



NINK

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

Marriage of Minds

**BY NIKOO AND JIM
MCGOLDRICK**

When Edgar Allan Poe's sleuth, C. Auguste Dupin, takes on the job of finding the purloined letter in the famous short story, he doesn't turn his antagonist's chambers upside down. Unlike his friend, the eminent Prefect of Police, our hero doesn't pry up the floor boards or drill the legs of the chairs in search of hollowed-out hiding places. He doesn't even look behind a single painting.

He doesn't have to.

The object of the Prefect's search, that stolen letter, is right there in the open, tacked to the fireplace mantle where all can see it.

And overlook it.

In a way, writing and publishing can be like that. How many of us, day in and day out, labor at our craft with blinders on? How many of us—cut off from the world in the little shoe boxes in which we write—struggle to produce successful stories?

What is it, then, that makes one person a Nobel laureate and another labor in relative obscurity for

a lifetime? What makes one person an Auguste Dupin and another a Prefect of Police?

We would be the first to admit that we are not a household name. Still, not so very, very long ago, we were among the ranks of those unpublished writers, laboring at the craft and getting nowhere. Working individually, we devoured books on writing, enrolled in classes and workshops, read and wrote and read and wrote.

And then, one winter afternoon, about ten years ago, something happened. We found the purloined letter.

For the eleventh time in a month, ice and snow had coated our trees, our street, our walks, and even our windows. This was the stormiest winter in any of our thirteen years of marriage—both inside and out. Our sensitivity to one another—and our search for ourselves—had developed to a critical point as we continued to deal with high profile jobs, our marriage, and our children. We attributed some of this turmoil to the personal aftershocks following the heart surgery of our infant son.

So here we were, snowbound and feeling...what? Some might have called it mid-life crisis—but in our thirties? We knew we needed a change. We needed something more. We needed a lobotomy.

Well, those standing outside our life and looking in thought so. After all, from their vantage point, we had successful careers in engineering and teaching, a solid marriage, and a growing family. Change is bad, we could hear them say. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

But even if it "weren't broke," the wheels were definitely starting to wobble.

We've all had the feeling—that nagging regret that you've never really pursued your dream. That panicky rush when you wake up thinking that you've missed something, and that you might just be too late to find it. It's the Hemingway Syndrome. That feeling you get in an airport that life is too short. If I just get on that plane, we think, in a few hours I could be in Paris, Nairobi, Key West, Tahiti. Then I could take those photographs, paint those canvasses, write that novel...

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Novelists, Inc.

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Send Address Changes to Central Coordinator

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THE PRESIDENT'S VOICE....

Getting Better, Year by Year

This month marks Novelists, Inc.'s fifteenth anniversary. I confess to being rather...well...surprised. Given all that Ninc's accomplished over the years, I would have expected it to be a lot older than a mere fifteen.

I didn't qualify to join until 1994, by which time—from my perspective, at least—Ninc had already assumed a pretty impressive presence in the business. Impressive enough that I sent in my application for membership about three minutes, fifteen seconds after I qualified. And I've never regretted it. Joining Ninc was one of the best things I've ever done for myself as a writer, both personally and professionally. Through Ninc, I've made good friends and learned a lot about this business. And I keep on making friends and learning more and more and more, which makes it all the sweeter.

What's made Ninc work isn't the years, however, but all the wonderful, hardworking people who have volunteered their time and talents to build it, run it, support it, and make it grow. There's been quite a few of them, and a lot of them have been here right from the start.

I'm honored to be sharing column space with one of Ninc's founding members, Janice Young Brooks, who has given untold hours of her precious time to getting Ninc up and running, then keeping it going. She's dug out some fascinating information for us that I'm delighted—and not a little awestruck—to share with you all here...

Novelists, Inc. – Who and When CHRONICLED BY JANICE BROOKS

I've been the volunteer database keeper since Novelists, Inc. was founded. As I prepared to step down and turn the job over to others, I learned something interesting. From the beginning I've assigned a coded membership number to everyone who joined, in order. Sorting by code number, I've discovered that an impressive number of those who joined earliest have been members for the entire time Ninc has existed.

The first five on the following list are the founders; the rest are those who joined in the second and third month and have maintained their membership continuously. One hundred and fifteen, if I've counted right. Some have become bestsellers; many have served as officers, committee chairs, newsletter contributors, and volunteers. All have been loyal members since August of 1989.

Rebecca Brandewyne, Janice Brooks, Jasmine Cresswell, Maggie Osborne, Marianne Shock, Iris Johansen, Fayrene Preston, Barbara J. Blackman, Ruth Ryan Langan, Nora Roberts, Catherine Coulter, Margaret Evans Porter, Deborah Gordon, Suzanne Simmons Guntrum, Victoria Thompson, Jayne Ann Krentz, Linda Howington, Fran Baker, Kay Hooper, Judith Myers, Marj Krueger, Lynda Varner, Georgia Bockoven, Janelle Williams Taylor, Alysse Rasmussen, Jan Greenburg, Dixie Browning, Kathleen Gilles Seidel, Roberta Gellis, Barbara Bretton, Stella Cameron, Sandra Brown, Robyn Carr, Elaine Barbieri, June Lund Shiplett, Linda Barlow, Anne McCaffrey, Laura Taylor, Patricia Matthews, Judith McNaught, Joan Wolf, Myra Rowe, Martha Sans, Debbie Macomber, Carolyn G. Hart, Sandra Chastain, Lillian Stewart Carl, Mary Lynn Baxter, Susan Elizabeth Phillips, Karen Crane, Jackie Casto,

Phyllis Kelly Halldorson, Mary B. Williams, Pat Warren, Andrea Parnell, Leslie O'Grady, Paula Detmer Riggs, Phoebe Conn, Phillis DiFrancesco, Patricia Hagan, Mary Jo Putney, Amanda Scott, Barbara Dawson Smith, Nira Herrmann, Edith Layton Felber, Janice Sutcliffe Kaiser, Shirley Parenteau, Bettie Marie Wilhite, Karen Harper, Elane Osborn, Karyn Witmer-Gow, Susan Aylworth, Eileen Buckholtz, Sally Siddon, Barbara Bradford, Barbara Hazard, Carla Simpson, Susan Wiggs, Patricia Rice, Christine Flynn, Kristine Rolofson, Ruth Glick, Francine Mandeville, Suzanne Forster, Barbara Keiler, Sara Fitzgerald, Catherine Anderson, Marsha Bauer, Kathleen Creighton, Terey daly Ramin, Helen Monteith Mittermeyer, Lynda Ward, Sandra Harrison Young, Mary Blayne, Laura Halford Sparrow, Gail A. Oust, Judy Gill, Patricia Gallagher, Cynthia Wright, Cheryl Reavis, Jill Marie Landis, Wendela Kilmer, Julie Garwood, and Nancy Knight.

There's no two ways about it: That's a darned impressive list.

So, here's to you all! Many thanks to each and every one of you for what you built...for all our futures.

Changing of the Guard

This is a bad news/good news item.

I'm sorry to report that Julie Kistler, our Advisory Council Representative for the past six months plus, has, for personal reasons, had to step down. She will be missed by all of us on the Board. The good news is, she's convinced Barbara Keiler to fill her place for the remainder of the year.

Thank you, Julie, for trying to keep me on track and for explaining all the intricacies of Ninc when we needed it. Thank you especially for all your hard work with the Site Committee, which has made Bishop's Lodge, Santa Fe,

possible as a site for the 2004 conference. We *all* appreciate that.

