



## Novelists, Inc.

FOUNDED IN 1989

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## The President's Voice

# The Time Warp

Perhaps by the time I write my last column next fall, I'll have mastered this odd sense of time-warp resulting from trying to predict what will be most relevant to all of us in February while writing this in the midst of Christmas shopping. As novelists we're accustomed to stepping into the skins of people living in different times and places, and that's something that normally comes easily to me, but...this isn't some fictional character; I'm attempting to step into my own skin two months hence, wishing for the gift of perfect knowledge. An item to put on my list for Santa.

Lacking that, I can tell you what I believe will be much on my mind in February, as well as on many of yours: the fabulous conference in Santa Fe in only a month! (Okay, nearly three months at the moment, but...you get the drift.) As I've said to all and sundry, I continue to believe that the very best thing I've done and perhaps ever will do for Ninc is not donating two years of my time to serving on the Board but rather, seducing the incomparable Cathy Maxwell into changing her "no" to a "yes" when asked to be conference coordinator.

Working with her has been a wondrous experience, and all the attendees are shortly to share in the fun. Laura Baker, bless her, has been involved from the get-go, utilizing her formidable knowledge of the area, along with expertise gained as she pulled off a wonderful NYC conference in 2002, to the benefit of us all. Barbara Samuel has also pitched in for the cause, and we owe our thanks to all of them, as well as to Julie Kistler (who was involved in the siting) for what promises to be a remarkable experience.

Being a Board charged with stewardship of the wonder that is Ninc, however, some of us are already thinking ahead to the 2005 conference, and I personally would be interested in hearing input on the shape of it, as the Board must deliberate on potential sites right away. NYC is always an option, and one to which we'll return in the very near future, but once we've tried out this retreat format in Santa Fe, perhaps members will be interested in doing another retreat first. Toronto for a business-oriented conference is also a possibility we're exploring, since the choice might entail some savings for both our Canadian members and those in the U.S., based on the exchange rate. Los Angeles, with an eye toward book-to-film discussions and screenwriters' views on story, is a possibility. In addition, Dean Koontz has, in the past, indicated an interest in speaking to us if we're meeting in California.

Weather, of course, would have to be a consideration, but that's the case with any northern clime in early spring. We're not wedded to March; it was chosen this year partly to avoid the inevitable conflict with spring break, Passover, Easter, Mother's Day, and graduations, and partly because the hotel rates are better before April. Both Toronto and New York in early spring can be iffy, weather wise, but it's my guess that those who made the decision to switch to a spring conference didn't intend us to boycott everything north of the Mason Dixon line. Weather is simply one element that must be factored into a complex decision; availability of speakers, hotel rates, and airfares are among those that must also be considered.

The site selection process will have to be underway very soon, but if you'd like to weigh in on the topic, please feel free to email me directly (see masthead).

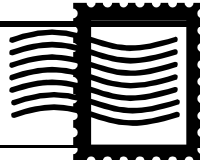
While you're sharing your opinions, I'd like to seek them in another arena: the website. When you get a minute, please go to [www.ninc.com](http://www.ninc.com) and peruse the Research/Resource Links section in the Members Only area. Craig, our

wonderful webmaster, and I have been through it, cleaning up outdated links, etc., but there are some sites listed which seem highly commercialized to me, and I'd like your input on any that are inappropriate, in your view. I'd also appreciate (as will your fellow members) information on any other links you think desirable to add, so please use my email addy listed on page 2 to submit them. If you're brand new to NINC, don't think you shouldn't chime in—new blood is good, and all opinions matter!

For those unable to attend the conference, we'll miss you. For those I'll be seeing in a month (or almost three, here in my time warp)...can't wait!

— **Jean Brashear**

## LETTERS TO NINK.....



Even in this online age – with Ninclink – 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.

**Yes, we want to hear from you, too, this year.**

### Coming Out of Lurk Mode

I confess to being what is known in this Internet Age as a “lurker.” For many years, now, I have welcomed the arrival of my copy of NINK each month and immediately proceeded to devour it from cover to cover, usually while sitting at the kitchen table sipping my chicken noodle soup (winter) or fruit and yogurt smoothie (summer), the better to prolong the moment when I must return (depending on how close I am to deadline) to the garden or The Work. Almost always, at some point while reading, I am moved to exclaim silently, “Great article!” or even, “Wow, I wish I'd written that!” Never have I been so profoundly moved, however, as to overcome my own natural inertia and bestir myself to write to express my appreciation and gratitude for those words that so inspired me.

Until now.

Barbara Samuel's “Falling In Love” chapter of her continuing series, “The Care and Feeding of the Girls in the Basement,” is simply one of the most beautiful essays I've ever read, on any subject. Beyond that, I can think of nothing to say. For me, I guess, great writing is the literary equivalent of Barbara's Spanish guitar.

— **Kathleen Creighton**

## 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:

Celeste Bradley, Spring Hill TN  
 Nina Bruhns (*Nikita Black*), Summerville SC  
 Donna Jean (*Donna Kauffman*), Sterling VA  
 Krista Turner (*Krista Thoren*), Normal IL

### New Members:

Leslie Esdaile Banks (*L.A. Banks*), Philadelphia PA  
 Susan Crandall, Noblesville IN  
 Susan Guadagno (*Susan Gable*), Erie PA  
 Ken Hodgson, San Angelo TX  
 Robin D. Owens, Denver CO

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

*If you are struggling with what you should be writing, look at your scraps. Encoded there are the themes and subjects that you should be grappling with as a writer.*

Betsy Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*

### Stay in Touch with Ninc online.

Visit the website at [www.ninc.com](http://www.ninc.com)  
 Join the never-ending e-conversation – for members only – by joining Ninclink.

#### Controlling Your Listserve Preferences through E-Mail

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Switch to Digest	NINCLINK-digest@yahoogroups.com
Switch to Individual	NINCLINK-normal@yahoogroups.com
No-Mail	NINCLINK-nomail@yahoogroups.com
<b>Moderators:</b>	<b>If You Have Questions,</b>
Brenda Hiatt-Barber	BrendaHB@aol.com
Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@comcast.net

# What is BookScan?

*Cont. from p. 1* ▶▶▶ m a n d rose within the entire industry for quicker and more complete data.

Enter BookScan, already operating in the UK and Australia, first as Whitaker BookTrack, then acquired by VNU Retail Entertainment Information Group out of the Netherlands, parent company of BookScan.

So who are the contributors they've lined up, estimated by various sources to comprise 65-75% of the retail outlets in this country? A pretty impressive roster beginning with Barnes & Noble, Borders, Costco, Target, Internet sites such as Amazon and bn.com. Before its launch, BookScan reached an agreement with Ingram Book Company to collect POS data from all independent bookstore clients previously collected under Ingram's RSVP system, and the data would be provided to existing Ingram publisher clients.

