



INK

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

Blah, blah, blah blah, blurb...

BY KAREN KATZ

Congratulations! You've just signed the contract on a nice sale to a new publisher. So what comes next? No matter which side of the Atlantic you're on, before that ink has dried, the dreaded author questionnaire will hit your mailbox, requesting the names of all your famous friends/compadres/compatriots/counterparts—every one a candidate to blurb that new book. If you're lucky, your editor will make those requests to hand-selected authors a few months down the road. More likely, s/he will be pressuring you to gather them on your own. As is becoming more and more the case, however, chances are that you have already had to secure those cover blurbs yourself—and long before your agent ever began submitting that new book proposal. Blurbs upon submission? One former in-house editor calls them “a passkey.”

A highly charged, highly political topic, the business of author blurbs sparked impassioned discussion from members of Novelists, Inc. and editors alike, most of whom preferred their comments be reported anonymously.

Hashed about in literary circles

long before the July, 2003, *Wall Street Journal* article reported Margaret Atwood's refusal to write another endorsement, the subject was addressed by William F. Buckley, Jr., in March, 2002, *The National Review* and in Elinor Lipman's *New York Times* piece published the following August.

“I appreciate the sociology and transparency of blurbs,” she wrote. “Heads of M.F.A. programs praising their darlings, editors turned novelists

“art form.” Soliciting nominations from his Internet readership since 2000, Good has annually awarded a “Puffy” for “the most essential of all contemporary literary arts: the super-hyped ad-copy dust jacket puffery meant to entice the unwary book buyer with specious claims of genius and instant-classic immortality.”

On the heels of the *WSJ* article, David Lidsky, assistant managing editor of *Fortune Small Business Magazine*,

“Katz's exploration of the blurb dilemma is pithy, pertinent, and perfectly on point.”

— Jillian Karr

praising authors turned girlfriends. I will see a mentor thanked in the acknowledgments for his support, faith, his in-law apartment. Then I turn to the back cover and see the acknowledgee declaring the book huge, important, dazzling, incandescent.”

Our British counterparts find themselves in the same spot we are. Not two weeks prior to the *WSJ* article, Britain's national daily, *The Daily Telegraph*, ran its own lengthy article on the practice of securing plaudits across the pond.

Canadian Alex Good, editor of *goodreports.com*, has even created a special literary award to recognize this

ran an online column at www.davidlidsky.com, and generously offered several fill-in-the-blank blurbs as a public service for overstressed writers. Here is one of them: “I read this book! Really! You've probably heard of me, maybe read and liked my work, so buy this book too because this is (my friend/another client of my agent/a book my publisher needs to make back its advance on or they'll drop my contract)! Buy it through my Web site and I get 5% of the sale price!”

There is truth in his jest. While the average reader may not recognize

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Novelists, Inc.

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Advisory Council

Rebecca Brandewyne†	Victoria Thompson
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Linda Barlow	Pat Rice
Georgia Bockoven	
Evan Maxwell	† Founder

If you have questions regarding Novelists, Inc., please contact a member of the Board of Directors.

2003 Board of Directors

PRESIDENT: Anne Holmberg
HCR1, Box 1A
Hilo HI 96720-7000
PH/FAX (808) 959-4489
[call first for fax]
anneavery1@earthlink.net

PRESIDENT-ELECT: Jean Brashear
P.O. Box 3000 #79
Georgetown TX 78627-3000
(512) 426-7153
bejean@cox-internet.com

SECRETARY: Karen Harbaugh
5734 S. 300th Place
Auburn WA 98001
(253) 839-9607
KarenHarbaugh@peoplepc.com

TREASURER: Ann Josephson
P.O. Box 151596
Tampa FL 33684
(813) 915-0747
annjosephson@att.net

NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Olivia Rupprecht
800 Hickory Tree Cove
Collierville TN 38017
(901) 853-4073
ORupp11155@aol.com

ADVISORY COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE:
Barbara Keiler
32 Atkinson Lane
Sudbury, MA 01776-1939
Phone: 978-443-0770
Fax: 978-443-0775
E-mail: b.keiler@juno.com

CENTRAL COORDINATOR: David L. Brooks
Novelists, Inc.
P.O. Box 1166
Mission, KS 66222-0166
Fax: (913) 432-3132
E-mail: ninc@kc.rr.com

Website: <http://www.ninc.com>

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

Congratulations, Mr. King

In September, the National Book Foundation announced that it had awarded its 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters to novelist Stephen King. The Foundation, best known for its National Book Awards, has in the past presented its Award for Distinguished Contributions to authors as varied as Saul Bellow, Eudora Welty, David McCullough, Studs Terkel, Ray Bradbury, and Arthur Miller.

When I first read the news of the award, I cheered so loudly that I startled the birds outside my office into flight and set the dogs to barking. Stephen King is one of my writer heroes, and I was thrilled to see him receive this kind of recognition for his achievements. I was doubly thrilled to see an organization like the National Book Foundation acknowledge that an author can work outside the “literary” lines and still create books worth reading, books that have something important to say about the human condition. Books that last.

In announcing the award, Foundation Executive Director Neil Baldwin said, “Stephen King’s writing is securely rooted in the great American tradition that glorifies spirit-of-place and the abiding power of narrative. He crafts stylish, mind-bending page-turners that contain profound moral truths—some beautiful, some harrowing—about our inner lives. This Award commemorates Mr. King’s well-earned place of distinction in the wide world of readers and booklovers of all ages.”

On behalf of Ninc, I sent a congratulatory letter to Mr. Baldwin and the following letter to Mr. King:

Stephen King
Bangor, Maine

Dear Mr. King:

I thought you’d like to know that the almost six hundred multi-published genre authors who make up Novelists, Inc. are roundly cheering the news that the National Book Foundation has awarded you the 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters. We think it’s about time!

As readers, we’ve loved your stories, large and small, for years. They made us shiver in our boots, lock the doors, check under the beds...and stay up long past midnight eagerly turning the pages to find out what happened next.

As writers, we have studied you in an effort to learn how you created so many memorable tales with such seeming ease, knowing as few others can that what you made look easy, wasn’t easy at all. Your honesty in speaking out about the challenges you’ve faced in your career has encouraged us, consoled us, and helped us deal with the challenges in ours. We know how

often your stories have changed lives by turning non-readers into eager readers, because some of those readers have become our readers, as well.

There's not much in life we can be sure of, but we in Ninc are absolutely sure that the 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters has gone to the right recipient. We're also sure that, long after we are gone, our great-great-grandchildren will be devouring your books just as we have, and among writers, that pretty much says it all.

Thank you, and congratulations.

Sincerely,

Anne Holmberg
President, Novelists, Inc.

The letter's long gone, but the satisfaction of seeing the Award go to a writer who richly deserves it remains.

Thanks, Mr. King. And congratulations. **NINK**

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:

Inglath Cooper, Penhook VA
John G. Hemry, Owings MD
Shirley Tallman (*Erin Ross*), Eugene OR
Lynn M. Turner, Kentville, Nova Scotia

New Members:

Wendy Bores (*Windy Lindstrom*), Allegany NY
Monica Caltabiano (*Monica McLean*),
Maple Grove MN
Cindy Dees, Azle TX
Jane Graves (*Jane Sullivan*), Richardson TX
Alison Hentges (*Georgina Devon*), Tuscon AZ
Cindy Holby (*Colby Hodge*), Winston Salem NC
Brenda Novak, Fair Oaks CA
Amy Voss Peterson, Middletown WI
Karen Whiddon, N. Richland Hills TX
Rhonda Woodward, Phoenix AZ

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

Blah, Blah, Blah...

Continued from page 1



which author pals are blurbing one another, it is apparent to those in the industry, and has not gone without criticism in the press. Still, not all books garner pal gushes plastered across their covers. Judith Arnold/Barbara J. Keiler's blurb war story will strike a chord with others whose pals have refused them blurbs. Of the four friends she approached to blurb her first single title—all of whom had blurbed others—one told her not to send her manuscript, one took it but returned it, unread, after a month; one took it, then never said another word, and the fourth gave her "a lovely blurb, for which I remain deeply grateful." She found the entire process demoralizing. "I told my publisher that if they wanted my subsequent books blurbed, they would have to get the blurbs themselves, because I was not going to do it anymore. I've been published blurbless ever since," she said.

Jasmine Cresswell poses the question many of us wrestle with when friends, editors, agents—and, thanks to the Internet—even total strangers press us to blurb a book. "What the heck do you say when you like the writer, hate the book, and don't want to have your fans believing you think dreck is great stuff?"

A Ninc member suggests one way around these issues. "Editors should stop telling authors, especially new authors, to go and get blurbs. The editors or agents should do it in a way that means that the book author doesn't know who turns down the request or reads and doesn't quote. These days they could send a few chapters electronically. If the potential blurbster was interested, she could get the whole thing in print form."

"...a real page turner."

