biz.....by Peggy Webb

Since Donna Hayes took over the helm of Harlequin Enterprises Ltd., authors feel empowered. She moved quickly to remove the thorn that had been pressing in our flesh for a long time, i.e., the rights to our pseudonyms. In addition, communications increased in such proportions that now we feel our voices are being heard.

While she was busy shifting the focus to authors and editors, she also steered Harlequin to record earnings of \$126.7 million, an increase of 19% from \$106.4 million earned last year. North American retail accounted for an increase of \$10 million, with increased shipments in both series and single titles, while the overseas market contributed an increase of \$2 million.

Who is this remarkable woman who is the first female to run the company since Harlequin's inception in 1949? A native of Montreal, she graduated in 1978 with an honors degree in English literature and communications from McGill University. She started her career at Doubleday Canada where she moved quickly through the ranks of the marketing division. After six years, she moved to an advertising agency for a short stint before returning to publishing.

***NINK:* So Donna, how does it feel to be the first female president of Harlequin?**

Donna Hayes: It feels great! Here's a scoop for you: My title was just changed to CEO. This change reflects recognition from the board and Torstar's CEO Robert Prichard for what we've produced this year. We just sent out a press release that shows the highest sales and profits ever. I'm very excited for all of us.

***NINK:* Congratulations, Donna. Tell us about you, personally. What do you love to do when you're not working?**

DH: First of all, publishing is not work for me. My husband is also in publishing, so we talk about it often. I read and spend a lot of time talking about reading. Horseback riding is the only thing I do which is completely different. It's something I always wanted to do as a child. I take lessons once a week. I love horses. I love learning something new, proving myself in a different way, and working with someone who doesn't speak my language. It's a great release. I've always wanted to learn to play piano, too.

***NINK:* Then you should. Playing piano is one of my greatest joys. Methods for teaching adults are different from those teaching children. You'd learn rapidly.**

DH: Maybe I'll do that when I retire.

***NINK:* You've steered a bold course with so many new lines. What prompted you to do that?**

DH: First, let me say that I wanted to make sure the

authors and editors are front and center in the company. Second, no company can be successful unless it produces something first rate that the customer wants to buy. We have all seen that even companies with established brands must continue to innovate to survive, especially in a global market. Innovation is the key to success. You have to make sure your content is relevant, that it's what people want.

***NINK:* How did you come up with the ideas for your new lines?**

DH: Last year we appointed global teams to focus on innovation. They were challenged to come up with five new series concepts and five new non-series concepts. These teams were made up of editorial, marketing, sales, finance, and people from the various countries we operate in. The list that came out of these teams was exciting, new, and will deliver something different for the public. Our innovation calendar covers the next two years. Right now two more teams are working on brand new concepts we'll publish in 2005 and 2006. It has been phenomenal to see the imagination and creativity that came out of these teams. Concepts that were ideas a year ago are now a reality. Also, our authors continue to innovate both within and outside of series and we'll get a lot more innovation in the coming years.

***NINK:* Tell us about the new lines and the time frame for development.**

DH: Red Dress Ink will move to two titles mid-year and later to three. We'll broaden the format to appeal to an age range from 20-40. Right now RDI is published in trade. In March we'll publish our first hardcover as well as add mass market. Margaret Marbury has done a remarkable job buying, and the books continue to be special.

***NINK:* How will you decide where to put the RDI submissions?**

DH: Content will determine where each book is put. Mass market will be reprints of the early trade books.

***NINK:* Back to the lines....**

DH: Love Inspired is doing well, and will move to four titles this fall. At the same time we will introduce Steeple Hill, inspirational women's fiction, with one trade title each month.

Also in the fall, Intrigue will increase from four to six titles, and Silhouette Romance will move from six to four.

Flipside, which replaces Duets (romantic comedies with two stories in one book), will publish two individual titles per month. Flipside will be romantic comedies that are character driven rather than situational.

We've created a new imprint, Luna, that debuts in 2004 with one title per month, trade paperback. Mary-Theresa Hussey in our New York office is at the helm. Luna is

romantic fantasy, which I think will always have a strong readership, but we'll be somewhat different from the romantic fantasies of old. The logo is just beautiful.

NINK: What is the logo?

DH: I can't tell you. It will be unveiled this summer.

NINK: You also have Bombshell.

DH: Yes. Starting in 2004, Bombshell is female action adventure with a heroine who can get things done. She's thrust into a high-stakes situation, and while these books will have a romance subplot, they won't necessarily have a traditional happy ending. Lynda Curnyn in our New York office is actively acquiring.

NINK: You make my head spin.

DH: I'm happy about that.

NINK: Do you have plans for series?

DH: We continue to create innovation within series to keep them new and fresh and keep readers excited. By the first quarter of 2004 we will change packaging on every line. The new designs are really beautiful. The focus groups that have seen them prefer the new designs.

We're buying authors all the time for single title and series. We work to build our authors, and in the last few months, we debuted three authors on the New York Times list—Diana Palmer with *Diamond Spur*, Sharon Sala with *Dark Water*, and Carla Neggers with *The Harbor*. All are Mira titles and all those authors started with us in series.

NINK: What demographic are you shooting for?

DH: We'll bring them all in with other new lines, but we won't target teenagers. We've never been successful with that program, so we won't focus on them. With all the programs we have now, we should bring in readers from 15 to 95.