And welcome, Barbara. We're very, very glad you agreed to serve!

— **Anne Holmberg**

ELECTIONS NOTICE

Proposed Slate of Officers for 2004

President Elect: Vicki Lewis Thompson

Secretary: Jaclyn Redding

Treasurer: Ann Josephson

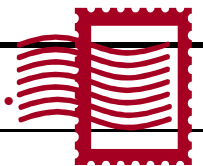
Proposed Nominees for 2005 Nominating Committee

(listed in alphabetical order, five to be elected):

Laura Baker	Cheryl Kushner
Shelly Cooper	Merline Lovelace
Kathy Lynn Emerson	Cheryl Ann Porter
Pat Gaffney	Terey daly Ramin
Vicki Hinze	

As set forth in article IX, Section 4, of the Bylaws, additional nominations may be made in writing if signed by the nominee and at least ten (10) active members who have not signed the nominations of any other person for the same position. Such nominations must be made by **September 22, 2003**. Mail all written nominations to Pat Rice, 9530 Hunting Court, Matthews NC 28105.

LETTERS TO NINK.....



Even in this online age—with Ninc link—we still welcome your letters. Submit to the editor via e-mail or old-fashioned snailmail [see masthead on page 2]. Letters may be edited for length or NINK style.

Setting the Record Straight

I just finished the July issue of *Novelists Ink*, and I thought it was terrific. Annette Carney's new column is great, Janelle Burnham Schneider's article on "When the Well Runs Dry" spoke to me in several different languages, and I was totally loving Laura

Resnick's column on "jabla" even before I saw my name in it. Really! But I have to admit, it was seeing my name that prompted this letter. Yes, I really did pass on the quote about getting past writer's block by lowering your standards. The problem is that I don't know who really said it. It's such a good quote that I wish I knew! It was a lovely man (I know he was male and over 25) and it was in a speech he gave at the Iowa Writers' Workshop summer session in about 1998. I remember hearing it and

thinking, whoa, that's a good one, I need to remember that. I did. I just didn't remember his name. I wish I did because I feel sure I should be reading the entire oeuvre of anyone that smart and insightful. So whoever you are, Mr. Insightful Guy from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, I apologize for taking your words of wisdom without your name. Until then, you can sign me...

Lowering my standards in Illinois,

— **Julie Kistler**

Marriage of Minds

Continued from page 1



The snow was still falling. The ice was coating everything.

Our feelings seemed to be recalling those years of childhood and adolescence, those times when we wondered what it is that we want to be when we grow up.

For as long as either of us could remember, we both wanted to be writers.

Six years prior to that winter, Jim had given up a successful career path as a manager in a shipyard. He wanted to pursue his dream of going back to school and getting his Ph.D. in English. He'd done that. I, on the other hand, had been tied into a career of engineering and then management. As a woman advancing successfully in a primarily male profession, I had a lot at stake. At the same time, being a storyteller at heart, I viewed writing as my true calling, as a dream that I would never be allowed to pursue. After all, as far as the world around me was concerned, I was the one with an analytical mind. What talent in the arts could I possibly possess? Why would I even desire to meddle in such a "frivolous" activity?

But then, this was the snowiest winter in our thirteen years of marriage. Ice was everywhere, and even the firmest ground had become slippery and treacherous.

Another ice storm. Another day off. An ad in a writer's magazine for a fiction contest catches Jim's eye. The two of us sit down side by side at the computer. An afternoon of working and reworking an idea into a short story.

And that was where our troubles really began...

In the beginning of the film *Shakespeare in Love*, the young playwright has work lined up in front of him. He has a play to write. He has money...well, he has a little money. He has the talent. He has an ear for language. He has the words.

What he doesn't have is his Muse.

As he searches for inspiration for the story he is to write, he continues to research, to practice, to listen. In short, he continues to prepare.

It is very interesting that Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, in collaborating on this work, decided to include in the story Christopher Marlowe, perhaps the leading playwright in Elizabethan England. To Will Shakespeare, Marlowe serves as a writer to emulate and to compete with. And in the historical fiction, he even serves as a collaborator, of sorts, providing Shakespeare with an exotic setting and characters and even solid plot ideas filled with conflict.

Collaboration. It's been a part of storytelling for as long as storytellers have put their heads together over a campfire or put a quill to parchment. It only makes sense. We all have strengths and weaknesses in our ability to tell a story. Some of us are strong plotters, but know deep in our ink-stained hearts that having a partner who can add snappy dialogue would improve the story tremendously.

To be honest, our own first stab at collaborative fiction writing was done pretty blindly. After seeing that call for story contest submissions, Jim came up with the concept for a story involving a young man struggling against the

forces of a hurricane while sailing in the waters off Newport, Rhode Island. When I expressed my concerns about the idea turning into a lesson in sailing in a storm, a subtle shift occurred in the relationship. Actually, at that moment the shift was not very subtle. But as the ensuing collaborative literary effort began to emerge, we realized that this dynamic aspect of our relationship was new and different. And as we worked together on the story, the original idea became transformed into something entirely different—a woman in a sailboat battling the hurricane while dealing with anger and guilt she carries about her past. The story became one about forgiveness as well as about the will to live. Our first combined creative effort turned out to be a prize winner.

That day launched us toward a new stage in our creative and, ultimately, professional lives. There were many discoveries that we made during that first collaboration and the subsequent ones, as well.

The concept of synergy became very real to us—one person's energy triggered as well as fed off the energy of the other. Oddly, we became more focused on our own creativity even as we became more open to the creativity of our partner. And there were other invaluable discoveries.

For years, while we were writing separately, finding time was perhaps the most difficult challenge in our lives. We thought we were disciplined. But truthfully, when it came right down to it, we usually put anything and everything before our writing, before working at our craft.

When we finally started our creative collaboration, our priori-

ties shifted a bit. Working on “the book” became a real thing that both of us were putting effort into, and “getting it done” began to assert itself as a real need. Before, it seemed we couldn’t find the time to spend even an hour a day writing. Now, together, we were able to identify more time for writing than we ever thought possible.

We wrote our first three books between the hours of 8 PM and midnight. We did this after putting in ten-hour days at our day jobs and spending time with our children and fitting in whatever volunteer activities were on the calendar. Did something have to give? Yes, we found we were sleeping a little less, exercising only when we took the dog out, and watching no television. The house was a little dustier, and the lawn was looking a bit more ragged than usual...but the pages were accumulating.

Was this a good way of doing it? For us, yes.

Of course, one of the reasons this worked for us was because we had that mutual support system built in. Naturally, it’s a bit easier having a collaborator living under the same roof as you, breathing the same air, and feeling the same pressure, and have the same expectations. But there are drawbacks to that, too. Sickness affects the entire family. Bad mood is contagious. Disagreements about the story can ignite into interpersonal fireworks.

Despite the thirteen years of marriage prior to our collaboration, there was a lot more that we needed to learn about each other. We had to learn a new lingo with which to communicate. We found we had to reveal more about ourselves than a lot of couples would be comfortable with. Thank goodness we liked what we found. Dark secrets and hidden fantasies are not always pretty. For those of us who happened to see the movie *Old School*, we know that the “trust tree” can be pretty shaky. This is

when a lot of people tell us they’d probably murder their significant other if they tried to write with them.

So after writing twenty books together, we find that the question that comes up again and again is, “How do you write with a partner?”

Our answer: Very carefully.