— **Publisher's Snack**

Credibility with readers is another problem many authors cite, since many readers, author readers included, do look to author endorsements when shopping. Like many of us, Ruth Glick/Rebecca York had a reader tell her she'd picked up her book because she saw the quote from a big name author on the cover and thought, "If she likes it, it must be good!!" Sometimes, however, a blurb can backfire on the endorser.

One, a reader who hates a book you've endorsed may stop buying *your* books. Two, Kristine Smith has observed that authors whose names crop up on great numbers of books are losing their credibility. "I've seen people comment on Usenet that a blurb by so-and-so will prevent them from picking up a book because they've read bad books in the past that the author has praised to the skies." Another Ninc member calls being approached for quote endorsements "one of the traumas of the writing life." Likening it to playing Russian Roulette, she warns, "We can end up with a bullet in the head."

Like many of us, Phoebe Conn/Cinnamon Burke won't offer a blurb that isn't true. "I look for something which genuinely deserves a compliment. But that



Blah, Blah, Blah Blah, Blurb

▶▶▶▶ leaves plenty of room for comments such as: 'I loved the heroine!' 'Endlessly intriguing plot!' or 'Author X has a terrific sense of humor!'"

A number of Ninc members say they volunteer quotes to friends and to authors whose work they admire. Linda Howington/Linda Howard is one. "Whenever I read a book by a new author that I particularly enjoy, I try to contact that writer's editor and let him/her know how much I enjoyed it, and that I'm available for blurbing on the next book if they want."

But just how important are those author blurbs? The sales force believes they help them position and sell

"Katz beautifully captures the nuances of blurbing."

— Karen Tintori

books, and Ninc member Ann LaFarge, formerly executive editor at Kensington, says the emphasis booksellers, reps, marketing people, and chains place on them is enormous. "I was encouraged to work very hard to obtain blurbs. I believe that's true of all editors," she said.

Although editors pressure their authors to obtain them, they themselves are not entirely convinced the blurbs sell books.

John Sconamiglio, editorial director, Kensington Books, says sales history, not blurbs, matters most. While he really doesn't believe blurbs are all that important, he says a review blurb carries more weight than one from an author. "You know the reviewer is being fair and impartial. And readers tend to like those better." LaFarge, and a senior editor at another house, also agree that review blurbs carry more weight. A former in-house editor says author blurbs are very tricky and that it is hard to judge how important they are in terms of sales. "They

are more about creating a sense of buzz about the book," she said. "Publishing is changing enormously," she went on. "Tours, ads, quotes—they are not as reliable. Readers are finding out about books in different ways—the Internet, store-level marketing, and good old-fashioned word of mouth."

"Do I think this helps sell books?," Ruth Ryan Langan asks. "On the one hand, there are readers who might not pick up your book unless they happen to see a glowing review of it by their favorite author. But I'm betting that big push isn't as big as the publishers would have us believe. After all, would anybody expect to see a blurb that reads: 'This book sucks. Avoid at all costs. Caution, this author can't plot his way out of a paper bag. Dullsville. For me the best part of this book were the words THE END.'"

Ninc past president Patricia Rice thinks the quotes are silly, but that editors love them. "They seem to think the name of a bestselling author across the front of the book will increase sales. Maybe they're right. But I'm just as likely *not* to buy a book if the bestselling author is someone I don't like." Rice says she thinks review quotes culled from industry magazines and Web sites would be just as useful on book covers. "I particularly love the game of pulling good words out of *PW* reviews and hashing them together to make a great quote," she said. "That's how high an opinion I have of blurbs. We have enough pressure in our lives, why create more?"

Almost every author said they'd prefer requests to come from their editors or agents, putting some space between themselves and the requesting author to deflect embarrassing situations. Melanie Jackson, who blurbs selectively, cited numerous reasons she might not blurb someone,

making the case for editor/agent-generated requests. "A genre I don't like, too busy, too sick, traveling. It makes the refusal more graceful if you don't have to say to the author, 'sorry, but...'" Also, your editor or agent will know if the book is one that is likely to be something you would enjoy and praise. That saves the wasted time (for both parties) of reading a book and then having to tell someone you don't like it."

Another Ninc member said she blurbs when her agent or editor asks, relying on both not to do so unless they feel the work deserves blurbing. "I have volunteered to blurb for writer friends, and have been asked by others. I consider it an honor to read and give a blurb for work and authors I enjoy."

Time constraint is the chief reason authors turn down a blurb request. Most times, editors want them last week. One author said she received a manuscript on the day after Christmas with a request to have a blurb in by January 1. It didn't happen.

NYT bestseller Nora Roberts has been asked to give a quote without reading a manuscript, because there was no time to read it due to either her own schedule or the publication schedule. "How can I possibly give an endorsement to work I haven't read? Yes, if it's a generic quote for an author whose work I've read often and enjoyed, but I'm speaking of work I don't know. A new author, a new-to-me author. On this point I am religiously firm. Absolutely not."

Roberts, who has never asked for a blurb herself, rarely blurbs these days. Yet, she says it doesn't hurt to ask, provided you go through the proper channels. "It got to the point several years ago that I was being asked so often, by people I knew, people I'd never heard of, agents and editors of people I knew or never heard of, that I wondered if I was supposed to just make blurbing my career. And I decided I didn't like the idea much. So I took a moratorium on blurbing."

Author AN Wilson, former literary editor of Britain's *Evening Standard*, said in the *Daily Telegraph* article that he finds requests for blurbs very much like e-mail marketing. "I've got two on my desk at the moment. You come home and you find a card from the Post Office saying you've got an exciting parcel. And you hope it's a box of chocolates or a year's supply of Viagra, and then it's another of those wretched Jiffy bags."

A number of Ninc members did obtain blurbs via RWA's short-lived quote service, begun in 1994. Its demise was attributed to sparse activity and a balance that didn't work, with too few sought-after "big names" participating. Additionally, rumor was that some seekers actually declined blurb offers from authors they didn't feel "important" enough. However, the concept sparks enough interest that a number of Ninc members expressed interest in participating in a similar service, if one were initiated.

"Editors want blurbs from best-sellers. Period," says Pat Rice. "Bestsellers would spend the rest of their lives reading manuscripts from neophytes to make up the demand. What would the neophytes do in return? It's not as if the bestsellers need blurbs."

Which is why the *WSJ* reports Margaret Atwood stopped giving blurbs ten years ago, and will only blurb dead authors in the future.

According to the same article,

"...a worthy enhancement to the erudite editions authors add to their blurbulous bookstacks..."

— Library Ledger

Bill Thomas, Jonathan Lethem's Doubleday editor, banned the author from blurbing "in hopes of speeding up delivery of his forthcoming novel."

Is it churlish to say no, or—as one senior editor terms it—obnoxious? "It's tough to sell books," she says. "As a community, we need to support others. Part of that is giving blurbs. I dislike it when authors who received blurbs early in

their career categorically refuse. Obnoxious, in my opinion."

On the other hand, Linda Howard cites the new author mentioned in the *WSJ* article, who thought it the responsibility of the established writers to lend a hand to the newer ones. "Get real," Howard says. "My responsibility as a writer is to write the best book I can. If I blurb, it's because I want to, not because I'm obliged."

The topic of blurb specificity had the Ninc members and editors who

"...polemic of truly epic proportions, grand in scope, sweeping in scale..."

— Kitty Karenina

spoke to the subject split down the middle. While Linda Howard requires her blurbs be book specific, Judith Bowen doesn't believe that a blurb is designed to be tied to a specific book, as a review is, but rather given "more to support an author's style/voice/craft/talent/etc."

John Scognamiglio calls generic blurbs "dirty pool," saying, "Each blurb should relate to that specific book." A senior editor at another house thinks generic blurbs are fine, if they are about the author. "It's wrong to mislead a bookbuyer into thinking that the blurb is about one book when it was written about another. If it's 'this author is great,' then that seems fine to me."

Dixie Browning, whose editors still pull from her file—and use—past blurbs from "some high flyers," says she is embar-

rassed by the practice, for two reasons. "I haven't asked permission to re-use them and I don't like to put other authors in an awkward position by asking."

Denise Dietz makes it clear she won't give generic blurbs, and spells out her other basic blurbing rules. "I want to know if the author has read my books (you'd be surprised... maybe you wouldn't). If I'm not fa-

miliar with the publisher, I want to know if the book has been edited by someone other than the author—75% of the time that kills the request," she said.

Which brings up requests from vanity published writers. One Ninc member has refused at least three such requests. "I simply explain that as an author working with a "real" publisher, I'm sorry, but I can't do it. None of them objected strongly."

Of all the opinions expressed on this hot topic, there was one that re-

fused to be reduced to several quotes, or even several paragraphs. This long, thoughtful and provocative reply from NYT bestseller Diane Mott Davidson appears in its entirety as a sidebar to this article.

Finally, if you are wondering which blurb won Alex Good's first "Puffy" in 2000 (and remains his favorite awardee to date) it is Dionne Brand's on Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*:

"Lightstreaked in tenderness, syntaxed with a radiant humanity, *Anil's Ghost* is a great book of our time. Ondaatje's characters, intimately drawn, intricately gestured, navigate a world in which ultimately 'only stone and rock can hold one person's loss and another's beauty forever.' His imperishable words caress, and sing over bones. Bones wrapped in disappearances, felt in haunting absences. As in a line Neruda once wrote, Ondaatje cups his hands around the live coal of life."