NINK: How do you plan to successfully launch so many new lines in such a short time?

DH: We have some incredibly

talented people. All you have to do is put a challenge out there, and they'll figure how to do it. I've heard the marketing people talk about what we're doing, and I just couldn't feel better. These guys are capable of anything. From a broad market standpoint, we did studies last year in order to figure out the size of the women's fiction market and what percentage we have. We are seven per cent of the North American market, so we are tiny. In the past we thought of ourselves as series publishers, and we were close to 100 per cent of that market with nowhere to grow. If we redefine ourselves, we have enormous opportunity for growth, which will create profits that we can reinvest in our programs. So there is really no way to lose.

NINK: That's good news for you and good news for us.

DH: Our authors are number one with us. We have great *authors* and we're buying great titles. Readers won't buy less than the best. We know what we're trying to acquire, and we know how we will market the books. We work closely with our sales force so the reps will understand our books, our authors, and our vision. I think they're the best sales force in the business. And we have a great track record. Last year we took our new Blaze and Red Dress Ink lines worldwide and have been very pleased with the results. Hopefully we'll continue on that track.

NINK: Do you foresee the new lines ultimately replacing some of the old ones?

DH: Not necessarily, but things can always change. We must be responsive to what readers tell us in the marketplace. The move to add two titles to Intrigue and decrease in Silhouette Romance is in response to reader's interest in longer, more complex stories and the appeal of suspense. We will always try to deliver the most appealing and salable selection—our booksellers and our readers demand it.

NINK: What is the future of category?

DH: The future of category is very, very bright. We've been publishing romance for more than fifty years, and this past year our North American Retail division sold a million more series books than in 2001. That tells me there's a great future in category romance. We will continue to expand. Our authors develop a huge readership. Many of the bestselling authors such as Debbie Macomber come out of series, and their readers follow.

NINK: Both authors and publishers strive for excellence, but sometimes I think we don't communicate about the best way to achieve our mutual goal. For instance, when editors at H/S ask for "something different," just how radically can the author depart from the "tried and true" elements, i.e. the secret baby, the cowboy, the single dad, etc?

DH: The issue is always "what's possible versus what's commercial." We want the authors to continue to push the boundaries hard. You can't stay in one place. In order to keep readers, you have to be innovative and appealing. With the amount of innovation we're doing, we have a mindset that *new* is a good thing. And we'll be trying even more.

NINK: This provides enormous opportunities for authors.

DH: Yes it does, and we're excited about that.

NINK: After you came into power, authors got the rights to their pseudonyms back. Why did you take up that fight, and how did you accomplish the reversion in such a short period of time?

DH: Why? I had a different vision of the company. One part of that is understanding that authors are the reason we exist. We ought to be respectful and put them in the center of our vision. I wish you could see the slides we show. In the center of the slide is big red circle with *authors* in the middle.

The issue of



The Buzz in the Biz.....

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ pseudonyms has been a thorn in the author's side for years. I asked myself, "What do we gain by that?" It made no sense to hold the author for ransom. That's not how I would expect to be treated. Isabel Swift, our VP of Editorial had been working on this issue, but was not then in a position to effect a change in that regard. When I came along I said, "Why don't we just change this, Isabel? We're in charge." We want authors to publish with us because they're happy here, not because they feel as if they're being held prisoners.

NINK: On behalf of our members, thank you, Donna.

DH: You're welcome.

NINK: What position do you

take on the issue of reversion of rights?

DH: Frankly, I'm not aware there's much of an issue with authors wanting rights back. But if an author has a specific issue, please feel free to raise it with us, and we'll see what we can work out. It's true that we have transformed ourselves from front list only to a company with an active and growing backlist program. We continue to work to maximize our author income for each title with theme-led as well as author-led programs as well as utilizing all our different distribution channels.

NINK: Legends about you abound. Some people say you read every book published by H/S. Is that true?

DH: I wish I had the time, but I do not. I wouldn't be able to do my job at all. I do read as many as I can, though, and always take books when I travel.

NINK: How much international travel do you do?

DH: Saturday I'm flying to Barcelona, then next week to Japan, which is our biggest market outside the US. We have twelve operating countries with some amazing people working for us. It's most important to get out and talk to them, to understand what their challenges are and how we plan to sell more books in each of our markets.

NINK: What do you read outside of romance?

DH: I read mysteries, crime thrillers, nonfiction, natural science, and a lot of women's fiction. Some of my favorite authors in those genres are P.D. James, Stephen J. Gould, Elizabeth George. I've just read an extraordinary book, *Crow Lake* by Mary Larson, a Canadian living in England. It's one of the finest Canadian novels I've ever read. Right this minute I'm reading Stella Cameron's *About Adam*. It's really good.

NINK: What is your long-term vision for Harlequin Enterprises?

DH: World domination of women's fiction. Everybody in the company—twelve hundred employees—will all tell you the same thing. We want to become the major player in women's fiction as well as romance.

NINK: With your track record plus your enthusiasm and energy, I've no doubt that you will succeed. Donna, thank you for an interview that is both frank and enlightening. Not only have you empowered us with your new author-friendly policies, but you have given us hope for the future. And in today's climate of fear and uncertainty, that is perhaps the best gift of all. NINK

For the Good of the Order....

