

# WINK

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## *In Praise of Writers*

BY KATHRYN SHAY

Since I entered the world of publishing twelve years ago, I've often heard the refrain: "Don't quit your day job!" Usually this advice is given regarding money, indicating how difficult it is for a writer to support herself on her publishing income. Because I had another career I loved (really, it was a vocation), I struggled with the demands of two full time jobs once I made that first sale. Quite simply, even when I received multiple book contracts and branched out to two publishers, I wasn't able to quit teaching. Spending 33 years in the same school district, in the same building, and with many of the same people was too much to give up. So I did the dual career dance and finished teaching in June 2004, when I hit retirement age.

In the last fifteen months, I've written three books, two for Superromance and one for Berkley. (I have to laugh when people ask me how I like my *time off*.) I've discov-

ered some interesting things about the differences between careers in teaching and writing. Maybe between any day job and writing, but I can't speak for other professions. I entitled this article *In Praise of Writers* because what I've experienced being a full time writer is not all positive. Yes, I now have control over my time, no five-thirty wakeup calls, no facing 150 teenagers a day when I didn't sleep well, or was sick, or was worried about my children. And, thank God, no more student writing to grade (I taught English).

However, there were *ups* in teaching that are not there in writing. How so many of you have coped with what I'm about to enumerate is truly admirable. I'm not sure I could have done it for the long haul.

### **Control—**

Every single day as a teacher, I could control the content of my classes. Of course, there's a curriculum, but it's loose in English, as

reading and writing are processes that can be taught in a variety of ways. And there are standardized tests. But if you teach kids to write and read well, they should pass those tests easily. No principal ever came in and told me what to teach or how to do it, and as a department, we suggested a few core books and writing forms for each grade level. But, mostly, my classroom was my domain. I treasured the autonomy. In writing, I don't feel I have that kind of freedom. I do decide what story to tell. I do decide how I write it. But there are so many things outside my office which affect the content of my books. Market trends. Sales figures and sell-throughs. House procedures. Right out of the chute, someone else determines if what I choose to write is appropriate for the publisher's needs. Some houses are heavy on revision, and that pesky little contract reads, no, I don't have to make revisions, or accept editing changes if I don't

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## President's Voice

# Hitting the Ground Running

As most of you read this, I'll be at the Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans, along with our conference coordinator, Pat Roy. The 2005 Board thought it would be a good idea for the two of us to check things out "on the ground," as it were, so that we can reassure our members that the hotel, and the city, will indeed be ready for our conference at the end of March. If all goes as we expect, that reassurance will make it into the March issue of *NINK*, in time for last-minute fence-sitters to make up their minds about whether or not to attend the conference.

I have to say that it gives me a warm glow to know how much the Hotel Monteleone appreciates Ninc's decision to stick with them for our conference. Though I expect this to be a spectacular conference for its own sake, it's nice to think that Ninc will also be doing its part to help with the recovery of New Orleans' economy by our very presence there. The hotel was more than willing to offer Pat and me a free room for this reconnaissance mission, and their sales manager apparently plans to wine and dine us while we're there. We'll also be meeting with Paul Willis, Executive Director of the Tennessee Williams New Orleans Literary Festival, so he can show us around and we can plan fun ways to dovetail our conference with theirs. Pat and I will try not to get so carried away with the party atmosphere that we forget what we're here for—it's still a couple of weeks before Mardi Gras begins, after all.

As I actually write this, at the very start of 2006 and my term as your President, I'm making a resolution to hit the ground running, in every way possible. I'm putting together an agenda for the first Board meeting of 2006 which will include at least discussing those issues the 2005 Board tried to tackle but had to set aside for one reason or another. For example, after a spirited discussion on Ninlink early last year, three of our members agreed to be on an ad hoc committee to look into the used book sales issue. However, no one was willing to lead that committee, so no real forward progress was made, though a good bit of information was collected. Here's my official plea for anyone interested to contact me, so we can get that ball rolling again. It may be rolling uphill at the moment, but if we have enough people pushing, who knows what we might accomplish?

Even though our New Orleans conference is still two months away, it's time to start thinking seriously about the 2007 conference. We need a place and we need a coordinator, so again, please don't hesitate to contact me if you have suggestions or, better yet, if you're willing to coordinate (or help coordinate) the 2007 conference. By the time you read this, I suspect that topic will already be under discussion on Ninlink.

As I mentioned in last month's column, one of my pet goals for the year is to increase and diversify Ninc's membership. We have lots of newly updated brochures on hand, just waiting to make their way into prospective members' hands. I need you all to help get them there! Email me or Lillian Stewart Carl if you'd like some. You can also send interested writers to our website for information and to join. Lorraine Heath has done some great work as Outreach Committee chairman, but now she's ready to pass the torch to someone else. If you share my vision for making Ninc an

important, representative voice for popular fiction authors, please raise your hand and let me know you'd be willing to explore ways to really get the word out.

Finally, I'm planning to hit the ground running on a more personal level. My watchword for 2006 is "energy" –because I'm definitely going to need it! In light of that, I'm vowing to be more rigorous and consistent with my exercise regimen, to get plenty of sleep, and to eat better. That should give me the energy I need to see me through what I expect to be both a challenging and rewarding year. You're all welcome to join me!

— *Brenda Hiatt Barber*

## We Announce with Sadness The Untimely Death of Ninc Member Gin Ellis

At presstime we learned of the unexpected death of Virginia (Gin) Ellis. A tribute article will be published in the March issue of *NINK*.

**Don't let this be your  
last issue of NINK!**

**Not yet renewed?**

Go to [www.ninc.com](http://www.ninc.com) now to renew your membership or send \$75 (\$65 plus \$10 late fee) to

Novelists, Inc, P.O. Box 2037, Manhattan KS 66505.

While you're at the website, please take a moment to fill out the Author Coalition survey and update your member profile. (This last item applies to those who've already renewed, too.) Thanks!  
— *BHB*

## 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:**

Barb Heinlein (*B.J. Daniels*),  
Bozeman MT  
Sabrina Jeffries (*Deborah Martin*,  
*Deborah Nicholas*), Cary NC  
Lynn Kurland, Salt Lake City UT  
Holly Lane (*Sarah McCarty*),  
Bloomsbury NJ  
Suzanne Macpherson,

Rolling Bay WA  
Pam Ford Stutz (*Pamela Ford*),  
Wauwatosa WI  
Robin Wells, Mandeville LA

### **New Members:**

Allison Brennan, Elk Grove CA  
Barbara Colley (*Anne Logan*),  
Luling LA  
Anita Gordon (*Kathleen Kirkwood*),  
Parker CO  
Judith Hand (*Judith Leon*),  
San Diego CA  
Kristin Lewotsky (*Kristin Hardy*),  
Merrimack NH  
Rosina Lippi (*Sara Donati*),  
Bellingham WA

Josephine Piraneo (*Angelique Armae*,  
*M.A. duBarry*), Cobleskill NY  
Heather Graham Pozzessere  
(*Heather Graham, Shannon Drake*),  
Coral Gables FL  
Laurie Vanzura (*Lori Wilde*),  
Weatherford TX  
Terri Wright (*T.A. Ridgell*),  
Fernandina Beach FL

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

# In Praise of Writers

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want to, but then again they don't have to publish my book.