In addition, BookScan more recently signed an agreement with the American Booksellers Association to pay the ABA for its help in signing up independent stores, which make up about 15% of the total book market. The ABA's *BookSense* bestseller list is now compiled from BookScan data. According to an article in *Bookselling This Week*, ABA members are giving the automated procedure a big thumbs up, some saying that the process of reporting has also helped them better pinpoint their own trends. One of the bigger concerns—that of confidentiality when the big chains are part of the process as well—is a non-issue because, according to King, retail figures are aggregated rather than broken down by source. The sense small stores might have that their sales figures are insignificant is addressed in information distributed on the ABA website, noting that sales data is weighted so that all reporting

bookstores influence the final list.

So who's missing from the grand scheme? Food and drug outlets are not yet part of the system, nor is Walmart/Sam's, primarily because BookScan technology requires POS data by ISBN number, and those outlets do not capture their sales that way. (Ever noticed how Walmart slaps a sticker across the ISBN bar code on the back?) King points out, however, that BookScan can cross-reference to ISBN in some cases, so a complete conversion to ISBN may not be necessary for those outlets, while they could find themselves at a disadvantage with a lesser understanding of

***The challenge for BookScan...is to tailor reports to the needs of very small presses putting out perhaps three or four books a year; BookScan's current database may actually have too much information for them.***

**Jim King**

the big picture than their competitors. Library sales are not collected, nor are what King terms "adoption" sales—a university professor requiring a given book for his class, for example.

Then who's buying this service originally costing a figure said to be \$75,000/year, affordable only by the big conglomerates? That figure is outdated, says King, and a new graduated fee structure is in place, based on company revenue. Most of the majors are onboard—Harlequin, AOL Time Warner, Simon & Schuster, Random House, and Holtzbrinck (which owns St. Martin's Press.) Notable holdouts are the

Penguin Group and HarperCollins.

Inquiries to those two houses went unanswered, but Michael Cader of Cader Books and *Publishers' Lunch* fame notes "for many of the larger houses, it's been a question of whether it's worth it to make what's said to be a six-figure annual investment. In the case of Harper in particular, they've made a sizable investment over the past five years or so in developing fairly sophisticated systems of their own which they believe already give them good knowledge of what's happening with their own books. And the Barnes & Noble feed is something they all already get, along with data from a number of other sources." Debra Dixon, CEO and President of BelleBooks, notes that an intrepid person [using Ingram's existing subscriber system] "could get some info on how someone else's book is doing or how much pub support has been behind books, etc." King concurs that the basic decision for any non-subscriber is probably financial. Cader, too, notes the existence of what he terms "FriendScan; it's not that hard to get at least some data now by calling a friend whose company subscribes."

The publisher most forthcoming about BookScan was Harlequin. When asked about its pros and cons, Loriana Sacilotto, Executive Vice President of Retail Sales and Marketing, says a point in BookScan's favor is "title-by-title, author-by-author sales data." As to disadvantages, she reports "not all of the retailers contribute to the service, so we only get part of the sales picture. Also, because the service is relatively new, there is limited trending information." Additionally, series title sales data, though tracked by BookScan, is more difficult to interpret, she reports, "because of how differently it is reported by different retailers, i.e., some retailers report it on a title-by-title basis and some report the entire series in a given month as one title."

Thanks to the graduated fee structure, a number of small presses subscribe, and that's certainly a growth area. King did a presentation at BookExpo America to PMA, the 3000-member Publishers Marketing Association. The challenge for BookScan, King says, is to tailor reports to the needs of very small presses putting out perhaps three or four books a year; BookScan's current database may actually have too much information for them.

University presses subscribe, and King is seeing more inquiries from literary agents, though none are yet signed up. Another expansion could come in the form of media outlets such as newspapers and magazines, and BookScan is developing charts to license to them, expecting them to be ready in the next several months. In the UK, media outlets are already onboard, but the technology has been around there for eight or nine years now. BookScan is also the leading book sales data monitor in Australia.

What happens to the current most-watched lists: *PW*, *NYT*, *USA Today*? The former two, considered by many to be biased toward literary fiction at the expense of genre fiction, are based on statistical sampling. In a 2002 *Washington Post* article by Clive Thompson, Chip McGrath, editor of the *New York Times Book Review* said, "I don't think we're missing the boat on popular books. We're missing the boat, calculatedly so, on things like religious books. I don't think we have to apologize for that."

Religious books aren't alone, though the phenomenal success of the *Left Behind* series is a striking example. They hit the lists for a few weeks but continue to sell very well in Christian bookstores nationwide, so much so that Tyndale House has its own business director simply to handle this one series.

Geoff Shandler, Executive Editor of Little, Brown, in a 2001 article on BookScan in *The Industry Stan-*

*dard*, noted that the *NYT* "skews toward sales in independent stores... which tend to be more literary in orientation than chain stores. This means that certain literary or regional books can 'cheat' their way onto the list. Once on the list, those books can cross over into the chains and sell tons of copies. The *Times'* list also has all sorts of rules that result in some books being left off. For example, romance novels, which sell tons of copies, are not included on the fiction bestseller list—unfair to romance novelists." Not all romance novels are ignored—Nora Roberts is a mainstay, and Jayne Ann Krentz, Catherine Coulter, Linda Howard, and others routinely make appearances. The point, however, that many other romance novels sell

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**Geoff Shandler**

more copies *in toto* than many *NYT* bestsellers is germane.

The *NYT* list survived its move in the mid-90s to use Barnes & Noble as its exclusive online bookseller (thereby alienating many independents), but its hold was weakened when the independents created the *BookSense* list and Amazon and the chains began their own, as did the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. The *WSJ* list surveys only large booksellers, no independents. *USA Today*, with arguably the closest likeness to BookScan, uses figures from a variety of both chains and inde-

pendents, discounters and online booksellers, about 3,000 all told, and doesn't ignore genre fiction in the manner that the others do.

So will the *NYT* and others survive BookScan? Literary agent Irene Goodman responds, "It's hard to believe the *NYT* will diminish. The public and the trade are so trained to see it as the gospel, even when it seems off the wall. A printed, formal list in the back of the *NYT Book Review* section, complete with their snipping little comments still carries tremendous weight." Literary agent Ethan Ellenberg concurs: "I don't think the bestseller lists will diminish in importance. The public is very aware of them, and they drive sales because they have enormous publicity and promotion value." Daisy Maryles, Executive Editor of *Publishers Weekly*, agreed in the *Post* article, saying that most bestseller lists, "are all pretty much on the same page, and that's not likely to change with BookScan."

For some indication of BookScan's potential impact, the closest precedent is in the music industry, dominated by only one list, the *Billboard* charts, once compiled by information gleaned from radio stations and music stores. BookScan's sister technology, SoundScan, revolutionized the music business literally overnight, in many views, when *Billboard* switched to using SoundScan data in May, 1991. Previously underrated musical genres such as country, rap, and Christian rock were revealed to have a far greater market share than had been understood, and music companies took note. A self-fulfilling prophecy played out, record labels and retailers discounting those albums, displaying them more prominently, and promoting them with greater fervor, boosting their sales even more.

