



# NINK

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## *Ken in a Barbie World*

**BY KEN CASPER**

The question I'm most frequently asked is how I, a man, got started writing romance. Implied is "why?"

Actually, my first attempt at literary immortality was a mystery, a spin-off inspired by Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe. I let my wife read some of it—written in longhand, since I hadn't yet bought my Commodore 128. Mary waded through perhaps a dozen pages and suggested I join the local writers club—her subtle way of saying I needed help, a lot of it.

The writers club turned out to be more of a social group than the workshop I was hoping for. A few of its members had written an occasional article, mostly unpaid, for the local newspaper, professional journals, or regional small press magazines—the kind that blipped in the far corner of the radar screen, then just as quickly disappeared. I lucked out, though. Three other new members joined shortly after I did, three women writing romance, and they asked me to join their critique group, probably because I was the

only one actively working on book-length fiction.

There are varying opinions about the value of critique groups. In my case and at that point in my writing career, ours proved to be exactly what I needed. I'd never taken a creative writing course, didn't have a clue about what POV meant (in the Air Force it stands for privately owned vehicle), much less practical matters like manuscript formatting (mine was single-spaced), query letters, proposals and—dare I even dream—contracts. One of the ladies, Roz Fox, had already published two Harlequin Romances as Roz Denny, and she became our resident authority on the mysterious world of commercial fiction.

I plodded along, finished two complete mysteries with my Stout-inspired main characters, submitted queries and proposals, and received a passel of rejection letters wishing me good luck in placing my efforts "elsewhere." We all know where that is.

Naturally I was disappointed, but I refused to be discouraged. After all, I was new at this game. I just

needed to learn a little more before I hit the *New York Times* bestseller list.

I was in the midst of brainstorming a third unsalable mystery when my critique partners suggested I try my hand at romance.

"What? Me write romance?"

But the proposition started me thinking. The primary reason we read fiction is for its vicarious emotional impact. In mysteries, for example, we can be cutthroats and thieves and never get our hands dirty, be brilliant sleuths without suffering mortal consequences if we get it wrong. In fact, the best, most satisfying mysteries are the ones we don't solve. "I never guessed," we say with a kind of ironic pride in the mastery of the author.

I confess to having experienced a tad of frustration at times with my critique partners. I'd read their pieces and had no problems with the actions and reactions of the characters; and I was learning a lot about POV. But when they read one of my scenes, they'd ask, "What is he or she feeling?" My standard response was "Isn't it obvious?"

*Continued on page 4* ▶ ▶ ▶

**INSIDE:** *President's Voice...2, Book Review: McKee's Story...6, Buzz in the Biz: Agenting A to Z...7, Sticky Notes: Innie or Outie...9, Bits 'n' Pieces...9, 11, 14, Ask Annette: Unable to Commit...10, The Comely Curmudgeon: Those Who Are About to Reboot...12, Rayguns, Elves: HACKED!...15*

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# THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

June? *Already?* Now, just how in the heck did *that* happen??? And where did March, April, and May go? How could they just gallop off my calendar and into the past without my noticing? Why don't people *tell* me these things?

June, huh? You're absolutely sure? Absolutely, positively, cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die *sure* that we're almost halfway through the year? I mean, really, really, really *sure*?

Well, imagine that!

June. Lots of good things about June: Summer vacation. June weddings. Somebody's birthday, though I can't remember whose. Ice cream trucks and church summer school. Camping out in the back yard and swim lessons at the park. Mud puddles and strawberries and riding your bike across endless lazy afternoons that haven't yet turned too hot to bear.

June. The month that Harry Potter Number 5 arrives.

I'm not the only one who's been waiting: The six point eight million copy first printing pretty much proves that. That's six point eight million copies *hardback*, mind you, just for North America. Who knows how many have been printed in the other English-speaking countries of the world. And then there are the translations and audio versions, not to mention the knock-offs like the Chinese version that roused such a stir a few months back. (Or maybe that was a whole lot of months back: As you may have guessed, I don't have too good a grip on this passage-of-time thing.)

I've had my copy on the reserve list at my local bookstore for...well, months, anyway. My sister, too. I'm even planning to show up at the midnight party when the book finally goes on sale. It's too much fun not to.

I was working as a bookseller when book Number 4 came out, and it was a hoot. *Everybody* came: Lots and lots of parents with kids, of course. Punks in nose rings mingled with grey-haired grandparents and grandbabies and uptight folks who didn't approve of nose rings or even, sometimes, babies. Schools of teenagers swam through the crowd, giggling and gossiping and trying to pretend they weren't just a little embarrassed by their own eagerness to read a book that was written for little kids, which they decidedly were not. There were twenty-something professionals, middle-aged laborers, professors and nerds and geeks and freaks and the perfectly normal folks who lived just up the street from me, and every single one of them was in the store that night because they really really *really* wanted to find out What Happens Next.

I've probably got it wrong, but I think the first printing that time around was a mere two million something. I'm trying to imagine the pent-up demand that would produce a print run three times that size.

Imagination, of course, is what it's all about.

As writers, we live in the world of imagination. We know it's readers' hunger for stories that engage their imaginations that underlies the entire fiction publishing industry. But I don't think even we fully grasp imagination's power to shape lives and change the world. The writers of children's fiction probably come closest, though, and it is they who have the greatest influence on the future. They certainly had an influence on me.

Sometimes, I wonder if I'm really *me*, or if I'm the creation of what I read as a child, an amalgam formed by the alchemical power of chance encounters

between the written word and my own imagination. What would I have done with my life—who would I *be*—if I had read something other than what I did? Or (horrible possibility!) never read at all?

If I found myself in the written word, on the printed page, where, then, did I begin?

Was it in the glossy pages of the old *National Geographic* stacked in the corners of my grandmother's glassed-in porch? I loved those magazines even before I could read, loved looking at those old tinted photos of Bedouin crossing the desert, or lion hunters in Africa, or mountain climbers in Tibet, or archeologists exploring Mesa Verde, which was, amazingly, practically in my own backyard. Behind the yellow and white covers of each issue lay tantalizing proof that the world was far bigger than the little prairie farm town where I was born, and infinitely more varied.

More than that, I was fascinated by the fact that many of those old magazines were published before my mother was born, before, even, my grandmother had met my grandfather, let alone married him and produced the baby who would eventually produce me (a staggering wonder, in and of itself). Not only was the world bigger than the world I knew, but it was older, too. A whole lot older.

**L**ike a tank filling a balloon in one great whoosh of helium, imagination, fueled by information, had expanded my world to dazzling dimensions. And that was just the beginning.

Surely a part of me was born in the pages of the first sf novel I ever read, which I discovered in my third-grade class's miniscule lending library. A tale of two kids who set off in a space ship to search for their missing father, only to discover that the asteroid where he was last seen is really an abandoned alien space ship, the book grabbed my imagination and refused to let go. Because of it, my world changed yet again. Now, there was not only a planet and a past to explore, there was all of space, as well.