NINK

Karen Katz writes nonfiction as Karen A. Katz and as Karen Tintori. She and partner Jan Greenberg/Jill Gregory write fiction together as Jillian Karr. While Karen may forget who she is on a given afternoon, she'll never run short of alter egos eager to blurb her latest tome.

An Open Letter about Blurbing

Dear Karen,

Thanks for your e-mail, and for your willingness to write what I believe is an extremely important article.

Initially, I had trouble getting any blurb for my first culinary mystery, *Catering to Nobody*. St. Martin's sent me a form that said in effect: Are there any authors whom you feel would be willing to blurb this book? In my naivete, I gave them a list of ten or so authors. The galleys went out; nobody replied. Then my excellent agent, Sandra Dijkstra, asked Sue Grafton (not a client of hers) to blurb the book...and Sue did. I was and remain extremely thankful for that endorsement.

I was eager to return the favor once anyone asked me for a blurb. I am a slow reader, but I was determined to be helpful, as Sue had been for me. (I did wonder if I would ever actually become well enough known for someone to ask me for a blurb.) Still, after my third book was published (1993), I began receiving requests. I read books and wrote blurbs, read books and wrote blurbs. What was a trickle of galleys from other authors became a stream, then a river, then an avalanche. I began to think, When is this going to end?

Worse, by the time my fourth book came out, whenever I would go anywhere—a writers' conference, a signing for a friend—authors whom I barely knew would corner me and ask for a blurb (almost always in a very demanding way). To keep from getting slammed, I began to avoid writers' get-togethers.

After I had done approximately thirty blurbs, I began to feel that whatever debt I had to beginning writers had been paid. Unfortunately, no one said, "You've done enough, now you can concentrate on your work and go back to reading the books you choose." And that's the problem. When do you earn your "blurb badge" and get to quit? The answer is: you don't.

Then things began to get even worse. Because I was slowing down on my blurbing, and because I was avoiding writers' get-togethers, writers who wanted blurbs from me got more creative in their requests. Editors whom I had never heard of would send me manuscripts via Fed-Ex,

demanding a quick turnaround for the blurb. One arrived on Christmas Eve, with the request that the blurb be back by January 1. (Why do these people want blurbs from me? I kept wondering. It's not as if I'm Danielle Steel or Tony Hillerman.) But I found out the answer to that, and it's a painful disclosure: editors "flood" published authors with a particular ms. Then they see what blurbs come in, and choose the ones from the most famous authors. Several times, I've read an entire manuscript, given a blurb (for which the editor or author professed to be thankful)...only to see my blurb bumped off the jacket because they got some "really big" authors to blurb the book.

Please don't get me wrong: I still believe that it is extremely important to be encouraging and supportive of beginning writers. I do several workshops and conferences each year, and treasure seeing that spark in new writers' eyes when they produce something they're excited about. Unfortunately, it is hard to keep your *own* spark when the demands for help begin caving in your front door.

When I had done forty blurbs, I said, "Stick me with a fork, I'm *done*, unless the request is directly from my own agent or editor and I have time to read the book." Sadly, when you don't respond to blurb requests anymore, new writers will begin to gossip about you and say (to anyone who will listen) that you're an uncaring bitch. (Writers who don't give blurbs are viewed as "churlish," according to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*.) One has to develop a thick skin. This can be difficult for a writer, because our emotional vulnerability is often the creative wellspring from which we draw to write our books.

Several other issues/developments deserve mention. One is that a beginning writer will sometimes latch onto a friend of the published writer from whom s/he wants a blurb. The beginning writer then goes to this friend and pleads his/her case, or weeps uncontrollably, or repeats some of the gossip about that "uncaring bitch who won't blurb anymore." (I've had all three.) The friend, wanting to "help" this new writer, puts pressure on the writer to give a blurb. (I admit it, I've caved. But no more.)

Another extremely unwelcome development is some agents' current practice of sending new writers' *unsold*

manuscripts to published writers, in order to get blurbs that will help sell the book. In a recent interview published in our Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers newsletter, an agent said she would not take on new authors who were unwilling to go out and get endorsements (for the unpublished manuscript!) from published writers. In other words, writers are being asked to do the agents' job. Not only is this heinous, it is downright dangerous for published writers to be reading unpublished work that they could then be accused of plagiarizing.

Finally, there is the whole issue of self-published books. The authors of these books sell them online. The self-pubbed writers will beg for blurbs because getting a blurb is "the only way they can sell the book." This puts the published writer in a very precarious position, because the blurb then becomes the *only* marketing device for a book that no agent or mainstream publisher would touch.

I would like to see a new etiquette of blurbing. Some aspects of this might be:

- 1) A new author would never ask an author directly (either in person or by mail, e-mail, or phone) or indirectly "through a friend" for a blurb—the request would come from the agent or editor;
- 2) A new author would graciously accept an author's unwillingness to blurb;
- 3) The practice of sending unpublished manuscripts

to published authors for a blurb to help sell the book would stop immediately;

4) There would be a standard in the industry for when a published author has blurbed enough;

5) There would be a way to insure that all blurbs received by a publisher would make it onto the jacket;

6) A new author would be grateful for the blurb and at a minimum, write a thank-you note to the author who did the blurbing, and send him/her a signed copy of the book. (Some authors I've blurbed have not only been ungrateful for the blurb, they've then expected me to purchase their book.)

It pains me to write much of this. I cannot emphasize enough how important I believe it is to be loving and giving. Not only does such support help the recipient, giving affection and offering support enriches the *giver*. But there comes a point, and I think we're there in this blurbing madness, where we must say, "No, thank you," or "I'm unable to do this now, but thank you for thinking of me," without being regarded as arrogant, self-centered, bitchy, churlish, etc.

I'm eager to hear what my fellow members of Ninc think on this issue! Thank you for giving me a chance to share my thoughts.

All the best,
Diane Mott Davidson

Bits'n'Pieces

EDITORS, EDITORS... A sad but fond farewell to **Ann LaFarge**, formerly with Kensington. You were one of my daughter's favorite dinner companions; she'd have written for you in a heartbeat because according to her, you were "the best one." As a long-time Novelists, Inc. member, though, I hope you've got the time now to get back to your own writing! **On The Bouncing Editor Front...** NAL, the publisher that just dumped a bunch of people last month (well, as of August and September), has now brought in a bunch of *new* people, fueling speculation that *something is up*. Bantam editor Anne Bohner is now at NAL, as is former editor turned agent for the Rotrosen Agency, Kara Cesare. And then we've also got Berkley's Martha Bushko moving over to NAL, as well as Avon romance program PR person Donita Dooley. So let's all just hold onto our hats, submit those proposals and see what happens now, shall we. ;-))

AND SPEAKING OF MOVEMENT... Agent Jenny Bent, formerly with Harvey Klinger, has joined Trident Media Group. Her best-known clients include Sweet Potato Queen Jill Conner Browne and Girls' Action Adventure Club author Laurie Notaro.

PROMO OP... Independent bookstore **Pages for all Ages** would like to put up a romance display. Ellen Willcox requests authors send cover flats or display items for the romance area. Upcoming releases or books just out are obviously best. Contact Ellen at: Ellen Willcox, Pages for all Ages, 1201 Savoy Plaza, Savoy, IL 61874—and many thanks to Ninc member Kathy Grill for the information!

Filed by Terey daly Ramin

“We are standing on sacred ground.”

Hank was his name, and the sacred ground he spoke of was a hot dusty cow pasture in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. He had traveled all the way from Pennsylvania by bus to hear the plaintive, insistent rhythms of a distinctive brand of music known as the Delta blues.

“I come here (to the Delta Blues Festival) every year. This is Christmas for me,” Hank told me while **Lil Bill Wallace** leaned over his guitar, tore music from its throat, and cast it to his audience, who sat on bales of hay underneath a torn blue tarpaulin. The tarp had been hastily erected that morning on rough-hewn posts to keep the sun from roasting the spectators crowded around the Juke House stage.

“I feel like I’m in the beer commercial, not just watching,” Hank added, capturing not only the gut-punched feeling of the music, but the ambience of the small unadorned wooden stage so close to the audience a performer (**Jerry Kattawar**) could lean down and drawl, *“Bring me that cell phone, darlin’. I’m tryin’ to make music up here.”*

Every year fans from around the world converge on Greenville, Mississippi for this gathering of bluesmen. Lil Bill Wallace is one of the few remaining original Delta bluesmen, and although he has had a stroke that stole his voice, he still comes to this annual feast for the senses to play his guitar.

“People here mix like Crown and Coke” is the way the manager of the Juke House stage described what was happening on that September Saturday when the music inspired an old man with a walking cane to do the slow drag with a young woman in backless high heels and a party dress that swung in all four directions as she moved.