But there's a dark side to that phenomenon, one that concerns many in publishing. First-week sales became, as in ▶▶▶▶

## What is BookScan?

▶▶▶▶ the film industry, make-or-break numbers. The music charts began to fill with clones of Faith and Tim and Britney and Puffy as record labels went for the sure thing. Johnny Temple, publisher and editor-in-chief of Brooklyn-based Akashic Books but also a member of a rock band, in a *Publishers Weekly* piece in December 2002 opined that “it is important to note that in the era of SoundScan, CBS Records may never have stuck with Bruce Springsteen for the years it took him to connect with a large audience; he didn’t realize major commercial success until the release of his third album, *Born to Run*. In today’s marketplace, Springsteen would likely have been dropped from the label after unimpressive sales of his first record.”

Temple warns, “My fear is that BookScan will inadvertently usher book publishing down that very same path.” Reflecting on a time when “‘artist development’ meant more than a hunt for instant radio hits,” he cautions, “It’s important that publishers not succumb to similar regressive marketing tendencies and remain committed to long-term promotion of their authors and their books.” One of BookScan’s major challenges for publishers, he says, is to use the sales data to diversify marketing efforts. The record industry, he credits musicians and fans as believing, “has lost its soul in its ongoing crusade to maximize profits.”

Publishing doesn’t have one colossal bestseller list, but that could change if enough outlets adopt BookScan data as the BookSense list has. Temple’s concern—and that of many authors achieving critical acclaim but not mega sales—is the age-old conundrum of art vs. commerce—the need to make a profit requiring extreme attention to the bottom line, at odds with the historical bent of publishing, once done more for love of the written word rather than in ex-

pectation of a given release being a profit center.

Love’s hold may slip even more for the small books, the literary darlings, some fear. Ellenberg notes, “We are deep into a business climate where sales figures are paramount. BookScan is part of that and will intensify that. Editors are already forced to justify books based purely on the numbers and not on their instincts or taste.”

Goodman concurs, “There’s always the danger of [sales figures becoming so important that authors are not allowed time to build an audience], but books have always been a quirky business. We’re already in a down market where only the best and most commercial books make it. That forces all of us to pay attention and to do our very best. One-week sales may turn out to be a good re-

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Ethan Ellenberg

flection of that. I can’t believe BookScan is single-handedly going to signal the death of American literature. People have a way of finding what’s good and hanging onto it—as evidenced by your first example about sub-genres in music. The way a book finds its audience may change, but the ultimate end result would not.”

Genre fiction, however, and specifically romance, may benefit as retailers and publishers gain increased understanding of what’s really selling. The *Post* article cited an Australian fiction author named Cate Paterson whose fantasy titles sold well but never made the bestseller lists. When BookTrack (later BookScan) entered the picture in Australia, its lists demonstrated that existing charts had not represented what people were really

buying. On the BookScan list, one of her titles was right there with Sue Grafton’s latest.

The divide between what the literary cognoscenti headquartered in the cultural centers of New York/Washington/Boston/Los Angeles read or think others should read and what’s actually being read in the heartland is, according to King, hard to quantify but clearly present. For example, *The Nanny Diaries*, #6 on the *NYT*, placed only #20 on BookScan’s nationwide numbers for the same time period, according to the *Post*.

Additionally, the weekly bestseller lists don’t give a true picture of overall sales, as *PW*’s annual review demonstrates. A *Slate* online magazine article cites BookScan figures as revealing that in 2002, *Pride and Prejudice* sold 110,000 copies (exclusive of academic sales, remember), nearly 40,000 more than Grisham’s *The Runaway Jury*. Ellenberg tells of a children’s book he first sold about a dozen years ago that has netted 135,000 copies. “That’s a bestseller but no one knows that. It’s just another successful book that has flown below the radar and still sells. All publishers have stars like this, more of them will become common knowledge, which I think is good because it can potentially create buzz and credibility leading to more sales.” The Penguin Group has begun a half-million dollar marketing campaign to promote classic titles because they’re moneymakers. Subscribers to BookScan will have at their fingertips the information to make such decisions.

Some helpful information is still lacking on BookScan, however. Sales are classified first under the headings Adult Fiction, Adult Non-fiction, Children and Other. Within Fiction, only the broad category of romance is used. Harlequin’s Sacilotto says, “We will only have a sense of the potential impact on different categories if BookScan reports sales at more detailed genre levels.” Doing that is possible, King reports; they use

BISAC coding, a system of over 3000 tags devised by the Book Industry Study Group used to determine where a title falls in the subject groupings. King says they're developing a way for users to access that info and hopes it will be available within the next few months.

If publishers, agents, retailers, and media can subscribe to BookScan, what about authors? Kristine Smith of Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America approached BookScan with questions about an account for interested writers' organizations, which might include such as Novelists, Inc., Authors Guild, RWA, etc. The response she received (and this reporter's experience as well) indicated that BookScan doesn't really understand how publishing works from the writer's end. King says the problem is primarily how to deliver the information in a

***Long-term, I believe BookScan's data, and its successful analysis and implementation, will prove essential.***

**Michael Cader**

timely way, but he also asked why authors would need the information when they could simply get it from their publishers.

So how does BookScan measure up? Were the shivers justified? The consensus seems to be that it's too early to tell. No overnight change as with SoundScan; agent Steve Axelrod says, "I know that BookScan is in increasingly active use in the business but I've not yet started to hear much about it as publishers plot marketing strategy, nor does it get much mention in the course of negotiations." Ellenberg: "I have not noticed any industry-wide change based on the adoption of BookScan. I must stress that as an agent, we are a few rows back from the heavy action. I have heard anecdotally that it has impacted manuscript acquisition in

certain instances—suggesting books to publishers for unfilled niches, changing offers for authors who weren't doing as good as they thought." Goodman relates, "I'm not seeing any earth-changing impact, except that more information is always useful. Some people are list junkies, and they like to pore over every list they can and try to analyze them."

Cader of *Publishers' Lunch* reports on reactions at BookExpo America, "None at all. Didn't come up, except when I visited someone at BookScan itself, who said they'd been quite successful at the show in signing up more independent stores to report their data...so far, I don't think the broad impact has begun to reach its potential. In part it's because they are still growing adoption—both in the kinds of stores that report and the publishers who subscribe—and their users are in the early stages of figuring out how to use the data. Also, unlike SoundScan, their charts aren't public yet [they are on the UK site, however], and in fact aren't even widely disseminated throughout the business itself, which had much to do with SoundScan's impact." Even King relates that it's too early to tell if the stated aim of reducing returns has been impacted by BookScan in the US, but in the UK where they have eight years' worth of operations to observe, there has been a definite reduction.

What does the future hold? Cader says, "Long-term, I believe BookScan's data, and its successful analysis and implementation, will prove essential." Ellenberg agrees, adding that "It will cut down on the 'fudge factor' and manuscript acquisition will be based even more on the pure hard facts of numbers, numbers, numbers." Goodman finds the advantage "that it's immediate. There is no time lag. That's a useful contribution in itself, and it's important, but it's still only one aspect."