Domestic Bliss

Nine members attending Malice Domestic or who live near Crystal City, Virginia: If you want to sup with other Nine members at the Crystal Gateway Marriott at 7 PM on May 1, e-mail Kathy Emerson (emerson@megalink.net) ASAP. Only catch—you have to take a few membership brochures away with you.

Insurance Switch

As of March 1, 2003, Customer Service Solutions is no longer serving as the administrator of the National Writers Union's health insurance plan. All of the administrative services that were previously handled by CSS will be handled by the new administrator: Aicare. After reviewing numerous proposals from potential administrators, the selection was made based on Aicare's qualifications as well as its ability to take on the administration of the NWU plan on such short notice. This transition will have no bearing on health insurance coverage through UniCare.

The new administrator, Aicare, is setting up a dedicated telephone line exclusively for NWU members and affiliates at (800) 725-9213. The number is to be in service at this time. Participating writers should have been notified individually of this administrative change, according to Jonathan Tasini, President of NWU. Bills for April and May will arrive later than usual with payment due almost immediately. Tasini notes this was out of NWU's control.



Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

A Spelling Test

How crazy is this? The two words I most often misspell are those that comprise two thirds of my name. “Cheryl” and “Anne.” Nuts, huh? I mean, come on, it’s not like I haven’t had this name all my life because I have. I could understand, and even forgive, my misspelling it if it were a foreign title (for example, anything Polish or Hawaiian) newly conferred upon me and I was therefore unfamiliar with the spelling. But that’s not the case. No, I’ve been Cheryl all my life. And Anne, too. So, what’s the prob?

Well, for one thing, there’s everyone else misspelling it so often that I begin to doubt myself and must periodically check my birth certificate to see if I’m the one who is wrong. I am not. It’s not a hard name, y’all. But one with many cutesy variations, I admit. Sheryl. Sheryle. Cherly. Sherrill. Ann. Anne. Ayn. I could go on, but I’ve made my point, which is: This is partly your fault.

Two more things. One, I’m left-handed. For that alone I should have special parking and head-of-the-line bathroom privileges. And two, there’s the mild dyslexia I have. Yeah, it’s fun to be me. It will probably come as no surprise to you that my favorite T-shirt reads: “Dyslexics of the world—Untie!” This has replaced my former favorite T-shirt, which stated in big, bold black letters: “**I’m a Virgin!**” Then, just below it, in tiny writing, it said: “This is a very old T-shirt.”

So, who cares if I misspell my own name? Well, the nice lady at the autographing, for one, who has just purchased my book and is standing in front of me waiting for me to sign it. And I screw it up. Picture that. I’m sitting there star-

ing at what is now her property—and I’ve just used blue ink to freakin’ misspell my own damned name in it for her. I’m staring at something like “Cheyl Ane Porter.” Inside, I’m dying. But I look up at her, smile, and then stare at the page again, trying hard to figure out how to insert the missing letters without being obvious. Or maybe I should scribble over it and try again. Or attempt to subtly tear the page out and sign it elsewhere.

By now, the poor woman (whom I do not blame one iota) has leaned in a bit and seen the problem. She looks at me and says something like: “You *are* really Cheryl Anne Porter, aren’t you?”

Me: “So I’m told.”

Her: “I’d think by now you’d know how to spell your own name.”

Me: “Yeah, I can see how you would.”

She stares at me, waiting.

Inspiration strikes! Me (cheerfully): “Yes, I have misspelled my own name. You’re right. But you know what? That will make this book more valuable when I die.”

Her (eyebrows raised now as she looks me over): “Really? So...how are you feeling? You don’t look so good.”

The author dedicates this column to any woman who has had to lie on her back to zip her jeans and then, when she sat up, couldn’t breathe.

As I reported last month, my hard drive went bad. During the process of replacing the hard drive, I did two additional things. I upgraded my operating system to Windows XP, rather than Windows ME—which was the original operating system. And I upgraded our home network to a Wireless system.

I've found Windows XP to be a more stable operating system. The one irritant is that Outlook Express, Version 6, will periodically disappear when I'm switching e-mail identities. I scoured the FAQ's area of Microsoft® and discovered this is a fault with Outlook Express (OE) 6. When switching an identity, Outlook goes away. <Control-ALT-Delete> does not show OE on the tasks menu and clicking Outlook Express results in nothing except an hour glass.

However, if you go to Processes, rather than Tasks, you will see "msimn.exe." Highlight and end that process. You will get a frightening message that says doing so might make your system unstable—but it doesn't. By ending the process, you can then re-open Outlook Express and continue on with your switched identity.

If you're not comfortable ending your processes, then you can always simply reboot to clear out Outlook. Hopefully they will correct this problem when it's time to update to Version 7.

The wireless system we are using is LINKSYS. My husband's PC is connected directly to cable. The rest of the family is connected through the wireless system which eliminates the need for extra phone cords. We've found it to be very reliable, fast, and efficient. We had some concerns about going wireless because we had a computer technician tell us that it wasn't yet a stable method for home networking, but we've not had any problems with it. Actually we've found it works better than the phone line system we were using.

