



INK

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Dr. Wertham, EC Comics, and My Misspent Youth

BY LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS

Years ago an editor asked me to write an article for a small 'zine called Penguin Dip. I asked what sort of article he'd like, and he suggested the title above based on what he thought he knew of my history.

There were definitely some false assumptions involved, but I wrote the following account anyway. (What follows has been lightly edited and updated.)

I was born in 1954, fourth of what was eventually six kids. The oldest was my sister Marian, who was born late in 1947. In 1955 or so, at age seven, Marian discovered comic books.

The comic books she discovered were mostly published by two companies, Dell and National (which at the time labelled its comics "Superman-DC"). She latched onto heroes like Green Arrow, Batman, Turok, Tarzan, the Lone Ranger, Tonto, Sgt. Preston of the Yukon, and so forth.

When my brother Bill learned to read, in 1956 or so, he started reading Marian's hand-me-downs, and also went in for DC's other superhero titles.

Then came Jody, who learned to read in 1956 at age five; she liked DC, especially Superboy and Wonder Woman, and Dell's Little Lulu, Uncle Scrooge, and Disney specials like *Cinderella*.

All the family's comic books were treated as communal property; whoever bought one could read it first, but then it got passed around, and, when everyone had read it, up it went to a box in the attic. Periodically, on boring rainy days, somebody would go up to the attic and haul down a stack of old comics to re-read.

When I was five, late in 1959 or early in 1960, I desperately wanted to learn to read so I could read those comic books. I'd learned the alphabet in kindergarten, and one day the teacher was teaching us a song that she'd written on the blackboard, something about "K-k-katy, beautiful Katy," and the concept of each letter representing a sound abruptly dawned on me.

I suddenly realized that maybe I could read, since I knew all the letters.

When I got home I got out the comic book that most fascinated me, a coverless old one with bright purple

spaceships and trees with faces and domed cities in it, and I sat down and read it, skipping words that weren't spelled phonetically.

So much for the arguments that comic books keep kids from learning to read!

That comic book, by the way, stuck in my memory, and 20 years later I tracked it down and bought a copy. It's *Adventures into the Unknown* #105, published by the American Comics Group in 1956.

Once I started, I was a voracious reader. I went through all the comic books that my sibs had accumulated by the time I was seven, as well as several assorted children's books. By the middle of second grade I'd run out of kid stuff, and while my classmates were puzzling out "See Spot run," I was reading Robert Heinlein's *The Green Hills of Earth* and Ray Bradbury's *The October Country* (though with both books, I totally missed the point in some stories—sex and politics and racism were complete unknowns to me at that age).

Meanwhile, I continued to read

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

Being a practical, business-minded person, I understand the difficulties that companies like Borders and Barnes & Noble have in finding the right people to work in their stores, especially given the pitiful wages they pay. I spent four years working as a part-time bookseller at a Borders in Colorado and, by dint of hard work and much application to learning my job, I eventually earned all of \$7.50 an hour, which was a whole buck and a quarter more than I was making when I'd started.

That \$6.25 starting wage seems cast in stone, which makes it hard for most folks to choose bookselling as a career if they also want to pay their bills. When B&N opened a new store in Bozeman, I applied for a job and naively put down as my asking salary that impressive \$7.50 an hour to which I'd attained. I was gently informed that, while my qualifications were sterling, I probably wouldn't get the job because I was asking *way* too much to start. Sure enough, B&N opened their new store without my help. Imagine!

I also understand the challenges of finding staff who are familiar with the wide range of merchandise such stores have for sale these days. I was good in children's books, inspired in fiction and history, fumbling in auto manuals, and extremely limited in music. *Extremely* limited. I am, after all, that bright young thing who, in responding to the young man inquiring at the music counter if we carried rap, smiled cheerily and said, "You bet! We have a wide variety up at the front register, and there's no charge for the service. Just take your pick." The words were already out of my mouth when I realized that his "rap" hadn't had a "w" on the front.

So I'm sympathetic to the challenges faced by the folks who work in these stores. Still...

I recently moved to a new house and a new state. I love new places, but when your work involves sitting all by yourself for hours on end, lost in your own imagination, one of the challenges of a big move is building a place for yourself in the community. As a reader and writer, some of the places I naturally check out first are the local bookstores and libraries. Here in Hilo, the library is in the middle of a big computer changeover so I can't even get a library card right now. The only general-interest bookstore in town is a Borders, complete with coffee shop, music, and DVDs.

According to a flyer I'd seen, the store had a couple of book clubs, and book clubs seemed like a natural place to start in my quest to meet people and make friends. So two days after I got here, I wandered down to the store to find out what was on the menu for the month. Their monthly program flyer listed the dates and times for the meetings, but not the titles selected for discussion. The bright young thing at the information desk didn't know what the titles were, either, but she at least knew where to look—on the display right beside her information desk. There, under a sign announcing 30% off on this month's book club selections, were a copy of *Ella Minnow Pea*, by Mark Dunn and *Wonder Boys* by Michael Chabon. Both were on my increasingly long list of Books I Want To Read Someday, so I decided to go for broke and get both of them.

I couldn't take the display copies (well, I could have, but then how would the information staff know what the book club choices were?), so I ambled over to the Literature shelves to find my own. Despite those four years at Borders, I assumed (I should have known better!) that there would be several copies of the books available for all those intelligent, interesting, eager book

club members I was going to meet in a couple of weeks. Hah! There were two copies of *Ella*, but only one copy of *Wonder Boys*, a movie tie-in edition that had a picture of Michael Douglas on the front.

Now, I'm not a particular fan of Michael Douglas, and I don't like movie tie-in covers mostly because of the implication that the movie is the really important part of the equation, not the book itself. But I'm also in favor of whatever will get people to read, especially if they might not ever pick up a book otherwise, so I took the book.

Despite temptation, I managed not to add any other titles to my stack and eventually ambled out of the book section and over to the checkout counter. Another friendly, bright young thing rang up my purchases...without the 30% discount. I politely pointed out the omission, so she called for help. Help came. That meant there were two clerks staring at the books, then the computer screen, then the back of the books, then the computer screen, then...

Eventually, one decided to go get the clerk at the information desk. Unfortunately, the bright young thing who knew where the book club display was had stepped away to help a customer. So...we waited. And we waited.

I mentioned the store display and the sign announcing the 30% off. The clerk who remained nodded and smiled and stared anxiously at her colleague, who was calmly waiting by the information desk for help to come. She probably couldn't see the book club display from where she stood, and if she remembered it was there, she made no effort to check it out herself. Help, after all, was on its way.

Eventually, help did, in fact, arrive, and clerk number 2 came back to assure me that, yes, those were their book club selections, and the books really were 30% off, and they could, in fact, give me that discount even though it hadn't yet been put into the computer. Sure enough, a couple of quick key strokes and the computer obediently deducted 30% from my purchase price, added the tax, calculated my payment and how much I was owed in change, and printed out the receipt.

All Was Resolved. Friendly smiles all around.

And then, as she slid my new books into their bag, clerk number 1, relieved to have survived the ordeal, smiled even wider and said, cheerily, "You know, until I started to work here, I had no idea how many movies used to be books! Isn't it amazing!"

Yes, indeed. Absolutely amazing.

Now comes the part where I'm supposed to say something intelligent, informed, and inspiring about Ninc. Ninc and its members and, especially, all the volunteers who keep Ninc running deserve lots of applause, but I, I regret to admit, am fresh out of intelligent, informed, and inspiring. Moving will do that to you.