## Security—

In the above vein, as a teacher, I knew if I did a decent job, taught as well as I could, and did mostly what was expected of me, I'd have a position the following year. Now, even if I write a good book, send it in on time, make revisions, review edits, and printouts, I'm not assured that I'll have a job when my current contract expires. Also, if my principal leaves his job for another, I'll still work at the school, teach the same classes. If my editor leaves, it's a crapshoot whether or not my writing will be as understood, as well-liked as before, and consequently if I will receive a new contract.

## Money—

After three decades in public education, I made a good salary and got a good pension. (I deserved it. All teachers do.) But more so, that income was guaranteed, as it is in the business world. I knew I'd get a paycheck every other Friday. I could count on the amount and punctuality of it. Need I say more about the writing world? How many times have we expected a check, only to have it come too late to pay the mortgage? How many times have we expected X number of dollars in royalties, only to be shocked, or at least disappointed, by the amount that finally arrives? Yes, I know there are unexpected boons in the writing world, like \$2500 for income from foreign editions we didn't anticipate. Or we might get

a huge advance for a new, innovative book. But for most people on a budget, paying college tuition and supporting themselves and their families, slow and steady probably wins this race. And pensions for writers? Forget it.

## Feedback—

In the teaching profession, there's nothing quite like seeing a reluctant learner look up at you and say, "Oh, wow, I can write!" Or an apathetic senior tell you, "I loved that book. It's about my life." There's nothing like hearing a principal inform a parent, "Mrs. Schaefer is one of the best teachers in the school." Or a mother confide, "Thank you so much for what you've done for my son." And this is the best: when a student comes back years after graduation and says she's a doctor, or a chemical-free adult, or he's a successful husband and father because of your influence. Not that writers don't get accolades from our editors, agents, reviewers, fans. We do. But for me, the immediacy of the feedback in teaching, the poignancy of it, the steady stream of it, was an ego boost like you wouldn't believe. I miss that.

## Isolation—

Sometimes, I can't believe I spend my entire day with people who don't exist. Sometimes, I can't believe I think about these characters so much. When I was teaching, I spent my time with real people, some not so nice, but most were really swell, kids included. In my workplace, if I was upset or sad, someone noticed and was there for me to talk to about it. Needless to say, my best friends were made in the high school

where I taught. My children attended the same school, and though it wouldn't work for everyone, it did for us. My own sister teaches reading there, and one year we co-taught a class. I had lunch with her and my friends every day. The principals were my friends, I shared a room with a lovely woman who said that until I got there in the morning, she didn't feel quite right. And when I did publish, it was cool to have secretaries fawn over my work, administrators buy my books, and students in my Creative Writing class think I walked on water. Now, that daily, hour-by-hour contact is gone. Like you, much of my time is spent alone in my office, at the computer. Because I'm an extrovert by nature, I go out somewhere every day—to church activities, yoga, volunteer jobs, and lunch with friends. But the isolation that is inherent in full time writing is hard for me to cope with.

## Conflict with others, even those in charge—

When I was teaching, if I had a run-in with a student or another teacher one day, I saw that person the next, and we could deal with the problem. Face-to-face. If I was angry at a principal, or he with me, we could discuss it immediately. Face-to-face. There's something different about working out issues with a boss or colleague by email or phone. Maybe part of it is that we don't get to know our editors or agents very well, even after years of working with them. If we don't attend conferences, we don't see them at all; if we do go to conferences, we only see them a few times a year. And I think being in

the same room with someone to work out a problem, watching facial expressions, reading body language, is preferable to working through difficult situations long distance.

#### **Ideas—**

The writer's adage, "Everything's material" is true for me. I take my story ideas from real life. In teaching, a wealth of material presented itself every day. I often dealt with suicidal teenagers, and the first category romance I sold was on that topic. My initial single title was about violence in the schools today, and some of the scenes, the layout of the school, the teacher heroines were taken from my personal experience. There was an ex-cop on staff who helped me plan out a bodyguard story, with the hero as...yes, of course, an ex-cop. A teacher's newborn son almost died because doctors couldn't diagnose his illness. Little Sean is fine now, and his story made its way into one of my medical books, the details recounted in two hours after school by a relieved dad. The Phys Ed guys provided terminology and plays for a book with a coach hero. And people always had contacts: a math teacher's husband is a firefighter and he got me into the city department; an administrator gave me the name of a school law specialist; one woman knew the federal public defender in town. Now, that fodder is gone. I struggle not so much with the big ideas for my books, but for the smaller details, occurrences and backstories which layer my setting and characterization. Watching TV and reading the newspaper doesn't cut it (though some of my volunteer work might).

#### **Obsession—**

After writing during the summer, I always went back to school

in the fall. There was literally no time to worry if the book I was working on was good, if my editors were happy. No time to scour the Internet for rankings on Amazon, reviews, reader reactions. I didn't check my email all day long. Simply put, I didn't worry about my career as a writer. Any concerns were diluted by other more pressing issues. Now, however, I fret. I obsess. I whine to my husband, who actually was the one to point out this difference to me. I'm not sure how writers live like this long term. Maybe you don't obsess like I do. If so, email me and tell me how you avoid it.

#### **Little things about teaching:**

I liked getting dressed up every day and especially having people tell me I looked good. The trademark joke about writers not having to wear panty hose doesn't apply to me, but I do indeed spend my days in sweats and pj's. I liked spontaneously going out after work with colleagues. I loved teacher parties, football games, heading up the literary magazine, planning the drug free senior bash after the prom. Ancillary professional activities for writers include volunteering in organizations like Ninc, which I know is time consuming and I recognize your hard work, but how much of your *daily life* does that make up? For three decades, my friends were my husband's friends, and our social life revolved around them. We shared our family stories and watched each other's kids turn into doctors, and teachers and wrestling coaches. Now, my writing buddies and I talk over the Internet about our lives, but we rarely get to see each other's spouses, or children, unless another writer lives

near us.