I do my work using a laptop that is connected to a docking station. With the wireless system, I can move the laptop through the house and remain connected to the Internet. I found this aspect of wire to be a true advantage, because I no longer have to string phone cords from the recliner to the phone jack.

FOR MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE WRITERS

Katherine Sutcliffe, Natalie R. Collins, and Robert N. Holden have launched *Readers Room*, www.readersroom.com, for mystery, suspense, and romantic suspense. "While Mystery, Thriller and Suspense fiction has always been—and continues to be—among the most popular genre fiction published, these genres' presence on the Internet is, in the opinion of ReadersRoom.com, woefully lacking. There are small sites that cater to readers, and small sites that cater to writers but as far as we have been

able to ascertain there is no site that caters to both readers and writers—allowing the two essential components of any fiction to come together.

"It is the intention of ReadersRoom.com to provide both readers and writers of mystery, thriller, and suspense fiction a stable, professionally administered, permanent, and interactive home on the Internet."

For readers, the site will offer "talks," book reviews, newsletter, contests, and more. For writers, the site offers web hosting and design, publishing news, banner advertising, and other advantages. Contact information is provided at the site if you need more information.

THE BUSINESS

If you're looking for a bit of extra work to get you through until that royalty statement arrives, you might check out *The Write Jobs*, www.writerswrite.com/jobs. Freelance opportunities are listed.

RESEARCH

I am a huge fan of *Google*, www.Google.com, and recently discovered that I could make it a permanent part of my browser toolbar so that it's always there as I'm searching the Internet. To accomplish this, go to www.Google.com and then:

Select Services and Tools, which you'll find along the bottom of the page.

Select Google Toolbar, which you'll find near the bottom of the page beneath "Google Tools" and follow the instructions.

It's a handy little addition to your toolbar that allows you to not only search the Internet but to search for information within the site. I went to my own website, which contains several pages, typed in a character's name, and Google told me where I would find information on that character with my website.

Free Translation, www.freetranslation.com, allows you to type in up to 10,000 characters and receive a translation. Translations in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, and Norwegian are available. Translations from those languages back to English are also available.

Need weather information based on month and locale? Visit *Intellicast Almanac*, www.intellicast.com/Almanac.

Did you know people began eating pork and beans in 1475 and using Worcestershire Sauce in 1835? For more food tidbits, visit *The Food Timeline*, www.gti.net/mocolib1/kid/food.html.

In early 2000, I mentioned *Legal Fiction for Writers*, www.legal-fiction.com/home.htm. I revisited the site. It's still available. They do charge a fee, ranging from \$25 to \$2500, for answering questions.

The URL for *Pain Alleviation and Anesthesia 19th Century and Earlier* has changed to: www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/biomed/his/painexhibit/panell.htm.

A subscriber to NINCLINK was looking for information on online dictionaries so I went through the archives and found these two sites: *Martindale's Resource Desk*, www-sci.lib.uci.edu/HSG/Language.html (yes, that's a dash, not a period after www) and *World Wide Words*, www.quinion.com/words/wordlinks.htm. I'm including the information here because usually if one person needs it, so does someone else.

The Firehouse Museum, www.globalinfo.com/noncomm/firehouse/Firehouse.HTML, provides photos and information on the history of firefighters.

A history of photography from its beginnings to the 1920's can be found at www.rleggat.com/photohistory/index.html.

For a quick history of photography, visit *The History of Photography Timeline*, www.photo.net/history/timeline.

The Timeline of Costume History, <http://www.costumes.org/pages/timelinepages/timeline.htm>, provides images of customs from Ancient Egypt through 1980.

Did you know that in 766 BC when women were ex-

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Moderators:	If You Have Questions, E-Mail:
Brenda Hiatt-Barber	BrendaHB@aol.com
Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@attbi.com

cluded from the Olympics that they created their own competition called the Games of Hera? Find out more at *The History of Women in Sports Timeline*, www.northnet.org/stlawrenceaauw/timeline.htm.

JUST FOR FUN

Need a bit of an ego boost? Visit www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~geoffo/humour/flattery.html and type in your name. Trust me. Everything it tells you is absolutely true.

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:

Joan Avery, Framington Hills MI
Michelle Black, Overland Park KS
Beverly Brandt, Saint Petersburg FL

New Members:

Dinah Dinwiddie (*Julia London*), Austin TX
Katherine Haupt (*Kate Bridges*), Mississauga Ont. Canada
Lois Kleinsasser (*Cait London/Cait Logan*), Hollister MO
Michelle Nicole Place (*Nicole Byrd*), Franklin TN
Linda L. Sankpill (*Linda Conrad*), Key Largo FL

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

Bits'n'Pieces

A M A Z O N STRIPPED BOOK CONTROVERSY UPDATE...News from

a reliable source reports that the sale of stripped books through Amazon's used-book button has been stopped. It was limited to one incident by a third-party seller and Harlequin's legal department worked with Amazon to have that party removed from the site. To their knowledge, there have been no further incidences of stripped books being sold via an Amazon connection, but if further instances of stripped Harlequin / Silhouette books being sold through Amazon are discovered the info should be sent to HQN to be dealt with. I'd suggest the same would be true of other publishers, as it costs them money the same way it costs us—and bravo to Harlequin for taking care of this.