However, I would like to say Thank You to the wonderful folks who agreed to serve on the Board this year: Karen Harbaugh, Ann Josephson, Julie Kistler, and our inimitable NINK editor, Olivia Rupprecht. I'd also like to thank Janice Young Brooks, who's handed over the

management of our membership database after twelve years of unpaid hard work. Thank you, Janice! Kathy Lynn Emerson has signed on for another year as head of the membership committee (the last she's allowed by our rules). Thank you, Kathy! Brenda Hiatt Barber is still keeping us in line on the Link. Thank you, Brenda!

And then there are all the wonderful folks who make *NINK* the great newsletter it is. Lorraine Heath continues to provide us with tons of useful information about research sites and the internet; Laura Resnick, the Comely Curmudgeon, continues to make us laugh, shout, and groan; Terey daly Ramin gathers all those useful "Bits'n'Pieces"; Ronn Kaiser has gotten more than one interesting discussion going with his "Tricks of the Trade" column; Peggy Webb has gamely taken up Olivia's "Buzz in the Biz" column; to Cheryl Anne Porter for her insight on the writing life—I'm still giggling about that family-assisted interview; and, of course, all those great folks who provide those special articles that surprise, delight, and inform us. Thank You Lorraine, Laura, Terey, Ronn, Peggy, Cheryl Anne, and all the rest!

And for all those I haven't space to name (or plain forgot I should have—see above on the fresh out of intelligent, etc.), Thank You! Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!

— Anne Holmberg

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:

Anna Adams,
Ft. Worth TX
Pamela Toth (*Pamela Roth*),
Woodinville WA

New Members:

Lynda Sue Cooper (*Lynda Sandoval*), Conifer CO
Danielle Girard,

San Francisco CA
Sharon Mignerey,
Brighton CO
Muna Shehadi Sill (*Isabelle Sharpe*), Wauwatosa WI
Karen L. Smith (*Karen Lee*),
Ashburn VA
Susan Freya Smith (*Sue Swift*), Citrus Heights CA

Ninc has room to grow...recommend membership to *your* colleagues.

Prospective members may apply online at www.ninc.com.

Comics and Me

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comics. I picked up the first issue of *X-Men* secondhand, for a nickel, about six months after it came out. I read the first Justice League adventures, which Marian had bought. I liked superheroes. I also liked everything else—I plowed through Marian's Turok and Lone Ranger and Jody's Little Lulu and Superboy and all the rest of it, loving all of it. About my favorite was *Strange Adventures*, a science fiction title.

It took awhile before I started buying my own, though, and when I did, at first I stuck to tried and true categories.

Then one day I picked up a secondhand copy of *Tales to Astonish* #13 (I know the issue because I tracked it down later), and discovered monster comics.

That comic book had four or five stories in it. The cover story was about "Groot, the Thing from Planet XI," a giant walking tree. Then there was a creepy one about a guy obsessed with finding the abominable snowman who *becomes* the abominable snowman, and one about a guy who gets turned into a wooden statue, and... well, I don't remember the others for sure anymore, but this was my first exposure to scary stuff in visual form.

I had nightmares for about a week.

I loved it.

If that sounds contradictory, it isn't really. I had nightmares a lot, about all kinds of silly things. *The October Country* certainly gave me nightmares, but then, so did Tommy Tomorrow and the cover art on Philip K. Dick's *Eye in the Sky* (I didn't actually read that book until much, much later) and even a silly Supergirl story about a red monster so gigantic you only see its feet.

I started looking for other scary comics, but didn't find much. Most Marvel monster comics were just dumb, and the Charlton ghost comics were dumb too, and the DC "mystery" comics I came across were even worse. Dell did a few that I liked—my favorite was a one-shot giant called *Universal Pictures Presents Dracula, The Mummy, and Other Stories*. (Catchy title, huh?) That one gave me nightmares, too.

It seemed to me at the time that there ought to be scarier comic books than that. I wondered why DC and Marvel and Charlton and ACG never had any werewolves or vampires or anything like that in their spooky comics. I couldn't find any, though, and eventually I gave up.

Time marched on. Marvel's monster comics turned into superhero titles, most of which I didn't like; DC's superhero titles got more serious. ACG folded. Charlton slogged on but was always lousy. Gold Key did lots of reprints, and the stuff that wasn't reprints got really weak, with bad art and sloppy writing. I gradually stopped buying and reading comics. By 1969 I wasn't paying much attention at all.

Then in 1974 I started collecting comics again because I discovered that there was money in it; I picked up *Classic Comics* #1 at a yard sale for \$4.25, as a curiosity, and sold it to a collector for \$60.00. I started buying up practically every old comic book I came across, with no discrimination at all.

Once I realized how many were pure junk, I began to narrow down to the good ones.

Then I started reading *about* comic books—I got hold of *The Comic-Book Book* and *All in Color for A Dime*, by Don Thompson and Dick Lupoff, and *Comix*, by Les Daniels.

The articles on Superman and

Batman and Wonder Woman and the rest were nothing new, but two subjects came as a revelation: the history of the original Captain Marvel, and the story of E.C. Comics, Dr. Wertham, and the Comics Code Authority.

For those who don't know, E.C. was a small comic-book publisher, in business from 1943 to 1955. From 1950 through 1954 they put out comic books often considered the best ever produced, certainly the best produced before 1960, including three no-holds-barred horror titles: *Tales from the Crypt* (which would eventually be the basis for a movie and a TV show), *The Haunt of Fear*, and *The Vault of Horror*. They also did some borderline horror: *Crime Suspense Stories*, *Shock Suspense Stories*, *Weird Science*, and *Weird Fantasy*. Even their war titles, *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted*, were unusually gruesome.

About two dozen other publishers (yes, there really were that many) tried to cash in on the boom in horror comics that resulted from E.C.'s success with those titles, and turned out heaps and heaps of gory horror comics.

Then in 1954-1955, a hue and cry led by a psychiatrist named Dr. Frederic Wertham, expert on criminal violence and author of the anti-comics diatribe *Seduction of the Innocent*, put all the horror comics, all crime comics, all lurid comics of any sort, out of business. Combined with the collapse of the then-existing magazine distribution system, brought about by the liquidation of the gargantuan American News Company in fancy financial maneuvers, this put about three-fourths of the comic book publishers of the time out of business, including E.C.

The survivors, with two exceptions (Dell and Classics Illustrated), submitted to censorship

by the newly created Comics Code Authority.

I hadn't known about any of this.

As for that other revelation, the original Captain Marvel was the star of the Fawcett line of comics, and for a time was more popular and sold more comics than any other hero. DC had sued, claiming he was an imitation of Superman, and after years of litigation finally won and drove Fawcett out of the superhero business.

Both the Big Red Cheese and pre-Code horror had been gone since before I discovered comics, and this was the first I'd heard of either of them. I'd thought the CCA seal had always been on comic-book covers, that Superman had always been the dominant superhero.

Fascinated, I found some of the DC reprints of old Captain Marvel stories that came out in the 1970s under the title *Shazam!* What a disappointment! This was the stuff that those fans had raved about?

I still decided to check out E.C., though, because the raves about E.C. were even more enthusiastic than the ones about Captain Marvel.

Then I looked at the prices for E. C. comics. A ratty issue of *Tales from the Crypt* went for ten or fifteen dollars!

No way! After the Captain Marvel incident, I decided to pass. At least those issues of *Shazam!* had only cost me a quarter apiece.

Let us skip ahead to April, 1978. I was married, unemployed, living off my wife's salary in an apartment in Lexington, Kentucky. I had a fairly extensive comic-book collection and was thinking about going into business full-time as a mail-order dealer, since my writing career wasn't going anywhere yet.

I saw an ad in a publication called *The Buyer's Guide for Comics*—someone in Florida had died, and his widow was selling off his E.C. collection, cheap. Instead of prices in the \$10-and-up range, she was asking as little as \$1.50 for issues of *Frontline Combat*, *Two-Fisted Tales*, and the like.