Once we’d taken the CPR and first aid courses, the dozen or so communication seminars, and the weekly yoga and Reiki sessions, what we learned over time was to identify and understand our talents and weaknesses. We understood why it was that we could not sell our work individually, but by working together, we could succeed.

Nikoo’s love of writing focuses on developing characters and writing dialogue.

Jim is happier plotting and writing action scenes and description.

Nikoo loves to rip into a story and rough out a first draft.

Jim is a poet and perfectionist. He takes great pleasure in revising.

Nikoo hates roadmaps.

Jim loves roadmaps.

Constant communication, though, is the fuel as well as the grease. We’ve learned how to listen and how to compromise. We’ve learned to separate the story from ourselves and look on it objectively from a safe and respectful distance. We’ve learned how to laugh at ourselves first, before we laugh at our partner.

Even the most basic courses in writing tell us to be aware of our audience. How do we perceive the “receiver” of our message? Sometimes we even create a general picture of our audience—their genders, their cultural backgrounds, their ages, etc. In communicating with a writing partner, we have a real person in front of us. We have a human being with feelings and insecurities and aspirations to deal with. In our

case, we’ve had to become keenly sensitive to each other’s feelings, which means being aware of two huge obstacles to creativity—ego and defensiveness.

What we’ve mentioned here really only scratches the surface. There are so many issues, craft-oriented as well as personal. There are constant problems of forging an identifiable style and a consistent voice, of our work habits, of our topic preferences and taboos. There have been personal issues of both of us feeling comfortable with the people we deal with on the business outside.

Still, for us the advantages in working together far outweigh working separately. We produce stories that are richer than we would produce separately. We take risks more comfortably, creatively and professionally, because we have the support of our partner. We have gladly forfeited the identity of “I” for “we.” We have become accustomed to sharing a single chair at the book signings. We’ve found our collaboration fulfilling and rewarding both in our art and our relationship.

And our advice to those who are interested in giving it a try: unless you are married to a saint, don’t try it at home.

Nikoo McGoldrick, a mechanical engineer, and Jim McGoldrick, a professor of English with a Ph.D. in sixteenth-century British literature, collaborate in life as well as in literature. Under the name May McGoldrick, they produce historical romances for NAL and Young Adult Highland Romance for HarperCollins/Avon. Under the name of Jan Coffey, they write contemporary suspense thrillers for MIRA. Under their own names, they are the authors of the nonfiction work, Marriage of Minds: Collaborative Fiction Writing.

On Becoming a Ripa Pick...

A few weeks ago Vicki Lewis Thompson got the phone call that every writer dreams of: *You're a Ripa pick*. Veteran of a 20-year career, author of more than 70 romances, Rita finalist eight times, and winner of numerous awards, Vicki appeared on *LIVE with Regis and Kelly* on July 14. Our conversation occurred before that event. At press time, her novel, *Nerd in Shining Armor*, continued to appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

As if impending stardom weren't enough to keep her busy, Vicki answered the call to become President Elect of Novelists, Inc. the day before she found out her book was selected for "Reading with Ripa."

NINK: Vicki, congratulations on your great news! All of us at Ninc share in your joy.

Vicki Lewis Thompson: Thank you. Everybody has been so supportive and wonderful.

NINK: What are your plans and goals for your presidency?

VLT: I plan to spend the first year as President Elect getting reacquainted with the goals that are in place and watching Jean Brashear do her thing.

Let me tell you how this came about. The night before Ripa was to air, I got a call from Victoria Thompson asking if I would consider the presidency. I told her I had to think about it for a couple of days because my life was about to take a major turn. If she had asked after I became a pick I would have said *no*. Then it would have seemed I was asked because of my new notoriety. Instead, I felt as if I needed to do it. It was serendipity.

NINK: How does it feel to be a Ripa pick?

VLT: Like a dream come true. This is something I've been thinking about since she started her book club, a little over a year ago.

NINK: You've had an amazing journey. How did your writing career get started?

VLT: I was a journalist for a small newspaper in Tucson, and I wanted to do something else but didn't know what. My husband saw a notice in my paper for an RWA Chapter forming. I couldn't go, and in fact, was not even a romance reader. But Larry went to the meeting and got all the information about the various romance lines. He also met the organizer, Mary Tate Engels, who later became my mentor. I took a class from her and got started with my first book, which I sold without an agent.

NINK: When did you decide to get an agent, and why?

VLT: I didn't need an agent to sell category, and didn't decide to get one until about four years ago. At that point, I had more than 50 books under my belt. I felt it was *now or never* for a single title. My kids were gone, and this was my time to take a shot at it.

NINK: So you went to an agent with a great idea....

VLT: No. I had no single title idea. I went to an agent first, then decided I would wait and see what happened. I thought, *if I'm paying an agent, I'll probably get inspired*.

It worked. Spurred by the 15 percent I was paying her, I started brainstorming ideas. While I was traveling I saw a billboard that said, "Geek in Shining Armor," and I thought, *No, that's not right. The word has to be closer to knight. It has to be nerd*.

I rewrote the billboard in my head, started jotting ideas, and the book was born.

NINK: Tell me about your struggle to get Nerd In Shining Armor published.

VLT: I had the most fun writing the first 100 pages. I loved it! I was crazy about my nerd hero and my hillbilly

heroine. I just had a ball.

Then I sent 100 pages to my new agent, full of enthusiasm, and she told me it needed all kinds of work. She sent me three or four pages of single spaced revisions. I decided I needed to do them because I didn't feel at ease in this new area. But as I struggled to rewrite, the book was losing all its flavor and fun. So I called my friend Pat Warren and complained. She is not a critique partner and never reads my manuscripts, but this time she said send it. I sent the original 100 pages, the agent's suggestions and my pitiful attempt to revise the first ten pages. Desperate, I sent it overnight. Pat got right back to me, and said, "This is the best thing you've ever written. But your revised ten pages are not good. I would advise you to stick with your original."

She even suggested that her agent Maureen Walters was the perfect person to market this book because she loved humor.

NINK: Were there moments when you wanted to quit?

VLT: I think that I never really wanted to quit, partly because I've always needed the money, and quitting would mean doing another job. I've done other jobs. No matter how bad this gets, nothing comes close to being the kind of job this is. I love it.

I'm not independently wealthy. I can't afford to quit.

Like the bumper sticker says, *a bad day fishing is better than a day at the office*. Make that *a bad day writing is better than....* just about anything you can name.

NINK: Talk to us about the support of colleagues and friends, and their importance to a writer.

VLT: I wouldn't be where I am without a host of colleagues who have been so generous, beginning with my mentor, Mary. I can't list all of them. Obviously, Pat Warren. The incredible

support of Peggy Webb (*Thank you!*). There always seems to be someone there to hold out a hand—Jayne Ann Krentz, Stella Cameron, Georgia Bockoven, Debbie Macomber. Carly Phillips has been incredibly helpful. I can't say enough about Julie Kenner. She'll jump in and give any advice she can. Julie Kistler. I have a lot of friends in my life—Julie Elizabeth Leto, Leslie Kelly, Janelle Denison, Roz Denny Fox, Patricia Knoll, Alison Hentges. I just have this huge network of support from people who honestly wish me well, and I feel it so strongly. They do all kinds of things, including moving books in the store. I try to be a good friend to them, to reciprocate in kind.

NINK: *I understand you worked with a publicist.*

VLT: Yes. Through Carly Phillips I had an entree to Theresa Meyers of Blue Moon Communications. She's my angel. She took me on, believed that *Nerd* would be a Kelly pick, stuck with it... And sure 'nuff....