And then I met Jo March, the closest thing to a kindred spirit that most shy, book-loving little girls are ever likely to find. Jo had more spunk and talent than I did, but everyone loved her even if she was clumsy and plain and prone to getting into trouble, which meant that I, who was also clumsy and plain and prone to getting into trouble, might be loveable, too. It certainly didn't hurt that she loved books and "scribbling" just as much as I did.

I met Nancy Drew, of course, and Tom Swift. (I loved Tom Swift—he had more freedom and better adventures than Nancy ever did, and *he* went into space!). Both Nancy and Tom were blessed with wondrously rational parents who didn't mind if they drove fast cars or got shot at or went blasting into space on their own. I wasn't quite so lucky in the parent department, which put a decided crimp in my after-school recreational activities. But even if the cars and guns and spaceships were out, Tom's and Nancy's exploits proved that I could still *do* things—interesting, *exciting* things—if only I were brave and bold enough to try.

All these years later, I still don't drive fast cars or dodge bullets or regularly blast into space, though I sometimes wish I were the kind of person who did. I have, however, traveled to some of those magical places I first discovered in the pages of my grandmother's old *National Geographic*, and found the courage to do so because Nancy and Tom and their ilk had proved that such things were possible, no matter what the grownups might say. I've crawled into the great pyramid of Cheops, canoed on the Orinoco, gone diving in the Red Sea, and seen the great tortoises of the Galapagos. (I am, however, unlikely ever to go mountain climbing in Tibet because I get nervous standing on a footstool.) I've spent endless happy hours in museums and archeological ruins, learning about the past. I've even worked on an archeological dig, just for the fun of it. The classes I took in college, the work I've done as an adult, the books I've written and chosen to read—all have their roots in those stories and pictures I met so long ago, and loved.

Who would I have been if words and images and imagination hadn't meshed as they did? Other than a shared love of books (which is an enormous gift in itself) there's little in my family's background to suggest I'd have made the choices I have, or done the things I've done, if it hadn't been for those serendipitous childhood connections. Still, there must have been something in me to begin with, just waiting for the right spark to ignite it, or why would one story set me alight while another did not?

I don't have an answer, and don't know anyone who does. Of one thing I'm certain, however: imagination is as essential to the human spirit as food and water are essential to the body. If we stifle the things that nourish it, something inside us inevitably withers and dies.

Imagination doesn't just shape the grand visions of one's self, however. It colors the little details, too. There's a mongoose standing on the concrete slab outside my office right now, warily peering through the screen door. We have several mongoose around here, and I love to watch them slipping across the lawn, quick brown shadows with pointy little noses poked out in front and long, bushy tails held out straight behind, always wary of the open spaces and always in a hurry to get somewhere else.

I remember the first time I saw a mongoose, how surprised I was that they were so small and thin and shy. I'd expected something bigger. Something more...aggressively inquisitive, I guess is the best way to put it.

It took me awhile, but I finally figured out that my confusion could be blamed on Rudyard Kipling. Or, rather, on the long ago collaboration between my imagination and Kipling's vivid prose. If the Discovery Channel had been around back then, I'd probably have had a more accurate conception of what a mongoose was, but I seriously doubt I would have found it anywhere near as memorable as Kipling's Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, who exists only through the imagination of his creator, and in mine, because I once found him hiding in the pages of a book.

— **Anne Holmberg**

# Ken in a Barbie World

Continued from page 1



Their inevitable reply was a resounding “No, otherwise we wouldn’t be asking.”

Yep, definitely frustrating, especially when I couldn’t formulate a suitable answer.

The truth is, I wasn’t much interested in what my characters were feeling or even thinking—which may explain those suggestions that I place my manuscripts elsewhere. What I wanted to know was what these people were *doing*.

You see, that was a man’s response. And it was inadequate.

So what better place to learn to plumb the depths of human passions, I reasoned, than in a romance, which is emotionalism at its most poignant and intimate? If I could write a romance, I reckoned, I could write just about anything. I still believe that.

My first attempt, targeted for Harlequin, was swiftly rejected. In fact, it was rejected twice. Undaunted, I started the next one and entered the opening chapter in the romance category at the Southwest Writers Workshop in Albuquerque. The final judge just happened to be Roz’s editor, Paula Eykelhof, who had recently taken over as senior editor of Harlequin Superromance. It was a blind contest, of course—no names. I received honorable mention. Paula and I met at the conference and discussed my submission. She gave me some suggestions on how I could improve it and offered to look at a revision—an offer I couldn’t refuse. That manuscript in one form or another bounced between Paula Eykelhof and me for the next two and a half years. I’m a slow learner, but I’m also persistent. And, thank heaven,

so is Paula.

Without fully understanding what I was doing (duh...), I’d entered another world, a realm that was far more mysterious than any Nero Wolfe caper or P. D. James intrigue.

Women. They’ve been an integral part of my life. My mother, sister, teachers in school. My wife, daughter, mother-in-law! But did I know how a woman thought, and far more importantly, how she felt?

The challenge for a man writing romance, I soon realized, is a microcosm of the divide between the sexes.

Now I had to learn women’s intuitive responses. What do they expect? Action, sure. Having the good guy trounce the bad guy thrilled my heroine no end, but the action that connected with her—and made the good guy her hero—was when he took her in his arms afterward and told her she was safe.

A man tends to focus on the punch; a woman on the hug that follows.

I’ve read somewhere about a culture in which men are buried facing east, toward the sunrise, because they look forward to the work of the new day and the things they can accomplish. Women are buried facing west, because sunset heralds the gathering of the clan and the warmth of being surrounded by family.

The question for the romantic is: are they belly-to-belly and seeing their goals and aspirations through each other, or are they back-to-back as they gaze at their respective horizons? A good romance starts out with them in the latter position. Happily-ever-after can only be achieved when they learn to change attitudes.

Needless to say, being the typical insensitive male, I encountered formidable challenges in penning my first romance.

Take, for instance, the (dreaded) love scene. The editor who read my initial attempt at this intensely intimate act described it as “awful.” That was her word for it. “Awful!” I was mortified. I’d failed as a lover. Even Viagra couldn’t redeem me. Mind you, my characters weren’t exactly laying, er...lying around doing nothing. The problem was that I was focusing on their physical actions, not on what those moves were making them feel.

“Well, gee,” I said with a brilliant blush to my critique partners, “isn’t it obvious?”

This time their answer was “Yes, but...but we want to experience what they’re feeling, too.” Whoa!

So how do I, a man, write a romance?

Being naturally action-oriented, my first drafts are heavy on action and dialogue. I envision an external conflict between two people of the opposite sex and a series of events that will logically lead them to a mutually satisfactory solution. In portraying these incidents, I come to discover my characters’ inner workings, their strengths and vulnerabilities. Essentially, I ask myself what kind of person would do or say such things (plot-driven), rather than what would such a person do or say (character-driven). Then I go back, expand, revise, add the introspection and emotion. In the end, the two major components, plot and character, must be inextricably interwoven to make a good story.