What the heck, I thought, and I splurged. I ordered half a dozen, mostly war comics, but including one issue of *Tales from the Crypt* at \$4.00.

I got the books, and read 'em, and I was impressed, sort of—but they sure were strange. They weren't like anything else I'd ever read. For one thing, I wasn't sure whether the stories in *Tales from the Crypt* #41 were meant seriously or not—they were on the edge between horror and parody.

I liked 'em, though.

I sold that book for \$16.00—and immediately regretted it, and decided to buy some more E.C.s. Which I did.

And from then on I was hooked. I bought more, and more, and more—until, six years and \$17,000 later, I had one of the ten most complete E.C. collections on Earth.

It was fairly easy, really. E.C. was a small company, and only lasted about ten years in the comics business (they're still around, as the division of AOL Time Warner that publishes *Mad*). There were only about 470 issues to obtain. (I say "about" because it depends how you figure it; they did some borderline stuff, like giveaways that they packaged for Consolidated Edison.) Putting together an E.C. collection was expensive and time-consuming, but it wasn't really hard.

But when I was finished, or at least as close as I got (there are a few giveaways I never found), where did I go from there?

I thought about it. I considered other companies—should I collect Fiction House? Ziff-Davis? ACG? But I wasn't really interested in any of those. I was interested in horror comics.

So I set out to collect all the horror comics ever published in the U.S. I came close before I finally gave up and sold them all for many thousands of dollars.

So what does all this have to do with Dr. Wertham and my misspent youth?

Well, the reason E.C. got out of the business, the reason horror comics gave way to wimpy "mystery" and "monster" and "ghost" comics, was

that Dr. Frederic Wertham and other anti-comics crusaders had conducted a massive campaign against these horrible mind-warping funnybooks that children were reading.

This campaign had resulted in the Comics Code Authority, a body owned and operated by the comic-book publishers to censor their products and make sure that they were fit for children to read.

When I was a kid, all the comics I read were either Code-approved and certified harmless, or came from Dell or one of its offshoots—Dell had never subscribed to the Code but had its own in-house version that was usually followed (except in a few early-60s books like *Universal*—remember, I mentioned those?).

That's why I couldn't find any really scary or gruesome stuff as a kid! It was all Dr. Wertham's fault! He'd killed the good stuff off when I was still in diapers! (That's a gross oversimplification, really—he was just the most visible anti-comics crusader, but as a matter of fact he wasn't all that influential. He hated all comics, and thought superhero stuff was at least as bad as horror. The Code was emphatically not his doing—he disapproved of it. He makes a great scapegoat, though.) And now let me appear to change the subject for just a bit—I'll tie this in in a moment, bear with me.

Who's been the best-selling writer in the world for pretty much my entire adult life?

Stephen King, of course.

So what does King write?

Horror. Often real gross-out stuff, too.

Where'd he learn this?

From the horror comics he read as a kid. He's said as much, and admits to swiping some of his most horrific images from them. In his short story "The Boogeyman," in the collection *Night Shift*, he talks about E.C.'s *Haunt of Fear* and the artwork of Graham "Ghastly" Ingels. Together with George Romero, who remembered those same hideous old comics, he produced the hit movie *Creepshow* and explicitly based it on

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

Comics and Me

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ a horror comic.
Now, what do I do for a living?
I write books.
What kind of books?
Science fiction and fantasy.
Why?
Because when I was a kid I learned to read from *Adventures into the*

Unknown and read piles and piles of science fiction comics and books and so forth.

Why didn't I read horror comics? Because there weren't any. If there had been, I'd have read them, even if I had to sneak them into bed and read them under the covers, the way I snuck my radio in to listen to rock 'n' roll.

See, it ties back in. It's all

Dr. Wertham's fault that I wasted my childhood with that other stuff, instead of horror comics, and didn't wind up as rich and famous as Stephen King!

Talk about a misspent youth! *N*

Lawrence Watt-Evans is the author of three dozen volumes of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, and owns 20% of a chain of comic book shops.



Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

What Writers Really Want

I was thinking about what writers really need around the house. Liquor. Assorted weaponry. A pit bull on acid. Seriously, is there really anyone out there who is still not willing to admit that these three items are essential? How else do you deal with those people and appliances that insist on creating problems for you when you're writing? Exactly.

Anyway, some truly labor saving devices that might not have occurred to you thus far include:

Things like a kettle with the decency to whistle when the water is boiling. And boiling. And rapidly evaporating. A whistling kettle saves a lot of time and energy for not only your local fire department but also for you. How? Visualize you without a whistling kettle...there you are, dragging up a ladder or a kitchen stool, climbing it and trying to disarm or smash with a hammer that irritating, buzzing smoke alarm. And mean while, just how much writing are you getting done?

Want something that's simply good for the soul? Think...paper shredder. Forget yoga for getting centered. Run paper through a shredder. I find this very soothing. Start with the bills, sometimes categorized as annoying junk mail. IRS notices? Nothing good ever came from one of those. Rejection letters, revision letters, royalty statements. Stand 'em on end and run 'em through, baby. What a gleeful sound. Oh, and don't forget all credit card offers and those notices that you, too, might be a winner. ERRRRRRRRRR.

And servants. You should have them, not shred

them. Why? I'm told they actually enjoy cleaning and cooking and vacuuming and emptying the dishwasher and watering the plants. And washing the car and putting gas in it and shopping for groceries. Barring your ability to employ servants, well-trained small children (forget teenagers) and pets will suffice. Yes, they'll whine and threaten to tell Grandma or the SPCA, respectively, but I think that, deep down, they love to help. My dog, for example, does a bang-up job of vacuuming. I just tie the canister-style device around his middle, plug it in and turn it on. Wow, can he run rapidly through every room!

Oh, save your stamp. I don't even have a dog. Or a vacuum cleaner. See "why not" above.

Want more? How about an in-house Computer Tech Support Person? Ideally, this geek appears the instant your computer does something rebellious or heinous. When (not "if," you wild-eyed optimist) a glitch happens, your CTSP, fluent in non-computer English and a being who accepts having abuse heaped upon his head as simply part of the job, solves the problem immediately and you don't lose any work or waste any time. Without a personal CTSP, you're going to be on "terminal hold," or "ignore," as those jokesters, 5000 miles away from you, like to call that red, flashing button.

So, this is just my list, off the top of my head, for ways to save labor in a writer's household. But you know what? Upon reflection, maybe it would just be better if we didn't have households. *N*

Reviewing Etiquette

BY PAMELA KINGSBURY

In an ideal world, reviews help readers find the books they are most likely to enjoy and help writers as well as publishers promote books. I started reviewing books about 15 years ago while working at my local library. From that small step, I've carved a list of review work for *Library Journal*, *ForeWord*, *BookPage*, *Southern Scribe*, *FirstDraft*, and the *Anniston Star*. Several friends from the publishing, academic, and writing worlds have asked various questions about reviewing etiquette over the years, so I've put together some thoughts on the process.

We've all read bad book reviews by bad reviewers. You know the type—their reviews are written to show how clever they are and how much better they could have written the book. My own goal is to provide distinctive, valued, interesting, imaginative, and fair reviewing.

I've always maintained that one of the best ways for a book to get a fair and/or good review is to get it into the "right" reviewer's hands. Good book page and/or book review editors send their reviewing applicants lengthy questionnaires asking about educational background, personal preferences, hobbies, passions, and dislikes. It may take a few tries but if the editor and reviewer persevere, most galleys and review copies will wind up in the hands of a sympathetic reviewer.