Lest you be ready to whip out the razor blades, however, Ellenberg cites mitigating factors to what may

seem a boulder rolling down the hill straight at us: "American book publishing is enormous and diverse—title output is up around 70,000 books a year, and that's the minimum. If you include all the small presses, self publishers, etc. it may easily break 100,000. I don't believe in the Internet Age interesting books are not going to find an outlet. They are. People are 'publishing' with websites. Nothing remotely like this has ever existed.

"Secondly, just like music and movies, you cannot completely exclude instinct, taste, gut. Some editors and publishers, however rarely, are going to gamble on some unknown, some has-been, someone's last book and come up big. You cannot innovate solely by sales figures—ask any major company in the world. Where have their big products come from? No one demanded scotch tape, someone invented it." **NINK**

*Originally published in Romance Writers Report, Sept. 2003*

## Bits 'n' Pieces

**U.S. Copyright registration by the publisher for all Harlequin and Silhouette titles—includes series/category titles—returns January 2004.**

In the early 1990s Harlequin/Silhouette dropped the practice of registering individual books with the U.S. Copyright Office. The corporation depended on world copyright coverage, registering the series books en masse. Without official registration, U.S. authors didn't receive benefits to cover "actual damage" and/or "statutory damage" in an infringement case. So for coverage, individual authors had to pay \$30/per book and provide the necessary copies of the book per title to the Library of Copyright in order to have a U.S. Copyright.

***(information provided by Terey Daly Ramin)***

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

## Constant Reader: I want to be satisfied....

Constant readers. Where would we be without them?

I write because I love the beauty of words and the art of storytelling, but I also write for the reader, as I suspect most of us do. What do they love about our books? What do they hate? Why do they read in the first place, and what makes them keep coming back?

To answer these questions and more, I'll be interviewing a cross-section of readers periodically this year. I found the first constant reader right here in my own hometown. She is Alice Virginia Daniel, and she has gorgeous red hair, an easy smile, and a huge appetite for books. A licensed professional realtor for more than twenty years, she works in Tupelo, Mississippi. She's a divorced single mom with one grown son, Carl. Alice studied early childhood education at the University of Mississippi.

Not only does she enjoy reading, but she enjoys talking about books.

**NINK: Alice Virginia, what do you notice first about a book?**

**Alice Virginia Daniel:** The title. If it intrigues me, I turn to the inside leaf to see what the book is about.

**NINK: Do you also read by author?**

**AVD:** I have favorite authors, but I don't go and read all their books at one time. I might read one or two books by the same author, and then I'm ready to move on to something different.

I really enjoy discovering new authors. When I go to a bookstore, I always check the rack of best sellers, the hardbacks. If I see an author I don't recognize, I'll say, *Who is this person*, and pull that book down first

to find out. I'll check to see if they've written other books.

**NINK: Are you influenced by reviews?**

**AVD:** I always read the reviews in *People* magazine to see which books they recommend. Also I love hearing or reading what authors have to say about the books they write. I like having the inside scoop. I've loved all the book reviews of yours that have appeared in the local paper. It's fun to know why you wrote that (particular book).

**NINK: Do you prefer male or female writers?**

**AVD:** I read both. Gender doesn't matter to me. A good book is a good book, no matter who wrote it.

**NINK: How important is writing style to you?**

**AVD:** Very, very important. There are a lot of writers out there without substance, intelligence. I've got to have that. Pat Conroy takes my breath away. His novels are like poetry. It doesn't matter how long his books are. His writing keeps me hooked from beginning to end.

But after one of his, I want to switch to a shorter book: *Bridges of Madison County* (by James Robert Waller). I cried my eyes out. I surprised myself with that particular book because it didn't have the ending I wanted, but I will say this: it had the right ending, a realistic one that satisfied me on some level.

I love that book. When I close a book I love, I don't want to put it back on the shelf. I want to keep it nearby on my bedside table. When I feel that way about a book, I know I've picked a winner.

**NINK: Do you always finish**

**reading the books you start?**

**AVD:** No. If a book hasn't captured my imagination within the first ten pages, I put it down.

There is a relationship formed between the reader and the written word. If I see I can't have a relationship with a book, I don't finish it. I've put many down. Even books that have been on the bestseller list.

**NINK: What do you love in a book?**

**AVD:** I want to be hooked from the very beginning. I want to be drawn in by the plot, but I want it to be subtle. I don't want to be able to figure out the ending by chapter three. I like surprises.

Last week I was reading a novel that left nothing to the imagination. By chapter six I just turned over to the back and read the ending because I didn't really care what happened in the middle.

I want to be satisfied from start to finish. I want to get to the last chapter and say *oh, my gosh, this is fixing to end and I don't want it to*.

I like to cry. I like to laugh out loud. I want a happy ending. I want a book that touches my heart.

Oh and I love books about water. It's weird, but when I go into a bookstore and start looking, I find myself gravitating toward books that involve lakes and cabins. There's something about water that is calming to me.

**NINK: What do you dislike in a book?**

**AVD:** An ending that leaves me hanging. I hate that.

Also, I don't like too many characters. I don't remember the name of the book I started recently, but it had so many characters I had to keep flip-



ping back to the previous pages to see what was going on. I got bogged down.

**NINK: Why do you read?**

**AVD:** I read to escape and to fill a void. When I'm blue, there's nothing better than crawling into bed with a book and being sucked into another world.

Reading gives me a lift, something to look forward to at the end of the day. I keep two or three going all the time.

Reading is also stimulating. I read books that are intelligent. I keep a little pencil and pad to write down the words I've never heard of, and then I reread the sentence to see if I can guess the meaning. If not, I look it up.

For me reading is a continuing education. It's a way of clearing cobwebs out of my mind, keeping it bright, adding to my vocabulary.

**NINK: What kinds of books do you read?**

**AVD:** All kinds. I like books that are heartwarming, uplifting. I enjoy intrigue and mystery and romance. Sometimes I find myself going in cycles. I'll read nothing but romantic books for a while, then I'll get on this spree of biographies or autobiographies. My favorite was *Kate Remembered* (Katharine Hepburn's biography by A. Scott Berg). It was absolutely superb. She had a relationship with the author over a period of many years. She trusted him, and you could tell the book was real, written from the heart. It was her. I could see her slithering through the book, smoking her cigarettes, throwing that hair across her shoulder as if to say *are you getting this?* And the author captured her.

One of the beauties of reading is that it doesn't matter what other people like. You just go to the bookshelf and pull out something that grabs you. Reading is personal. The books I read reflect wherever I am in my life at that particular time.

**NINK: Does the book's cover influence you?**

**AVD:** Not really. Except that I hate those cartoon covers. They're kind of corny. I'm not drawn to that.

**NINK: When books are made into movies, do you generally prefer the book or the movie?**

**AVD:** Nine times out of ten I like the book better. With the book I can form my own opinion of what a person looks like and sounds like. I can put myself in the middle of the book.

Sometimes the movie shows people I didn't see, didn't hear. As a reader I've already established the characters' looks and voice, and the movies disappoint.

That's the beauty of the written word: I'm able to put my own imagination into the book. Form my own opinions.

I'm so sorry the young generation today doesn't read like we do.