NINK: *At what point did you decide to hire her?*

VLT: In February. I didn't know what my print run would be and was nervous that my first breakout book was not going to get enough push. I was afraid my book would sink without a trace, and maybe it would have. Though, who knows?

NINK: *In addition to promoting your book with Ripa, what does your publicist do for you?*

VLT: She sends partials of my book to reading groups around the country. In addition to promoting the book, she promotes me as an author. Theresa believes that name recognition is vital to success. She contacted all kinds of reviewers. She did a lot of things I might have done on my own, but I have neither the time nor the inclination.

I'm not a promoter. I'm not good at it. It's hard enough to write. Theresa has flair, and I don't. She's trained and I'm not.

NINK: *I'm Southern to the bone, so the first thing I noticed about Nerd in Shining Armor was the Tennessee angle. Why did you choose a hillbilly heroine?*

VLT: I lived for a while in West Virginia. I've been to Lynchburg and toured the Jack Daniels distillery.

I went with Mary to Tennessee and drove around the hills and hollows where I picked up a lot of local literature and folklore. I also channeled Dolly Parton.

NINK: *Except for your work, of course, what are you wanting to talk about with Ripa? What myths about romance in particular and writing in general are you dying to explode?*

VLT: I've always thought that romance was a revolutionary genre. I believe that women can get a sense of entitlement from romance. They're also given permission to have great sex, and frankly I think that's something the feminist movement neglected to address.

NINK: *What's next for you?*

VLT: I will continue to write for Harlequin. That was my first home and I enjoy writing Temptation. I enjoy communicating with a category audience. However, I certainly have a single title that's going to follow on the heels of *Nerd*. It's called *Hanging on by a G String*.

NINK: *What effect has being a Ripa pick had on your personal life?*

VLT: At this point, except for having so much fun sharing my excitement with family and friends, I haven't felt any real impact personally....other than being happy all the time.

I'm not going to get a face lift and a tummy tuck. However, I will probably buy a new car. I'm driving an 18-year-old car with no air conditioning, and it's a 115 degrees in Tucson!

NINK: *How has being a Ripa pick affected you professionally?*

VLT: Before all this happened, my book was not even on the *USA Today* and the *New York Times* lists. Now I've moved up into the magic fifty with *USA Today* and moved into the number 18 slot on the *NY Times* List, just three points away from the magic 15. I'm higher on bestseller lists than I've ever been in my life.

My book originally had a 20,000 print run, though Bantam did go back twice to print an additional 4,000. Currently the print run is more than 300,000.

NINK: *Vicki, you have the love and support of your friends and peers in Ninc. In a way we feel as if your fantastic break is happening to us as well.*

VLT: I feel the excitement among other writers. I think it's for me, personally, but I also believe there's an excitement to know someone who is 58—we can say that—and has been in the business 20 years can still have this kind of terrific thing happen to her career. It's never too late! We've never missed the boat. And we can always reinvent.

Bits'n'Pieces

FILED BY TEREY DALY RAMIN

FRANKLY IT'S THE DOG DAYS OF SUMMER, which means it's been a damned boring month hunting news here in the trenches, but I did my best—sans the dog offerings of the past two months (well, sans literary dogs, that is. There are five of the real things here at my feet... ;-))

IN ONE OF THOSE WAY COOL, "WISH IT WAS ME" ITEMS...The *Seattle Post Intelligencer* noted that local author Gregg Olsen has finally become a bestselling writer — 13 years after the fact when his novel *Abandoned Prayers*, about an Amish serial murderer in the 1980s, made the *NYT* paperback list. The paper referred to the event as "a mystifying development for the author of six books because there is no known engine driving sales..." Olsen called it, "... a complete fluke. It got there by sheer sales—no promo, no nothing. ... The funny thing about it is that publishers put big bucks behind books to get on the list and [sic] seldom make it. So this is kind of cool." An understatement if I've ever read one. <g>



Sticky Notes from the Edge

— Cheryl Anne Porter

Friends, Family, and Society

W. Somerset Maugham said: “Friends, family, and society are the natural enemies of the writer.”

Here’s proof:

Friend on the phone: Hi. What are you doing?

Me: Writing.

Friend: Oh. So you want to go out for lunch?

Me: No. I’m writing.

Friend: Writing what?

Me: A book.

Friend: Oh. So you want to go out for lunch?

Family on the phone (from Oklahoma): Hi, honey, it’s Mom. Today’s my birthday. Why haven’t you called me yet?

Me (in Florida): Because it’s only eight a.m. here and you beat me to it.

Mom: Oh. Well, your sister got me this new cell phone with free long distance, so now I can call you all the time and talk as long as I want.

Me: Ask My Sister (who lives next door to my mother) to call me. I have something to say to her.

Mom: Just tell me, and I’ll tell her.

Me, though I was tempted: No, I’ll tell her myself.

Mom: What were you doing when I called?

Me: Writing.

Mom: Writing what?

Me: A book.

Mom: Oh. Well, I wish you were here so we could go out to lunch.

Me: I know. Too bad, huh? Well, anyway, happy birthday, Mom.

Baby Son from Oklahoma: Hi, Mom. What’re you doing?

Me: Writing. A book.

Baby Son: Oh. Well, hey, Mom, I need four billion dollars (it might as well have been that figure) for some bills or I’ll have to come live with you.

Me (This one was easy.): The check’s in the mail.

Baby Son: Thanks, Mom! I love you. ‘Bye.

First-born Son: Hi, Mom. What’re you doing?

Me: I’m writing a book. How much do you need so you don’t have to come live with me?

First-born Son: Four billion dollars.

Me: No problem. The check’s in the mail.

First-born Son: Thanks, Mom. I love you.

‘Bye.

Society on the Phone: Good morning, Mrs. Porter, this is the Stupid Survey Company whose job it is to waste to your time. How are you?

Me: Homicidal.

Society: Good. I’m calling this morning on behalf of the Hyena Laughing Gas Company and we—

Me: (click)

Another Segment of Society: Good morning. Is this Mrs. Porter?

Me: Maybe. Does she owe you money?

Segment: Ha-ha, very funny, Mrs. Porter. You should write comedy. Anyway, this is Tiffany with You Ain’t Got No Money Bank, and I’m calling regarding two checks in the amount of four billion dollars each.

Me: Yes, I’m familiar with them.

Segment: Well, Mrs. Porter, you don’t have eight billion dollars.

Me: Well, not anymore I don’t. So, Tiffany, what were you doing before you called?

Tiffany: Huh?

Me: Myself, I’ve been trying all morning to write this book and it ain’t happening. So I thought maybe you and I could go to lunch.

Tiffany: I can’t go to lunch. I’m working.

Me: So was I until the phone rang—Tiffany? Hello? Strange. We must have been cut off.

Yep...natural enemies. So, if I haven’t written much lately, I take comfort in the fact that neither has Shakespeare.

The author would have you know that the opinions expressed in this column are not necessarily those of the author of this column.



Burnout Bites

DEAR ANNETTE:

Here's the problem: I want to write and publish again so much I can taste it, but I'm my own worst enemy. My former agent even called to ask me to submit something new! I have started a new project. Sometimes I think it's pretty good, and other times I think it stinks. And then I say, why bother? I'm getting older by the minute. But heck, I say back, you're going to be old anyway! Why not be old and be published and having a good time at it? I feel as if I've lost the "magic." If you have a way of addressing that in a future column, of how to get it back, I'll be thrilled to read it.