Book review editors usually ask and trust their reviewers to inform them if the book doesn't have merit. Policies may vary. Some editors may ask for a second opinion but most don't. Editors at the larger review publications receive hundreds of galleys every month and prefer reviewing books they can recommend

to their readers. Some reviewers are purists, preferring not to review books by friends; others make a practice of not giving bad reviews to local writers in their hometowns.

As a personal aside, I was asked to review a novel by an Alabama author after two other reviewers refused to finish reading the galley. As a professional courtesy, since we both live in the same state, I reviewed her novel, believing I had been kind and helpful. My editor e-mailed and asked me what I really thought about the book. I replied rather bluntly. Several months later, the author's comments about my review started drifting back to me (Alabama, is after all, a very small state). It turned out that my private e-mail had been incorporated into a public review.

Unfortunately, space tends to be limited and consequently, book reviews can be short shorts (150 words or less), moderate (350 to 400 words), and lengthy (800 to 1,000 words).

Most periodicals have deadlines and most reviewers are given deadlines. If your publisher doesn't meet the deadline, your book may wind up in the toss pile.

Most reviewers work from galleys and/or advanced reader's copies. With the current economy, reviewers don't always see the finished book.

There are some self-published gems but quite often book editors won't touch them.

Most book page editors want their reviewers to address four basic questions:

1) Is the author's work original? What has the author tried to accomplish and how successful is the result?

2) Is the book written in a clear, readable style? Is the book's organization clear and effective?

3) To what audience will it appeal? (In determining whether or not a book should be reviewed, the reviewer may want to establish whether or not there is a reliable market for the book.)

4) Are there significant books already published on the subject? And how do they compare?

WRITING THE REVIEW:

Michael Dirda, senior editor for the *Washington Post Book World* said, "A good reviewer is a literary entertainer. Book reviews should be essays that people enjoy reading even if they never buy the book."

As in all writing, the lead lines should be interesting. Quotes, anecdotes, significant statements, and astonishing facts all draw in readers. (Think Tolstoy's opening line from *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.")

Clichés should be avoided. If a reviewer believes a book is powerful, unique, or stunning, s/he should be able to explain why s/he responds to the book.

Third person always facilitates a more objective view.

Readers need to have a sense of the book without giving away the book's plot. The rule is "Explain it, you drain it."

In longer reviews, two to three interesting examples of the content or the author's style should be mentioned. Vague or ambiguous statements should be avoided. Shortcomings, if mentioned, should be mentioned tactfully and briefly. The conclusion should include a positive "wrap-up."

REVIEWING DON'TS:

Reviewers should never request a book they have no intention of reviewing. Small presses, in particular, have little or

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ no publicity budgets and review copies are a luxury. Also, if a galley is sent for review and the promised review never runs, it is hurtful and disappointing to the author.

Selling review copies on the Internet and to book stores is bad form for any reputable reviewer. Quite often, galleys, advance reader's copies, and review copies are marked as "not for resale." Reviewers should honor the spirit of the reviewing agreement by donating books to their library of choice.

When I dislike a book, I tend not to read other reviewers' opinions. As Laura Resnick wrote in her *NINK* column, "I will not compare myself to others." It's self-defeating. In fairness, I also need to admit that when I go to a writer's conference knowing I'm likely to run into the author of a book I've given a bad review to, I do have the impulse to hide in the bathroom.

AS A WRITER

You should know, reviewers will never get rich writing reviews. Payments for book reviews in the smaller publications generally fall between \$25 and \$75 per review.

As in other occupations, book reviewers and book page editors compare notes. A good review from a benevolent reviewer can be a gift that keeps giving.

If you're upset with a review, you have the right to correct errors but nothing is accomplished by arguing with a reviewer's *opinion* of the work. At least two publicity directors and one writer tell me dissenting reviews help sales because they arouse curiosity in readers. A publisher friend who lives in Connecticut tells me he can always tell when a book has gotten a bad review because sales of the book double for a week or two.

Thank you notes are always

appropriate and appreciated. Over the years, I've developed several friendships and professional relationships with writers as a result of reviewing. A Birmingham-based novelist came to one of my speaking engagements to thank me personally for a review. I recognized her from the book's dust jacket. In the hope of helping her promote her first novel, I introduced her to the audience and mentioned her book. Never underestimate the power of a small act. We're all inclined to shamelessly promote people who've been kind to us. *N*

FURTHER READING:

Billy Smith's *I Like Reading Reviews: A Memoir*, HarperCollins, \$14.95, ISBN: 0337485988.

Charles McGrath, editor, *Books of the Century: A Hundred Years of Authors, Ideas, and Literature*, Times Books, Random House, \$30.00, ISBN: 0812929659.

Editor's "Voice"

Though it did indeed cost me a box of Godiva, I have learned the name of the editor who coined the wonderful phrase, "Book of Your Voice," at the Ninc conference in New York. I and many members of Ninc will forever be indebted to Carrie Feron of Harper Collins/Avon Books for giving a name to the types of books we want to write.

— Julie Elizabeth Leto

For the Good of the Order....

NOW HIRING

Are you tired of squelched ideas, late paychecks, and/or dull pencil lead scribbling all over your pristine pages? Have you ever considered how rewarding and fun it might be to take center stage as a wordsmith, playing to an appreciative audience of your peers? Oh, and actually get paid to do it!

NINK is currently in search of two staff writers who can bring fresh, new voices and bright ideas to our newsletter. Monthly or bi-monthly. Serious or tongue-in-cheek. Technical or pushing boundaries to the extreme. No restrictions apply beyond the limits of imagination, courage, expertise, and craft.

Please send your queries, ideas, and/or a sampling of the column that's uniquely you to *NINK* editor, Olivia Rupprecht, via orupp11155@aol.com, or phone (901) 853-4073 for further discussion.

Queries are also being accepted for feature articles.

NINK is an EOE employer. Insurance and paid vacations are not available but creative benefits and fiscal compensation are guaranteed.



Bits'n'Pieces

THE PENGUIN GROUP... Well, it's official: as rumored, as of January 2003, the US division of the company formerly called Penguin Putnam will now simply be called The Penguin Group. The Putnam imprint remains in place, and "The Penguin corporate brand will have no impact on the position or presentation of any of our imprints." Quoting David Shanks, the guy in charge of these things, "The Penguin Group has emerged over the years as one of the world's foremost consumer publishing brands.

"Making this move to create a single, consistent brand internationally using the Penguin name is a signal of the businesses' unity, strength, and momentum. It also reflects Pearson's CEO Marjorie Scardino's and Penguin's Chairman and CEO John Makinson's deep commitment to global teamwork." O-kay.

— Compiled by Terey daly Ramin

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

Down here in the deep South, I worship at the shrine of fellow Mississippian Eudora Welty whose short story "Why I Live at the P. O." not only kept me laughing the whole way through, but also awakened my literary sensibilities. (Is there such an animal? I picture *Literary Sensibilities* as a bright-eyed little creature hungry for lyric beauty and deep insight.) If Welty awakened this little creature, Shannon Ravenel kept him alive.

Co-founder of Algonquin Books in 1983 (along with Louis D. Rubin, Jr.), she has made a career of bringing excellence to the reading public. As editorial director of Algonquin she brought such stellar talents as Larry Brown and Kay Gibbons into the limelight. The authors she has edited have won countless awards, and she is a beloved and venerated figure in publishing. When she neared retirement, Algonquin's parent company, Workman Publishing, reeled her back with the offer of her own imprint, Shannon Ravenel Books.

Let's take a look at how one woman accomplished so much.

NINK: Shannon, how did you get into publishing?