**NINK: Who are your favorite authors?**

**AVD:** Pat Conroy, Elizabeth Berg, Anne Lamott. I love Anne Rice, too. She's writing her last vampire books and taking another approach. I get totally lost in her novels. I find myself walking down Bourbon Street, thinking I can come in contact with a vampire and say *take me, baby*.

It's great to get lost in a book. Everybody needs a healthy escape, some healthy excitement. With Anne Rice you never know what's going to happen.

Also I'm loyal to my native Mississippi writers: Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Willie Morris, John Grisham, Peggy Webb. There are others, too, but these all live(d) within a 90 mile radius of me except Welty. I feel like Queen of the Hill!

Oh! I must not forget J. K. Rowling. I absolutely adore the Harry Potter books. I have them all, and can't wait for the next one.

**NINK: What draws you to the Harry Potter books?**

**AVD:** The Harry Potter books are amazingly creative. Fantastic!

I'm a great cheerleader and love characters I can root for. Harry is such a young hero, a loyal friend who

sticks by his pals through all sorts of wild and crazy adventures.

I love powerful heroes and heroines. I like to see them stand on their own two feet, no matter what. The Harry Potter books make me want to stand up and shout *Yes, good for you!* I love strong characters who don't mind saying something I wish I'd said but never did.

**NINK: Name your five all-time favorite books.**

**AVD:** *Prince of Tides* by Pat Conroy, *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, *Where Dolphins Go* by Peggy Webb, *Talk Before Sleep* by Elizabeth Berg, and all the *Nancy Drew* mysteries. I loved them so much.

The first time I knew about the mysteries I had German measles and was sick as a dog. My Granny Shaw sat beside my bed and read them to me with a flashlight. Back then, the doctors didn't allow people with measles to have much light.

I was feeling so bad and Granny Shaw was trying to keep me alert. She took me to another place. She made me forget I was sick. And she told me *when you get well, you'll want to read these for yourself*.

And I did. I read every one of them. Since then I've gone back and read them many times. The inner child in me wanted to recapture that feeling of having my grandmother by my bed reading in her beautiful voice. I wanted to remember happy times.

That's what good books are—a part of memory. I can close my eyes and remember sipping a Johnie's Drive-In chocolate milkshake, eating a hamburger—you know those oatmeal laden hamburgers—and my grandmother reading to me.

Can I mention three more?

**NINK: Yes, certainly.**

**AVD:** *What's So Amazing About Grace* by Philip Yancey. I've read it three times. When I bought it I thought it was going to be one of those Sunday school type study books, but it reads like a novel. *The Thorn Birds* by Colleen McCullough and *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur



# Revitalizing the Writer...

## Procrastinators' Special Deadline Extended... Sign Up for Tuesday, March 9 Optional Tours Registration

Please use this separate registration form for these tours – **deadline has been extended** to Sunday afternoon, March 6. **But that's absolutely positively your last extension.....** Make checks payable to Novelists Inc and mail to: **Laura Baker, 12301 Cedar Ridge Dr. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87112.** Contact Laura with any questions: **registration@ninc.com.**

Name:

\_\_\_\_\_

Address:

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E-mail

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Phone

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Tour:

**Bandelier National Monument** \$65

**Abiquiu Afternoon** \$65

**High Road to Chimayo** \$45

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

*Please note: We have a cancellation deadline with Cynthia, which is based on a minimum number of people registering for each tour. Your check will be returned to you if we must cancel a tour and, hopefully, you can reschedule for another.*

## The Buzz . . . .

▶▶▶ Golden. I loved that book. It took me inside the Geisha culture. I loved the scope of the book, the characters, the details. It was satisfying in every way.

**NINK: What determines whether a book is a keeper?**

**AVD:** One I'm certain I want to go back and read again. Just like a good movie—I can't let a Christmas go by without seeing *It's a Wonderful Life*. I've seen it fifteen thousand times, but I go back and see it again every year. Great books are like that. You know halfway through that it's going to be a keeper.

**NINK: What are you reading now?**

**AVD:** I have three books going now: *Gold Coast* by Nelson Demille, *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, *Flat Lake in*

*Winter* by Joseph T. Klempner. It's set in a lake town. Very interesting.

I usually have two or three books going at one time. A little multi-tasking. Depends on what mood I'm in at night. If I'm down I might not read a romance. I might be on a little pity pot and want to turn to *What's So Amazing about Grace* or a good biography. If I feel my spirit is a little low, I grab a book I think will pick me up.

I'm a night reader. Reading is my sleeping pill. I have to read at least five or six pages a night. I might read fifty or sixty, but I have to have my page fix. That's why I keep more than one book going at all times.

I'm sorry more people don't turn the TV set off and read. What are they waiting for?



**Correction:** Carolyn Hart's book, *Letters From Home*, was nominated by the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers at Oklahoma State University in Tulsa and not the Oklahoma Center for the Book in Oklahoma City as reported in the January, 2004 "Buzz in the Biz" column. "Please make it clear it was my mistake," Carolyn said. "I feel dreadful about it. The director is Glenda Carlile, and I owe her a huge apology too."

Carolyn is receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award from the OKC Center in March. With so many heady happenings, anyone could make a mistake.

**Peggy Webb**





# Revitalizing the Writer...

## Sequined G-Strings

We're honing in on the program and on filling it with all the things that make a Ninc conference or retreat special.

My goal is that when you arrive at Bishop's Lodge, you feel free enough to remove all the doubts that have been weighing you down. I want you to shuck them off like winter clothes. Dump them by the front door. Leave them there in a big sopping mess. They'll be waiting for you at the end of the retreat. Of course, my hope is that by that time you will know you don't have to put on all those heavy, burdensome clothes. A little doubt goes a long way. I'd like to see you all return home in nothing more than sequined g-strings.

We have a lot to work with: There is Tony Hillerman, grand master of the mystery novel, and Donna Hayes, publisher and CEO of Harlequin Enterprises LTD. Laura Kinsale will be making one of her rare appearances to discuss caging the muse. Rambo creator David Morrell will offer exercises to prime the writer's mind along with an optional seminar on what he has learned from four decades of working with publishers, Hollywood, and television folks. The poetry columnist for *Writer's Digest* Miriam Sagan will bring to us the tools of the poet and insight on how we use them to give strength and resilience to our work. The one, the only George RR Martin and his outside-the-box thinking will enliven us, while Curandera Elena Avila will present a completely different look at the creative process when she works with us on understanding, celebrating, and honoring the

"writer's soul." Nor can we forget *Publisher's Weekly's* Daisy Maryles who will share her view of what's on the horizon for publishing.

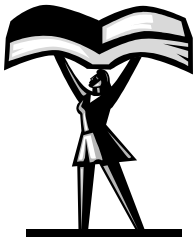
But what makes Ninc special is what our own members bring to the table. Our goal is to mix it up a bit—some lectures but also a good number of round table discussion groups where we learn from each other. We'll be holding Night Owls on Sunday evening. Our own Annette Carney will lead a discussion on Betsy Lerner's book *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice for Writers*. Try and read it before you come. Lerner has been an editor, an agent, and a writer. She discusses the ways writers dive bomb their own careers. I saw myself in several chapters! This could be the best workshop of the retreat.