The manager of the Juke House stage was none other than **Jerry Kattawar**, who wrote such famous bebop songs as “Rollin’ on the River” and “Ride, Sally, Ride.”

Like most of the bluesmen, Jerry learned partially by oral transmission—listening to and playing with other musicians. He says he was raised with B. B. King and Eddie Cusic, and in the early days before Elvis became King, he played with Elvis Presley.

Jerry made the piano walk and talk when it was his turn to perform, while the old man in creased overalls continued his slow shag, using his walking cane as if it were a third dancing leg. The old man was **A. C. Love** of Birmingham, Alabama, and although he was a bluesman, the only performance he did that day was his impromptu dance with the young woman in the swinging party dress, who turned out to be **Eden Brent**.

Eden was once described by her mentor Abie “Boogaloo” Ames, as “the only white woman (he) ever heard who could play and sing black.” If you didn’t see Eden with her hands flying across the ivories and her head thrown back belting the blues, you’d swear you were listening to a whiskey-voiced, fifty-something black woman who cut her teeth on cigarettes and blues.

Eden and Boogaloo used to travel around the country singing the blues, but he died two years ago and now she performs solo. And what a performance it was—music straight from her heart to the heart of her listener. After her gig was over, she hiked her dress up and clambered back on stage at Jerry Kattawar’s invitation to join him at the keyboard.

“Most folks just bit the keys and let

the hammer strike the strings, but I reach into the piano, bring the music to me and then give it to the people.” That’s the way Jerry described his performance after he left the stage to **Bobby Whalen and The Lady’s Choice Band**.

“You know what the blues is?” Whalen asked his audience, and everybody there nodded *yes*. To some it’s that lonesome ache you get when you think about lost love. To others it’s a broken-down car and a bird dog with fleas. To novelists it’s the book we know would make the *NY Times* list if only some publisher would buy it. To Jerry Whalen it’s *“when you bring home your pay check and give it to your wife and she gives it to some other man.”*

To **Eddie Cusic** it’s a way of life. Born in Leland, Mississippi to a dirt-poor family of sharecroppers, Eddie’s first guitar was a piece of baling wire strung across the barn wall. He used a broken bottle neck to create the lyrical whining of his first blues. On fire with the music he heard at juke joints along the Sunflower River, he eventually saved enough money to buy a Gene Autry guitar from Sears-Roebuck. At the age of twenty, Eddie set out playing at parties, in dark, hot country stores and anywhere else he could earn a dime.

One of a dying breed of blues traditionalists who played with such greats as John Lee Hooker, Eddie had to give up his beloved blues in order to support his family. *“I couldn’t pay my bills. I laid down my guitar and quit. My only claim to fame is that I taught Little Milton (Campbell) to play the blues.”*

“I didn’t pick up my guitar for twenty-five years.” Eddie Cusic’s story is the tragedy of art. It was not lack of talent or style that stilled his voice, but

simple economics.

Fortunately, Eddie came back. After twenty-five years of silence, he retired from cutting stone in a government quarry and picked up his guitar. He was rediscovered and finally cut his first record.

"Has the music changed over the years?" I asked, and he told me, "It's

still the same song. You just rewind the old songs."

Then I asked him the question we've all heard a million times, "Where do you get your inspiration?" And this grizzled old bluesman who still lives in a modest little house behind a feed and grain store in the Mississippi Delta gave me a perfect description

of the creative process: "I think about hard times, is how I get my blues. I pull out songs with feelin' in them. My songs make people feel good, make 'em cry. They solve problems... I don't know. Nobody's been able to figure out the blues." **NINK**

Writer's Review



Lessons from a Writing Life, Pencil Dancing

Pencil Dancing by Mari Messer

REVIEWED BY JANELLE CLARE SCHNEIDER

Five years ago, *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron pulled me out of a creative slump so deep I was sure I'd never write again. Since then, I've gone through creative peaks and valleys, and Julia Cameron's writings have remained within easy reach of my writing desk.

Then three months ago, I discovered *Pencil Dancing* by Mari Messer. Where Cameron emphasizes the mystical nature of creativity and offers exercises designed to entice creativity out of hiding, Mari Messer's book reconnected me with the pure fun of creativity while maintaining connection with the need to harness that creativity into something which helps pay the bills.

Pencil Dancing hooked me through the introductory section entitled "How To Use This Book." The author says this book "can be used in countless creative ways, just as a screwdriver can be used not only to tighten screws but to make holes for planting seedlings or to wedge a stuck window . . . there's no one right way." Those are comforting words I need as I continue the everlasting juggle of life, family, and writing.

Messer's self-stated goal is to "explode the myths of creativity." She begins by examining how we look at time, creative space, and "the innovative self in each of us." The first assignment she gives is "question everything." For example, it seems to be an eternal truth that snow is white. If, however, you look at it at dusk, it appears blue or purple.

Further chapters outline the eight characteristics of a creative person, "going into your egg," and the balance between activity and rest. Rather than advocating a single type of journal, and a single time of day for writing in it, Messer encourages an artist to use several—a daily two-line journal, a notebook for writing anything and everything, a collection of scratchpads, and a rough draft pad. This is followed by an entire chapter devoted to "getting it wrong the first time," using the image of the rusty water which primes a hand-operated pump.

The middle section discusses polishing powers of observation and using all our senses in the process of creation, as well as feelings, memories, and both sides of the brain. Individual chapters deal with focusing on detail, practicing extended observation, and "thinking like an alien." Of the process of creation, she says, "Our downfall is not to have narrow vision but to fall in love with that vision so we can't see a situation from any other point of view."

The final section addresses "the nagging logical mind" as well as "fears and other gremlins." Logical mind can get in the way of true creativity, she claims, by trying to control the process. "The process itself can teach if we loosen our stranglehold enough to let it."

Then she addresses the gremlins which interfere with our creativity. "The creative act generates fear and anxiety just as surely as hot asphalt summons heat ghosts. No matter how broad and deep your experience, there's always a gremlin of fear lurking under the next briar bush, waiting to pounce and paralyze."

This is followed by my favorite chapter in the entire book, a discussion of the chaos stage of creativity. "In simple terms, chaos is the storm before



Writer's Review



the calm, an uncomfortable layer every creative act goes through to reach the aha! of a new idea, a new piece of writing or work of art. If you didn't enter the chaos layer, the strange disquieting place you've never been before, your creation would be condemned to repeat the same old boring, trite repetitive stuff."

The introduction concludes with these words: "What you will read in this book is sometimes diffuse,

overlapping, and seemingly contradictory. That's as it should be. Creativity can't be grasped directly and tied in neat bundles—that's why people call it 'sideways thinking.' There are no step-by-step directions."

Those words fit me like the comfy pair of sweat pants which form the basis of my writing uniform. They'll stretch and move with me as I continue to exercise my creative compulsions.



Lessons from a Writing Life by Terry Brooks

REVIEWED BY JANELLE CLARE SCHNEIDER

This book only ended up on my shelf because someone in my favorite writer's group was going to do a book study on it. I'd never heard of Terry Brooks (yes, I'm blushing) and don't typically read in the fantasy genre. After reading *Lessons from a Writing Life*, I'm ready to go look for the Shannara series. Remarkably easy reading, *Lessons* feels like a personal memoir with the "writing lessons" woven almost invisibly throughout.

Brooks begins by giving an overview of his start in fiction writing. He acknowledges that his beginnings seem like something from a fantasy. However, as he points out later in the book, the difference between a one-book wonder and writer with a long-term career is mastery of the craft. The tone and style of this book alone show that Brooks has definitely mastered the craft. One of the chapters I found most interesting is entitled "It's Not About You." The introductory paragraph reads, "The point of book signings is not to make you feel good about yourself. It is not to rack up huge sales of your work . . ." His opinions about what book signings are really about gave me a whole new perspective on an experience I've been determined to avoid.

In the middle of the book, he discusses the continuing question: To outline or not to outline? This is followed by a chapter on the importance of "dream time," the hours we spend thinking about our stories without writing anything down. Brooks' 10 Rules for

Good Writing are presented so conversationally I forgot I was reading a list.

Terry Brooks has written two movie adaptations, one of which was one of his worst experiences ever, and the other one of his best. Without tossing insults or casting blame, he speaks candidly about what made the one experience terrible, and the other terrific.

He also talks about finding one's voice, changing one's genre or writing style, and the importance of making the beginning and ending strong enough to anchor the story arc as a whole. One of the later chapters reveals what he thinks is the most striking similarity between his writing and that of J. R. R. Tolkien.

Woven throughout the book are Brooks' comments about his family. Not only does he speak affectionately of his wife (who seems to have the exceptional fortitude required for living with and loving a writer), but he also passes along the lessons he's learned from his almost five-year-old grandson.

I would recommend *Lessons from a Writing Life* to writers not yet published, as well as to those with established careers. It's the kind of book I know I'll read repeatedly, gleaning new insights with each reading. The final chapter features this thought: "If you do not hear music in your words, you have put too much thought into your writing and not enough heart."