Shannon Ravenel: In college, I was an English Lit major and edited the literary magazine my senior year. When I graduated, in 1960, I went to New York at the suggestion of my major professor and advisor, Louis Rubin. In fact, he wrote letters to about ten people in publishing companies asking them to at least let me come by for an informational interview. I ended up taking a job as marketing assistant in the School Department at Holt, Rinehart & Winston. I wrote a lot of "direct mail advertising" copy in the form of letters addressed to teachers touting the virtues of books like *Modern Chemistry* and *Modern Biology*. I stayed there one year then set off to find a job in trade publishing (books sold in regular bookstores). Luckily, I landed a great job as an editorial assistant to four editors in Houghton Mifflin's trade department. After three years, I began to work my way toward being a full-fledged editor and remained there in that capacity for seven or eight years.

NINK: Was it your dream to live and work in New York or something entirely different?

SR: My childhood dream was to get married, live in New York, and have lots of time to read. It was Louis Rubin who introduced the novel idea of a career in publishing. As soon as he did, though, a clearer vision of my future clicked into focus. I didn't end up in New York for long (I worked in Boston for eleven years) and I didn't marry until I was almost 30, but I did find a way to read to my heart's content.

NINK: What was your vision for Algonquin when you co-founded it?

SR: Again, Louis Rubin was the one with the vision. He wanted to found a publishing company that would be accessible to writers, both young and old, who did not have contacts in the New York publishing world. He wanted to publish "good books." He invited me to join him because I had publishing experience and because, in 1982 when he got the serious gleam in his eye, I was editing Houghton Mifflin's anthology, *The Best American Short Stories* and reading 200 or so literary magazines. I knew which writers were just starting out and might be looking for a literary publisher who didn't care whether or not writers had agents.

NINK: You and Louis certainly have realized your goal of bringing "good books" to the public: Algonquin is known for its great literary fiction with authors such as Larry Brown

and Jill McCorkle. What do you see as the difference between literary and commercial fiction, and what prompted the decision to add commercial fiction to the list?

SR: When asked this question by writers wanting to know if we'd be willing to consider their fiction, we answer that we care more about *how* a novel is written than what it's *about*. This criterion still holds true for us. If we've had some "commercial" novels on our list, I think it's safe to say that they have been well-written and that we took them on because of that.

NINK: Your own imprint launched in 2001. Tell us what you're looking for in the Shannon Ravenel Books. What distinguishes these books from other Algonquin books?

SR: I'm looking, as always, for wonderful writers. Nothing distinguishes my books from other Algonquin Books, except perhaps that many of mine are written by authors I've long edited—Clyde Edgerton, Jill McCorkle, Carrie Brown, Suzanne Berne. More recently, I'm adding a few writers new to our house: Ingrid Hill, George Singleton, Robert Ashcom, Marshall Boswell. And I've had the great good fortune of adding Lee Smith to my imprint with her eleventh novel, *The Last Girls*.

NINK: How many books per year appear under your own imprint, and do you have plans to expand?

SR: My contract requires me to publish seven to eight new titles a year under my imprint. I have no plans to expand that number.

NINK: If you receive a good manuscript that isn't suitable for your imprint but has possibilities in the general list, do you send it over, and vice versa?

SR: There's a lot of crossover between my imprint and the Algonquin list. I refer to my editorial colleagues here any and all good submissions that I can't handle due to the smallness of my list.

NINK: Approximately how many submissions do you receive per month? Do you accept unagented submissions?

SR: Algonquin (as opposed to Shannon Ravenel Books) receives about 100 full manuscript submissions a month. It also receives several hundred queries. We do indeed accept unagented submissions. That's still a big part of our mission.

NINK: What is the correlation between publicity budget and sales?

SR: Not much. Publicity plans are made far in advance of actual sales. Advertising has a little more to do with the sales performance, however.

NINK: What current trends do you see in publishing and what do you predict for its future?

SR: Too many books are being published for fewer and fewer readers. I think publishers are beginning to realize this and that the industry is at least slightly scaling back on the number of titles published every year. It is said that recent "blockbuster" book sales haven't lived up to expectations. Maybe that will also be a wake-up call. I think many readers want fiction and nonfiction with more depth and complexity.

NINK: Thank you, Shannon. We have already felt the winds of change you mention. As Fitzgerald wrote, "And so we beat on, boats against the current..."

Until next month this is Peggy Webb, paddling as fast as I can.

It is with profound sadness that I begin this column by reporting that on December 2, Carmel Thomaston passed away unexpectedly while recuperating from surgery. Her writer-helpful enterprises—Painted Rock, the Prock-Research list, and The Rock e-zine—closed December 31. Carmel patiently dragged me kicking and screaming onto the Internet and often generously provided me with useful information to share in this column. She is greatly missed.

NEWSLETTERS FOR YOUR READERS

On NINKLINK, someone recently asked how best to go about sending online newsletters to readers, so I decided to provide some helpful hints to those who have not yet ventured into creating their own listserves. An advantage to using a listserv is that you no longer have to keep track of e-mail addresses and bounced mail doesn't go into your mailbox. Although several list services are available, the best known for free lists is *Yahoo! Groups*, www.yahogroups.com. The person who establishes the list is called the OWNER. To create a list at Yahoo! Groups, you must register at the site first. This process is relatively painless for most people. But if you run into problems, feel free to drop me an e-mail and I'll try to help.

Once registered, you should return to the HOME page and select START A NEW GROUP. Even if you are already logged in, you will need to input your password again.

- Select "Entertainment and Arts."
- Select "Humanities."
- Select "Books and Writing."

Either click "Place my group in Books and Writing" or select a sub-category. I selected "Reading Groups."

You will then receive a user-friendly form that you'll have to complete.

Name your group. I recommend using a form of your name. For example: Lorraine Heath News or something similar.

You'll need an address for your group. Again, I recommend using a form of your name: `lorraine_heath`; `lorraine-heath`; or `lorraine-heath`. Spaces aren't allowed. Note: This address will be the default for your subject area, so the shorter the better.

Describe your group. An example: A periodic newsletter to alert fans of Lorraine Heath about upcoming releases and scheduled appearances.

Select to have your group "Listed" because you want people to have no problem finding it and subscribing.

For Membership, select "Open" unless you have a reason for restricting membership.

For Moderation, select "Newsletter" which will allow only you to post to the group.

Then you must select which profile and e-mail address

you want to use. Most people only have one choice.

You can then begin sending invitations to members. A convenient aspect to the invitation feature is that if you invite people who are already subscribed to your list, you will be notified that they are subscribed and they will not receive an invitation. Therefore they are not hassled, and you don't have to verify who has already subscribed before sending out invitations. I periodically send invitations to my readers when I've received several fan letters.

That's it. You're ready to go.

The commands for handling the list through e-mail are the same for every Group. Simply place your group name before the command:

- YOURGROUP-subscribe@yahogroups.com
- YOURGROUP-unsubscribe@yahogroups.com
- YOURGROUP-nomail@yahogroups.com
- YOURGROUP-digest@yahogroups.com
- YOURGROUP-normal@yahogroups.com

Therefore you can easily give instructions to your readers if they aren't familiar with Yahoo! Groups, and they can subscribe without registering at the site.

I recommend that you then go to your Group for some fine-tuning.

On the left side, click "Promote." You'll receive a page with html code that you can copy and paste into your website html code (or pass on to your web designer to place in your website code) so that your site will display a button or box for your readers to click in order to subscribe to your newsletter. **Caution:** When I used the html code on my website, I found that it caused my site to take longer to load because the code picks up the image from the Yahoo! Groups website. For faster loading:

- Copy the image using a right click.
- Paste it into your website document.
- Save the image to a file.