So, you're probably asking, why did she quit teaching?

For one thing, I was tired. Teaching is grueling, and the pace is brutal. It's tough keeping up with teenagers, the work load, conflict which is unavoidably part of dealing with so many people every day. I've always contended that there is no such thing as teacher burnout, but exhaustion drives people to quit or retire. It was time for me to leave. I realize writing is tiring, too. But for me, even when I've had to work eight hours a day to finish a book, it's been easier setting my own time frame, taking breaks when I need to, and normally not rising at dawn to begin work.

Second, I wanted to leave teaching when I was at the top of my game, when I was well-respected, well-liked and doing a terrific job. I wasn't sure I could stay up there any longer. I hope to finish my writing career when I'm at my best, too.

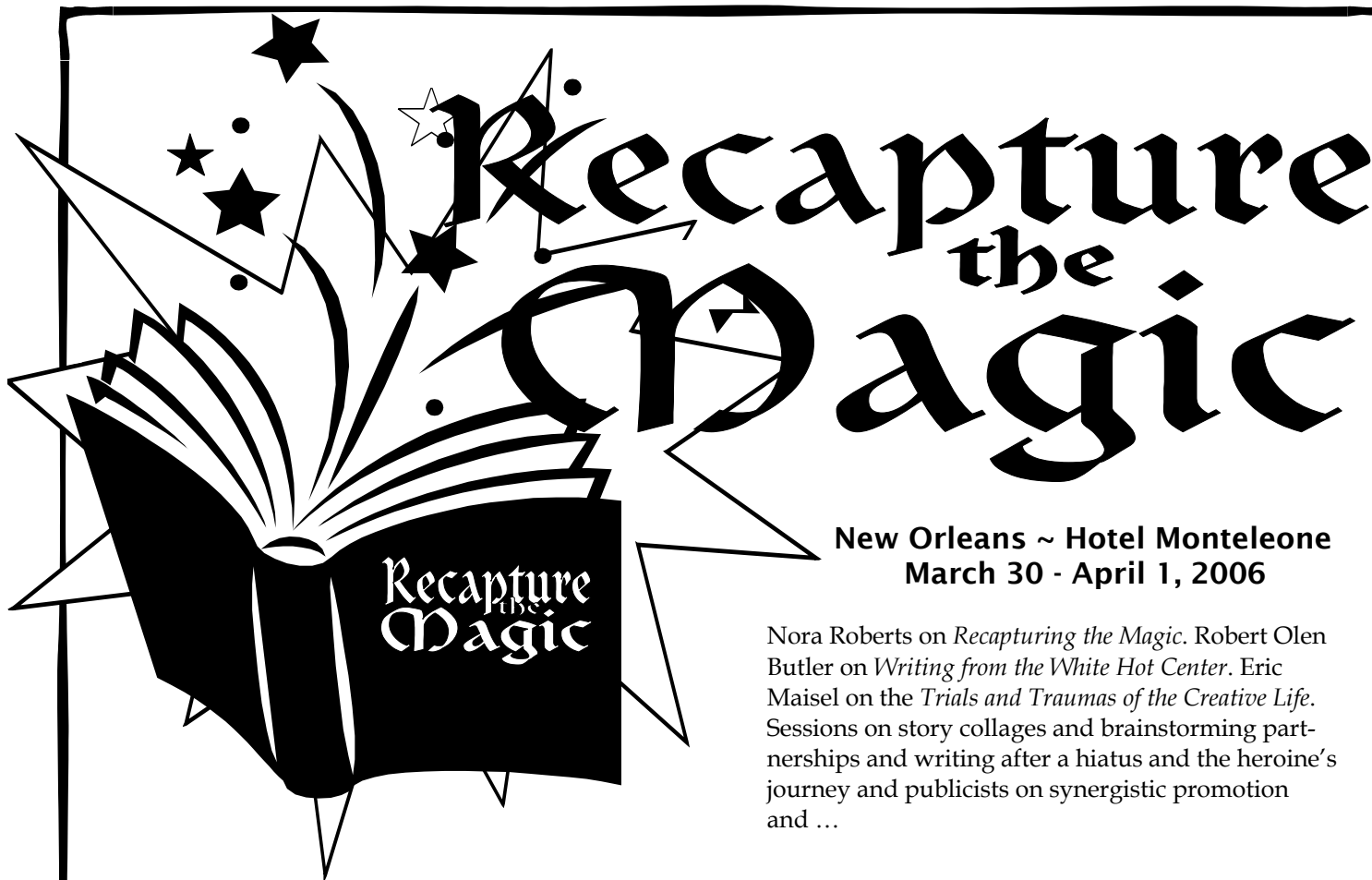
And last—this is very important—I wanted time to write. After twelve years of having to fit it in at four in the morning, at nine at night, all day on weekends, I still can't believe that writing comes first in my work schedule. I don't have to wait to get my teeth back into that book. I can spend as much time as I want on a scene. I can research without the stress of worrying that I should be writing and not out riding fire trucks or shadowing a public defender. Best of all, I'm not tired when I write, but fresh and anxious to see what happens next in my story. It's a joy.

I hope I've made my point clear. A full time writing career has hidden challenges that often go unaddressed and unappreciated. As I said, I'm not sure I could have been happy doing what most of you have ▶

## *In Praise of Writers*

▶ done all these years. I'm managing now, though I've yet to find my writing sea legs; maybe it will get

easier. In any case, let me end with a well-deserved "Bravo!" to all of you who've made writing your life's work. ▲



# Recapture the Magic

New Orleans ~ Hotel Monteleone  
March 30 - April 1, 2006

Nora Roberts on *Recapturing the Magic*. Robert Olen Butler on *Writing from the White Hot Center*. Eric Maisel on the *Trials and Traumas of the Creative Life*. Sessions on story collages and brainstorming partnerships and writing after a hiatus and the heroine's journey and publicists on synergistic promotion and ...

Plus tours of New Orleans and all the fun events of the Tennessee Williams Festival (<http://www.tennesseewilliams.net/>).

Amtrak trains are back on schedule, airlines are flying, street cars are running, restaurants are open, water is safe, and even as you read this, Brenda and I will be wandering the streets of New Orleans, ensuring that all is well.

Please join us in nurturing our creative spirits while we support the rebirth of New Orleans. Register online at [www.ninc.com](http://www.ninc.com)

*Laissez les bon temps rouler!* — Pat Roy

Note: February 15 is the last date for regular registration. Registration goes up to \$340 on February 16. Registration ends on March 15.