Women romance writers, I suspect, are more comfortable with the let’s-see-where-these-people-

lead-us approach, because for them it's the journey that counts, any by-road will do. Like Marshall McLuhan, the medium (sexual tension) is the message. Getting to the goal—happily ever after—is more than half the fun.

To “effect” those female emotions is extremely difficult for me—and probably in varying degrees for most male writers. I mean, guys don't react the way women do. (I'm sure this comes as a great “ah-ha!” moment for all of you.) We fancy ourselves to be “rational” animals. Oh, we acknowledge emotions, but we strive to get past them, maybe because the ones we express most easily are the negative ones—anger and its evil stepson violence. Real men—you know, the strong silent types—are supposed to be masters of their passions. We regard emotions, especially the feely-touchy variety, as essentially untrustworthy and unproductive. They make us vulnerable and weak. Reverting to prototype, if the hunter were to dwell on the beauty of the deer, he'd never kill it, and his family would starve.

Romances, on the other hand, focus on a woman's “emotional” fulfillment.

A writer can get away with showing a male character's emotional state in gross terms—angry, sad, happy—without much elaboration, and the reader will generally accept that. But a good writer cannot portray a female character in the same way, especially for a female audience. There must be more emotional detail, more introspection, more angst. Thus, women writers are *usually* successful in their male characterizations in romances, while male writers have a distinct disadvantage in trying to characterize women.

I learned something else, too. I can't write words that make you feel. I can only use words in such a way that they allow you to read into them, thus generating a feeling that makes a difference to you. Tricky?

Absolutely. How do I do it? I don't know. Sorry. I bet you thought I was going to divulge *The Secret*.

I believe, though, that it's probably done more by omission than commission. By the things I don't say but only hint at, than by the things I do say, and therefore aren't subject to debate or ambiguity. Remember that “awful” love scene? The editor gave me good advice. “Just close the bedroom door,” she said. “The reader will figure out what's going on.”

Imagination. It's a wonderful thing.

Then comes the last question: When am I going to write a real book?

Groan.

I am writing real books, unless you consider half the reading public unworthy as an audience. I'm writing real books because I'm plumbing the depths of basic emotions, which are the true hallmarks of a good story.

Are my romances different from those written by women? The question presumes all women write the same, which is obviously not true. Still, I've asked readers who didn't know I was a man before reading my books if they found them any different from those written by women. They've said no. I take that as a huge compliment.

A friend of mine, a man, read the manuscript of my third book, *The Texan*. His reaction was “You sold this as a romance?” It's a murder mystery. It's also one of my best sellers. My last Superromance, *First Love, Second Chance*, is a legal thriller. Would these two books have general appeal to male readers if the covers were different? An interesting question.

A final note: I've long believed that a valuable college course for men would be “Women 101.” A bit disingenuous, of course. Men will never understand women, but this course would strive to give them a modicum of insight into what to expect and maybe how to conduct

themselves. The textbooks would be exclusively romances and “women's fiction.” What might men learn?

A maze of contradictions.

Let's take “show, don't tell.” It's the number one concept we learn in writing and something that's drilled into us when we're growing up as a principle of honest living—that it's what we do that really matters. Men are strong believers in showing *rather than* telling.

Women, on the other hand, believe in “show *and* tell.”

Case in point: a man buys his wife a diamond necklace. She adores it and proudly shows it to all her friends. Later, however, she complains that he doesn't love her anymore.

“I bought you an expensive necklace,” he counters in complete bewilderment. “What more do you want?”

She wants him to tell her he loves her.

On the other hand, these same two people can be starving in an unheated garret in the middle of winter, but if he says he loves her, well, somehow it's okay. All right, so I'm exaggerating, but you get the idea.

Another contradiction. Men are largely sight-oriented, thus pornography is primarily a male fetish. Yet women are much more visually aware. Example: after ten minutes in a room full of people, the men will be absolutely sure everyone has clothes on, but they'll suffer brain strain if they have to tell you what any one of them is wearing. Ask the women, and they're likely to give you a comprehensive rundown of everyone's attire, male and female, to include the different hues of blue Nancy and Sally were wearing.

Those are superficial differences between the sexes, but what's a man to do when he discovers from reading chicklit that some women have rape fantasies?

Run, brother, run. **NINK**

# ***Robert McKee's Story: What Screenwriting Teaches Novelists***

**REVIEWED BY PHOEBE CONN**

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to attend Robert McKee's *Story* seminar at UCLA. For two days McKee paced the stage of an immense lecture hall as he eloquently described the essential principles of story design. On the third day, he provided a six-hour scene by scene analysis of *Casablanca* to illustrate why the film is an enduring classic.

During the seminar, I filled an entire notebook with notes which I later typed and referred to frequently. I also developed an outline based on his principles to aid me in plotting my books. When McKee made his popular seminar available in book form in 1997, as *Story: Substance, Structure,*

*Story Design,* and *The Writer at Work*. He offers suggested readings and an extensive list of noteworthy films.

His chapter on Structure and Genre describes 25 separate genres and each provides a writer with the challenge to not simply meet the audience's expectations, but to do so in fresh and unexpected ways. In Structure and Character, he offers Aristotle's view that story was primary and character secondary, then dismisses the argument by insisting that structure is character; character is structure.

He provides excellent points to consider in crafting characters which aren't simply a collection of observable traits. That's merely characterization. He believes true character is revealed in the choices human beings make under

***"...story is about mastering the art, not second guessing the marketplace."***

*Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, from Regan Books, a division of Harper Collins, I was eager to buy it.

Robert McKee earned a Ph.D. in Cinema Arts and was a Fulbright scholar. His love of theater inspired him to study acting and playwriting, but he is best known as an inspired teacher. In *Story*, he is able to provide the same excellent insights he offers in his seminars but in greater depth and detail.

Unlike Anne Lamott, who weaves her own life through her advice on writing in *Bird by Bird*, Robert McKee remains focused on his topic. He stresses that story is about principles, not rules, and then illustrates those principles in an informative and entertaining manner. He believes literary talent isn't enough, for what the world demands is not simply lovely images and subtle dialog, but story.

He charges the writer to devote 75 percent of her labor in designing story. We all know the questions: Who are these characters? What do they want? Why do they want it? How will they go about getting it? What will stop them? What are the consequences? In McKee's view, our overwhelming creative task is in finding answers to these grand questions and shaping them into story.

He charges us to craft stories which test our own maturity and insights with the admonition that a good story is something worth telling that the world wants to hear. One of my favorite bits of advice from his book is that story is about mastering the art, not second guessing the marketplace.

The book is divided into four sections: The Writer and the Art of Story, The Elements of Story, The Principles of

pressure. The function of structure is to create progressively building dilemmas which will force the characters to make increasingly difficult choices which will in turn reveal their true natures. The function of character is to bring the qualities necessary to act out those choices. In his view, all stories are character driven because event design and character design mirror each other.

As a novelist, you may wonder why you should consult a book written for screenwriters, but regardless of the medium you select, every involving tale illustrates the same principles of story. There is also the benefit of McKee's use of examples from films which are readily available on video or DVD, rather than an exhaustive book list which might require months or even years to study.