IN PASSING...For those who don't know, Chicago-based agent Jane Jordan Browne, who founded Multimedia Product Development in 1971, passed away February 27, 2003 after a brief illness. Her business partner, Danielle Egan-Miller, continues to manage the agency.

— *Compiled by Terey daly Ramin*

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

BY RONN KAISER

BLIND MEN AND ELEPHANTS PART II

Last month I promised you my “definitive” explanation as to why stories fail. No, I won’t cop out, you’ll find the piece below. But I must tell you that after I finished Part II, another Ninc “blind man,” **Chris Rimmer**, arrived on scene after deadline. Her observations are not only astute and incisive, but they complement and enrich what I tried to say. I offer the combination as the “definitive” explanation as to why stories fail. First, Chris:

“Ultimately, the success of a story is in the story’s tension—what Dwight Swain wrote: ‘Your reader reads fiction because it creates a pleasurable state of tension in him, line by line and page by page.’ I think the line-by-line and page-by-page part is where we, as storytellers, most often fail. The trick, I think, is in layering in necessary information without ever losing that ‘pleasurable state of tension,’ in getting exposition, description, and backstory *within* the forward momentum of the tale. And more than just how well the whole is woven together, great stories, no matter how large or small in scope, always have that never-let-you-go narrative drive, the constant sticking to the story, upping the stakes, deepening the conflict, so the reader never gets ‘off the hook’ until the end—where the tension is finally released in satisfaction.

“I think we as authors get bogged down in failure to invite discomfort, which means we constantly step back from upping the stakes, which means the conflict doesn’t deepen, which means we’re stuck with repetition of the beginning conflict, which means the story doesn’t ‘go’ anywhere, which means there’s no narrative drive, which means no ‘pleasurable state of tension’ in the reader—which means the reader can put it down and walk away and probably not come back.”

The key terms in Chris’s comment, I think, are “discomfort” and “tension.” What do they have to do with, say, Jesus,

James Bond, and Ally McBeal? Phrased differently, what do these characters have in common? The answer, of course, is their humanity. But what does it mean to be human?

I think Buddha had it right when he said that what unites us as a species is the fact that we all suffer and die. That is the ultimate common denominator, the thing that moves us most profoundly, because it goes to the heart of who we are individually and collectively.

We bond through a common culture, stories being an integral part of the sharing process. Stories are also a means by which we celebrate who we are as individuals and as a species. Stated simply, stories are about suffering because life is about suffering. In my view, the magic quality common to all good stories is a depiction of suffering such that we experience it as though it were our own. Stories fail when they do not give us this experience in a convincing and accessible manner, (which involves, as Chris Rimmer might say, “a pleasurable state of tension.”)

Before you go running from the room screaming over the apparent morbidity of my hypothesis, consider this—suffering has many shadings. It can be blatant or subtle; it can even have positive associations. When we are *busting* with joy or *dying* with anticipation or love *sick*, we suffer, albeit pleurably. The point is there is a tension which demands release. Suffering can arise from high drama or quiet moments. It can be brutal, gentle, ironic, even amusing. Suffering, you see, is not so much a state or condition as it is the currency of human experience.

Okay, so what does all this philosophy have to do with writing? Simply this: stories are about good and evil, bad things happening and good things happening. But at their core they are about suffering, the tension that shapes and defines the human condition. If the storyteller’s audience doesn’t *feel* the suffering depicted — i.e., the humanity of the characters — the story fails to engage us.

Perhaps my personal journey will help explain how I came to the conclusion that suffering is the “elephantness” of story, if you will, the magical, universal element essential to a successful tale.

When I wrote my first novel, my concept of story was this: fiction is a tale of pretend characters doing adventurous things that are (preferably) interesting. As regards structure, I had a rudimentary sense of beginning, middle, and end; a crude sense of drama; and little more. My first rejection letter read, “Your story is not compelling because it lacks conflict.”

I must say I didn’t have a clear understanding of what the phrase “lacks conflict” meant, and I struggled with the notion mightily, even through my first few published novels. For a while I managed to generate conflict in a crude hit-and-miss fashion. Eventually, though, I came to understand that the characters not only needed opposing interests, but that these interests were defined by who the characters were as well as what they did. I learned that a character’s fears, needs, and desires mattered greatly and that the purpose of the plot was to create events and provide a setting in which the integral conflict could play out. I managed to strike some emotional chords along the way, though it was often by accident.

The subsequent stages of my development as a storyteller involved a refinement of what I’d learned about conflict as well as an appreciation for the fact that the conflict should have depth, complexity, and layers. Conflict, I came to realize, was most powerful when its inner and outer aspects worked together harmoniously. The nature and the structure of the story, in other words, were defined in part by who the character was. It finally dawned on me what Robert McKee meant when he said character and plot are but aspects of the same thing.

Understanding the theory is one thing, applying it to a story that isn’t working is another. I came to realize that the notion of “conflict,” while useful, didn’t adequately describe the essential ingredient of story. More was needed than simple adversity, problems, and obstacles. I needed a better concept, one that connected the inner and outer.

I abandoned “conflict” in favor of “struggle,” which seemed more personal and suggestive of an inner dimension. A character who struggled was more likely to push the empathetic buttons of the reader.

This notion helped, yet I continued to read novels (including some of my own) where there seemed a fair amount of struggling going on, yet the story wasn't working—or wasn't working as well as it could. Why?