# How Does Your Grass Grow?

BY LYNN MILLER

No, I'm not talking about a greener lawn or fertilization techniques for illegal drugs, but I am talking about fertilizing roots—grassroots as in Grassroots Promotion/Advertising. What is it? How can you use it? Who is your audience? What are the elements involved? Will you get instant success or attention, or is it a long-term growth project?

## What is Grassroots?

Grassroots activities are generally started by someone with a passion, with a desire to share an idea, a concern, or information about a specific situation. The desired result is people will understand, accept, and then are motivated to change their attitudes or habits.

It can be a topic that is deadly serious, such as child abuse with a subtext message of children's rights and adults' moral responsibilities; or one like "Save Howard Stern," about saving a shock-jock entertainment personality from cancellation while the subtext message concerns freedom of speech. Or it can be an exciting new author you discovered with a book "you just gotta read!" Or the discovery of an author who is doing something special, such as an individual program that benefits someone in society either directly or indirectly through the author's association.

However grassroots activity begins, there are two objectives that all of the messages have in common.

Grassroots promotion begins with an intense desire to communicate "something about something."

That "someone" wants to tell "someone else" about that "something" and so on and on. (How's that for clarity?)

So what are the elements of grassroots advertising or promotion? They are varied, and range from local promotions such as speaking engagements or other personal appearances, or writing local columns for a paper or newsletter, to widespread geographic ones. Most often the media elements include websites and chat

rooms. Naturally one of the most effective ways to spread the news is through WOM (word of mouth). Since the Internet is perfect for WOM, websites and chat rooms are huge elements of the promotion activities.

## Get 'em Talking

Talking? If we're talking women, no problem. Let's consider some recent information about "women on line," researched from various Internet studies about Internet usage. We're focusing on women here because their web usage is different than men's, as is their general choice of topics that interest them. (Men, do not stop reading here. If it weren't for your involvement with women, there would be no audience. Besides, you read also, so consider these facts from a male point of view and see how you can use these basic principles to get your message to your targeted audience.)

Women are known to talk and communicate more than men. The dynamic duo of the computer and Internet offers a wonderful way for women to keep in touch. (Could this be a way of saying we talk too much? I know some men who can blow my doors off when they get started chatting.)

Women are creating and participating in online communities. Most are based on common interests. They flourish because the Internet removes both geographical and time-of-day restraints. These communities are based on the same fabric as women's clubs, bridge clubs, shared hobbies, etc, but these online communities fit better into today's woman's busy life. Women use the computer to share life experiences, feelings, and provide contact. (As a writer, you can already see the possibilities here.)

Men generally use the web for fun (games) or to get and give information. Generally they don't share feelings and emotions as women do. On a car site they might post a problem with a specific engine and ask for advice. It's a rare man who will tell you how he feels about the car beyond 'the G-D-Son-of-a-B... stopped running during rush hour after I spent all week- ▶

# How Does Your Grass Grow?

▶ end fixing it.’)

Women’s use of the Internet reflects their lives in general. (If they like to read as an escape they are more likely to listen to WOM, seek out authors they like, or be willing to discover a new author.)

What does this info mean for a writer? Your promotion task is to focus on your audience as you reinforce your primary messages through creative live or media usage and techniques. This is more than just putting up a JPEG of your cover and a blurb about your book.

## Give ’em something to talk about

Perhaps you create a website that promotes your newest book which is a historical novel that includes some scenes about cooking in the 1700s. You could create an area on your author website that shares this info along with recipes and perhaps even contains a contest about the most inventive use of cloves in a recipe, with the prize being a free book and a spice grinder. Will this promote your next book even if there are no cooking scenes in that one? Believe it! Because you have given someone some fun info that is outside everyday life for the majority of the audience. At the very least it gives you a name-recognition-leg-up for the next book or article or speaking engagement.

A continuation of that cooking idea is to infiltrate other targeted topic chat communities, and post a comment mentioning your book, such as:

“I just read in *The Marquis’ Sexy Kitchen Maid* by Delicious Auburn about what women had to do to cook in the 1700s—and oh, was it ever hot in that kitchen! Even though I don’t have a Marquis, consider me lucky! I only have to turn on the stove, not haul wood a mile to get a fire started, and that’s after skinning the deer! By the way, does anyone have a good recipe for venison stew?”

Now, what have you done here to get people talking? You’ve followed the guidelines of the community—cooking—where you are posting; and you’ve shared the book’s name and author as you’ve given a bit of info that could pique someone’s interest to locate the author’s book. Will it result in a sale? Who knows? It will result in WOM, though, and WOM is part of Buzz, which is part of selling.

## See how two authors created Buzz

Toni Blake and LuAnn McLane created an idea for a Love Bug tour, which included a cute little red VW bug as

a theme for the regional bookstore tour. While the actual tour wasn’t successful from the authors’ POV, it was very successful because of the publicity it generated. It was picked up and promoted by *Romantic Times*, and then positioned on Toni’s website with a separate logo and webpage. All of this resulted in more hits on Toni’s site and more name recognition, which could lead to more sales. If nothing else, you can capture the names of visitors and add them to your target promotion list.

## What is Buzz?

Buzz is personal. It creates a relationship. It’s a way to create a compelling, strategic, targeted message and get it directly to the people in a way that feels, or is, personal or one-on-one. This helps consumers feel as if they personally matter and have a choice in what messages or products they want to pay attention to.

Products? That’s right. As much as I know that each book, article, or other written endeavor is an emotional and personal piece of art, it is also a product. I know many writers who don’t think of it that way, but from an outside professional view we need to consider this POV also. If every book is “the book of your heart,” a reader might wonder how many hearts a prolific writer has. I can see individuals out there in Ninc-land bristling at this statement. Relax, this is not to say you shouldn’t write the “book of your heart.” All of us have projects that are more personal to us than others, but you still have to convince someone they want to read it, and this is where promotion techniques such as buzz come in.

Salzman, Matathia and O’Reilly in their book, *Buzz*,\* explain:

“Buzz marketing deepens the brand experience.... It’s about creating trust and involvement.... A good buzz campaign takes on a life of its own and touches everyone in its path in a way traditional marketing rarely does. Buzz marketing often involves staged events, interactions between people, product sampling and giveaways, parties... genuinely interactive encounters.”

Brand? Now you have to think about brand, too? Well yes. We’re not talking toilet tissue here, but I think of a brand as nothing more than a distinctive way to label a product so the audience can differentiate it from the competition, want to buy it and then recommend it to others.

How do you create your own brand? Consider your writing strengths. What is similar about you and your style or your writing choices regardless of the type of



book you write? Is it your sense of humor? Your unique point of view? Your pacing? However you identify it, these are some of the elements that create your brand. Another way to discover this is to ask your readers. (When in doubt go direct to the source.)