In his final chapter, Fade Out, McKee states some writers fear that an awareness of how they write will harm their spontaneity, but he believes those who rely on instinct rather than a careful study of their craft seldom create significant work. He advises us to study thoughtfully but write boldly and above all, to tell the truth.

Clearly Robert McKee is a man who loves a good story, and he has written a book filled with insightful observations. I highly recommend *Story* as an invaluable resource for any novelist's bookshelf.

*A New York Times bestselling author, Phoebe has won numerous awards from Romantic Times and Affaire de Coeur for her exacting research, wildly adventurous plots, and charming characters. Her 30th romance, Wild Desire, is a December 2003 release from Dorchester.*



## **A to Z: Agenting à la Zuckerman**

The author/agent relationship is among the most important ones in a writer's life. I am blessed to have Al Zuckerman, the King of Agents (my term, not his), who graciously agreed to let me plunder his brain for nuggets of wisdom which I happily pass on to you.

Before founding Writers House in 1974, Al taught playwriting at the Yale School of Drama. He is a former writer for three television series—*The Edge of Night*, *Somerset*, and *Love of Life*. Winner of the 1964 Stanley Award for best play by a new playwright, he is also the author of two novels published by Doubleday and Dell. A superb book doctor as well as agent, Al has guided more than two dozen novels to blockbuster status. In addition, he wrote the definitive *how-to* book for writers.

**NINK: Al, your book *Writing the Blockbuster Novel* has become the writer's Bible. The book was first published in 1994. If you were writing it today, would you add or change anything?**

AZ: One of the things I said in the book was that there is more of an appetite for contemporary subjects than for historical ones. But if you look at the success of *The Da Vinci Code*, there now seems to be an appetite for a contemporary story that brings in interesting historical materials. That seems to be something of a new direction. What that book is doing is playing on a familiar name. Use Stalin or Picasso or some name with monumental resonance, and the reader is instantly engaged.

**NINK: How would you describe the perfect author/agent relationship?**

AZ: One of mutual trust and mutual respect.... An author has to feel he or she is valued, admired, and if possible liked on a personal level by the agent. The agent also needs to feel valued and appreciated for his or her work.

The crucial thing is that expectations of the author and the agent have to be the same. If there is unbalance, the agent has two choices: lie and say *yes, your work is worth twenty million* or tell the hard truth that the market is only paying twenty cents and we're not likely to get more.

In the end, unbalanced relationships won't work. An unhappy author blames the agent for not getting what he wants. Sometimes the agent is at fault, and can be a bit lackadaisical. But more often than not, the author's previous book just didn't sell.

**NINK: What is the truth about why certain books don't sell?**

AZ: Sometimes the book is good, but neither the agent nor the publisher got behind it. Often, though, the book is not as good as the author thinks. Not too many authors want to recognize that.

**NINK: That's true. It's much easier to assign blame.**

AZ: Of course, it's true. If somebody comes to me and tells me they think their book is worth two million and I think it's worth only one, I won't take it on, because I don't want to deal with the kind of unhappiness that is sure to come.

**NINK: Telling a hard truth but still leaving the writer's self-esteem intact requires great finesse. Al, you have a knack for making suggestions in a way that empowers me and leaves me feeling good about myself as a writer. In fact, I've found your entire staff to be gracious. Is the positive environment a result of your vision or did it merely happen?**

AZ: Most of the agents here either began as my assistants or have been with me for more than 20 years and tend to work the way I do. All my agents are sweet people, and all are very successful. We recently had Nora Roberts hitting the bestseller list at number one and Laurel Hamilton at number two.

**NINK: What was your vision when you founded Writers House?**

AZ: It's an old-fashioned house—gracious, spacious, and with a comfortable feeling. People like coming here. We are devoted to helping authors. We love books and writing, and we are excited about the authors who are our clients.

We offer a wide variety of services, including selling subsidiary rights for 15 small publishers and selling foreign language books to American houses. We are a nerve center for the buying and selling of rights to books.

**NINK: Do you also have a film rights department?**

AZ: No. We had one once, but now we sell film rights mostly as co-brokers with LA

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

# The Buzz in the Biz.....

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ agents who are more intimate with Hollywood than we in New York can be.

We do have three people doing foreign, audio, and first serial rights. We have agents who specialize in children's books, cookbooks, science fiction/fantasy, and just about every genre. Although we have niches carved out, everybody does a bit of everything.

***NINK: I've heard that Writers House is moving away from romance. Is that true?***

AZ: It's true to the extent that when Karen Solem left, most of our category romance writers went with her. We do some category but not a huge amount. We try to develop our category writers into writing bigger books.

***NINK: The last few years have seen a great upheaval in publishing, with mergers and ventures into e-publishing. Change often creates fear, and many writers fear the market is shrinking. They fear that editors will not be willing to take a chance on anything except the "tried and true." What is your assessment of today's market?***

AZ: Books are competing with television, movies, Internet sites, outdoor barbecues, football games... In our media-saturated world it's not so easy to find a quiet spot to sit and read a good book or to have an hour when we won't be bothered.

Devoted readers will still buy, but most of the population doesn't buy unless someone says, *you've got to read this book*. There's a difference between writing a good book and writing a marvelous book. It's a tough thing to do.

Publishers are looking for blockbusters, not merely the competent, well-written books. They want authors

who are, or will become, stars.

When I started this business in the early '70s, Ken Follett would be on the bestseller list for 36 weeks and sell 100,000 hardcover copies. Now he can sell 400,000 and be on for only eight weeks. Sales of popular writers have gone way up.

Nowadays we have many more bookstores, but there is more of a premium on brand name authors.

***NINK: What is the impact of chain bookstores on the market?***

AZ: People in chain stores don't usually recommend or handsell books. The demise of the independent bookstore makes it harder for new writers to get started. Before this happened, a publisher's rep could tell the manager, "This is a great book," and the manager would read it, then recommend it to customers.

Here's a tip: Go to the bookstore, buy a copy of your book, autograph it, and give it to the manager or clerk in the hope that he or she will love it and promote it.

***NINK: Thanks for that tip, Al. Sometimes the author thinks his book will never make it to the bookstores because the manuscript is being held hostage somewhere in the publishing house. What is a reasonable amount of time for editors to consider a manuscript?***

AZ: I set deadlines: three to four weeks. That doesn't mean I always get a response in that length of time, but I try for it. A hot book will get a response in three days.

***NINK: After you submit a manuscript, what is your follow-up procedure?***

AZ: As I approach the deadline, I call around if I haven't already heard back to remind editors that time is running out. When I do get an expres-

sion of interest or an offer from a publisher, I'll call the others and say, *if you want it, you'd better move fast*.

Publishers are often dilatory and totally forgetful about getting back on books they're not hot for.

***NINK: Let's talk about money. How do advances compare to those of ten years ago?***

AZ: I don't think advances are shrinking for the front-table books, but they are for category.