Plus, there will be time to shop, nap, write, visit the spa, horseback ride, walk—bring warm clothes, it is winter! (dress is casual)—drink, and time for talking about this business we all hate and love, our lives, and our writing.

It's going to be an incredible experience.

Oh, yes, Magical History Tours is allowing people to sign up for the Tuesday optional tours all the way up until registration Sunday afternoon. We may have to combine some tours but Cynthia Leespring is being very generous with her time. So, if you've been uncertain about what you want to do, you still have some leeway before you have to make up your mind.

— Cathy Maxwell



## THE LAND OF ENCHANTMENT Day Trips in New Mexico

BY LAURA BAKER

The high dry country of New Mexico is the land of the tall tale. The heady mixture of winelike air, sparkling sunlight, and delicate pigments dazzle the senses and fire the imagination. Here, we have gods who live in clouds and bring rain, twin heroes slay giants whose blood hardens into black flows, men shapeshift into wolves, badgers rescue an entire people, and coyotes put the stars in the sky. The storyteller's words rise on smoke that stains ancient walls and, escaping the ghostly flames, travels across landscape and centuries carrying a brew of legends and myths. In those times, the gods wore turquoise.

### The Turquoise Trail

Called the High Road to Santa Fe, the Turquoise Trail winds through the forested "backside" of the Sandia Mountains and the mining towns of Golden, Madrid, and Cerrillos. (Take I-40 east out of Albuquerque, ten miles to NM 14 and head north. This route will lead straight into Santa Fe. Also along this route is the scenic drive to the crest of Sandia Peak, NM 536.) This sixty-five mile link between Albuquerque to Santa Fe roughly parallels the straight shot of Interstate 25 to Santa Fe (on the other side of the mountains) and will add approximately an hour to driving time. After the mountain town of Cedar Crest, you reach Madrid, once a booming town in the Old West, now an artist's colony complete with an old saloon perfect for a midway rest stop. General Stephen Watts Kearney supplied his army from the coal slams here, and oxen teams hauled hard coal from here to St. Louis. A haunting row of cabins stand testament to the past. Three miles past Madrid is Cerrillos, perhaps the first mining town in the western hemisphere. Once boasting

twenty-one saloons and four hotels, Cerrillos' Old West streets are the backdrop for nearly a dozen motion pictures, including "Young Guns." Men mined gold in the nearby hills, also silver ore and coal. Before all this was turquoise.

According to Pueblo Indian legend, turquoise mines were the gift of Turquoise Woman. For over 2,000 years, turquoise was the most significant material for trade. The Indian Pueblo with the longest tradition of jewelry making and with prehistoric ties to the mines of Cerrillos is Santo Domingo Pueblo (I-25 north out of Albuquerque, 30 miles, exit 259; no cameras; no visitor center).

North of Santo Domingo Pueblo is Cochiti Pueblo (43 miles north of Albuquerque, I-40 to NM 16; no photography allowed at the pueblo). The drive meanders through Tent Rocks National Monument, a gray army of spires carved from a mountain of volcanic tuff. Beyond Cochiti is a lake and a golf course.

### "Here Nature has gone Gaga and Dada." Henry Miller

There's a trail in New Mexico that leads to waterfalls and hot springs, winds through ancient pueblos and historic towns, through river canyons and a volcanic caldera, and then past the birthplace of the atomic bomb. This is the alternate drive to Santa Fe through the Jemez Mountains. Take I-40 north to exit 242 (ten miles north of Albuquerque city limits) and head east on NM 44. Your first stop is Coronado State Monument, the site of the ancient Tiwa Pueblo of Kuaua (1300 - 1600 AD) and rarely seen multi-colored kiva murals. Francisco Vasquez de Coronado wintered here, 1540-41, on the banks of the Rio Grande.

Twenty-two miles east on NM 44 is the 17th-century town of San Ysidro

at the junction of NM 4. Turn north on NM 4 and you're traveling the Jemez Mountain National Scenic Byway. The road traces the Jemez River into the volcanically-formed Jemez Mountains and to Jemez Pueblo, the last Towa-speaking pueblo. Their ancestral pueblo hides on the mesa top. (From the junction at San Ysidro, it's six miles to the Walatowa Visitor Center; no photography allowed within the ancestral village.)

Past Jemez, the road ascends into the mountains, but simultaneously into the heart of the land—where the earth's heat bubbles to the surface. Two miles north of Jemez Springs (a town 12 miles north of the pueblo) is Soda Dam, a 300-foot-long massive deposit of travertine. Two miles north of Soda Dam is a parking pull-out on the right side for Battleship Rock hot springs. From the trail head, this is a three mile hike round trip. And another two miles north on NM 4, is a very wide parking area, also on the right side, marking the trail head for Spence hot springs, a .5 mile hike round trip from the highway. (For all hot springs, clothing is optional, drinking water is not. Bring plenty of water.)

Where NM 4 seems to dead-end, turn right (you're still on NM 4) for the spectacular sight of Valle Grande, 176 square miles of green meadow, cradled by the Jemez Mountains. The largest extinct volcano caldera known was also the location for filming *The Missing*.

Five miles past Valle Grande is NM 501. You can turn here to visit Los Alamos or continue on NM 4 and the entrance to Bandelier National Monument. Past the Monument, NM 4 will eventually turn north and join NM 501/502. Just past White Rock Canyon (on 502) is the pueblo of San Ildefonso in a breathtaking setting. To the west flows the Rio Grande through the mouth of White Rock Canyon. Across the river rise the tiered mesas of the Pajarito Plateau. To the north is Black Mesa, pockmarked with the cave homes of the monster ogres. If the Pueblo children misbehave, their

mothers say, the ogres will kidnap them back to their lair and eat them. The Tewa-speaking people of San Ildefonso descend from the ancient ones of Mesa Verde. The pueblo was also home to Maria Povenka — now known to pottery collectors worldwide as simply Maria — who along with her husband, Julian, perfected the trademark San Ildefonso blackware pottery. (Camera permits at Visitor Center, open daily 8 - 5.)

Back on NM 502, merge onto US 285, heading south. This will take you to Santa Fe. This route to Santa Fe is approximately 160 miles. Without stops, but at a leisurely pace (given the winding canyon roads), the travel time is about four hours.

**“It had a vast far-and-wide magnificence.”**

**D.H. Lawrence**

To the west of Albuquerque are lava flows, sandstone buttes, ice caves and natural arches gracing isolated canyons. All this enchanted land bows at the feet of Acoma Pueblo, high atop a solitary mesa. From the heights of Acoma, named Sky City, the visitor is eye-level with soaring hawks and drifting clouds. Until the early twentieth century, the pueblo was accessible only by an ancient staircase carved into the mesa. Acoma vies with Taos and Old Oraibi (of Hopi) as the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States. All visitors are accompanied by an Indian guide for tours lasting one and half hours (camera permits sold at the Visitors Center). A bus carries you to the top of the mesa, where you disembark and walk the narrow, stone pathways through the honeycomb of the pueblo and past slick-rock concaves that gather rain water for drinking. At the end of the 1- 1/2 hour tour, you can ride the bus or descend by way of the old foot trail. (To reach Acoma, go west from Albuquerque on I-40 to exit 108, about 55 miles. Including a tour of Acoma, this particular drive is approximately four hours.)