(Signed—My Own Worst Enemy)

DEAR ENEMY:

Losing the magic has a lot to do with that old, tired saw, creative burnout. To most people, burnout means bored and cynical. That's certainly one form the beast takes. Anxiety and avoidance is its lesser-known evil twin.

We creative types appear to be highly susceptible to burnout. Research suggests that people who have high expectations of themselves, few tangible means for measuring success, and a high need for control are at strong risk for burnout. Wahoo. Doesn't sound like anyone in the writing profession to me.

The good news is: we know a lot about this creativity-slayer and how to conquer it.

First, what triggers burnout? Years of research have boiled it down to the interaction of two elements: level of

challenge and perceived skills. When our perceived skill level matches the level of challenge in our work, life is good. When we believe our work doesn't take advantage of our talents, boredom, cynicism, and resentment build up. On the flip side, if we think our skills aren't up to the challenge of the work, anxiety, and often paralyzing fear, are generated.

My guess is that you fall into this second category. I know you have an excellent publishing record, but since it's been awhile since you last sold, I wonder if deep down you doubt your skills or perhaps you over-estimate the challenges of selling work again. Those beliefs could certainly lead to the self-doubt and roadblocks you describe.

Let's say it is burnout. Now what?

For the person experiencing the boredom type of burnout, finding new challenges and stretching artistically is the answer. Easier said than done, I know, but that's a whole 'nother column.

For anxiety burnout, the cure takes a different form. If you were a budding author, I'd say take some workshops (raise your skill level), expand your knowledge of the markets (lower your perception of the challenge), and your resistance will just fade away. But, knowing that you're an exceedingly experienced writer, it ain't gonna be quite that easy. I hate it when that happens.

I'm hoping your answer centers on figuring out how to rally your belief in your abilities and at the same time, learn how to set some more tangible, achievable goals for yourself.

From your question, I wonder if you're not putting too much pressure on your writing right now. When you sit down to work, is selling often on your mind? That kind of emphasis on a long-term, (relatively far-off) goal only generates doubt about your skills and abilities. Have you *really* come up with a saleable idea? Can you *ever* get back into that mental space where the writing flows? See? It doesn't take but a heartbeat for these poisonous thoughts to ooze in, eat away at your confidence, and make you doubt that you're up to the challenge you've set for yourself.

Finding a way to design small, achievable writing goals could help tremendously. You've clearly demonstrated over and over that you write well enough to get published, so I can't for one second believe your skills are in any way inadequate to the task. Alert! I'm about to reveal my true, mean-spirited nature here: When I'm really doubting my abilities I pick up a terrifically bad novel. It buoys my confidence to remind myself that if someone with clearly fewer skills than I have has sold work, I can do it again, too. Somehow after that I'm better able to put aside those paralyzing doubts about selling and focus on tiny, daily goals like designing the next scene, or working out a tricky piece of dialog.

The other piece of the burnout cure involves lowering your perceptions of the challenge. The thing is, you've likely set your sights on a goal that's too far distant, ▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶▶ and somewhat out of your control. You mentioned wanting to get the magic back. I think the only thing standing between you and wonderful writing sessions is anxiety and fear about the ultimate outcome.

You've published. Multiple times. You know what works. I hope this doesn't sound trite, but I think if you could trust your story-telling instincts and figure out a way to focus on the immediate challenges of the work in front of you, your burnout would disappear.

Help Wanted: I'd like to thank the many Ninc members who've offered to share their struggles. I'd love to tackle any comments or questions related to mental health (our own and maybe even our characters'), creativity, self-esteem, motivation, or family issues—just to name a few areas—in upcoming columns. All comments and questions will be kept strictly confidential. My contact information: e-mail annettecarney@sbcglobal.net, fax: 775-746-4560, phone: 775-323-0445.

Annette Carney, Ph.D is a Marriage and Family Therapist with 15 years' experience. She's multi-published in short contemporary romances and young adult novels.

In Review.....

Getting Into Character

7 Secrets a Novelist can Learn From Actors

REVIEWED BY JANELLE SCHNEIDER

While I expected to be intrigued by the subject matter of this book, I certainly didn't expect to find it "un-put-down-able." From Page One, Brandilyn Collins hooked me into her premise and kept me turning pages until the end.

Collins spent years in training as an actor before turning her attention to the craft of writing. As she began studying writing, she realized that the principles of Method Acting could be applied to the novelist's craft. She began looking for books on the subject, but found nothing. So, in typical writer fashion, she wrote her own. Several novels later, including bestsellers, she's proven she knows what she's written about.

Each of the "Secrets" presented comes from the teaching of Constantin Stanislavsky, the great Russian actor and director who revolutionized early 20th Century drama with the principles of Method Acting.

Each chapter begins with the "Actor's Technique" being discussed, followed by the "Novelist's Adaptation." Each chapter ends with one excerpt from classical fiction, and one from contemporary fiction, to illustrate the principle, as well as "Exploration Points" which help the reader apply theory to excerpt.

Personalizing helps an author create characters "so distinctive that their traits and mannerisms become a critical component of the plot itself."

Action objectives "pave the way for conflict, ensuring that scenes won't be merely setups for what's to come."

Subtexting creates "dialogue that is rich in meaning

while sounding natural."

Inner Rhythm creates "action so vibrant with life that readers will feel the characters' emotions."

Restraint and Control enables the author to use "vivid verbs and adjectives that create a strong visual picture, and the technique of 'sentence rhythm' to help create the aura of the scene."

Emotion Memory help the author write about any character facing any circumstance with realistic emotion and motivation.

My favorite chapter was the one on "Subtexting." In her Novelist's Adaptation, Collins says, "In realistic dialogue, characters will not always say what they mean. Communication often goes far deeper than words, flowing from the underlying meaning, or subtext. The key is to know when subtexted dialogue is appropriate, and how to convey the underlying meaning to readers."

For example, she uses the following conversation:

"Morning."
 "Morning."
 "Sleep well?"
 "Yeah."

She then adds description, introspection and physical gestures to show that while "the conversation is about morning greeting; the communication is about power and the need for love." In other words, the subtext of that simple five-word exchange reveals an abusive marriage.

I also learned much from her chapter on "Action Objectives." As professional writers, we've all probably read plenty about "Goal, Conflict, and Disaster." Conflict and Disaster weren't hard for me to grasp, nor the concept

of an overall story goal. But when it came to defining a goal for a specific scene, I often had trouble. Having read *Getting Into Character*, I feel like I now truly understand what goals in a scene are about, and how they can contribute to the overall story goal. Collins calls her interpretation of scene goals “the four D’s”—Desire, Distancing, Denial, Devastation—and these make excellent guidelines for those of us who like to plot our stories prior to the first draft. She states more than once that even those who prefer to write “on the fly” can benefit from using the four D’s as the story unfolds.

The book concludes with two Appendices. The first is a list of recommended reading, which Collins classifies according to which of the 7 Secrets the selection will supplement best. As she states at the beginning of the appendix, “The Secrets we’ve discussed here are unique enough to the fiction world that you will not find them mentioned—much less discussed—in other writing books. But that hardly matters. All of these books have something to offer as the authors present their own techniques for characterization, dialogue, plotting, and sentence structure.”

Appendix B gives details concerning Stanislavsky’s three books about Method Acting, as well as one entitled *Acting: The First Six Lessons* by Richard Boleslavsky. A chart follows this list, outlining where each of the “Secrets” is further explained in the books about acting.