For an unknown author with an exciting book, the sky is still the limit. Once an author has published, though, his or her sales figures are easily accessible to everyone in the business. That affects advances, even if the author has now written a much bigger, much better book.

But an author doesn't always become a prisoner of his sales history. Say an author's last book sold only 4,000 copies, but his latest book has been sold to the movies, and publishers are spending big money for promotion....then the bookstores will put in substantial advance orders and display the book prominently.

***NINK: How do we all get rich, Al?***

AZ: We do not all get rich. Forget about it.

(At this point I had to stop the interview because Al and I were laughing so hard.)

***NINK: Okay, seriously, now... talk about writing for money.***

AZ: I don't think anybody should become an author with the goal of getting rich. It's too heartbreaking.

Most authors do not get rich. An author is doing well...extremely well...if he or she can make a living writing.



**NINK:** (See what I mean about how good AI makes a writer feel! I tried to crawl through the telephone to hug him, but my hips got stuck. Too many late-night deadlines that require chocolate candy.)

AI, thank you for an extremely informative and forthright interview.

## Bits'n'Pieces

**B&N GOES USED...** Yep, that's right, though consumers *will* need to use a separate search interface rather than seeing used offerings on the same pages as new books. The new feature is called Book Quest, and B&N is offering access to "30 million listings from a network of independent third-party dealers." Although a used-book search has been available, it was slow and not particularly useful, and the announcement of this new feature was made *very* quietly. Hmmmm. Interesting. Perhaps they learned something about writers from the Amazon thing...

**Compiled by Terey daly Ramin**



## Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

### Are You an Innie or an Outie?

Pictured navels, didn't you? And then you thought you'd hang around to see how I worked that into something of interest in a writer's life. Like you don't contemplate yours and call it thinking. Yes, you do. We can see you. But ha-ha, Smarty Pants, this column isn't about innie or outie navels. However, here's where I stand philosophically on the subject: Each of us (mammals and a certain variety of oranges) has a navel unto himself or herself, with Adam and Eve being the possible exceptions.

And, yeah, right about here (X marking the exact spot) is where it occurred to me that so far this column is, indeed, about navels. But what I'm really talking about are introverts and extroverts. Excuse the literary license of "outie" standing in for "extro" in my title because "Are You an Innie or an Extro?" wasn't as funny, nor did it hint at a possible discussion of navels.

Anyway.

I always thought I was an extrovert. Why? Well, you know me. I'm outrageous and talk all the time and love the limelight—in fact, insist upon it—and think you're wasting your time if you're not looking at me. All of that. But—and here's the funny part—as it turns out, I'm acting. I'll take that Oscar now. All you little people may consider yourselves thanked.

No, seriously. A while back, I read some article (I never quote my sources, mainly because I forget who they are) about innies and extros and decided that the innies are way cooler. So I am now one.

Innies are more focused, more creative, and get their energy from their own thoughts, emotions, and impressions. They like to be alone; in fact, need to be alone so as not to waste precious energy. And they operate at a slower pace and use long-term memory instead of short-term. That's why you can't remember where your car is at this very minute but know you bought one a while back.

So? What do you think? Sound like every writer you ever knew, including yourself? Hey, I can be all of the above, too. I can. But then the article said something about innies speak more slowly and softly than extros, but aren't so good at fast action and snappy repartee. Oops. I have a quick, loud mouth and can run away really fast when it gets me in trouble. Instead of being confused by all this, I decided to claim aspects of both. See, sometimes I do thrive on stimulation (i.e., from caffeine, conferences, porn—No, I'm just kidding...about conferences), but most of the time I need, require, and must have complete quiet, silence, and aloneness. So I can write stuff like this.

And you thought I could produce this drivel sitting on top of an operating jackhammer, didn't you? (See "porn" above.)

Hey, I think I got off the subject. Aren't I, as an innie, supposed to be focused or something?

*The author would have you know that she diligently cleans the lint screen in the dryer after every load.*



## ***She's Come Undone***

### **Call me Ish-my-Writing-Sucks.**

*After the Ninc NY Conference, I came home renewed, recharged, ready to take on the publishing world. Then, Wham! real life intruded in the form of critical family illnesses. Because I'm not a fulltime novelist, I've always had to juggle. But these last months the challenge hasn't been balancing time commitments so much as emotional energy. I'm drained.*

*I start stories and they run dry. I'm burned out on writing romantic suspense. I'm halfway convinced the women's fiction story I was writing at conference time jinxed my family. What do I do, Annette, to regain my creative energy and my focus to see a story through to the end...and most important, to figure out what it is I want to write now?*

**<signed> Unable to Commit**

### **Dear Unable:**

I don't think you're unable to commit. I think you're drained... and doubtful. Give yourself a break here. Why do you think world-class athletes have a coaches? *Because even people who have clear, tangible evidence of their successes, who've won everything there is to win, continue to fall prey to self-doubt and low motivation.*

And here we sit. Alone at our computer screens. Day after day, having to dredge up our own confidence and our own motivation in the face of frequent rejection and often less-than-obvious yardsticks for success.

It's enough to give anybody the heebie-jeebies.

It seems like your problems really started after you decided to branch out into a new area. I wonder if the main creativity thief here is fear. I have a feeling you're second-

guessing your decision to branch out.

Nothing kills creativity and focus quicker than self-doubt.

But fear can be conquered. Once you banish the self-doubt, your creative energy will return and what you really want to write will come into focus. You already know what it is. Fear's just holding you back.

My first suggestion is to tweak your environment to create a mental attitude that puts you back (as close as possible) to that wonderful, energized emotion you felt right after the conference. What got you excited in New York? And no, the naked cowboy in Times Square is *not* where I was heading. My own conference list would include things like:

- Feeling validated as a writer
- Being immersed in a culture that values and encourages creativity
- Discussing new ideas with other writers and getting positive feedback
- Having nothing else to take up my mental or emotional energy at the time
- Learning things regarding the industry that added to my excitement about the possibilities of my craft.

Make a list of the things that got you jazzed about writing. Then figure out ways to simulate those things in your daily life as much as possible.

This is where experimenting and patience come into play. Are there parts of your current writing routine that accomplish any of the things on your list? Great. Keep them. Maybe even emphasize them more than you have been recently. Think about re-arranging your work space to reflect your new commitment to a new area of writing. Literally changing your perspective can be an amazing thing. But as I said, experiment.

Okay, so you've analyzed the things that got you excited, and figured out some ways to try and keep those energies in the forefront. That's great, but you still have to sit your butt at the keyboard and write. This is the danger time, when those evil creativity-stomping demons start whispering in your ear.

If you were Shaquille O'Neal or Andre Agassi, this is when your coach would earn his money, keeping you pumped up about your abilities. We're stuck with the poor man's solution: learning how to coach ourselves. The best way I know involves creating a daily routine that gradually works to block out the negative, energy-sapping thoughts that make perfectly fine story ideas shrivel up and die in the middle of the third scene. Not to get too wiggy on you, but this is where you figure out how to get yourself into what sports psychologists call "The Zone." You know what I'm talking about; that place where, even if it's only for a paragraph or a scene at a time, the writing is all you see.