If you have a full day, lava fields, ice caves, and the Zuni Pueblo are within reach. Return to I-40, then con-

tinue west twenty miles to NM 117, and head south to the El Malpais, a vast area of lava and cinder cones. (If you look to the northside of I-40, you'll see the volcano, Mt. Taylor) This national monument is also sacred ground to the Acomas and Zunis, the labyrinth of tubes and caves an important passage in initiation rites. Also on NM 117, and near El Malpais, is La Ventana, the largest natural arch in New Mexico.

Below the lava field are ice caves, filled with greenish ice 12 to 20 feet thick. The easiest route to the Bandera Ice Caves is to return to I-40, drive west (about 7 miles), and exit at NM 53, going south about thirty miles. Also on NM 53 is El Morro National Monument, also known as Inscription Rock (13 miles past the ice caves). In 1605 Juan de Onate inscribed his name on top of petroglyphs left by migrating clans of the Anasazi.

Continuing west on NM 53 about thirty-five miles, you'll come to Zuni. On a day in 1539, a black Moor strode into Zuni. By all accounts he was arrogant in jewelry and attitude — a survivor of daring adventure and dangerous escapes — he forged ahead of the Spanish expedition, confident, perhaps eager to add to his legend by delivering proof of the Seven Cities of Gold. Instead, an annoyed Zuni war chief delivered Esteban of his head. When you're done visiting the 18th-century church and artist shops, you can loop back to Gallup on NM 602 (30 miles to Gallup) and catch I-40 (138 miles east to Albuquerque).

### **The Duke City**

Of all the myriad things to do in Albuquerque, I want to mention four areas. One is the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. On 12th Street, just off I-40, this is a springboard to the nineteen pueblos. The center has a museum, exhibits, a gift shop, and a restaurant.

One exit west of here on I-40 is Rio Grande, the entrance to Old Town. Settled in 1706 by thirty Spanish families, Old Albuquerque was a farming community and military outpost on the Camino Real near the Rio Grande River. Today's visitors can stroll nar-

row brick pathways, through courtyards and into old adobe homes, now turned into cafes and stores. Also in Old Town are four museums: Albuquerque Museum of Art, the Atomic Museum, the NM Museum of Natural History and Planetarium, and Explora! Museum (a hands-on science center). Two blocks from Old Town is the Biopark on the Rio Grande, which includes the Albuquerque Aquarium and Botanic Gardens.

The next exit west on I-40 is Coors. Take this north to Atrisco Road and turn west for the entrance to the Petroglyph National Monument. Artwork from the millennia — ten thousand petroglyphs left by migrating clans — adorns the lava rocks on an escarpment that runs north. There's a visitor center and hiking trails.

Or, finally, you may want to sit at the top of Sandia Peak. Take the Aerial Tramway, the world's longest at 2.7 miles, to the crest of the Sandias (10,678 foot elevation; access to the tram is off Tramway Blvd). There is a restaurant at the top, or maybe you would like to sit on a boulder, at the edge of the pine and spruce forest, and stare into the blue vault of sky. Alone in such a place, the imagination calls up the spirits from what N. Scott Momaday called “the remembered earth.”

### **Suggested websites:**

[www.newmexico.org/visitor/links.html](http://www.newmexico.org/visitor/links.html)  
[www.indianpueblo.org](http://www.indianpueblo.org)  
<http://goamericanwest.com/newmexico/santafe/sfsights.shtml>  
[www.hitthetrail.com/destinations/new.htm](http://www.hitthetrail.com/destinations/new.htm)  
[www.thesantafesite.com/Adventures/listofactivities.html](http://www.thesantafesite.com/Adventures/listofactivities.html)  
[www.newmexico.org/Industry/storyideas.html](http://www.newmexico.org/Industry/storyideas.html)

*In addition to writing suspense set in the Southwest, Laura Baker manages the two stores she and her husband own in Old Town, Albuquerque: [www.tannerchaney.com](http://www.tannerchaney.com); [www.nativegoldonline.com](http://www.nativegoldonline.com). She will try to answer any questions you have about visiting the Land of Enchantment (LBaker10@aol.com).*

# HAD I KNOWN, DEAR READER, WHAT ANGST AWAITED ME...

BY CHARLOTTE HUBBARD

Six years. That's how long I went without selling anything between the last of my Heartfire historical romances and the first erotic novel I wrote for Black Lace, and *had I known* my dry spell would last so long, I'd have signed on for a "real" job within weeks of that last romance's pub date. I couldn't have justified all those years of "doing nothing"—for if you're a novelist and have no books in the stores, that's what you must be doing, right? Lord knows that to non-writers, we look like slackers even when we're at the top of our creative game!

But ignorance of the future is bliss, especially for those of us whose writing is our best escape from everyday reality! And grasping at every next carrot—even imagining and creating those carrots—was the survival skill I practiced daily to stay in this game.

Lucky for me, writers' block was not my problem. Just happened that in '93, "shrinking midlist" became a catch phrase in publishing, and since so many writers were receiving pink slips as lines folded, I could tell myself I wasn't being singled out and picked on. I could take the advances and rights from the three-book contract Zebra canceled and move on...me and those dozens of other orphaned writers. I even sold a book to the To Love Again line: completed it, and proofed the galleys, and then got the letter about *that* line folding. Which made four books dead in the water within a year.

But, hey—by then I'd sold ten books and my agent was one of the most respected in the romance biz, right? I could surely find another editor, another house...if only someone could find my agent. Seems she was disappearing for weeks at a time by then, as were thousands of her top clients' dollars. I felt lucky that my paltry earnings must've escaped her notice before we parted company.

So I began attending small conferences in earnest, especially sessions about "what's hot, what's not." Without fail, I hit it off well with the editors I pitched to, and they asked for partials. And without fail, I failed to propose stories with that elusive something they were looking for. I tried Silhouette, and woman-in-jeopardy, and even the emerging Christian romance market. At least I could tell myself I wasn't a lousy writer: I had a stack of very complimentary rejection letters to prove it! Ironically, I was also receiving the most and best fan mail ever for my ill-fated final Heartfire, which barely got distribution because wholesalers had canceled their orders for that line when its death knell first rang a year before.

As the next few years went by and I heard other displaced authors had found new houses, however, it became harder to convince myself I was still a storyteller. Envy is one of the Seven Deadlies for good reason, and mine got so bad I had to cancel my *RT* subscription and stop going to the bookstore. I couldn't stand it that those writers were selling and I was not! Their plots, premises, and style were no better than mine!