A possible disadvantage to using the button or box provided is that when clicked, it takes potential subscribers to the Yahoo! Groups website for subscribing. If the potential subscriber is not a registered user of Yahoo! Groups, he will have to register before he can subscribe to your Group. On my website, I prefer to have an area that says, "Subscribe to my newsletter." When it's clicked, an e-mail appears with the address: `lorraine_heath-subscribe@yahogroups.com`. The person then simply sends the e-mail; he never leaves my website, he never goes to Yahoo! Groups. I think this method is more convenient for subscribers.

After you decide whether you want the code, you should return to your Groups main page and select MANAGEMENT. You will then have four areas under GROUP SETTINGS that you might want to review. "Description and Appearance" lets you add your own website as a re-

lated link. You can also edit your list description if you decide later that you want it to read differently. Under "Membership" you can change from open to restricted if you change your mind. Select "Web Tools," then EDIT. It's fairly self-explanatory, but you'll probably want to either turn off all the features or make them moderator-access only. Then return to the MANAGEMENT page. Click "Messages." It is within this area that you can change your group e-mail address, your subject tag (remember, it defaults to your group e-mail address unless you change it), and add a footer. I recommend having a footer that includes instructions for how to unsubscribe from the list. Although your subscribers voluntarily subscribed, some may want to remove themselves from the list. Instructions in the footer may save you from receiving e-mail requests for getting off the list. My footer says, "To unsubscribe, send a blank message to lorraine_heath-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com."

The calendar is a useful feature if you have events coming up and want to send reminders to your readers. You place an event on the calendar and then select how frequently and how close to the date you want reminders sent. Under the FILES feature, you can upload files or create letters that are periodically sent to your subscribers. If you have something you want to remind them every month, you can designate a letter to be sent every month. Once you begin exploring the various features of Yahoo!

Controlling Your Listserve Preferences through E-Mail

Subscribe	NINCLINK-subscribe@yahoogroups.com
Unsubscribe	NINCLINK-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com
Switch to Digest	NINCLINK-digest@yahoogroups.com
Switch to Individual Mail	NINCLINK-normal@yahoogroups.com
No-Mail	NINCLINK-nomail@yahoogroups.com
Moderators:	
If You Have Questions, E-Mail:	
Brenda Hiatt-Barber	BrendaHB@aol.com
Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@attbi.com

Groups list, I think you'll find it easier to manage than it might first appear.

FOR FUN

Toni Herzog shared *Visual Thesaurus*, www.visualthesaurus.com/index.jsp, with us this month. It's a fun site that you simply have to visit to appreciate.

If you discover sites that you think would interest Novelists, Inc. members, I'd appreciate it if you'd e-mail them to me. I'm always looking for interesting and useful sites to include in the column. E-mail me at lorraine-heath@attbi.com. Thanks!

Bits'n'Pieces

OKAY AND NOW FOR ONE I COULDN'T RESIST... Dateline Germany: Businessmen who have been blackmailed by former lovers are being allowed to file for tax rebates on the payments they made to them. In a landmark court case, an adulterer from Cologne was awarded the special consideration when a ditched lover threatened to tell his wife about their affair. The guy said he was concerned the, er, disclosure would damage his wife's health. He then claimed the cash was a legitimate business expense... I love this job. <vbg>

AUTHORS HOPING TO ADD SCREEN-WRITING TO THEIR CREDITS have something to look forward to in 2003... Oscar winner Kevin Spacey is taking a sabbatical through this year in part so he can spend time working on his new website

triggerstreet.com. The actor—along with Bono and Mike Myers—set up <http://www.triggerstreet.com> to provide an outlet for wannabe screenwriters who find their efforts blocked because they don't have an agent. He's now looking for new projects. We've discussed screenwriting agents on the link; now here's your chance to go it without one! (And what a chance, too. ;-)

J.K. ROWLING'S FILE CARD WITH 93 HANDWRITTEN KEYWORDS relating to her forthcoming Harry Potter book was recently auctioned off for \$45,000.00. Which probably means I ought to start treating the notes I make on my manuscripts with a great deal more respect and quit leaving them lying around on napkins that the dogs inevitably find and eat, huh? (Yep, we know, we know...June 21)

FORMER NINC MEMBER CLIVE CUSSLER HAS ANNOUNCED he's quitting writing because "the drive is just gone" ... "[after] 35 years of this stuff." So there you have it folks: one more bestseller spot open for somebody. ;-)
— TdR



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“Nurturing the Nature”

Maybe an Amazon reader has compared your new novel to rancid pork. Possibly someone at *Publishers Weekly* has written a review of your work which seems like a personal vendetta. Or perhaps nine editors in a row have rejected your latest manuscript. Perchance your agent has snorted the entire agency, as well as six months' worth of your earnings, up his nose, or fled the country with his much-younger male secretary while your career is at a crucial juncture. Or perhaps your editor has written you a 15-page single-spaced letter demanding revisions which you defy her to characterize as “reasonable” while keeping a straight face. Maybe your publisher isn't paying your fall royalties until winter, and they're openly annoyed that you *mind* being paid months late.

Has a major retailer refused to carry your new book because they dislike the cover which your publisher has put on it (and has your publisher then, in a fit of stereotypical predictability, abandoned both you and the book)? Have you gotten a cover with copy for the wrong novel on it? Has an editor rewritten one of your characters as a raccoon? Has your hard drive crashed in the middle of a deadline, or your printer died while printing an overdue MS? Have you woken up, only to discover your editor has been laid off, your imprint has been discontinued, or your publisher has folded?

Heigh ho, the glamorous life of the working novelist!

And in the ceaseless hail of the publishing world's slings and arrows, you have to keep writing. Without a full creative well and the mental focus needed to craft riveting fiction, we cannot survive professionally as novelists. Yet the publishing industry, the marketplace, the logistics of the work, and even life itself regularly intrude on the paradise of the imagination, turning it into a desert.

So how do novelists keep fertilizing the soil? How do you nurture your creative nature and comfort yourself as a writer swinging in the breeze of this brutal profession?

“Food,” says novelist Patricia Bray. “Food is good. Chocolate and alcohol are better.” Silhouette writer Katherine Garbera recommends Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Ninc member Tracy Grant advises, “Keep good single malt whiskey and French champagne on hand.” [Curmudgeon makes note to self.]

Jodie Larsen Nida recommends a frozen strawberry

daiquiri in the shade in summer, and adds, “No matter what the season, French Vanilla or Toasted Marshmallow Jelly Bellies are my favorite reward! What could be better than sweet treats that have only four calories apiece?”

Personally, when stuck in morbid distraction while my bank account dwindles into negative figures because it takes five months for a check to travel from New York to Cincinnati, I find solace in the Elizabeth Bevarly Theory of Plotting: There is no plot problem which cookies cannot solve.

Former Ninc president Barbara Keiler says, “I've endured times when the only nurturing which seems to work involves chocolate consumption.” (Let the church say, “Amen!”) However, she neatly counters the inevitable consequences of chocolate consumption with jogging. Having commenced a year ago with brisk walking, Keiler currently does a slow, steady, daily jog of about five miles, and she says, “[It] has worked wonders for me. It eases stress, increases my energy level, gets me pumped up, and helps me empty the ‘trash’ in my brain... And since the brain abhors a vacuum, once I empty the ‘trash,’ the useful thoughts come rushing in.” [Curmudgeon, who also hates vacuuming, briefly considers jogging before coming to senses and re-embracing the Elizabeth Bevarly Theory of Plotting.]

Katherine Garbera admits she hates to exercise but nonetheless says, “Yoga helps to make everything flow together for me.” She finds that yoga in the morning is a great way to start the writing day. I myself am giving yoga a whirl at the local yoga school. I like the lying-on-the-floor-and-dozing part, but I'm having trouble adjusting to the “now lift every bit of your body except your left elbow off the floor” portion of it. While yoga has not yet filled me with story solutions, it has become an asset in stress management.