To put this another way, grassroots advertising will result in WOM, and WOM is part of buzz, which is part of selling, which is accomplished by creating your unique brand that appeals to your targeted audience. The end result? A new reader says, "A friend told me that I just had to read your book!"

## Creating WOM buzz using the Queen Bee.

"Give people something interesting to talk about and they will spread the word."

This comment from *Buzz\** is a real duh head-slapper. It's so obvious that most people don't consider the promotion value it can give. People talk. They talk about things they like and things they don't. Ever hear, "There's no such thing as bad publicity?" In a way that's true. Just look at the tabloids. I mean, what does Paris Hilton really do that merits her that amount of tabloid exposure? Doesn't she annoy and fascinate you at the same time? And don't you wonder how she stays so thin if all she does is party? How the hell does she resist snacking with her wine?

Regardless of what you think of her, Paris Hilton is the perfect example of a "Queen Bee." A queen bee is a key influencer of a group of people. If she says something is hot, or decides, "I'm over it," some people listen. They listen, and then they tell others, who tell others. The process is much like dropping a stone into pond. So you have to figure out who is the person in your "fan life" who can fulfill that type of role.

When Lori Foster published her first novels for Harlequin Temptation during the mid-'90s, she had a remarkably sexy style that appealed to readers. She deliberately cultivated those readers. I know several individuals who were, and still are, some of her biggest cheerleaders as they helped spread the word about her and her books. With items such as her email loop, a message board that links from her website, to holding fan appreciation events, she has used the power of WOM very effectively. Besides writing good books, Lori says, "My accessibility to my readers seems to really count with them. I get a dozen emails or snail mail letters daily from readers thanking me for being 'out there' where they can talk with me about my books, ask questions, discuss the works of other writers, or just plain share personal experiences. It's wonderful for me because it's like this gigantic peer group."

## Apply your passion

What Lori has done in essence (as have numerous other authors whose examples we will share) is use tech-

niques such as websites, web chats, and blogs to create an online club or community. At its heart the community focuses on like interests, connection, entertainment, and information.

Grass roots marketing is about identifying a specific topic passion, and communicating that passion to someone else. The most successful programs start locally and then expand. Let's consider two nonfiction projects that were started by grassroots methods.

## Beardstown Ladies

It all began quietly enough. The Beardstown Business and Professional Women's Investment Club was formed in 1980 as a three-year educational program. "Just by word of mouth, we soon had 36 ladies with different opinions investing different amounts of money," says Betty Sinnock, 69, a charter member and the club's current recording partner. The first club disbanded and a second began. The ladies went on to demonstrate that 16 women – most of them senior citizens at that – from a small town in the Midwest could learn about the stock market.

After numerous financial successes using their educational approach to the stock market, and the print projects resulting from it, the ladies hit the media spotlight big-time. Though it was the promise of spectacular returns that grabbed people's and the media's attention, in the minds of the Beardstown Ladies the attention was still serving its purpose – to spread the word that ordinary, everyday people could become successful investors. Betty says, "For us, this was what it was all about – sharing what we had learned to help others."

## Sweet Potato Queens

The Sweet Potato Queens is a grassroots organization that came about because of a sweet potato parade in the leader's southern hometown. A friend told Jill Connor Browne, a recently divorced and rather outrageous southern woman, about the parade. She decided that the parade needed queens, and she was the main queen. It was sure better than "Miss Pork Rind." Jill's personality, sense of humor, and knowledge of her southern audience set in motion the development of activities and other elements that would enable Jill to eventually have fun and make some extra money at the same time.

The Sweet Potato Queens is basically a club of bawdy, delightful women who have their own set of standards to live by – outrageous as they may be. The club grew and they ended up with a second club of wannabes. They take trips together and write books of advice – love, cooking, you name it. They have merchandise, t-shirts, gift packs, mama-knock-you-naked margarita mix, etc. They sell all of these items online. Basically, this successful effort was started by word of mouth, a parade of wild women, and sweet potatoes!

# How Does Your Grass Grow?



What's that? You don't write nonfiction, hate sweet potatoes, don't have an outrageous hat, can't balance your checkbook and are shyer than an overweight teenager at a nudist camp? Now what?

It doesn't matter. Those two examples only illustrate how WOM and imagination can help a good basic idea go further. Your task is to apply it to your project or your career.

Let's say you've written a fun mystery novel where the person murdered was a top financial advisor. In your author's note you could include a "call to action" giving the reader more info about handling finances. When readers click on your web address, they get a fun, downloadable print follow-up that contains books to read for research, web resources, etc.

What has this done for you? You've extended your name recognition, provided a useful "extra" for the audience (everyone loves a gift or a reward), and you've given them a reason to visit your website, which might result in a next sale. Or you can find another way to get people interested in your topic, as Vicki Lewis Thompson has.

Vicki and her web guru, Audrey Sharpe, have capitalized on the "nerd theme" since the success of *Nerd in Shining Armor* with logos, inclusive content, and special features. She also does contests such as "Ninety Days to Nerd" that offers progressive prizes culminating in a grand prize. All of which add to her newsletter list and keep people coming back. Vicki says, "The other giveaway that's turned out to spread goodwill like crazy is offering my foreign copies for the asking, but the person has to tell us that they either speak the language, are trying to learn it, or know someone who speaks it."

## Grassroots Ground plan

The basic elements of grassroots promotion are used with great success by many authors. We've already addressed some of these elements; so let's concentrate on what some other selected authors think of them.

## Websites

They have to keep changing, keep updating, and give the visitor more than just a flat promo. The best sites, in my opinion, are interactive, built around a theme or a personality, seem personal, and entertain even as they inform.

Sherrilyn Kenyon says, "I was a solid midlist author prior to the launch of the Dark-Hunter website. I'd been around for years so I know for a fact that the website was

instrumental in taking my books to the next level. The site actually broke two years prior to the release of the first DH book, and by the time the series was launched, we had people ready to storm St. Martins and steal the book off my editor's desk (I was also able to see the interest in my backlist rise as more and more readers discovered the site). My preorders for the first DH book on Amazon reached #6 months before the book was released and the book went back to press 3 times before it was even printed. When the initial order hit the Ingram warehouse, *Fantasy Lover's* stock was completely depleted in less than 24 hours. Months before the first book in the series was released, my online groups numbered in the tens of thousands and more than a million people had been to my site. So when the first book came out, I had a waiting audience who was dying to get their hands on it. Heck, my site was so well known before the launch of the series that I was even mentioned in the *Idiot's Guide to Vampires* a full year before I had a Dark-Hunter book out."