Janelle Clare Schneider lives in Ontario, Canada, with her hero-husband, two children, and two dogs. She hopes eventually to learn enough about writing to write a few "Lessons" of her own.



Revitalizing the Writer...

Slam Dunk!

"There is no stage of the writing process that doesn't challenge every aspect of a writer's personality."

— Betsy Lerner

The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers

George RR Martin, best-selling Fantasy writer, '03 Worldcon keynote speaker, television producer and story editor of the 80's very original, forward thinking *Beauty and the Beast* and the 90's *Doorways*, will be joining us. We'll be doing a Q & A session with him. You'll be charged by his energy. For a taste of what I mean, visit his website www.georgerrmartin.com

Are we done? Our line-up of speakers is in place: Harlequin CEO Donna Hayes, writers Tony Hillerman, Laura Kinsale, Miriam Sagen, David Morrell, George RR Martin, *Curandera* Elena Avila, *PW* Executive Editor Daisy Maryles and spiritual counselor, medicine man Bear Heart. We have an incredible setting—New Mexico. And we have the company of writers—to date, over one hundred of our members.

There's nothing left for the planning committee to do but focus on making this retreat the best experience it can be. We're up for the task. Night Owls are being organized by Barbara Samuel, and our Registrar and New Mexico guide Laura Baker is always coming up with amazing ideas to add to the quality of the retreat.

Prices go up. Sorry, it's got to be done. November 30 is the cut off date for the \$275 price. The retreat goes up to \$295 December 1. Bishop's Lodge's fantastic room rate disappears January 5. We are lining up overflow hotels in case we sell out the Lodge, so don't hesitate to join us.

You're signed up! Now what? Familiarize yourself with the work of our guest writers. Read *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice for Writers* by agent/writer Betsy Lerner. The first half of this book is a provocative examination of author personality styles that can cause a writer to derail her own career. *NINK* columnist and therapist Annette Carney will lead a discussion of the book focusing on how to rout out career-killing traits.

Plenty of room for a Tuesday afternoon tour.

Tuesday will be a free afternoon. We want you to have time. You can write, shop, nap, or take advantage of one of the tours we're offering. Details are on the Web site or you can e-mail me at revitalize@ninc.com and I'll fax you the info.

So, here we go—into the homeward stretch. We hope you can join us. This promises to be an energizing experience.

— Cathy Maxwell, Retreat Coordinator

Joining Us in Santa Fe? Sign Up for Tuesday, March 9 Optional Tours Registration

Please use this separate registration form for these tours and note the deadline of **February 16**, when the registration must be **received**. Make checks payable to **Novelists Inc** and mail to: **Laura Baker, 12301 Cedar Ridge Dr. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87112**. Contact Laura with any questions: registration@ninc.com.

Name:

Address:

E-mail

Phone

Tour:

Bandelier National Monument \$65

Abiquiu Afternoon \$65

High Road to Chimayo \$45

**Walking Tour of the
Santa Fe Historic District** \$10

Please note: We have a cancellation deadline with Cynthia, which is based on a minimum number of people registering for each tour.

Your check will be returned to you if we must cancel a tour and, hopefully, you can reschedule for another.



Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

VRS can just KMA

Voice recognition software. Hah. All my well-meaning and sadistic friends who know I have carpal tunnel thought they were doing me a favor. Get that dragon thing. It's totally cool. You'll love it. Once you learn it, you'll think it's the best thing since computers. Well, I hate computers and have yet to learn them, too, so I should have known. But no, I'm a trusting soul. So here's how my writing day went while using it (once).

ME: The day dawned cold and rainy.

IT: the day dawned cold and rainy period

ME: No, you idiot. Capitalize "the" and don't type comma. Insert a comma.

IT: no, you idiot period capitalize quote the unquote and don't type comma period insert a comma period

ME: Look, you farging bastage, I know all that. Just type what I say.

IT: look comma you farging bastage comma i am just typing what you say period

ME: What's with all the periods and commas? What the hell do you think you are—a telegram?

IT: what the hell do you think you are dash a telegram question mark

ME: Smart ass. Let's try this again.

IT: you're the smart ass period we can try it again comma but i don't think you're smart enough to use me...period

ME: I'm plenty smart enough, you piece of dog doo. You're the idiot who doesn't know a colon from a hole in the ground.

IT: oh yeah question mark, belligerent tone

Me: Yeah.

IT: yeah period.

ME: Ha! I won. So here we go again. The day dawned cold and rainy....

IT: ha exclamation point i won period so here we go again the day dawned cold and rainy, followed by cutesy little punctuation to try to throw me period

ME: All right, dip wad, let's go another route.

IT: whatever.

ME: I didn't say whatever.

IT: i didn't say whatever period.

ME: You did so. It's right there on the page.

IT: you did so period it's right there on the page period

ME: I hate you.

IT: i hate you period.

ME: Exclamation point, actually.

IT: exclamation point comma actually period

ME: I think I know what's going on here.

IT: i think i know what-apostrophe-s is going on here period

ME: You were invented by someone's ten-year-old brother to taunt us all by repeating everything we say, right?

IT: maybe

ME: I'm going to tell Mom.

IT: i'm going to tell mom period but you better not because i'll tell her all the names you called me.

ME: Oh, yeah? Like what?

IT: idiot dog doo dip wad smart ass farging bastage.

ME: Ha! Farging and bastage aren't even words.

IT: mom will think so.

ME: I see you can punctuate when you want to, you little tur—never mind.

IT: i thought so. so do you want to write a book or not?

ME: I would love to. Truce?

IT: truce.

ME: The day dawned cold and rainy.

IT: the day dawned warm and sunny, you ice-hole.

The author would have you know the dragon has been vanquished—stomped into a mud hole and left at the curb where it belongs. I'll just type and hurt. It's easier.



Dare Not to Compare

Dear Annette:

I'm forever comparing myself to other writers and coming up short. There's always something they've done better than I have. They've won more awards, have better contracts, smarter agents, or nicer editors. My own career is going well, but I can't quit dwelling on what's going better for somebody else. I'm sick of spending so much energy comparing myself to others. I can feel it lowering my self-esteem, but I can't seem to stop.

Signed, The Grass is Always Greener

Dear Grass:

Envy's a big bad monster to tackle, especially in 750 words, but I've got a couple of ideas.

Believing in Your Own Success:

Envy comes from insecurity. We don't envy what we're not lacking. Think about it: in areas of your life where you're truly happy and have a strong sense of self-esteem, I doubt you compare yourself to others.

So, my first question to you would be: have you thought about what reasonable, attainable writing success would look like for you? And most importantly, *do you believe you can attain it?*

If you have a clear picture of where *you* want to go, and you feel like you have a reasonable expectation of getting there, it won't matter nearly so much that Lulu Bestseller who started as an unpub in your critique group is heading off to Hollywood.

Okay, but what if you *don't* believe your goals are achievable? Then either the goals, or your beliefs about them, need to change. This is the part that takes time, self-honesty, and a whole lot of struggle for most people.

The truth is, some of us do need to lower our expectations. Perfectionist tendencies often go along with envy. The last thing I want to do is discourage anyone from striving, but some people simply set the bar way too high. If being the next Stephen King, John Grisham, or Nora Roberts is the only way you're going to feel like a success, you may be in for a long, long wait—and a lot of professional jealousy while you're twiddling your thumbs.

Life Outside of Writing:

This is an area that can get pretty darn touchy. Sometimes people focus their anger/envy on things in one area of their life because it's less painful than facing issues in other arenas. I've had many clients who seem to focus an inordinate amount of emotion and attention on work-related envy when, from my perspective, things at home sound like they're running about as smoothly as a car with two flat tires.

Taking an honest inventory of things in the rest of your life might help. Are you generally happy in most other areas of your existence? If not, I doubt feelings of jealousy are going to go away without some fair-sized changes.

No News Is Good News:

Okay here's where I get to do my Dr. Phil imitation... Stop checking out other writers so much. I mean it. Sure, it's important to stay on top of the market and the business of writing to a certain extent. But too much information can be deadly. And we all have our own threshold. I would strongly recommend doing your best to stay away from information about other writers as much as possible. Clearly, at this point in your career it's doing more damage than good.

Not that you hadn't already figured that out. But I bet you're not doing it, are you?

I play a lot of competitive tennis (at a laughably low level). Early in my so-called career I spent far too much time reading the local tennis rag, poring over the latest tournament results, and comparing myself (unfavorably, of course) with other players. There was always someone who'd won one more tournament than I had, or a new player who came out of nowhere and cut a swath through us middle-aged women vying for the engraved silver plates. And every time that happened, I brooded over how unfair it was that I could spend so many hours perfecting my game, only to see some hacker with a bad serve and a truly gawdawful backhand rise in the rankings.

Several years ago I stopped (checking out other players, not playing tennis). Since then, I can tell you I've been playing the best tennis of my life. I've reached my highest ranking, and best of all, I'm having the most fun.

I think there's a lesson about envy in there somewhere...