Annette Mahon suggests an additional (and less acrobatic) way to nurture the writer by caring for the body: She has started paying a professional massage therapist to come to her house and give her an upper body massage once every two weeks. “It makes *such* a difference to the neck, back, and shoulders. I especially have problems with my right shoulder—that darn mouse!—and it feels wonderful for almost a week after [the masseuse's] visit.” In

addition to massage, Tracy Grant recommends facials. Jodie Larsen Nida enjoys “a long rest in the whirlpool with the jets hitting my tired neck and shoulder muscles.” I like a hot, scented bath, a glass of wine, candles, and a good book-on-tape to listen to while I relax.

Shopping is another popular way we take care of ourselves. (Of course, “shopping” presupposes that your check has made the arduous, months-long, overland journey from New York City to your mailbox.) Katherine Garbera tries to buy something little with each new sale or success she has. Barbara Samuel goes to a tourist town she has loved since childhood and buys baubles like copper bracelets and faux turquoise.

I like to buy books (and, come on, is there anyone here who *doesn't*?). Tracy Grant buys cute “writing clothes” and Victoria’s Secret pajamas rather than just working in old sweats. In fact, I started doing this about a year ago, too, and have found it picks me up on low days. Sitting here in pretty loungewear costs no more than my sweats, and it feels nicer.

Cynthia Pratt stresses that she goes shopping by herself, particularly when stuck on some point in her work, to steep herself in sights, smells, textures—and other people’s conversations. “Just getting out among ‘normal folks’ is a great creativity generator.” Indeed, “getting out,” in one way or another, is a common means of nurturing ourselves—undoubtedly because we spend so much time cooped up alone in a little room with only our imagination for company. “I go to the pub and drink Guinness with my girlfriends and listen to a Celtic band play badly,” says Barbara Samuel. Silhouette author Ann Schuessler might meet a friend for coffee, spend time at a new art exhibit, visit a museum, see a play, or attend the opera. Patricia Bray greets rejection letters the same way she celebrates writing successes: by going out to dinner with and talking to someone she enjoys. Ninc member Nancy Cohen will call someone she hasn’t spoken to in a while or “just go out to have fun.”

Although there are times in a writing schedule or in the creative process when I need isolation, I don’t thrive well for long without regular contact with the people whose love supports me, whose wit stimulates me, and whose wisdom enriches me; so I make sure I spend time with my friends. I also enjoy spending time at our wonderful local zoo, where every day feels like a holiday.

My single favorite way of nurturing myself is a popular one among Ninc members: travel. Sue-Ellen Welfonder, who writes Scottish medieval romances, makes two annual trips per year to Scotland to “spend weeks driving all by myself through the Highlands, seeking out the most remote and atmospheric places I can find. Each trip replenishes my soul and my creative well, while the anticipation of the next one keeps me going.” When feeling depressed or stressed, Welfonder places her airline ticket for her next Scottish trip in a visible spot on her desk. “Just seeing it lying there warms my heart and makes me smile.”

Ninc member Evelyn Rogers leaves the country if she can afford it, usually on low-budget trips to Europe, preferably Italy: “There’s nothing like wine sipped in a palazzo to revive the spirits.”

Barbara Samuel describes herself as “addicted to travel” and delighted by the myriad details she finds in new places. She rhapsodizes about how tickled she was to see dew so heavy “it *dripped* off the trees” when she was here in Cincinnati last year. (Conversely, our sodden climate is one of the reasons we Cincinnatians are also addicted to travel.) Upon experiencing a burnout so thorough that I wanted to quit writing, I abandoned my career and spent a year crossing Africa. I’ve written over a million words since then, so I guess it revived me.

However, not all solutions to creative desertification need involve airfare and yellow fever shots. Cindi Myers, using an idea she got from *Write It Down, Make It Happen* by Henriette Anne Klauser, collects compliments: “I keep a little notebook, and into it goes copies of fan letters, any encouraging comments I’ve gotten about my work or myself as a person, favorite quotes, anecdotes, etc.” I keep notebooks filled with things that have made me look twice or start dreaming: magazine pictures, postcards, stickers, stamps, maps, favorite poems, favorite song lyrics, favorite quotes, bizarre news items, amusing articles, notes on interesting traditional weapons, possible titles, possible story ideas, special mementos. When I open these notebooks, I again feel the infinite creative possibilities of their contents.

For another stay-at-home stimulation to creativity, Lillian Stewart Carl recommends crossword puzzles: “The effort it takes to find the word that fits the clue is just enough to turn off that hyperactive leaping-around of the thought process and helps me to either calm down or focus, depending on what my goal is.” Cheryl Wolverton goes to the movies or reads outside of her genre “so I can allow fresh ideas from different perspectives to fill me when I’m running on empty.”

Tina Wainscott cherishes the rare treat of “getting to *read*” something that is just for fun and has nothing to do with her work-in-progress. Romance novelist Toni Herzog says she takes a nap or reads a book if she feels like it, even if she should be writing at the time, adding, “I just generally try to be good to myself when possible, figuring I’m a lot more likely to turn out good writing if I’m feeling happy and content.”

In fact, the practice of being good to oneself is a powerful fortress against any siege on a writer’s creative health. Sue-Ellen Welfonder steers clear of “those online romance sites I know to be of the slash-and-burn variety. Nor do I skim reader message boards... Since I went cold turkey on those things about a year ago, my nerves have vastly improved.” She also writes more since then.

Ann Schuessler tries not to compare her own career with her friends’. “We are each on our own path, and as long as I remember that, I’m okay.” When

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THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

▶▶▶ she forgets that, she makes herself miserable. Ronn Kaiser wisely tries to put his failures, setbacks, and problems from his mind, because embracing them is self-defeating. He believes that creative behavior is natural and instinctual, and that inhibitions are the obstruction. So, he says, “If, as I believe, I am but a conduit for the creative forces in the ether, then work isn’t about me, it’s about process and product... which means the name of the game is turning off the ego and letting the powers of the universe flow into me and through me.” I myself find that if I praise myself for how much I’m getting done rather than condemn myself for how much I’m not getting done, I get more done. It’s not just perspective, I actually do accomplish more work this way.

Additionally, trust in ourselves and respect for our work is vital nourishment for our creativity. After more than twenty years in this profession, bestselling novelist Kay Hooper has learned “not to waste time or energy, or lose sleep, whenever I run headlong into that inevitable wall in whatever book I’m working on.”

Kay looks at the long line of books on the nearby wall with her name on them and reminds herself that she *does* know how to do this. Then she turns her computer off and walks away. She gets on with her life, takes the time she needs, doesn’t let herself drown in guilt about it, and doesn’t return to the book “until I have that—also inevitable—moment of realization: ‘Oh, yeah—that’s what I need to do!’” The real comfort, Kay says, is that she has finally learned to trust herself and her abilities.

When Cheryl Wolverson receives rejections or bad news, she says, “I have to remind myself that I am doing this for me.” Cynthia Pratt finds it helpful “to remind myself every so often that I am extremely lucky not to be standing behind a counter or a broom—which usually suffices to send me back to my chair with renewed determination.” Remembering some of my own past jobs (kennel girl, cleaning lady, waitress, cashier, office temp, telemarketer, ale wench, dishwasher) is a pretty reliable way for me to suddenly feel remarkably lucky and terribly creative.

Finally, a means of nurturing ourselves as writers which Judy Gill brought up: “You know what gives me a bigger high than anything else in this world? Writing. Just sitting down and writing and leaving my desk at the end of the day wonderfully exhausted but supremely satisfied deep in my soul. Oh, yeah... and then there’s chocolate.”