It was at this point that my wife's observations about the importance of a character *caring* about his problems struck me. How could a character endure adversity, struggle mightily, yet not care *sufficiently* about what was happening to him to spark an empathetic response in the reader? The answer, I realized, was that he was struggling, but not genuinely *suffering*. The emotion, the pain of being, was missing.

I began looking at all the good stories I could find and discovered in every case the character suffered, often greatly. Sometimes it was subtle, maybe only implicit, but what distinguished these successful stories from the failed ones was the element of suffering. To illustrate this, let's go back to Jesus, Bond, and Ally.

Martin Scorsese, in discussing Jesus's humanity in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, asked rhetorically how someone could successfully tell a story about someone who is God. How could the audience empathize with someone like that? The answer, Scorsese says, is that in his film Jesus did not realize his divinity until the end of the story. Until then he *suffered* (Scorsese's actual word) like anybody else. The film is about Jesus's humanity. He suffered as human beings do and we suffered with him. That was why the story worked.

Analyzing James Bond poses a bigger problem. If suffering's the key to a successful story, how does it come into play in the 007 films? Bond certainly faces adversity, he is sometimes bloodied and in pain, but he is a virtual super hero who succeeds against all odds. He is the antithesis of Everyman—a guy who manages to keep his tux perfectly pressed, sip his martinis calmly, and seduce beautiful women at will. Bond is practically infallible.

Where's the suffering?

A few weeks ago I saw *Golden Eye* again, and heard the following exchange. Natalya Simonova: "How can you act like this? How can you be so cold?" Bond: "It's what keeps me alive." Then it hit me. James Bond has sacrificed his humanity for a greater good, turning himself into a charming, neatly pressed, seductive android in order to save the world. Bond knows pleasure, but not joy. He can have anything he wants except love. He has sold

his soul not to the Devil, but to Queen and country. We admire the god-like creature he has become, but in our hearts we weep for him because we know he is lost and alone. It is a form of suffering that anybody can empathize with, and it makes the Bond stories work.

The fact that Ally McBeal suffered is no surprise. The character is both sad and poignant, but her suffering was always more than an affectation—it was what made the episodes work. David Kelly's technique was to create compelling, comedic encounters in which he embarrassed and humiliated his characters so that we not only laughed, but we saw their hearts.

The suffering in all comedy or light drama is the sort that makes us blush, squirm, cringe, or turn misty-eyed right along with the character. In its own way that can be very painful. But the important thing is that the character care deeply about her plight, so we can suffer and laugh along with her. If she isn't mortified, if we don't feel her anguish, we won't care.

If you want to understand the importance of suffering in comedy, you need only watch the thirty-second spots networks run to promote their sitcoms. Almost invariably we see an embarrassing moment, a blow to the character's dignity or pride. It's only thirty seconds, but still our emotions are joined. This is what it is to be human, to live, to laugh, to be connected by the tension that drives emotion.

I may have made it sound easy, but we all know it's not. As our fellow Ninc "blind men" have pointed out, a well-drawn, complex character shouldn't be predictable. She should engage the reader's emotions, have depth, and be well-motivated. The stakes must be high and the reader must be made to care. We must take our characters seriously. We must send them on an heroic journey so that in the end we can say that they have been validated or transformed. And how do we ensure the reader will be with us to the end? By sustaining a pleasurable state of tension that can't be ignored.

I think that being mindful of our characters' suffering *and their palpable need or desire to endure and triumph* is the surest way to engage the reader's humanity and hold their interest. If we understand our character's suffering and the concomitant struggle, the tale is more easily spun, her motivations are clearer, the plot more coherent and the story's meaning or purpose more easily identified and articulated. Quite simply we will have a deeper, more intuitive understanding of our story. And so, too,

will our reader, who, if we do our job well, will be unable to put the book down.

By way of farewell, let me thank everyone who's contributed to "Tricks of the Trade" during the past nearly year and a half I've been gathering your thoughts and ideas for publication. I've learned a tremendous amount in the process and I'm richer for all the considerable wisdom you, the members of Ninc, have shared.

I hope in some manner, in some way, the process of coaxing wisdom from the rank and file of the membership will continue. Ninc has been the difference in my career and I imagine for others, as well. Giving the gift of insight and knowledge to our colleagues in this crazy but wonderful business may in fact be our highest calling. Our millions of readers stand to benefit most because the power and joys of story rest in our hands. Thank you again and Godspeed.

Ronn Kaiser hangs up his columnist's hat with this issue. Next month, *NINK* launches Lawrence Watt-Evans's new column. Ronn has brought great contributions to Ninc via his columns, and we're grateful for his service. In months to come, new columns in the ever-evolving *NINK* will begin. Watch future issues for details.

Bits'n'Pieces

NEW AT SILHOUETTE... LUNA..."Luna Books delivers a compelling, female-focused fantasy with vivid characters, rich worlds, strong, sympathetic women and romantic subplots. ... 100-150,000 words." So states a portion of the guidelines for the new women's trade paper fantasy imprint from Harlequin / Silhouette. The line, headed by Executive Editor Mary Theresa Hussey is scheduled to launch in 2004 with one book per month. Authors who have sold to the imprint include Mercedes Lackey, Catherine Assaro, Sarah Zettel and Michele Hauf.