Far from being a dry treatise on technique, I found *Getting into Character* to be a fascinating study into how to make my fictional “worlds” come alive for my readers. Having finished reading the book, I feel like I now have the tools to make my WIP absolutely irresistible to my “target editor.”

The subtext of Janelle Burnham Schneider's family needs often colors her passion for writing, redirects the action objective of her work time, and causes her to exercise restraint and control as she endeavors to

create emotion memories that will keep all their inner rhythms pleasant.

Bits'n'Pieces

L A T I N O
V O I C E S T H E
C O M I N G
T H I N G

AMONG SOME YOUNGER AGENTS...A recent article in the *Boston Globe* explored the phenomenon of younger agents who seem to be trying to develop Latino lists. A quote from the article states that “Established literary agents who specialize in Spanish-language books or books written by Latinos don’t have time to take on new clients. Other agents may not want to represent anyone outside the mainstream. And the editors eager to buy manuscripts are exhausted by working double duty as literary agents in an effort to fill their fiction and nonfiction slots every season.” According to Touchstone/Fireside editor Marcela Landres “If there’s anything I’ve learned being a Latina editor at a major publishing house [it’s] that we still live in a segregated society. If you’re not Latino, you don’t know Latino people, much less Latino writers.” Agents identified as among the “...new generation of Latino literary agents aspiring to place culturally accessible reads into the hands of this community” are Sanford Greenburger Associates agent Johanna Castillo and Carol Mann agent Leylha Ahuile. And yes, as we’ve learned in romance, sometimes it pays to specialize—or to have a specialty agent.

YEAH, YEAH, YOU ALREADY KNOW THIS ONE...Publicity for the average writer sucks. But now the *San Francisco Chronicle* has figured it out, too. According to them, publishers of an estimated 55,000 books a year count on all us lesser-knowns to do more and more of our own book promotions, from hiring publicists to setting up and paying for our tours to... yep, you got it, submitting a marketing strategy as part of the book proposal. *Say what?* Apparently such is the experience of a number of nonfiction authors in the Northern California area. And this on top of those unhelpful sales clerks who don’t want their beautifully shrink-wrapped books unwrapped so the author can sign and sell them—you know the ones we all abhor and, well, have to love. Or at least put up with in order to actually get our books hand-sold to customers. And why is it that the publishers want the *authors* to come up with marketing strategies? Because says Gerry Howard, head of Broadway Books, a division of Random House, “A lot of authors are better at thinking outside the box than publishers because they live outside the box.” Well, of course. That explains everything. We already knew that. For pity’s sakes, look at what we write. ;->

— TdR

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BY LAWRENCE
WATT-EVANS

I call this column “Rayguns, Elves, and the Walking Dead” because I’ve written science fiction, fantasy, and horror; the original notion, as much as there was one, was that since most of the membership of Novelists, Inc is made up of romance writers, I’d have a somewhat different perspective that might be of interest.

We’re all writers, though—regardless of genre, how different is what we do, really? A novelist still needs to work with the same elements of plot, character, setting, and so on, no matter what field he’s working in. We all use the same tools.

One difference I’ve noticed in one genre, though, is not in what we do, but in how readers assess our work. Science fiction bills itself as “the literature of ideas,” and a good many readers—not to mention far too many would-be SF writers—take this seriously. They place too much emphasis on originality and think that all that *really* matters in science fiction is having a cool new idea; character development or dramatic tension is all very well, but the important thing is to have some nifty scientific or pseudo-scientific gimmick that’ll make the reader say, “Wow!”

And it has to be a gimmick, they think, that hasn’t been used before.

The first SF magazine was founded in 1926; SFWA has 1,600 members, and there are several hundred, probably over a thousand, SF books published every year. New ideas are not easy to come by!

Obviously, not every science fiction reader believes this nonsense about a need for novelty in every single story; most don’t worry about rules or standards, they just know what they enjoy reading. Among the hard-core fans who put on conventions and are active in online discussions or writing about the field, though, the myth persists. And since conventions and online discussions naturally attract people who want to write SF and are trying to learn as much as possible about the field in order to not make fools of themselves, many of the would-be authors get caught up in misconceptions. It’s not at all unusual to see eager young writers struggling to find plots and concepts that haven’t ever been used before. The single question SF writers reportedly get asked more than any other is, “Where do you get your ideas?”

Even if there were a simple answer to that, would it matter? Ideas are not stories, and what really matters is

Original Ideas?

having a good story well-told. Originality isn’t needed—but try to convince some people of that! In other genres it’s common knowledge, even in SF’s close relatives like fantasy, but in science fiction? No.

I’ve been arguing about this loudly and publicly for years, to the point that if you explore the SF community you may even come across people quoting “Watt-Evans’ Law”: “There is no idea so stupid or hackneyed that a sufficiently talented writer can’t get a good story out of it.” Yet there are still science fiction fans who will insist that what makes SF special, the whole and only reason they like it, is that it’s full of wonderful concepts, strange worlds, and brilliantly innovative ideas, and that they want to see something new every single time, some new idea drawn from current scientific thought or speculation. They mock other genres for rehashing the same plots over and over, sometimes with particular ire directed at fantasy for its use of outright magic. Science fiction is based in reality!

Uh huh.

Let us consider some of the classics in the field. The biggest names in the history of SF are probably Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov; were their stories really so original?

Well, Asimov’s masterwork is the Foundation trilogy—and Asimov openly admitted that it’s largely a retelling of Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* on a galactic scale in the far future, with some pseudo-science and a happy ending added.

Heinlein maintained that he stole all his plots, then just “filed off the serial numbers” enough that readers wouldn’t recognize them. It’s fairly obvious, for example, that his novel *Job* is based on James Branch Cabell’s *Jurgen* and *The Silver Stallion*; *Citizen of the Galaxy* bears a strong resemblance to Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*. Brilliant scientific ideas in these stories? I don’t see them. Good writing, appealing characters, yes; scientific innovation, no.

And the book chosen by a poll of fans as the greatest SF novel of all time, Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination*, has a plot that’s unmistakably *The Count of Monte Cristo* in futuristic drag—though Bester did add teleportation to the mix. He didn’t bother finding any scientific justification for it, though.

You’d think that would be enough that would-be SF writers wouldn’t worry about originality or accurate science, but it’s not. I still see beginners asking worriedly whether anyone has ever before written a story with a particular premise, and when told “yes” (because after all, coming up

with a really *new* idea doesn't happen often) abandoning a promising story, even if the only previous use was some obscure short story that last saw the light of day forty years ago.

I think this problem, this idealization of originality, may be unique to SF. Certainly we all want our stories to be a little different, to stand out from the crowd, but no one's going to abandon a romance novel about, say, opposing lawyers falling in love just because it's been done before, or toss a mystery because the killer's motive is similar to one Agatha Christie used in 1947.

This is one reason SF fans think their chosen genre is something special, and why many of them openly look down on other genres—they place a premium on originality, and in most genres, reader expectations call for certain consistent elements that limit originality. You can't write and sell a category romance in which the hero and heroine wind up deciding the whole thing was a mistake; readers demand that the story end with the two of them together, with some expectation of living happily ever after. A mystery novel has to show the reader the solution to the mystery. Science fiction doesn't have any such structural requirements. It has its own rules and expectations, but they're more subtle.