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Top Ten Things I Do to Nurture my Creativity

- 10: Remind myself how I drifted off into daydreams whenever I worked at anything else.
- 9: Watch TV shows and tell myself I could write better ones if I had to, probably, maybe.
- 8: Go to movies, think about how many of my books would be terrific movies, and contemplate taking a course in screenwriting.
- 7: Fantasize about how the president, or the Pope, or Oprah, will go to a news conference and my well-thumbed book will fall out of his/her pocket, title up.
- 6: Equal parts: hot fudge and white wine.
- 5: Reread other writers’ books I have loved and imagine how depleted my life would be if they had given up.
- 4: Dream of success, because dreaming is what I’m best at.
- 3: Think of new directions I might take.
- 2: Remember the old directions weren’t that bad.

<drum roll>
And the number one way I comfort and nurture myself as a writer swinging in the breeze of this brutal profession?
- 1: Remember that I have no choice. I have to write because I’m a writer.

— Edith Layton

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

BY RONN KAISER

WEAK OPENING, EARLY CLOSE POSSIBLE

NEW YORK — The new format for the “Tricks of the Trade” opened last month to tepid reviews and box office indifference. Producers had hoped to revive the concept with an innovative approach, but reader reaction indicated the offering, entitled “Author, Break a Leg” was either uninspiring, boring, unhelpful, insipid, pedestrian, or all of the above.

Only two responses were received, one from a budding actor, the other a former playwright, both accomplished novelists. The stage, such as it is, is theirs:

Up and coming thespian, Gordon Aalborg, wrote: “Your January *NINK* column hit me at a particularly tender time—while attempting to ‘be’ an actor for the first time since grade-school.

“I’ve always been sort of dismissive of my mystery-author wife Denise Dietz’s penchant for reading her dialogue aloud. I also ‘read’ my dialogue as I’m writing, of course, but ‘in my head’—which is a far, far different thing, as my foray upon the boards is proving and your excellent column has mightily reinforced.

“Writing dialogue has always been easy for me (too easy...I now ask?) but far less so, now that I’m having to learn—and speak and put my own stamp upon—someone else’s words.

“Indeed a most salutary experience, and your article provided interesting insights into the process of melding dialogue to the character fated to speak the words.

“Well done!”

Columnist responds: *Thanks, Gordon, your compassion is greatly appreciated. Unfortunately, we must fill the house to avoid closing shop. Publishing, regrettably, is a volume business, columns included.*

Our old playwright (though clearly young in years and spirit) is none other than Ninc past president, Barbara Keiler. I confess to cajoling BK to offer her insights on the subject because of her exceptional qualifications. She has had plays produced at the Eugene O’Neill Memorial Theater Center in Connecticut (Tom Hulce, pre-“Animal House” and “Amadeus,” starred in that production); American Conservatory Theater (San Francisco); and New Playwrights Theater of Washington, D.C. She’s also had plays presented at the Manhattan Theater Club, Circle Rep and a few other off-Broadway theaters in New York City. Her playwrighting won her grants from the Shubert Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. (The NEA grant was used to write her first novel.) BK had this to say about how her years as a playwright influenced her work as a novelist:

“Having worked as a professional playwright for nearly a decade before I sold my first novel, I agreed with everything Ronn said about writing ‘in character’ so our characters will come to life. If a writer cannot see each character, hear her voice, smell her deodorant, and have a tactile sense of the coarseness of her hair, the reader will not see, hear, smell, and feel the character, either.

“One of the most useful aspects of theater training for me as a novelist is that in the theater everything must be shown. Nothing is more deadly boring on stage than a narrator explaining what’s going on, pro-

viding backstory, and bombarding the audience with words unaccompanied by any other sensory information. Theater audiences learn about the characters on stage not just through the characters’ spoken lines but through their actions, their posture, their costumes, their vocal inflections, and facial expressions. A character on stage can be saying, ‘Of course I’m not angry,’ but if the audience sees the character’s clenched fist and clenched jaw when he speaks that line, if they hear the edge in his voice and notice the tic in his cheek, they will get a much richer, more complex image of just how angry this character may be. We can do this in our prose fiction, too.

“In college, I studied with a marvelous playwrighting professor named Len Berkman. One thing he always said was, ‘In a hack writer’s play, if a character is sad the character weeps. In a Chekhov play, if a character is sad she peels an onion.’ Studying great plays—and writing my share of middling to good plays—helped me to learn the difference between a character weeping and a character peeling an onion.”

Note to the Reader: The object of this column is to create a forum for the members of Ninc to share their wisdom about the craft of writing. Easier said than done. Despite Gordon and BK’s wisdom and generosity, this initial experiment was a flop. I wasn’t able to get you guys to open up. It seems there is a natural reluctance to attempt to enlighten or inform one’s peers. We are all successful and knowledgeable writers. Nobody wants to be presumptuous, or open themselves to ridicule. But the fact remains: there is much we can learn from each other and the gifts we have to give are lost unless we have the courage not only to share, but to challenge one another.

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ *Enlightenment comes with discussion, which requires a willingness to speak up and be heard whatever the consequences.*

The question is how do I, the compiler, draw all that wisdom and genius out of you? Perhaps writing a thought piece and asking for reactions and comments isn't the best way. As my wife, who calls 'em as she sees 'em, was quick to tell me, "Who cares what you think? Most people know as much or more than you do, anyway." This may be true, but I'm stubborn and I've learned a lot doing this column, so I'll give it another shot.

For the March issue how about if we try to answer this question: Why do most stories fail? We watch a movie or read a book and we're bored or we fall asleep. We groan and we give up, changing the channel or closing the book. What went wrong? Bad writing, right? What is the cause of most of these failures? Isn't the shortcoming at the human level? The writer failed to engage us, to touch us as human beings. Is this a subjective phenomenon or is there a key, an essential ingredient, to good story, regardless of genre, something that is universal and elemental in all

good writing? We've all captured it in our work, if only by accident.

Wouldn't it be great if we understood it so well that we could do it at will, quickly identifying the essential elements as we begin to shape our tale? Is there a formula, a principle, a concept that goes to the essence of story? What is it? Share your secret and be blessed by the rest of us for an eternity. Please write to me by February 10 at: ronkaiser@prodigy.net **N**

Bits'n'Pieces

RULING COULD CLOSE WEBSITES...The High Court ruling that's allowed US online news publisher Dow Jones to be sued for defamation in a Victorian court under Australian law by mining businessman Joseph Gutnick could force the closure of some websites according to an industry expert. "Online publishers will be looking at their revenues and looking at the potential of a lawsuit or potential legal action and they have to be arriving at a decision where they basically ask themselves whether it's worth continuing," said Internet Industry Association (IIA) chief executive Peter Coroneos. The action refers to material published in the *Barron's Online* section of *The Wall Street Journal* website. Quoting the article, "*Dow Jones argued the case could not be heard here because the article was published in the United States, where its servers and editorial*

offices are located. The landmark judgment means material on the internet is deemed to have been published in the place it is viewed, not the country of origin." What does this mean? That litigants may well take advantage of favorable overseas laws and commence defamation cases *outside* the US against US publishers that are afforded freedom-of-speech protection under the First Amendment. It's a real "gotcha" situation. According to Coroneos, Aussie pubs are least likely to be affected by the High Court ruling because they already face tough local defamation laws. "The person wouldn't necessarily need to be a citizen in this country. The person could sue on something said about them in the US (and published on the web). ... (The decision) might just be enough for some publishers to say enough's enough." Parties who joined the High Court action include *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, CNN, Reuters, Yahoo, and Amazon. The IIA plans to lobby the federal government to make laws offering less risk to online publishers. So online just got more interesting. — *TdR*

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