— TdR



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“Fool’s Gold”

So a friend of mine, a professional actress, is at lunch one day with several old school chums. None of them are actors, nor even remotely connected to the business. They know nothing whatsoever about the working life of an actor, but they’re nonetheless full of unsolicited advice. When my friend admits that she’s gone to a lot of auditions but hasn’t gotten a role in months, they come up with a brilliant plan: “I know! Why don’t you go work in *films* for a while? Once you’ve become successful there, wouldn’t it be easier to get stage jobs?”

Well, yes. It probably would. That’s true.

It’s also true that once you’ve become a successful film actor, it’s probably easier to run for political office, beat felony charges, get invited to the White House, meet supermodels and star athletes, get your picture on magazine covers, and get a huge advance for a book.

Wait a minute... Get a huge advance for a book?

Wow! Why didn’t I think of that? If I had just starred in a few films first, maybe I wouldn’t have to serve my tour of duty in the underpaid and overcrowded trenches of midlist fiction. Damn!

Where was this advice when I needed it?

Oh, wait. Now I remember. It was in the same sinking boat with advice like: “I know! Why don’t you sell a movie script and make a million dollars?” Or better yet: “Why don’t you write my brilliant idea and make a million dollars for us both?” And my personal favorite: “Why don’t you write my fascinating life story, and after you sell it, I’ll split the money with you?”

I call such advice “fool’s gold.” That’s advice which seems brilliant as long as you have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.

An acquaintance who noticed that I’m always having financial problems once wondered why I don’t just deliberately write a bestseller and thereby secure my financial freedom.

Okay, I’ll give you three guesses on this one:

(a) I’m too fine and noble to lower myself to writing a bestseller.

(b) I think it would be morally wrong to get a seven-figure advance before putting in two or three decades of hard work as a midlist novelist.

(c) I’ve yet to write a novel that any publisher wanted to buy for that kind of money. Nor have any of my books turned into word-of-mouth runaway bestsellers in astonishing defiance of my publishers’ expectations.

If you guessed (a) or (b), then I suggest you go star in some films for a while.

As my friend the actress noted after her luncheon with her eagerly helpful old school chums, she had been trying to get a film *audition* ever since leaving drama school. And unless you’re a celebrity (or providing extremely intimate services to the right person), you usually have to get a film audition before you can get a film role—let alone enough film roles that theatrical producers fall all over themselves to give you a job when you decide you want to perform on the stage.

Meanwhile—barring the shortcut of becoming a movie star first, of course—the way to get a seven-figure advance in our business is to write a novel that some publisher thinks hundreds of thousands of people will choose to buy (in hardcover) when it’s released. And in order to write a word-of-mouth runaway bestseller, you have to write a novel that hundreds of thousands of people decide to buy even though the publisher, not expecting this, didn’t promote the book or even give it a large enough initial print run.

Pop quiz: I have never written a novel which sold for a seven-figure advance or went into a tenth printing because:

(a) I’m too fine and noble to write down the surefire bestseller ideas which plague me day and night wherever I go.

(b) I feel it would be unfair to the rest of you.

(c) Life doesn’t love me that much yet.

If you guessed (a) or (b), then you should go call Tom Hanks and offer to co-star in his next movie.

I’m always baffled by well-meaning comments which translate as, “Gosh, I have a suggestion! Why don’t you just soar overnight to the pinnacle of your profession?” In the fifteen years that I’ve been a professional writer, I have never once told a disc jockey, stockbroker, or trapeze artist how to achieve overnight success in their vocations. I may ask a lot of dumb questions, but I’ve never handed them fool’s gold. I have always assumed that they,

full-time professionals in those fields, know far more about their careers than I do. Yet an astonishing number of people who know nothing about the publishing business nonetheless seem to assume that they know more about my profession than I do and therefore feel obliged to advise me about it.

I'm occasionally pinned into a corner by people who don't even *read* fiction (never mind reading *my* fiction), but who nonetheless insist on telling me what I should write if I want to sell books (sort of ignoring the fact that I *already* sell books). I was recently trapped by someone who kept trying to give me advice about my screenwriting, ignoring my protests that I don't write screenplays. And I could quit writing for a living if I had a dollar for every person who, while knowing nothing whatsoever about our business, has offered me business advice.

For example, I've been told quite emphatically, any number of times, that I shouldn't spend my own money to go to big national conventions like the World Science Fiction Convention, RWA National, or Novelists, Inc. No, I should "make" my publishers pay my way to such events, or else refuse to go. (Every time someone gives me this advice, I picture the incredulous guffaws in New York which would greet such a demand.) My typical response to such advice is that it is I, not my publishers, who benefits from my attendance at such events, because I'm a freelancer who goes there to make useful contacts; to network with others in my profession; to promote my name, my work, and my career; and to keep abreast of developments in my industry. This response, of course, usually gets brushed aside as an irrelevant comment made by someone who hasn't thought this through clearly or who is simply too timid to confront her publishers. (Right, that's me. Too timid to confront my publishers. Just ask around. "Resnick? Oh, yeah. Too timid to confront us." Uh-huh.)