## Chat rooms or Message Boards

Dianne Castell believes that special, dedicated loops and chat rooms are very helpful as well as web relationships with other authors. She says, "I'm on a loop with other authors, Scamps, Vamps and Spicy Romance." Although the loop has just started, Dianne reports 15-20 responses each time she posts. Elizabeth Bevarly and other authors have just started *Talk of the Town*, which is getting a lot of buzz. Obviously this is a great way to personally communicate about both yourself and your work. Remember though, it isn't all about you. It's about the connection you make with the fan.

## Blogging

People either love or hate it. Is it useful as promotion or just a way to waste time? Everyone has a different opinion, but I am more interested in whether or not the recognition that comes from blogging helps sell books.

Jennifer Crusie says, "I know it has, people have posted that it has. It's a great way to generate buzz on a book." On the other hand, Holly Jacobs says, "I don't blog. I'm too boring." Sherrilyn Kenyon's blog is in the form of a blog from one of the characters from her books. Blogging success depends on your comfort level. If you hate the thought but think, "Everyone else is doing it so I have to," it will show.

## Speaking Appearances

Almost every author I spoke with believes that speaking engagements are a great way to get your name known. Mary Jo Putney is not enthusiastic about promotion activities beyond the essential website, but she does believe that speaking engagements can be a good way to get your name out and create interest. Holly Jacobs agrees, "I have noticed whenever I do a speaking gig, the number of hits on my site bounces up afterward. For me, the public speaking thing tends to generate attention." Holly also feels you could successfully attract an audience by, "Getting naked in public, but I'm not sure that will sell your books, but it would garner attention!" Either that or an arrest warrant.

Many of these authors also suggest continual website updating, a dedicated theme on the site for different promotions, contests, judicious giveaways, and writing articles. Rosemary Laurey suggests you continually meet readers at readers' groups, conferences, and signings. She also suggests, "I really feel contact with booksellers helps (especially indies), because a bookseller who likes your work will sell books by the boxful."

All of these are helpful ideas to consider, but the most important one is appreciate your fans and show it!

## Does Grassroots promotion work?

Do grassroots promotion techniques and efforts really work, as opposed to more traditional methods like ads, etc? Yes, but this type of promotion doesn't happen overnight. It's a slow build that needs long-term fertilization and continual inventiveness. It's a lot friendlier and accessible than other forms of promotion. However, it's essential you do it in a way that it is not bragging or shameless self-promotion. It needs to involve others' willing participation. In the end it can work and work very well.

Everyone wants to feel as if they are treated as an individual, and feel a sense of connection. Yes, any promotion can be time consuming, but for many grassroots promotion can be very effective and rewarding, and more

active than just reading your Tarot cards. I think Sherrilyn Kenyon says it best:

"The most effective way to build a fan base is one reader at a time." ▲

***How many times have you heard from an editor or agent that the key to publishing success is, "Just write a good book?"***

That goes without saying, but there are many good books that don't make a ripple, while less well-crafted ones do. Many times a publisher's push has a lot to do with that. But not everyone will get that type of publisher support. So I suggest you, "Write a good book and look for creative personal ways to get the message out to your audience."

\* For more information on grassroots advertising and buzz, check out *Buzz: Harness the Power of Influence and Create Demand* by Marian Salzman, Ira Matathia, Ann O'Reilly.

— LM

*Lynn Miller aka Meg Lacey, [lnmiller@parkemedia.com](mailto:lnmiller@parkemedia.com), is the president of Parke Media and has written for all media, from websites to cable TV. Most recently she has written for Harlequin/Silhouette, and after a few years away from writing is currently working on a contemporary urban fantasy that she hopes to sell. Anyone interested? (Hey, this article is about grassroots promotion, give me a break.)*

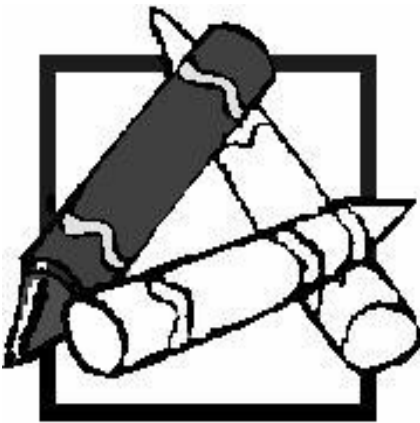
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# Crayon on my



# Key board

## *It's Not All in Your Head*

BY JANELLE CLARE SCHNEIDER

Creativity has not come easily to me in the past several years. I've met my deadlines and fulfilled my contracts, but my Hero can tell you, it's been a struggle all the way. Basically, I had to have the deadline breathing in my face before the story would untangle itself from my subconscious. This was more than garden-variety procrastination. No matter how much in advance I started working, the words, the scenes—heck, the entire plot—eluded me until the very last minute.

Writers' email loops filled me with envy. Where was the fun they talked about? How on earth did they do this for a living? Writing is in my blood, something I do because it's part of who I am, but it often seemed a job at Starbucks would bring me more enjoyment—particularly since I'd at least get a free pound of coffee beans out of the deal.

There were countless external reasons for my creative angst: a cross-country move, Little Realities still not in

school full time, my mother's terminal illness and death, my Hero's deployments to conflict-ridden areas of the globe. I kept telling myself that things would get easier when my life settled down. At the same time, I noticed other writers continuing to produce excellent novels in spite of crises more severe than mine.

Then came The Move of 2005. Everything seemed to be lining up miraculously to give me the writing life I've dreamed of: a beautiful office, a new laptop computer, Little Realities in school full time, no crises in either my family or Hero's, no deployments looming on the horizon. As I unpacked boxes, I dreamed of quiet days spent in my imagination. Stories swirled in my imagination and characters told me some of their secrets.

But when the flurry of moving was over and the first month of school had elapsed, creative productivity continued to elude me. I tried to work. I tried hard. But each story detail appeared on the page with only slightly less effort than giving birth to the Little Realities. To make matters

### **Avon Promotion**

May Chen has been promoted to editor.

## **Bits'n'Pieces**

annually with a launch in 2007. Dorman has worked on *The Secret Life of Bees*, *The Mermaid Chair* and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones* books.

### **St. Martin's Loss, MIRA's Gain**

Lisa McFall has left St. Martin's to join MIRA as senior editor. She will be acquiring commercial literary fiction and thrillers.