But the notion that it's the amazing scientific ideas that make science fiction unique doesn't reflect reality very well. Most science fiction has very little actual science in it, and what's shown is often just plain wrong. In *The Stars My Destination* Bester makes no attempt to explain how his characters can teleport using only their minds; he just says that somewhere between now and the time of the story, a French scientist discovered how to do it and taught the rest of the world. The question of why people should have possessed this astonishing innate ability and never discovered it until sometime in the twenty-first century is simply ignored.

And the real reason it's there, of course, is that Bester thought it would make for a nifty story.

That's really the case with most SF—the fancy technology and bizarre science is simply a given, there to make the story work. You don't need to know real science to write science fiction; you just need to know the conventions of science fiction, what readers will accept and what they won't.

But some of the fans sure don't want to admit this! Insisting that their favorite stories are all based on careful extrapolation from modern science makes the whole thing seem more intellectual, more sophisticated, more important—and it lets them look down on mere fantasy, where everything's just made up and there aren't any rules, or on more mundane genres like romance and mystery and Westerns where the authors get to use ready-made settings instead of having to build them from scratch. (Never mind that getting the real world right, doing the necessary research, is often harder than invent-

ing a new world.)

And to bring up Bester's masterpiece once again, it occurs to me to wonder whether he was mocking this very delusion that so many of his readers labor under. In the story there's a small lost colony descended from the survivors of a stranded scientific expedition; they call themselves the Scientific People, and use a great deal of scientific terminology, but their actual practices are the sort of behavior found in the most primitive societies, with an elaborate system of taboos and meaningless rituals.

I wonder how many readers realize that the Scientific People might be a parody of the sort of SF fans who talk about the great ideas and the importance of originality in SF, while enjoying stories far more rooted in folklore than in science? How many fans see themselves being mocked?

Given the book's immense popularity, apparently not many—or perhaps they have more of a sense of humor about themselves than I thought!

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:

Marthe Arends (*Katie MacAlister*), Snohomish WA
Deborah Chester (*Jay D Blakeney, Sean Dalton*), Norman OK
Doranna Durgin, Flagstaff AZ
Jennifer LaBrecque, Dallas GA
Sharon Lee, Unity ME
Karen Templeton-Berger (*Karen Templeton*), Albuquerque NM
Bonnie Tucker, Sugar Land TX
Linda Warren, College Station TX

New Members:

Darlene Gardenhire (*Darlene Graham*), Norman OK
Alison Hart (*Jennifer Greene, Jeanne Grant, Jessica Massey*),
Benton Harbor MI
Liz Peterson (*Elizabeth Powell*), Fitchburg, WI
Leah Vroman (*Leah Valé*), Portland OR

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



Laura Resnick is

THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

“What I’ve Learned From Will”

Like many unfortunate people, my first exposure to the works of William Shakespeare was in school. As a teenager, I was forced to read *Julius Caesar* in English class. Though a bookish kid, I was ill-equipped to struggle through Shakespearean language at age fifteen. (“Come hither, sirrah.”) Moreover, as a modern American teenager obsessed with modern American teenage stuff, I was indifferent to the point of somnambulism when Marcus Antonius comes “to bury Caesar, not to praise him” in the brilliant eulogy which stirs up the masses and skillfully manipulates the crowd in this initial salvo of what soon becomes all-out war between him and Brutus, one of Caesar’s assassins.

As Mark Antony laments Caesar’s murder before the masses of Rome, he keeps insisting that Brutus and Cassius are “honorable” men who *surely* had good reasons for what appears to be their wholly unconscionable murder of Rome’s greatest leader: “Er, *did* they have good reasons? Does anyone at this eulogy happen to know?” Unspoken in this scene is the fact that Antony’s wagon had been hitched to Caesar’s star, making Cassius and Brutus his enemies, too—enemies who will oppose Antony’s now picking up some of the power that dropped and scattered when Caesar fell.

Well, gee whiz, Antony tells the crowd, *he’s* sure not going to accuse those two fine, upstanding men of vicious murder or base motives, no, indeed... And yet, as the scene progresses, Antony turns the crowd against them, bringing the people under his influence with the fluid skill of a brilliant conductor directing his orchestra: “Gosh, I really don’t want to upset anyone by going into morbid detail about the assassination... But, okay, if you *insist*, folks, I’ll draw you a diagram of who stabbed Caesar in what body parts and how he suffered. By the way, did I mention the Big Guy left you a little something in his will?” By the end of Antony’s eulogy, citizens who favored Brutus at the start of the scene are now screaming for his head.

I learned from Will that characters don’t always say exactly what they mean, and they may have goals quite different from what they’re telling people they’re after. The whole time Antony is assuring the crowd he just wants to lay Caesar to rest and walk away without blaming anyone, he’s deliberately doing exactly the opposite. When I came back to this scene again a few years after I started writing, I learned more. Just as

a character may lie to the reader, so a character may lie to everyone else while letting the reader in on the joke. Will was particularly fond of writing the latter kind of scenario, and it was through watching his plays that I began to develop an understanding of when and how this technique is effective. Above all, I realized that Antony dumps huge quantities of dialogue on us in this scene because he’s trying to *accomplish* something with it. Will showed me that dialogue can also be action.

Antony’s friendship with Caesar served his own ambitions; now his manipulation of the crowd serves him by winning them over to his quest for power against Brutus’ faction. Will taught me to ask the question I now pose first and foremost when developing a character’s motivations and intentions: What does he want most, and how far will he go to get it? Brutus was willing to kill to keep power from Caesar, and Antony was willing to go to war for power.

However, despite their enmity, Antony respects Brutus. After defeating him, Antony says over his foe’s corpse, without irony, “This was the noblest Roman of them all.” I learned from Will that the most compelling adversaries may be those who respect—perhaps even like—each other.

Being forced to read *Julius Caesar* at age fifteen, however, I didn’t get any of this. I also had no idea I’d grow up to be a writer; in fact, growing up in a writer’s house ensured that writing was the very *last* thing I wanted to do with my life when I was a teen. (Like Will’s character Romeo, I am fortune’s fool. If my own life were played upon the stage, as Will writes in *Twelfth Night*, “I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.”)

Being forced to read *Antony and Cleopatra* in my first year of college was an equally dismal experience. Shakespeare was spoiled for me for years thereafter by turgid academic interpretations which made his stories as clear as mud and which forced his work into cherished ivory-tower theories. What I learned from this, as well as from some other good writers whom my education ruined for me, is: Do everything you can (if anything) to prevent academics from “teaching” your work. And write a prohibition into your will in case the vultures descend after you’re dead.

Now you may be thinking, “Not my problem, Resnick. I’m a popular fiction writer. Academics will never even acknowledge my work—apart from the occasional dismissive

reference to ‘that populist trash’—let alone ruin it for generations of young people by interpreting my love scenes as metaphors about the relationship between the state and the monarchy.”

Hah! Well, think again! That’s exactly what Will said, after all, and look what happened to *him*.

Okay, maybe not *exactly* what Will said; but Will was a working actor and playwright whose job was to keep the crowds coming back to the theatre show after show. He was the Steven Spielberg of his day. Will didn’t give himself airs about becoming (as he is now often called) the greatest writer in the history of the English language. Will was just the Elizabethan equivalent of a pop-fiction writer with a very demanding release schedule. Think of him as Nora Roberts with a beard. (And four hundred years from now, academics will probably theorize that Nora Roberts’ stories were actually written by someone else, the way they say it about Will now.)

Will tried to keep people in their seats by writing strong, well-crafted stories about compelling characters, like any good writer. Yet centuries later, teenagers all across America are cursing his name as they’re forced to wade through *Macbeth* while their teachers tell them (brace yourself) this is GOOD for them because it’s WORTHY LITERATURE.