My next suggestion is fairly simple. Once you've done everything you can to regenerate your creative spirit, the rest is a matter of applying some mental discipline until the flow

just starts happening again on its own.

To regain your confidence and enthusiasm you're going to have to find a way to just write. Just wrestle that women's fiction story you started to the ground until it works. You've done it before. I'd suggest carving out a strict schedule of writing sessions. Or, if you work better on a page system, create a wordcount schedule, then *make it happen*. No matter how you feel about the work at the time. No matter how badly you think the writing sucks.

Every time a negative thought creeps into your head acknowledge it and keep working. You might even allot yourself time to have the negative thoughts... but not while you're writing. If you're at the keyboard, do not allow yourself to dwell on them. The negative thoughts will sneak in, probably a lot at first, but if you can make yourself put each one aside as it comes and finish that sentence or paragraph, the negative thoughts will come less and less often. I promise.

*Just do the writing.* The rest will come. Either that, or you'll find Kevin Costner standing in a cornfield in your backyard. Personally, I could live with either outcome.

#### **Got a question you want to "Ask Annette?"**

All comments and inquiries will be kept strictly confidential. Annette's contact information:

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fax: 775-746-4560,

phone: 775-746-1680.

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## **INTRODUCING.....**

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*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:***

Eileen Dreyer (*Kathleen Korbel*), St Louis MO  
Susan A. Lantz (*Susannah Carleton*), Tallahassee FL  
Pam McCutcheon (*Pamela Luzier*), Divide CO

#### ***New Members:***

Mary Burton, Richmond VA  
Susan Hicks (*Elizabeth Chadwick*), Radcliffe-on-Trent,  
Nottingham, UK

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

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## Bits'n'Pieces

**JUGGLING EDITORS...**Karen Taylor Richman left Harlequin/Silhouette as of May 14. Gail Chasen is the new senior editor of Silhouette Special Edition.

#### **AND SPEAKING OF HARLEQUIN...**

Their newest single title venture, the Harlequin HQN will launch in August with a hardcover by Diana Palmer. Several single titles have already been released—by invitation only—under the aegis of either Harlequin or Silhouette "Special Releases." Authors like Karen Templeton, who *does not* write romantic suspense even though she's published quite a number of books in Silhouette's Intimate Moments line—as well as several other of the Silhouette series—have headlined these features, which are doing well. Headed up by Tracy Farrell, and perhaps a counter to MIRA, Harlequin's original women's fiction imprint, which initially featured a wide variety of women's fiction including historical fiction, glitz and glam, as well as the romantic suspense that is its current concentration, I've been told that the new imprint is *not* seeking romantic suspense but is more ... real people and perhaps a little more pastoral in nature. Although at press time I *did* learn HQN just purchased two paranormals from a previously unpublished author, so...

#### **HUGE OPPORTUNITY: FANTASY AND SF SPLIT GENRES...**

Recent HarperCollins UK market research concludes fantasy should be displayed and sold as a separate genre from science fiction. They plan not only to aim for separate display and shelf space, but will also alter their packaging strategy. According to managing director Amanda Ridout, "The key thing is to simplify the jackets, and not to ghettoize them into what used to be traditional fantasy. What we want to do is to make sure that people who have enjoyed a wide variety of fiction aren't put off by the traditional fantasy look." The payoff, per Voyager publishing director Jane Johnson, would be "A huge opportunity for the trade. It's a hidden audience, and that's what we're all looking for." You know, honestly, I've often wondered why this hasn't been tried a long time ago. It's a natural. Still then you've got the problem of where to shelve the cross-genre sci-fantasy stuff, which is the same problem the women's fiction genre has with shelving all of *its* cross-writing authors...

— *TdR*



**Laura Resnick is**

## **THE COMELY CURMUDGEON**

### **“Those Who Are About to Reboot Salute You”**

This past November, my agent casually asked if it was going to cause a tax glitch for me that, due to our having made a sale at the start of the month, I'd be getting a signing check right before the end of the year. I, of course, laughed gaily at this naive question. (Okay, “gaily” might be hyperbole.) All my previous experience with the publishing house in question had consistently proven that there was no possibility whatsoever of my receiving the *contract* in as little as eight weeks, never mind the first check. I suppose the various instances which had demonstrated this fact had momentarily slipped my agent's mind; he does, after all, have a number of clients who typically get paid in less than five months. I just don't happen to be one of them.

But I digress.

Anyhow, if there *had* been a snowball's chance in hell of my getting paid in December, that money would have come in handy at the time. While I was trying to print the final manuscript of the book for which I had not yet received a contract, my trusty old Brother printer died. This was a sentimental blow to me, as I had enjoyed that printer for its eccentricity. The first time it ever broke down and I called tech support for help, the young man on the other end of the phone line instructed me to clear the surface of my desk, turn the printer upside down, and bang it hard against the desk three times.

They just don't make 'em like that anymore.

So I was sad to lose the Brother; but I had known this day was coming. The thing was eight years old, and no one lives forever. Besides, after getting the bill for its previous repair some three years earlier, I'd discovered that it had cost me more to fix it than it would have cost me to replace it. Moreover, the repair shop had inflicted on me all that familiar, dreaded, techno-dweeb hemming and hawing about how this printer was so old that they'd have to cobble together repair parts out of forgotten Cold War refuse from nuclear waste dumps in Siberia and then transport it to an old blind monk in the hills who was the last person in this hemisphere with the arcane knowledge needed to repair a machine this obsolete.

You know the spiel.

And that was back in 1999. Three whole calendar years earlier. That's 21 dog years. In computer terms, it's about nine centuries. In other words, by December 2002, it would have been easier to find Osama Bin Laden's jock strap than it was to find the right parts to repair my comatose printer. (Whereas it remains quite easy to get my 14-year-old Toyota repaired, and my bedside lamp which is older than my parents.)

Where was I?

Oh, yes. So I went out looking for a new printer. I *bate* shopping for new equipment. I've been stringing wires together and reading instruction manuals non-stop since 1988, and I'm tired of it. But a working writer needs a printer; especially a working writer who'd like to deliver a book and get paid for it, oh, five months later.

Well, here's the interesting thing I discovered upon shopping for a new printer: I couldn't *use* a new printer with my computer. Brace yourself for some technical jargon: The printer port (i.e. the socket where you plug in the printer) on my computer was a “serial port.” About two years earlier, the entire industry had come up with the bright idea of ceasing all production and sales of serial port printers. Ever since then, printers must be plugged into a “USB port.”

In other words, the bastards changed the shape of the plugs.

Now maybe this is old news to you and you're astonished that I'm so out-of-touch and anachronistic that I was out there shopping for a serial port printer; but I, for one, was shocked to find that everywhere I went, the best advice any computer stores could give me was that I should spend \$900-\$3,400 on a new computer to solve the problem of the damn plug on all the damn printers manufactured for the past two years being incompatible with all the damn sockets they made on computers before that.