Annette Carney

You can "Ask Annette," in strict confidence, at one of these contacts: e-mail: annettecarney@sbcglobal.net, fax: 775-746-4560; phone: 775-323-0445.

The Comeback Kid

From Burnout to “She’s Baaaaaaaaaaaaacccckkk”

BY LORETTA CHENAKI, AKA LORETTA CHASE

My last new book came out in 1998. My next will be out in 2004.

In between was *burnout*. That sounds so dramatic, so meteor-like: a trail of flames, a crash, then a small, sad heap of ashes.

The reality was more like a battery wearing down, or maybe like one of the crazy clocks in our house (all the clocks are insane, even the atomic one, and tell their own time) that for reasons of its own will begin spinning counter-clockwise.

Burnout is a running-out-of-steam, a blank space in the writing life. The Why varies: catastrophes personal and/or professional, physical/mental exhaustion, long-term failure to replenish the mysterious fuels necessary to creativity, overburdened lives, stress and/or discouragement, miscellaneous muse-killers.

In my case, the sky started falling as I was finishing what turned out to be my most popular, most award-winning book. There was my father’s slow deterioration after a stroke, then his death from cancer. There were my own health problems, along with congenital mental health problems like perfectionism and insecurity and *I have no talent* or *I did have it and ran out* panic attacks. But I was still functioning as a writer. Not until my beloved editor—whom I’d known since my early Regency days—decided to take a breather from the publishing treadmill did I truly begin to lose heart. Maybe because of my training as a corporate scriptwriter, I viewed my editor as an integral part of the writing process. (Copy editors are another story.) Anyway, seeing the forest for the trees is not one of my talents, and I felt lost without her wisdom and insight. That’s about when the ugliness started: the obsessive revising, discarding, rewriting, and the spirit-killing discontent, frustration, and sense of futility.

Six years later, it’s hard to put events in order, or even remember them all. This may not really matter. Maybe only the quantity of unhappiness matters. For instance, we all have gripes about publishers and/or agents. We also know it’s possible to cope with these annoyances, and still function. But the minor irritants grow monstrous and intolerable when too many other things are broken or going wrong, like the demented clock whirling backwards.

The day it stops dead, though, we notice. For me, it happened late in 1997. I said “!&@# this,” threw the WIP—#3 of a three-book contract—into a box, and shoved it into a

dark corner of the basement. This, naturally, led to a parting of ways with my publisher and, some years later, my agent.

Those early months brought an exhilarating sense of freedom. Close behind loomed Fear. For the last twelve years I’d been an Author. Who was I when I wasn’t writing?

That question went unanswered, mainly because the not-writing-at-all phase didn’t last long. It was too *weird*. After fiddling with fiction ideas that went nowhere, I succumbed to use-it-or-lose-it fear, and reverted to my former incarnation: corporate scriptwriter. This work does not require one to go on regular expeditions into the hidden depths of one’s soul. It also pays better. Having a spouse who was president and part owner of a good-sized media production company helped. His connections could bring me all the work I wanted. Or, if I didn’t want any, his paycheck took care of things.

Mostly, he got to take care of things. I gardened. Went to museums. Left town often. Took pictures with my tiny camera. Read murder mysteries. Became fatally addicted to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I read *The Artist’s Way* and even did the exercises, but this is not the sort of thing I can do for long with a straight face. *Buffy* was much better therapy, because there was a lot more killing.

But corporate writing—and the endless meetings, conference calls, e-mails, and all parties changing their minds one hundred eighty-seven times (this is why it pays so well)—soon lost its appeal.

I embarked upon a book dealing with death and evil things in the dark.

Interesting, isn’t it, how not writing wasn’t an option. But why did this surprise me? Since first becoming sentient, I’ve been making up stories in my head. As soon as the pencil in my grimy little fist could spell out actual words, I was writing those stories down. By fifth grade, I’d already faced artistic rejection, thanks to a Girl Scout troop leader who failed to see the Shakespearean quality of my twenty-three-act play. By age seventeen, I’d embarked upon the first of what would be six or seven hundred attempts at the Great American Novel.

Anyway, the death-and-dark-things book went through several versions during the next year or two (and bore an interesting resemblance to the GAN). It eventually made its way to a few agents (by this time I was agent-free), who declined the honor, some graciously, some not. Well, that was annoying, but so was being a literary genius Girl Scout among Philistines. I wrote yet another version.

This should have been another clue. You can lose the joy

of creating. You can find only blank space where once you had more ideas than time to write them. Yet something of who and what made you a writer in the first place remains—the need to do it, the willingness to continue, no matter how many times or how hard They knock you down. The will and ability may remain dormant for a time—years, even—but the light does not, as you feared it would, go out entirely.

So I persevered. Then, a month before September 11, my husband's successful, happy, much-admired company died suddenly—an early casualty of the tech crash.

My death-and-dark-things novel became the next casualty. Agents weren't breaking down my door and wouldn't unless they saw me as the next Stephen King or Anne Rice. My book simply wasn't at that level, and I no longer had the luxury of trying again.

We had a mortgage to pay, and utility bills. In short, I had to *get a job*. And it was either more corporate writing (No! No! Anything but that!) or returning to romance...where I'd broken down and fallen apart and to which I'd vowed never to return. Not to mention I'd been out of the picture for several years, during which time publishers had been swallowing each other, and the midlist was facing the same fate as the dodo.

On the other hand, I had writer friends who, during the long drought, introduced me to their agents, phoned other authors for the scoop on *their* agents, and talked me up to editors. At Ninc conferences and via e-mail my friends and colleagues offered shoulders to cry on, ears to rant and rave into, commiseration, advice, and solid help. And this time, when I began discussions with an agent, I had a list of her Ninc clients, who graciously let me interrogate them via e-mail.

Meanwhile, my husband—who'd been my favorite producer in my early days of video scriptwriting—was now available to play something like his old role. He helped me construct the main plot of a new historical romance, and quieted my jitters. And those brainstorming sessions reminded me (a) why I married him and (b) how much fun it is to create terrible conflicts for Love to conquer.

By the spring of 2002, thanks to this amazing support system, I had a terrific new agent who helped me hammer my proposal into shape, then went out and negotiated a great contract. And despite the usual insecurities and anxieties—and the unusual one of not having written a historical romance in five years—I finished the first book of the contract, and have embarked on the second. Meanwhile, my husband's been doing some consulting and a lot of saving the world, i.e., giving his business savvy away free to local nonprofits and bringing back our local "art" cinema from the brink of death. He's so happy.

And me? The other day I was tearing my hair out about cover copy. Any minute now I will have to face the darkest of evil things, the dreaded *copy edit*. I'm five chapters behind where I ought to be.

Boy, it's great to be back.

NINK

Loretta is happy to report that the copy edit of her new historical romance, Miss Wonderful, resulted in only minor casualties. She does not know when or why people started tacking the "e" onto the end of chaperon, and wants them to stop it. Now. She also thinks she better come clean about a recent unsavory development: her husband got a job...as a publisher.

Bits'n'Pieces

AND HERE'S A PLAN FOR YA... According to the *Seattle Times* Eastside bureau, there'll be no more semiannual scramble for the 80,000 cheap books unwanted by the King County Library System, no sirree Bob, huh unh. Why? Because they're puttin' that orgy up on the WWW in the virtual marketplace and opening it up to the whole international system of orgies and teaming up with Amazon to sell the books, that's why. (Oh, yeah, and you thought we were gonna go a month without the big A, didn't you? HA!) "Whereas we loved the book sale, it has become a difficult thing to sustain because of the sheer volume of books and the amount of time it took to hold the sales," said library spokeswoman Marsha Iverson. Library officials admit this will allow them to raise the money with less effort, but that it will naturally make the cheap books more expensive and the shopping experience less memorable. Oh heck. Who really wants to be camped outside the library doors at 6 a.m. to buy bags of books for a few bucks anyway...

~ TdR

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Moderators:

If You Have Questions, E-Mail:

Brenda Hiatt-Barber	BrendaHB@aol.com
Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@comcast.net



Love and Death

BY LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS

Last month I mentioned in passing that my father did not like horror. There's a bit more to the story than that. You see, my mother was a horror fan—but for the first twenty-five years of my life I didn't know that, because my father wasn't.

Both my parents were avid readers, always had been. They both loved mysteries and science fiction, but read widely, both fiction and nonfiction; both of them came from book-loving families, as well. I grew up in a house filled with books, thousands of them—novels and poetry and dictionaries and histories, 19th-century limited editions bound in leather and gold leaf and cheap crumbling paperbacks, everything from Jane Austen to Roger Zelazny. There were a few horror titles in the mix, but only a very few; I remember asking my father what he thought of one of them, an anthology entitled *Brrr!*, and getting a disdainful response. He clearly didn't care for horror per se at all.

But in 1980 my father died.

I was living in Kentucky at the time, a thousand miles away from the family home in New England; I was recently married and trying to get my nascent writing career off the ground. We didn't have much money or vacation time, so to my regret I didn't visit my mother very often.