### **New Hyperion Imprint to Target Females over 35**

Fiction and nonfiction for females over 35 will be coming from Hyperion and Pamela Dorman, former vice-president and executive editor at Viking. The unnamed imprint will acquire 12 hardcover books

*"Bits" Compiled by Sally Hawkes*

worse, my body craved sleep, lots and lots of sleep. A nap could easily consume the better part of a school day.

In desperation, I sought the advice of my fellow Ninclinkers. I mentioned my overwhelming need for sleep, but didn't mention I'd been fighting this creative battle for close to five years. I was afraid the "real writers" would confirm my worst fears—that my creativity was gone, that I was no longer qualified to be a writer.

A couple of Ninclinkers suggested I get my thyroid checked. I dismissed the suggestion since my family doctor in Kingston had run the test on me twice in the previous 18 months. Then another linker mentioned that a blood test isn't an accurate evaluation of thyroid functioning. Yet another linker related her experience with thyroid deficiency, including the inability to think clearly or to focus on her writing. It quickly became apparent that many of our number had experienced their own form of combat with hypothyroidism.

How I found the help I needed is a story in itself, but the short version is that I found a naturopath who listened to my woes, and agreed that a sluggish thyroid could definitely be to blame. She recommended a homeopathic treatment (a little bottle of vile tasting drops).

I left that appointment feeling hopeful for the first time in months. Though she'd predicted it would be a month before I started feeling better, within ten days I could feel the difference. Slowly the compulsion to sleep the day away faded. I now actually had time to write.

By the end of the first month on treatment, it was as though I'd finally found my "on" switch. The story idea I'd been wrestling with for eight months suddenly became clear. A totally new idea blossomed with such intensity it kept me awake nights.

Though "inability to focus" and "lack of concentration" are two symptoms of hypothyroidism, I hadn't realized I had those problems until they disappeared. Now when I sit down to write, scenes actually appear in my mind and

words show up on my computer screen. It feels as if I've stepped into a whole new world. My brain actually works.

I can still procrastinate with the best of you, but when I decide to focus, I'm able to do so. When I need ideas, they're there—both useable ones and the other kind. Writing is once again an enjoyable, fulfilling activity. I feel better in every way than I have in years.

Because we writers live in and make our living with our brains, it's easy for us to forget that creativity is so much more than what happens in our minds. Sometimes we do have to use sheer willpower to get the story written. However, there are other times (likely more often than we realize) when our creative slumps have nothing to do with creative deficiency or lack of willpower.

Not long ago a mentor asked how my hero's absences affect my writing. I shamefacedly confessed that I get little accomplished while he's away. "Just keeping up with my Little Realities wears me out emotionally," I told her.

"And when we're emotionally exhausted, the creativity is the first thing to go," she replied.

"You mean it's not just laziness?"

She assured me laziness probably isn't even a minor factor. Creativity requires balance. That's not to say our circumstances have to be perfect in order for us to be creative. Sometimes creativity itself brings balance. However, what feels like the dreaded writer's block could simply be a warning that something other than the writing itself is out of whack. When we take care of our entire selves, our creativity can only flourish.

Which reminds me—time for another dose of my drops.

*Janelle Clare Schneider welcomes any inquiries about her experience via her email address [jcswrites@cablerocket.com](mailto:jcswrites@cablerocket.com). More information on hypothyroidism can be found on [www.drlowe.com](http://www.drlowe.com).*

### Can't Make the Trip? Phone It In!

Publishers are recognizing the growing influence of book clubs, and are making arrangements for authors to talk to their readers—by phone. Harpercollins.com has set up connections for Denene Millner, Angela Burt-Murray and Mitzi Miller (*The Vow*); Christopher de Bellaigue (*In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs*); Jennifer Haigh (*Baker Towers*); Michael Chabon (*The Final Solution*); Elizabeth Noble (*The Friendship Test*); and Edeet Ravel (*A Wall of Light*). Bookclubreader.com at Simon & Schuster has an offer with Cathy Kelly for her novel *Just Between Us*.

# Bits'n'Pieces

### Has the E-Book Finally Arrived?

Sony introduced a new e-book at the Las Vega Consumer Electronics Show that is cited as the most user friendly so far. It has a 6-inch display screen and weighs 8.8 ounces. The battery life is reported to provide 7,500 pages per charge. This is a dedicated reader, but is MP3 compatible. Starting price for the reader is \$299 to \$399 and e-books will only be available online through Sony Connect. No catalog is available, but all major publishers have promised support for the spring launch. E-books prices will be determined by the publishers.



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

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

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## A Year of Celebration

In honor of Valentine's Day, which is arguably the most celebratory of all the holidays, I'm going to kick off a year of celebration.

First this: over the month of December, I gave serious thought to whether I wished to continue writing this column. I worried that you must have heard everything I could possibly say, that someone else might be burning to write a column for this space, that there are writers with different approaches, but each time I'm nearly ready to send an email to Annette, it's as if I've whispered my intention to the group—suddenly I will have an email or two or three, or posts to my website, or a phone call from someone who says, "I really needed that." And I think, okay, another one or two. We'll see.

As often happens, I learned a lesson from a classroom in which I was teaching online. One writer was distressed and lost and could not hear her voice, even though we had been through many exercises and discussions. Everyone else in the group could hear it, very strongly (this woman honestly has one of the strongest voices I've heard in an aspiring writer), but she couldn't hear it herself.

It finally came out that she was listening to another

kind of voice, thinking that she should be writing in that fashion, because it was popular at the moment. Once it was gently expressed that her voice was entirely different, but brilliant in its own way, she was desperately relieved.

The ensuing group discussion about how difficult it is for all of us to accept who we are struck me like a boulder rolling down a hill. I realized that I'd been worrying that for purposes of serving this organization, I am not sophisticated enough or cynical enough or business-minded enough or whatever enough. But that's the whole point, isn't it? There are lots of people who are sophisticated and/or cynical, many who have a far better grasp on the business angles of our world, who can teach you how to watch for pitfalls and prepare yourself for whatever might come, but my job is to be the earnest one. It's a slightly embarrassing moniker, but it's no accident that my books seem to take place in kitchens and over meals and the protagonists are almost universally nurturers.

What I like doing in this column is offering your artist some nourishment. What I like is seeing writers flourish, becoming healthier, physically and mentally; more fully themselves, taking delight in the surprise of

doing something so magical as writing novels. What makes me happy is to celebrate life, writers, our individual steps and milestones and accomplishments.

So, honoring my own quest, I declare this the Year of Celebration. We will celebrate ourselves and others, celebrate the work and our bodies and the market and our quest to be our best selves. I am earnest and geeky enough to plan it out and to have a set of exercises I hope will help us all to partake of these celebrations.