This is organized crime at its finest.

Needless to say, I decided to look for an alternative to dropping \$900-\$3,400 on impulse, despite the blank stares that my questions about a possible alternative produced at every computer store I entered. Okay, sure, I



found the shaking heads and long, negative, incomprehensible replies a bit discouraging; but I'm a *writer*, I eat discouraging obstacles and idiotic responses for breakfast! Moreover, my determination to solve the problem without buying a new computer tripled after I learned that I'd need to spend even *more* money if I actually wanted to *work* on a new computer. This is because the industry has ensured that the newest operating systems cannot run the majority of the software produced before last week; ergo, if I bought a new system, I'd have to buy new software in order to open and print the manuscript for which I had initially gone forth in search of a new printer. And the price of such software is roughly what I paid for my car (a car for which—did I mention this?—I can still readily find spare parts).

So, due to the computer industry ensuring instant obsolescence of everything it sells us, I could only replace my \$300 printer by first spending a fortune on hardware and software.

These people will soon form their own Reich and start bombing Poland.

This is why the average working writer needs a secret army of computer-geek friends. Mine all happen to belong to the Cincinnati Fantasy Group (CFG), one of the oldest clubs in sf/f fandom. I consulted Scott Street (who is also my webmaster), Stephen Leigh (an sf/f writer), and Frank Johnson (a disc jockey), all of whom have kept me from shooting the computer on several occasions. Finally, Guy Allen (engineer and, more importantly, host of the annual Chili Con) walked me through the exact steps I needed to solve my problem.

This is how I—yes, I!—wound up installing hardware. It turned out that for a total cost of about \$50, I could take my computer apart, install a “USB port,” install the “driver” to make the port work, install the operating system upgrade to make the driver work, and *then* go shop for a new printer. So that's exactly what I did.

I'll bet you're impressed.

I'll bet you're also wondering why none of the many computer industry employees I'd talked to had ever said to me, “Oh, sure, you can solve this problem by spending about \$50 and an hour of your time.”

Have I mentioned the three full days I wasted running around to computer stores asking for help?

Why, I keep asking myself, does someone like me even *need* to learn to install hardware?

Oh, wait, now I remember. It's because the computer industry is run by pirates, rapists, and thieves, that's why.

Oh, well. As they say, all good things come to an end... and my computer turned out to be one of them. About three months after my hunt for a printer, my computer started making noises like a lawn mower preparing to blow up. It was almost six years old, and no computer lives forever... or even as long as a good pair of sandals. One day, it gave up the ghost and went silent.

This happened less than five months after I'd printed

and shipped that book, so, of course, I hadn't been paid the delivery check yet. And while looking at the migraine-inducing prices on new computers and new software, I got some shocking news from the IRS; 2002 certainly hadn't *felt* like a good year, but my tax statements said otherwise, and the IRS wanted even more blood than they'd already drained from me.

I retreated into a morbid depression during which I watched about 20 episodes of *Trading Spaces* and made a dent in Ohio's supply of Ben & Jerry's.

A couple of weeks later, my new computer arrived. The first thing I noticed was that I couldn't attach it to my trusty old 17" monitor because (wait for it!) the bastards had changed the shape of the plugs.

I hate my life.

I wasted two more full days running all over town asking for an adapter. “I cannot,” I kept saying to blank-faced, head-shaking computer store employees, “be the only person who ever bought a new computer while still owning a perfectly good old monitor. Other people on this planet besides me must have wanted an adapter.”

“Maybe so,” these fellows all replied... but that didn't change the fact that the only possible solution to my problem (they insisted) was to spend \$300-\$1,900 on a new monitor.

Even *remembering* this makes my skull feel like exploding and painting their faces in splattered schmutz. (Sorry about the imagery.)

Finally, at the suggestion of one of my friendly CFG gurus, I contacted a store called Computer DNA. They instantly said, sure, they had an adapter, come on over and get it. The actual price was about \$15, but since they'd quoted \$10 to me on the phone, they only charged me \$10.

So I was wrong! Not *all* computer industry people are the minions of Beelzebub! Some of them (i.e. the tiny handful of people working at Computer DNA) are even terrific folks.

Next up, I had to find an adapter for my keyboard, because (you can see it coming, can't you?) the bastards had changed the shape of plugs.

Then, with my hardware problems finally solved, I turned my attention to my software problems.

The only version of my e-mail program which worked with the new operating system wouldn't read the earlier version in which all my contact addresses were stored. My screensaver program, to which I was deeply attached (a series of “tropical paradise” pictures which I stare at when stuck for the next sentence), not only wouldn't work with the new operating system, it even (inexplicably) made the CD drive malfunction for a full day after I tried to install it. The only versions of any word processing software which worked with the new operating system could not communicate with Alphasmart, the mercifully simple word processor on which I'd been writing while awaiting the arrival of the new computer.





## THE COMELY CURMUDGEON



By the time the Alphasmart tech support people heard from me, I was weeping tears of exhaustion. I was also terrified into near-hysteria that I wasn't going to be able

to transfer a week's worth of work from the Alphasmart into the computer. The nice man at Alphasmart talked me down from the ledge, then solved my problem. This involved choosing a different "start-up disk" on the computer, rebooting into an older version of the operating system, opening an older version of a word processing program, connecting the Alphasmart to that for uploading, then saving and closing the word processing document, choosing a different start-up disk again, rebooting back to the new operating system, and then using the newest word processing software to open the saved document.

I am not making this up.

Once my software problems were also solved (or else, in some cases, abandoned as lost causes), I began working my way through two expensive instruction manuals (one of them more than 800 pages long) which I bought to help me figure out how to use the new system. At the moment, I have no idea what I'm doing, because this system is five years newer than my previous one. That translates into 35 dog years, or 79 generations of computer hardware and software upgrades.

At some point in my adventures with the helpful technological tools of the modern novelist, I may even find the time to write again.

Laura Resnick's current fantasy release is *The White Dragon*. Her current romance release, written as *Laura Leone*, is *Fallen From Grace*. She divides her time between *Microcenter* and the ice cream freezer at *Bigg's*.

### Bits'n'Pieces

#### NORA ROBERTS "MOST SUCCESSFUL ROMANCE NOVELIST ON PLANET EARTH,"

says the *Washington Post*. Well Duh! Where have they been? We understood this aeons ago. She's the Queen Empress Czarina of romance writing, romance novels, and romance storytelling. But I guess even the *WP* has to finally get around to recognizing a milepost when an author writes over 150 novels, and adds another four or five to that number every year. The article quotes are typical, understated Roberts: "You have to tell a good story. That's true in any writing. It's all about the story and the people in it." Plus, "My people win. That's what people buy me for. They're not buying me to write 'King Lear.'" And this is why we love her.