I’m telling you, start re-writing your will today.

Speaking of *Macbeth*, that one was forced on me at sixteen. As a sensible adult now, I’m uneasy about the obvious ramifications of this. Suppose a teenage boy wants his father’s sports car, and his girlfriend is urging him to get it or she won’t put out. Next thing you know, their English teacher shows them how it’s done by walking them through *Macbeth*: “We can kill the Big Guy, make it look like natural causes, and no one will ever know. Then the throne [Porsche] will be ours! In fact, it’s really our *right*. We shouldn’t even feel bad about this.”

I missed these implications at sixteen, but now I can’t understand why tax-paying parents don’t put their collective foot down about this and insist on their teens being “taught,” say, *Two Gentleman of Verona* instead. Oh, wait, no, headstrong young woman runs away from home; perhaps not. *Romeo and Juliet*? Teen lovers deceive parents and wind up committing suicide. Oops. *King Lear*: “Let’s lock up Dad and take over all his property.” *Othello*: “I suspect my wife may have cheated on me, so I guess I’ll run mad and murder her.”

It’s a challenge, finding a Shakespeare play to which we can expose the youth of today without risking personal damages.

What I learned from Will is that basic human truths persist century after century, and a story which portrays them always speaks to us. Historians can write that people were considered “adults” by adolescence in other eras; but Romeo and Juliet, though of marriageable age at fourteen or so, are clearly *children* in their story, which was written over four hundred years ago. We recognize their impulsive passions, their lovesick stupors, and their dimwitted optimism because, oops!, kids that age haven’t really changed much since 1595. We’re not peering through the telescope of time when we watch *Romeo and Juliet*; we’re gazing at a crystal-clear mirror and seeing ourselves and our children gazing right back at us.

I first started to “get” Shakespeare when I was attending drama school in England. Our Shakespearean text teacher was named Judith, and she was so old that rumor claimed she was Will’s daughter (also named Judith). When Judith got to talking, she’d start rattling off characters, conflicts, scenes, speeches, and one-liners, going so fast she didn’t bother to say which plays she was quoting. I occasionally got confused and thought she was talking about her relatives. In any event, Judith’s job was not to teach us what Shakespeare’s text “meant,” but rather how to speak it without keeling over in a dead faint (those passages are *long*), and to ensure the audience wouldn’t collectively say, “HUH?”

Soon after we met, Judith realized she needed to give me the lecture she gave to every acting student who had attended university: “Forget what they taught you about Shakespeare, it’s rubbish. These are wonderful characters who should not be locked in an ivory tower. Shakespeare wrote for the masses in the pit. If he were alive today, he’d be writing for television. What’s *Titus Andronicus*, after all? Sex and violence, violence and sex.”

Personally, I don’t really envision Will writing *Baywatch*. But you get the point.

I went home and read *Titus Andronicus* that night. Judith was absolutely right! Sex and violence, violence and sex. That’s Shakespeare for you.

I also learned that even a great writer can do some pretty lame work at the start of his career. I certainly did, and at least I’m in good company. *Titus Andronicus* was one of Will’s earliest plays and, let me tell you, it sucks canal water. Baaaaaaad.

Nonetheless, despite a few turkeys here and there, Will’s overall body of work consists of many stories that continue to be riveting and full of human truth.

I feel sure I’m supposed to say something about *Hamlet* at this juncture, since so many people think Danish Boy was Will’s greatest character. I’ll go as far as saying Hamlet was some of Will’s best word-crafting. There’s a reason you can’t go more than thirty seconds in *Hamlet* without hearing a familiar saying (and we’re talking about a four-hour play!); Will wrote brilliant, quotable, shrewd line after line after line in that story. I learned from Will that how well the language is crafted *always* matters, I’m not buying any of this “that’s not really important in genre fiction” crap. Will crafted that brilliant language to keep the masses coming back to the pit; that’s what a good writer does, like a composer who makes sure we all leave the concert humming one of his tunes.

On the other hand, I always spend most of the play wishing Hamlet would just shit or get off the pot. Has anyone in the whole history of the world ever vacillated as long and loquaciously as he does? Good grief.

However, though it’s not my favorite story, it does contain some valuable lessons for me as a writer. Most notably, the famous (partial) line, oft-repeated to actors: “The play is the thing.” The work I do is not about me, it’s about the story; writers who forget to serve the story and instead try to make the story serve them are destined to deliver self-indulgent dreck. And as Hamlet gives directions to the players, we hear



THE COMELY CURMUDGEON

▶ ▶ ▶ the beleaguered voice of the writer, clear as a bell across the span of four hundred years, begging for some common courtesy for the work: Just say the words the way they're written, don't gesticulate too much, "suit the action to the word, the word to the action," and, for god's sake, don't ruin my work by overacting (read: over-editing).

Anyhow, if I had to pick a favorite from Will's work—and I'm not sure I can, so don't hold me to this—I think it might be *Macbeth*, despite my trauma over being forced to read it at sixteen. Admittedly, sitting through that play is a hard day's night; you've got to be in a grand, tragic mood.

Macbeth and his wife kill a king who trusted them, in order to gain the throne with which three witches tempted them. But before long, the Macbeths find themselves in that "undiscovered country"—not death, which Hamlet fretted over, but conscience and consequences. They're gradually tormented by the weight of their guilt until their world falls apart. Lady Macbeth loses her mind, and Macbeth's self-loathing leads to such stark bleakness that he decides life is a tedious, never-ending "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

What I love about *Macbeth* is how much I learn from it every time I sit through it. The story captivates me because, when it begins, I *like* Macbeth. The evil deeds of a villain are par for the course; but the evil deeds of someone we care about are compelling. Someone tormented by guilt and doubt, someone who longs to undo something he has done... This someone is *us* (even if, okay, we haven't committed regicide lately). Each time I sit through the first few acts, I find myself hoping that *this* time, Macbeth won't kill Duncan—or that *this* time, he can find redemption for doing it. Now *that's* good writing.

Macbeth makes me ask as a writer not only how far a character is willing to go to get what he wants, but also: How

far is *too* far? What could make you go there? How do you know when you're finally there? How do you get back? *Can* you get back? Is remorse enough for forgiveness? Is sacrifice enough for redemption?

Will's body of work, stretching across the centuries, teaches me that the writer's most important work has always been exploring the human heart in conflict with itself. And four hundred years from now, I believe that will still be true. (So, really. Re-write your will.) In any case, it's our duty and our privilege to continue Will's work. As storytellers, we are "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time."

Best of all, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." And I learned that from Will.

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Bits'n'Pieces

AND YET
MORE USED
BOOKSTORES
IN THE OFF-
ING as indies are

encouraged to go used... You know those Independent Booksellers we're all supposed to love and encourage? (Except for those of us who write genre fiction of the type that's not carried in those kinds of stores anyway, that is. <g>) Well, apparently they've discovered what everyone else (meaning those big, bold, nasty, author unfriendly chain stores and franchises—yes, okay, like Amazon) discovered a while ago: it pays to go used. Yep, that's right. Indies are now not only looking into but more often than not turning to that mega growth industry called used and remainder sales to "help boost profit margins, as well as to provide good value to customers." There was even a BEA advice panel to teach them how to go about it. So I guess it's just authors and publishers who don't like this practice twisting alone in the wind on this one any more. Think they'll get together and decide to act on the threat to the industry now...?

— TdR

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