Let's begin by celebrating what is. I know we've done this before, but it doesn't hurt to do it as a regular practice, even every day. Take a few minutes and celebrate your life as it is, just this very minute.

February is, after all, the month that brings us one of the most celebratory of holidays—Valentine's Day. I'm sure you're trying to think of little things to do for the significant others in your life. It's a good time to celebrate them. I like to send my big boy sons little boxes of candy conversation hearts and packets of red hots and a card with a cute dog or cat on it. I used to be worried that they would outgrow this practice and I'd be reduced to Silly Mom, but they genuinely seem to enjoy receiving them.

And why not? Is there anything more pleasant than opening the mailbox to a surprise of a favorite candy or an expression of love? Discovering a little box of candy or a card left by a child, or being surprised by flowers, or getting a card in the mail that says, "I love you," or even, "I was thinking about you," is a big mood booster for all of us.

My late mother-in-law kept a calendar specifically for the cards she'd need to buy for birthdays. At the start of each month, she'd check to see who was celebrating a birthday and she'd take out cards for each one. Sometimes, the cards were not exactly on time, and sometimes she mixed one birthday up with another in that month, but it was always such a treat to get a card, to be remembered, to be treasured. Since she passed away, there are many, many of us who miss it and remember that missing card every year.

She knew how to celebrate the fact you were on the earth. An ordinary thing, a plain birthday card, bought in bulk, with glitter that fell off and cozy kittens on the outside, signed simply with her name and a smiley face. An ordinary thing celebrating an ordinary event, a birthday, of an ordinary being on this ordinary planet.

And yet, so not ordinary, none of it, not any of us or our birthdays or our being.

Mama was wonderful at celebrating such ordinary things. She had a habit of joy, of greeting the world with a cheery smile and a most endearing twinkle in her eye that would be almost wicked if she hadn't been such a devoted Christian—thus it was only mischievous. She celebrated everything just as she celebrated birthdays. Every morning was a gift. Every phone call a

delight. Every hug or kiss, every child or grandchild ever born. Potato salad and her sisters and losing a couple of pounds so her dress fit just right over her waist—everything was a celebration.

It's a good way to live.

One of my favorite movies of recent years is *Love, Actually*, which has to be one of the most celebratory movies around. My favorite scenes are at the beginning and end, in airports, where people are greeting beloved others arriving from elsewhere, with love and excitement and relief. I'm living in Colorado Springs, where there are five military bases, and many troops moving in and out. When my twenty-two year old son visits now, I'm always standing in the airport, watching those soldiers in their desert khakis greeting mothers, brothers, wives, children, and they seem so precious and endangered, and when it is at last my own Ian, thin and now bespectacled, I rush to hug him.

I say the same thing every single time, "I'm so glad you are not a soldier." Here he is, skinny and pale from studying, but whole. Huggable. Not going off to Iraq anywhere even in the dimmest future.

Here I am, on a warm winter Wednesday with all my limbs and digits and a computer and a furnace. I will go hiking later with said child and girlfriend and have the peculiar pleasure of being able to teach them something—about hiking—that they really want to know. I am a writer. I have lots of music to listen to.

Yes, there are things that are annoying. I've had cash flow issues all year and currently have about \$12 to my name. I have had sinus troubles this winter and currently have a bit of a headache. Life is not perfect, ever. That mother-in-law of mine lost her hearing when she was in labor with her eldest child and she had rheumatoid arthritis in both knees and worked as a housekeeper her whole life. Some of her children broke her heart and one died too soon.

She still celebrated every single day. Let's do the same. Acknowledge, yes, that you have trouble, that things hurt or are not going to work out the way you hoped, but it's still a gift to be here, with breath in your lungs and ideas in your mind and the opportunity to write some more pages, whatever they are.

## HOMework

Your homework, should you care to try it, is to take a piece of paper and write a list of 15 things you are grateful for today. If someone feels brave, take five of them and post them to a friend or to the Ninklink or put them on your bulletin board.

For the rest of this month, try to remember once each day to stop and be thankful for what is, in writing and in your life. You don't have to be positive every single minute. You don't have to live like Pollyanna, singing in spite of the rain. Just take five minutes ▶



## The Girls in the Basement . . .

# Celebrate

- ▶ each day to acknowledge whatever good there is in your life, even if it only feels like a teeny, tiny bit.  
Next month, get ready to celebrate yourself.

Barbara Samuel would love to hear suggestions and comments on this series. Write to her at [barbara.samuel@gmail.com](mailto:barbara.samuel@gmail.com). She is celebrating the possibility she might have wrested her domain name from a black hole where it resided for nearly a month. See if she won at [barbarasamuel.com](http://barbarasamuel.com).

### NEA Funds Reading Programs

After documenting the decline of reading in the 2004 Reading at Risk, the NEA has dedicated \$265,000 to the pilot program BIG READ in 10 communities. Four books are in the spotlight for the pilot: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury [Enterprise, OR, Miami, Buffalo, and Boise]; *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald [Little Rock and Huntsville, AL]; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston [Minneapolis and Topeka]; and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee [Fresno and Brookings/Sioux Falls, SD]. The program runs February through May. The programs will be evaluated, with an eye toward expanding to 100 cities in 2007.

### From the NINCLink – in case you're not online

1. Kasey Michaels supplied this direct email for authors making inquiries to Barnes & Noble: [publisherauthorinquiry@book.com](mailto:publisherauthorinquiry@book.com)
2. Want to know if your title is a best seller? Fran Baker posted this link: <http://www.lulu.com/titlescorer/index.php>
3. Elizabeth Ashtree provided another amusing site, but says her husband found it <http://www.gnod.net/>. List three authors' names

under Gnod Suggestions and see what other authors are suggested.

### The Smoking Gun aims at Frey

Not only does The Smoking Gun account state that James Frey has tampered with the truth in *A Million Little Pieces*, but the sequel *My Friend Leroy* as well. The January article states the police and court records don't support either Frey's claims and other portions of the book, which the author says he may have embellished. Anchor and Doubleday issued statements supporting the author. *A Million Little Pieces* has had the biggest sales of any Oprah book club book, 1.77M copies sold in 2005. <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/0104061jamesfrey1.html>

### US Best Sellers of 2005

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1 <i>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince</i> - JK Rowling | 4 <i>1776</i> - David McCullough       |
| 2 <i>A Million Little Pieces</i> - James Frey                | 5 <i>The Da Vinci Code</i> - Dan Brown |
| 3 <i>The Kite Runner</i> - Khaled Hosseini                   | from Nielsen BookScan                  |

# Bits'n'Pieces

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