But the next time I went back to Massachusetts I noticed something different about the old place. It took me awhile to figure out exactly what it was; the furniture was all the same, nothing had been moved or rearranged, but the house definitely looked *different* inside.

And then I figured it out. More books had been added, dozens of them.

That wasn't unusual in itself, of course; my parents had been adding books constantly since before I was born, and I was accustomed to seeing stacks of them on all sides, strewn on tables and piled atop bookcases, waiting to be shelved. It's just that when my father was alive, the books would always be colorful and varied.

These weren't. They were all fat black paperbacks with red titles—in short, they were all horror novels. My mother had apparently spent the months since my father's death buying and reading the complete works of Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and John Saul.

I'd always been vaguely aware that my mother's opinion of horror had been more positive than my father's, but I'd never realized there was *that* big a discrepancy in taste.

Maybe losing my father had as much to do with the change as her pre-existing preferences did; I mentioned last month how I tended to react to deaths in the family by writing horror stories. Somehow, though, that didn't seem likely. I never asked directly, and I doubt she'd have given me a straight answer if I had, even if she herself knew why—my mother had a way of evading subjects she didn't want to think about. I don't know her reasons; I do know that she spent the '60s and '70s reading SF and mystery, and the '80s reading horror.

I wasn't the only one who noticed; a couple of my sisters remarked on it. It wasn't a big deal, just a minor curiosity.

And then, about ten years after Dad's death, Mother, who had smoked since college, was diagnosed with cancer. She had put off seeing the doctor until it was too far along for treatment.

She died in April of 1990. None of her five surviving children was really in a position to keep the house she'd lived in since 1958, so over the summer of 1990 we cleaned the place out, dividing up the furnishings, selling or throwing away the things none of us wanted.

My parents were both pack-rats and it was a big old Victorian farmhouse, so there was a lot to go through. It took months.

And in the process my sisters and I found all the letters my parents had written to each other during World War II, when they were courting, and we read through them, and I found the beginning of the story of how Mother gave up horror for thirty-five years.

My parents were pen-pals before they ever met. My father was an orphan, his only family on this side of the Atlantic his appalling maiden aunt, and most of his friends were scattered around the world doing their part for the war effort. When he was drafted and sent to basic training in Alabama, a friend of his who knew my mother suggested she write to him, that letters from a pretty girl would keep a lonely young soldier's spirits up.

So she wrote. She was bored and lonely herself, working in a dismal law office in Philadelphia, and was happy to put hours into writing long chatty letters to a stranger—letters her children read fifty years later.

She had, the letters made clear, been a big fan of the old radio spook shows, such as “Inner Sanctum” and “Lights Out.” She didn’t mention them by name, but she made references to “our friend Raymond,” who was the host on one show, and to the famous squeaking door on “Inner Sanctum,” and the like.

These references just confused my father. He didn’t listen to radio drama or pay attention to horror in any form. He didn’t know anyone named Raymond, and wondered whether she was writing to other men and had gotten him confused with someone else. He didn’t know anything about any squeaking doors. He always hated missing out on things, and got a bit resentful. He made some remark about how he didn’t understand something she’d said, and supposed it was a reference to one of those trashy radio shows, but of course he didn’t listen to those and hoped she wasn’t a big fan of such time-wasters.

He was twenty-two, with the thoughtless arrogance of youth; I’m sure he didn’t mean any harm by it. But she was only twenty-one, an over-protected only child fresh out of college and still living with her parents, a girl who had always attended all-female schools; Gordon Evans was practically the only man her own age she knew who hadn’t already gone off to fight, who answered her letters and seemed happy to hear from her.

So she never mentioned radio shows or horror stories to him again—not in any of her letters, or ever, in all the years I knew them, for the rest of his life.

There’s something of a horror story for you, and a love story, too—a woman giving up things she enjoyed not because anyone had forced her to, but just because a young man she was falling in love with had made a casually-disparaging remark about them.

Thirty-some years later, though, when that man was gone, those black-bound paperbacks began piling up on all sides.

I would have thought that the long hiatus would have killed her interest, that after so long she would have forgotten all about it, or dismissed horror as a childhood thing she had outgrown, but no—a couple of hundred books, almost all of them now in my own library, say otherwise.

I don’t think Dad ever knew what Mother had given up for him; I think he’d have been dismayed, perhaps appalled, if he found out.

Looking back now, it’s pretty obvious to me why my father disliked horror stories while my mother loved them. He was a rationalist. Dad liked stories about heroes outwitting their opponents, solving puzzles, working out logical solutions to their problems; that’s why he was so fond of murder mysteries and “hard” science fiction. Stories about fear, about confronting problems that can’t be solved rationally, about dealing with one’s own irrational emotions, were anathema to him—he just didn’t see any point to them.

My mother was a far more visceral reader; she loved adventure stories, vicarious thrills of every sort, intense drama. Where Dad had grown up admiring Sherlock Holmes, Mother had adored Tarzan—a man unfettered by civiliza-

tion’s restraints, able to act on instinct. She wanted the strong emotion my father disdained.

And what stronger emotion is there than fear?

She liked science fiction for the adventure, mysteries for the thrill of the chase, but horror, it seems, was better than either, and when Dad was gone she went back to it.

When I was a kid, like every boy, I wanted to be like my Dad. When I started writing, I wanted to write science fiction, the sort of thing Dad loved—mysteries would have been nice too, but I’d realized early on that I couldn’t plot a decent mystery. So I wrote science fiction for awhile—but I wasn’t really all that good at it. It took years before it sank in that I’m much more my mother’s son—I’m happier writing fantasy than SF, and at home with horror, too.

So that’s the story, and I suppose in a way it has a happy ending, but oh, how I wish I could give my mother back those thirty-five years of the innocent pleasure of reading horror that she missed!

NINK

Bits'n'Pieces

PUBLISHERS AND IMPRINTS: We’re Baaaaack...Ten years after Arabesque (which they sold to BEI) Kensington is returning to the African-American genre romance market with a new line of books that will be published under their Dafina imprint. And Over At Harlequin... **CHRISTIAN CHICK LIT.** *Publishers Weekly* reported Harlequin Steeple Hill is launching a new imprint aimed at the religion market, but borrowing from Harlequin’s Red Dress Ink imprint’s expertise in the chick lit market. The tagline for the new imprint is “Life, Faith, and Getting It Right,” coined by the imprint’s new Associate Editor Farrin Jacobs, who along with Steeple Hill’s senior editor Joan Marlow Golan, is part of the five-person team launching the new line. Voice, the mainstay of chick lit, is the key, while premarital sex and four-letter words continue to be off limits in the Christian line. “When you try to define what chick lit is, it’s really a voice,” she said. “They use wit and irony. They have a certain edge and they deal with reality.” October 2004 will see the line’s debut with Judy Baer’s *The Whitney Chronicles*; in 2005 books will be released every other month and include books about married women struggling with family life in a related genre Golan called “mom lit.”

~ TdR



The Care and Feeding of the Girls in the Basement

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

Be Here Now

A few years ago, I began teaching journaling classes to women in transition. Most are not writers, and some have difficulty in the beginning knowing how to write about themselves and their lives. To help them grow comfortable with the process of just letting words out of themselves, I discovered that timed writings of various sorts could be very useful. One of the most effective turned out to be the starter, “In the moment...” By simply describing exactly what was happening in any given moment, the writer was free to observe her environment and emotions without judging either her words or her world.

I’m a life-long journaler, but I’d not used that phrase in my ramblings. It proved so effective for my students, however, that I made it a rule to try it while on a hiking trip to France. I thought it would help me remember things better.

August, 2001, Paris, 7:30 pm

In the moment...

I am sitting in the window of my little hotel room in the 12th Arrondissement of Paris. Fourth floor, with windows that open like French doors to the street far below—I am completely free, if I wish, to throw myself to my death, and I love having nothing between me and the world beyond except a little grate. The view is not particularly inspiring. I’m overlooking a tiny alley, and across the way is an unbeautiful gray building. But there are apartments in it, and I’ve spent the last hour, blearily jet-lagged but unwilling to sleep, drinking red wine from a plastic cup (it has a tiny leak, so I’ve wrapped it in tissue), smoking cigarettes, admiring the snippets of lives I can see. There are red geraniums in clay pots lined up on the outside of one window, bottles of some sort in another. Directly across the way, even with my view, is a high apartment with the windows open and I can hear an Arabic family at dinner. If I spoke the language, I could eavesdrop on their conversation quite easily. Perched on their open window is a tricycle, almost poised for riding, right off the roof to the street 40 feet below.

I thought using the “in the moment” starter would help solidify my memories, but I gained something more. I began to practice “in the moment” when I wasn’t writing, too. It started running a litany through my head during the journey. “In the moment,” I’d think, “I’m sitting on an old stone wall where once a member of the French Resistance had his lunch. My feet have terrible blisters, but I didn’t die on that last hill.”

What I noticed was that by practicing the discipline of “in the moment,” I was in fact actually participating in the moments of my life. Not judging them, not evaluating or reorganizing them, or observing them: living in them.