However, as tiresome as this sort of thing may be, at least I know it's not happening because something about my face says to people, "Hey, I'm an idiot, and I desperately desire professional advice offered from a standpoint of total ignorance." Before you start making wisecracks about what my face says to *you*, I hasten to point out that almost every writer I know endures unsolicited advice from people who don't know what they're talking about, but who nonetheless offer it up because... What? The publishing business is child's play? The answer to every writer's career problems is inside a fortune cookie? Oprah did a show on it?

Or maybe because writing is one of those professions, like acting, that so many people have fantasized about or thought they could do successfully—someday, in their spare time—that writers (and actors) are just destined to keep bumping into these people for the rest of our lives. Or maybe it's because my mother was right—the person most likely to give you unsolicited advice on how to remain happily married is the person who's been divorced three times.

Anyhow, it's not just me. Several times a year, a friend of mine returns from family gatherings grinding her teeth over the emphatic and unrequested advice she has received about what to write and how to run her career. Another friend had a colleague at her day job who regularly inflicted unwanted guidance on her. This included telling her she must copyright every story before submitting it, or publishers would steal it. He also advised her never to use paperclips in her submissions because (wait for it!) publishers "keep them and make a good income from them." (Yes, I'm still trying to figure out that one.)

"You should try writing short stories first. They're easier!" was a piece of advice which regularly plagued Maggie Shayne when she was an aspiring novelist, along with: "You should try writing children's stories. They're easier!" Gosh, if only Maggie had listened to that advice... Oh, wait, if she had listened to that advice, then today she wouldn't be an award-winning romance writer with more than thirty published novels to her credit.

When sf/f writer Janni Lee Simner was first starting out, any number of people told her she'd never sell a story because "you don't know anybody in publishing, after all." When Ninc member Lillian Stewart Carl introduced herself at the counter of a bookstore, the bookseller told her she needed to get on *Oprah* first if she wanted to sell a book (sort of ignoring the fact that she'd *already* sold books). Because, presumably, getting on *Oprah* is your next best choice if you can't manage to become a movie star before writing a novel.

Bestselling fantasy novelist Raymond E. Feist was once a guest speaker at a writing class where he heard the instructor give them one of my favorite pieces of fool's gold: "Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or style. If the editor really likes the story, he'll find someone to fix all that stuff for you." Yes, and if the NBA really likes your height, they'll find someone else to do all the running, dribbling, and passing for you.

Another writer recently told me that someone advised him to "start at the top" by submitting strictly to work-for-hire publishers. That should be his "first choice" if he wanted to publish "real novels." (Damn! Why did no one tell me these things before it was too late? I've wasted *years* of my career writing original fiction over which I have artistic control and to which I own the copyright.)

The one piece of fool's gold which full-time writer Steve Perry best remembers was some long-ago creative writing teacher who assured him that he could never make a living as a writer or quit his day job. (So Steve and all the full-time writers I know are evidently figments of my imagination. Come to think of it, that must mean *I'm* a figment of my imagination. Perhaps this could come in handy with the IRS. [Curmudgeon makes note to self to consult accountant about this loophole.]

Despite all that, however, I do have to admit to getting real gold from at least one non-writer. An aunt of mine has told me several times that if I ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶



THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

▶▶ want to be a bestseller, I need to put more sex in my books. That would be my aunt the nun, Sister Rita. (Yes, really.) And, in fact, I think Aunt Rita may be right about this, since I've gotten so many "add more sex" editorial notes over the years.

Speaking of which, the most insidious fool's gold surely comes from people actually *in* the business, since it bears a illusory sheen of credibility. Raymond Feist recalls once hearing an editor tell an audience that he preferred first-time writers to approach him directly, *not* through an agent. Feist says, "Under my breath I muttered, 'And armies prefer it when the other guys surrender without firing a shot.'" The shiniest fool's gold sf/f writer George R.R. Martin ever got was also from an editor, one who'd been fired and replaced by someone new. The dismissed editor told Martin what to say to "break the ice" with the new editor over lunch. Martin followed the advice. The result: "It was the worst lunch I ever had in this business." Not only did Martin never sell a word to the new editor, but when the check came, the editor figured out Martin's share.

And don't *even* get me started on the fool's gold that writers get from agents. How about the time, for example, a newly hired agent told me not to sign another multi-book contract with my then-publisher because he expected to sell my new proposal elsewhere for six figures, so I needed to keep my schedule clear. After the new proposal got five rejections, the agent not only gave

up on it, he dumped me because I'd never amount to anything. Meanwhile, I had just refused a multi-book contract with my regular publisher, signed for only one novel there, and lived to regret that decision. Ah, the lessons we learn through bitter experience. (See? You got me started.)

Okay, final exam: When receiving advice, how do you know for sure that it's real gold instead of fool's gold?

- (a) Because your next door neighbor gives it to you.
- (b) Because an editor or agent gives it to you.
- (c) Because a deadline-crazed columnist gives it to you.

If you answered (a), (b), or (c), it's time for you to go nudge Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts out of the limelight.

NINK

Bits'n'Pieces

AH YES, OPRAH'S BACK...We knew she couldn't stay away. So the Oprah Bookclub returns. No, don't get excited about possible mega bestsellerdom hitting you out of the blue. This time she's featuring dead white guys in her reads. Yeah, that does mean such classic authors as Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Hemingway. Segments will likely run three to five times a year. (Hey, I knew she missed us.)

— TdR

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