#### THE NOW BIG THING...Dog Books...

Well, at least that's what Japan's *Daily Yomiuri* finds, as interest in dog books (at least in Japan) continues to grow. A quoted source in the article says, "Many people are seeking affection and peace of mind through dogs, at a time when they are being inundated by gloomy topics including the war in Iraq and the long-continuing economic recession." I suppose that makes sense, the same way a surge in knitting projects and an interest in knitting books took an upswing here after 9/11. We look to the homey, the fuzzy, the furred, and mundane for comfort when chaos strikes. So, all of you unemployed writers out there looking for what to add to your work...add dogs (and find Japanese publishers). I know it works in my house. We have five dogs. ;-)

— TdR

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# Hacked!

BY LAWRENCE  
WATT-EVANS

I think I was in my thirties, maybe even my forties, before I finally realized that the definition of “hack” I had learned from my childhood reading was just not a definition that anyone else used.

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines a hack as “One who hires himself out to do routine writing.” That was more or less the way I used it—but I didn’t pay much attention to the “routine” part. I just meant a writer who works for money and writes to order.

Unfortunately, everyone else puts a *lot* of emphasis on the “routine” part, or else they use different definitions entirely; the one I’ve quoted was the kindest I found in any dictionary I own. “Hack” is an insult, a term for bad writer—but that wasn’t how I used it.

A lot of Nine members have probably been called hacks at one time or another, and taken offense at it—but for most of my life I took it as a compliment.

So how did this discrepancy come about? Why did I take pride for several years in considering myself a hack?

Well, I grew up reading lots of genre fiction paperbacks and magazines—science fiction and mysteries, mostly, but other stuff as well—and I had read all the introductions and afterwords and bio notes, and noticed the authors’ names. I had seen that most of the stuff I liked had originally been published in the old pulp magazines, or at least had been written by the same people who wrote for the

pulps. I had also noticed that the same authors would turn up in different genres—Fredric Brown wrote science fiction and fantasy and mystery and horror, as did Ray Bradbury; Robert E. Howard wrote fantasy and horror and westerns and jungle adventure and Oriental stories; Marion Zimmer Bradley wrote both science fiction and romance; and so on.

And I read those introductions that described how the old pulp writers would turn out whatever stories they could sell, as quickly as possible, for a penny a word or less—how Henry Kuttner wrote so fast that he had to use dozens of pen names, sometimes writing entire 60,000-word issues of monthly pulps under various names; how Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth wrote a classic novel in a few weeks to fill a hole in a publisher’s schedule; how one writer (whose name I’ve forgotten, though I read two of the stories in question) once wrote the exact same plot, involving a locked-room murder on a train, in three genres—as a western on the Union Pacific, a contemporary mystery aboard the Century Limited, and a science fiction story aboard an atomic-powered Pan-American Express—by just changing the names and details. He sold all three.

I didn’t see anything derogatory about these anecdotes; I thought they sounded really cool. I was impressed with the speed, ingenuity, and versatility thus displayed. And the writers who accomplished these feats were described as hacks, so I wanted to be a hack when I grew up.

The problem there was that I was missing context. I was supposed to

already *know* that the pulps were junk, and that a hack was, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, “a literary drudge... a poor writer, a mere scribbler.” But I didn’t know that; I didn’t get that at all. I *loved* the old stories those “hacks” wrote. How could they be “mere scribblers”?

I wasn’t totally clueless; I did know the pulp magazines were considered the low end of the market, and had died out before I started grade school. I just figured that meant I’d have to write for paperbacks and slick magazines. It didn’t look impossible. I thought that once I started to get published, once I could write well enough, I’d just write anything and everything, whatever I could sell. I didn’t intend to limit myself to one category; after all, even with the pulps gone, Isaac Asimov was writing both sf and mysteries, and Robert Sheckley wrote both sf and spy novels, and so on.

As I explained last month, when I was in high school and college I didn’t expect to make a living at it; writing was going to be a hobby. Even so, I wasn’t going to be a prima donna, limiting myself to a single genre, or taking years to write a book—I was going to write fast and well and to order. That was what I saw as being a hack, and that was the role I wanted.

But somehow, the rest of the world didn’t see hacks as the noble creatures I considered them.

It took an amazingly long time for me to accept that maybe I was misusing the word. Eventually, though, it sank in that for most people, “hack” means low quality, and I stopped calling myself that.

But you know, I’m still not entirely sure why. Maybe people think so because they think





▶▶▶▶ the word has something to do with “hack” in the sense of rough cutting—but it doesn’t; it’s from “hackney,” like a hackney carriage, meaning “available for hire.”

Or maybe it’s the idea that hacks write fast—but realistically, writing speed doesn’t have much to do with quality. One writer may turn out a masterpiece in a few weeks, while another slaves for years over a mediocre novel. Alas that more people don’t realize that!

Or maybe it’s the mercenary aspect; it’s inherent in the term that hacks work for money. Is this all part of the notion that true writers are artists who create their works for love, rather than filthy lucre? Is it the idea that hacks choose what to write on the basis of what they can get paid for, rather than following their muse where’er she may lead, untouched by the lure of commerce?

It’s probably all of those—or none; maybe the word picked up its negative connotations centuries ago, and modern users don’t know it

means anything more than “a poor writer.”

Whatever the reason, I now acknowledge that the word is a pejorative one, and I don’t use it anymore—but I’m still glad I modeled myself on those old pulpsters.

For one thing, it meant I trained myself to work fast—to plot quickly, type quickly, and produce a lot of words. That means I meet deadlines. I get a lot written—over my career so far I’ve averaged about one and a half novels and five short stories a year. I can write to editorial specification, which has led to some lucrative work writing tie-ins, novelizations, and comic book scripts, as well as sales to theme anthologies. I’m not tied to a particular genre; I’ve written in whatever category I wanted, adjusting to market conditions as they shifted. I learned to focus on the story, not the style; to please the reader, rather than myself.

Those skills let me make a living as a writer, just as they did for the folks in the pulp days.

And I see so many young writers who work from other traditional models running themselves aground!

There’s the Starving Artist, turning out idiosyncratic works of genius that go unappreciated by the mindless masses, unwilling to change his immortal words because that would be untrue to his vision.

There’s the would-be Overnight Success, brainstorming merchandising

options while trying to come up with the next Harry Potter, and never actually getting around to writing the story.

There’s the Great American Novelist, endlessly polishing the first chapter of his never-to-be-finished magnum opus, unable to move on to the next chapter until every word of this one shines with crystalline perfection.

There’s the Workshop Junkie who has written one tired story that he drags interminably from group to group, desperately hoping to find the one magical dead-on critique that will turn it into the award-winning masterpiece he knows it can become.

These are all roles for would-be writers, roles that are socially acceptable in a way that the hack churning out reams of undistinguished prose never was. Unfortunately, I don’t see them as very *useful* roles; they don’t focus on the practical side. They’re all artists of one sort or another, and that’s one reason most of the people who follow them will probably never get much of anywhere. They’re all too caught up in the *art* of writing, and not learning the *craft*. Or the business, either.

Me, I set out to be a hack, and I think that’s a large part of how I became what I am—not a hack, not a literary drudge or a mere scribbler, but a successful full-time writer.

And artist or not, routine or not, I think that’s something to be proud of. ●

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