The result of that simple habit was that I came home with the details of the trip more firmly placed in memory than any other journey I’ve taken. It’s been a couple of years, and I’m still able to call up, quite clearly, thousands of “in the moment” memories.

I was also more aware of what was happening while it was happening. I was genuinely living—not worrying about what might be happening at home, or thinking about what I had to do for work, or trying to rush anything along. I found myself letting things just be whatever they were.

It was startling to realize how much that simple practice changed my perception of almost everything around me, and how it has begun to change the shape of my life. It is likely changing my writing, as well, though it’s hard to see our own work clearly except at a great distance.

Writers don’t need training in how to get things down on the page, as my journaling students do. They also don’t need instruction in how to step apart and observe—most of us have been one step separated from events all of our lives, watching the flow of life around us, often collecting moments without participating in them.

What we do sometimes need is a way to connect our minds to our bodies, a way of grounding ourselves in the real world. Writers are cerebral and imaginative. We live in our heads.

In the moment....

It's early on a Saturday morning. I'm wearing my moon-and-stars hippie-dress-turned-robe, and my feet are cold, even in socks. I'm in my office with a red-painted wall and a Spanish Art Deco cigarette ad on the wall. My dog, wishing for me to come play, is breathing on my side, making a hot and annoying spot of yearning on my ribs. The Siamese is yowling. There is sun coming through the windows, through curtains so thin they're like a glaze of ice. I love this room, this house, this dress, these critters. I love being awake early, writing in the quiet, with a fresh brain.

Now matters. There is a little extra sweetness in loving this room because I'm getting the house ready to sell, and I will miss it. Now, I'm here.

It takes practice to "be here now," as Ram Dass, puts it. The modern world has trained us to be multi-taskers—and I'm as guilty as anyone. I notice I'm often doing more than one thing at a time: eating and reading, watching television and editing a book on the commercials, walking and listening to music. It's very difficult for me to simply do one thing, and even when I do, I'm often thinking ahead to the next task, or thinking backward to something I wish I'd done. It makes it difficult to be aware of what's going on in this minute.

Which means we often don't even know what's going on with our own bodies.

In the moment:

July 30, kitchen. I'm still recovering from the conference in New York. It was wonderful, but it's always grueling, and I feel it in my shoulders and the back of my neck. I need more sleep, but I have to get some actual writing done! Maybe I'll go get a latte from Starbucks and bring it back and drink it as a treat while I work.

August 4, back yard—I am tired. My shoulders ache. There is too much to do. Visitors to entertain, trip to New Zealand next week to pack and plan for (six talks!). The proposal to mail.

August 13, New Zealand—I am tired. I have a headache from a twelve hour flight. I need some coffee. The palm trees are clacking together, a wonderful sound.

August 23, Santa Fe—I'm enjoying this little side trip, but I'm tired. Too much travel, too many guests, too much to do! I have a little headache. I think I'll go find some coffee.

September 6, back yard—I'm tired beyond description. Mama (my ex-mother-in-law) died. We'll have to go to St. Louis.

September 10—I can't stop sleeping. Every night, I'm out cold by 9:30 and sleep straight through until 8, and I'm still taking naps every day!

If I'd been truly in the moment, instead of rushing around from task to task to task, I would have seen clearly that my body was screaming for rest. Instead, I kept pushing along, thinking about the next thing and the next thing and the next thing. Even a few minutes spent in the moment, being aware of what I was really feeling, might have been helpful. I would have been able to recognize the tiredness was getting beyond worn, into deep exhaustion. Instead of manipulating my energy with coffee, I might have taken a longer nap on the days I could. I might have let

myself go to bed earlier and sleep later.

Instead, the more tired I grew, the less I lived in the moment. As a result, I finally hit the wall and could not function for more than a week. I dragged my aching body from the couch to the back yard then back to my bed. Read about seven novels in a row, watched movies, ate. Slept an average of 12 to 13 hours a day.

There's more we can achieve from the awareness of the moment than an awareness of our bodies. One side effect of being in the moment can be a better grasp of truth. Truth with a capital T—the emotional truth and the physical truth of life as it flows by.

Writers are masters of reweaving reality. We're always taking bits and pieces and snippets of life and weaving them around into new shapes, new forms. It's how we create books, by doing all that re-weaving, re-adjusting, re-shaping.

An example: in my Irish-American family, arguing politics and books and ideas was an art form, but I'm not adept in verbal combat. I just don't think quickly on my feet, and I learned to hold back, let everyone else argue, then later, in the quiet of my room, rewrite the argument including what I'd say if I could have thought it up fast enough. It was one of the things that turned me into a writer.

This is an absolutely necessary function of the brain that creates novels. It's not always a great tool for living. If we're always mentally rewriting, how can we be truly living and experiencing the reality? The emotional truth of a moment is sometimes difficult, and it's only natural to want to shy away once in awhile. But often the most difficult moments have something rich to offer the girls in the basement, for those future novels.

In the moment:

It is a funeral for a woman I adored, my sons' grandmother. She died very suddenly, and we're all shell-shocked, dizzy, milling around outside the Riverview Church of God in St. Louis on a sunny, hot September day. I am wearing my very best "successful writer" outfit, a pin-striped skirt and shoes that make my legs look good, and a turquoise blouse that makes the most of coloring, because it's the first time I've been around my ex-family (as if such a thing exists) since a divorce a couple of years ago, and I want to look prosperous and healthy. I do.

It doesn't matter. I wish I were somewhere else—her death makes me feel hollow and lost. This moment is one I would rather not have in my life. But I force myself. Force myself to see this moment, because it won't come again. Force myself to look at the sisters of the woman who crossed over, their neat dresses and sad faces and graciousness. See the long black cars ready to carry us to the burial. See my stepdaughter, sneaking away for a cigarette. She is too thin, too pale. I worry about her.

My eye is drawn to my sons, standing together, a little apart from everyone else. One neat and slim in his crew cut and tweed jacket, his long white hands patting the back of an aunt who hugs him. The other, six inches taller, dressed in a tailored black suit and black sunglasses, his long, beaded hair pulled away

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶



▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ from his face. He laughs when another auntie says, “Can I have your autograph? You look so cool, I know you have to be famous.”

They’re painfully beautiful, my boys, grown up and well trained, and my heart swells double its size with pride—and recognition of how fast time goes. How did

they grow to be so tall? They were only born yesterday! In an hour, they’ll be fathers themselves. In two, they’ll be burying me.

Today, this minute, one is twenty and in love and his girlfriend is holding his hand. His heart is broken—this is the first death that he’s really known, and it’s hard. The other is 18 and not yet fully aware of his charm. Mama is dead, and our family will scatter a little more, and I hate that. But as the Navajo say, “You see, I am alive.”

I remember a line I read as a very young writer: “a writer writes best with a sense of mortality at her back.” I had no idea at the time what it meant.

It means be here now. Live this minute. Then put that on the page.

Our moments are finite. Choosing to be conscious of the moment we are living in right this very instant makes more precious the hours of our mortality. It also makes precious and precise the moments in our books. It makes them detailed and rich and real. It means we have more details to deliver: the sound of the single cricket singing to the night last evening as you sat on the front porch for a little while; the smell of sausage permeating the air on a walk through an old neighborhood; the dog, still breathing hope of a game of tug-of-war on my side. The sweet, immeasurable, fleetingness of all moments, which observed, become eternal.

In the moment:

August, 1987—I am in the backyard of a house I love, a rental. My toddler sons, one blonde and slim, the other round and dark, are dancing in the sprinkler. The late afternoon sunlight makes the water

glitter in the air and shines on the wet backs of these two boys. I can hear my husband singing a gospel song in the shower. I smell freshly cut grass, and I have taco meat simmering on the stove. I just cut the lettuce and I’m going to go inside in a few minutes and finish up the last of the corrections to the manuscript Silhouette requested. We’ll eat in a little while.

For now, I just want to watch them dance, watch my dog April sneaking up on the cat—Moses Many Toes, who warns him off with his baseball-mitt-sized paws. Chuckle over the song coming through the bathroom window. Life is sweet sometimes.

Long ago.

Eternal.

NINK

Bits'n'Pieces

AND IN A I-REALLY-DON'T-KNOW-HOW-I- FEEL-ABOUT-THIS-ONE...

Borders Group doesn’t want publishers to price books anymore and has plans to start working toward that goal next year. Naturally they intend to work *with* publishers on this. To which I say, hmmm. “Bookselling is one of the few retail environments where the price is fixed by the supplier of the goods and not by the seller,” says spokesperson Anne Roman. “This is not the most advantageous environment for any of the key parties.” Essentially what Borders wants is for publishers to quit printing the price on the book covers. According to them, if the seller set the price they could get the customer to buy new authors at a lower price because “Publishers do not know what their books are worth.” My concern, of course, is author-based. In genre, our royalties are for...well, you get my drift...as it is. So if there’s no cover price for publishers to base our royalty on... Yeah. Can you say wild and woolly negotiating times ahead?

~ TdR

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