My confidence faltered. I kept going to conferences, pitching to editors and agents, but the ole Catch 22 was kicking in: agents were getting so cagey, you practically had to have an offer on the table before they took you on, while fewer editors would look at your proposal if you didn't have an agent. My honesty about that canceled contract and my notorious former agent were probably the kiss of death, but I didn't have the guts back then to lie when asked about my track record.

That's when I began to feel like an impostor. A major fake. Sure, I'd been a published writer—years ago—but what had I done to prove that lately? My writer friends were the best: they never, ever treated me as though I was finished. They kept encouraging me and inviting me to present workshops even when I was wondering if I still had a right to discuss how to write and sell stories. And bless him, my husband never once suggested I go out and get a real job. He always had faith I'd sell again, if I kept at it.

Surely a reasonably intelligent woman could find a saner way to go crazy, I told myself. But thoughts of classroom teaching again scared me even worse than not knowing if I'd ever sell another book, so I'd work up another proposal and send it out. Lucky for me, some skeletons hopped out of the family closet to distract me from my professional woes.

Do you know how disorienting it is to learn that your dad is not your biological father—from a total stranger, when you're forty years old? To discover your mom was married to a different man when she had you—and that he and his second family, your half-sibs, want you to come home for a visit?

While it was one of my life's biggest blessings to go from being an only child to being the eldest of five, and to reunite with my very dear father, things got *real* touchy with Mom and Dad. They'd never intended to reveal this secret! My bio father died two years later, and then Mom got lung cancer and died three years after that—and then some really disgusting skeletons sprang from Dad's side of the closet. Add to this mix my hormones, which were migrating south toward menopause, and you have an

emotional roller coaster that rivals any ride at Disney World.

I'm not bawling on your shoulders here to bring you down: my tale, Dear Reader, has a happy ending, or I couldn't have become a member of Ninc! In the fall of '99, the editor of Virgin Books' Black Lace line broke my drought cycle, so I entered the new century in a naughty new genre. What a joy to write for a woman who praised my voice and eventually dubbed me "the undisputed queen of kinky erotica..." And what a hoot to assume the leather-and-lace persona of Melissa MacNeal, my pseudonym, when a bookseller playfully suggested I wear leather to sign in her store.

Who knew that *Devil's Fire* would pave the way for autographing in a tattoo parlor, and then camp on erotic bestseller lists for months? Who knew that Melissa would be invited to speak at her RWA chapter and at RT conventions, for breaking into that kinky, kinda sordid, sorta out-there genre of erotica?

And who knew I could sell my next three Black Lace titles with only a brief, e-mailed synopsis? The Information Highway was the way to go, and I was back in the driver's seat! I got better terms than most Black Lace authors because I'd accepted the come-hither from a new agent. And who knew another editor would read *Devil's Fire* and ask me to help launch her hot new website, Wicked Velvet?

Now Melissa is selling herself to American markets as erotica surges into the mainstream here, and she's to present a full-afternoon session about writing erotica at a St. Louis university this fall! All because I gave myself permission to change; to be a little bit bad when the door opened enough to wedge my black-platformed foot in again.

So did I learn anything of value to you, Dear Reader, while wandering lost through my professional wasteland? I believe I did. It all has to come as hindsight, of course, because we never know our dry spells will end until they just *do*. And then it takes awhile to stand back and be a bit more analytical, a bit more objective, before you can see how the patchwork of your life stayed stitched together during those rough months when you couldn't write the right thing at the right time.

I know now, for example, that should I ever find myself slogging through the Slough of Publishing Despond again, I'll come out of it intact. I won't fall apart, and I won't lose ME. Life will go on, even when it seems I'm no longer a novelist; even if I decide that yes, there *are* saner ways to go crazy and I take on a different profession. They say people who change careers are happier and more stable, so—as much as I love writing stories—now I'm not afraid to reinvent myself yet again, if I have to. After all, I loved teaching those first ten years, too, but getting out of it was the right thing to do.

I also believe that things happen pretty much as they're supposed to: had I been under contract when those life-defining closet skeletons overturned my most basic beliefs, I might not have allowed myself to deal with—or heal from—those personal issues the way I needed to. And the books I'd

have written then would have suffered from all that emotional upheaval. It wasn't fun, that six-year dry spell, but it's behind me now and I'm moving on. No doubt in my mind that real life then was providing fodder for future fiction.

That's the key to writing (and living), you know: keep chasing after that carrot—even if you have to create it yourself—and keep moving on! Take the lemons life hands you and make the best damn Lynchburg Lemonade anyone's ever tasted, to inspire a page-turner only you can write. End of dry spell. **NINK**

## **BACK FROM THE BOTTOM**

*Tips for Surviving Dry Spells in Your Writing Career*

BY CHARLOTTE HUBBARD, WHO IS NOW MELISSA MACNEAL

1) Keep attending conferences and writers groups! Don't let your fears of being "an impostor" keep you from current market trends—or just the great connection of talking with other writers.

2) Keep getting your writing/organizational magazines. Keep learning/honing your craft and following market trends.

3) Explore new genres and markets. REINVENT YOURSELF, rather than letting your past "label" keep you in an out-dated niche.

4) Remain Pleasant, Positive, and Professional—especially around editors and agents. You will probably see them again... and they WILL remember you!

5) Put aside your bitterness (toward the editors/houses that canned you) and your envy (toward other writers who are thriving). Negativity never takes you in a forward direction.

6) Don't take it personally. LOTS of well-established writers have hit—and survived—slumps.

7) Changes in markets and publishers, or unscrupulous agents, or other hazards of the trade only gain sympathy for so long. EXCUSES like these don't get your next proposal or book written!

8) How long will your slump last? There's no way to know...but if you quit writing and submitting your best work, it'll last forever. Use this time to explore other interests, other genres, other positive outlets, until your Muse drags you back to the computer.

9) Writing for publication has always been like playing the slots or the lottery:

- ▶ The odds of winning are low, while the personal risk is high.
- ▶ The odds are always stacked in favor of The House (who must make a profit).
- ▶ Once you win, you must keep investing—maybe take some losses—to stay in the game.

BUT YOU CAN'T WIN IF YOU DON'T PLAY.  
You can't sell your next story if you don't write it.

YOU, AND YOU ALONE, ARE ULTIMATELY  
RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR SUCCESS! SO GO FOR IT!



## If Memory Serves Of All That I've Lost, I Miss My Mind the Most

### Dear Annette:

In December 2000, I quit my day job to write exclusively. I thought I'd achieved paradise when I started staying at home...but my memory took a vacation that scared me. By the end of 2001, it had gotten much worse. I was ordering items for Christmas over the phone, and the clerk on the other end asked for my address. I couldn't remember it. I had to pull out my driver's license. I was certain I was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. I ended up seeing a neurologist as well as a psychologist, went through the whole gamut of tests...and the final diagnosis was that I had gone from a very structured environment to one that wasn't quite as structured, so my mind had *really* gone on vacation. Just knowing what's going on has helped tremendously, and I've developed a few tricks, like keeping a pad of paper nearby and writing things down when people call. But this scare made me wonder: *is this common? Are there other things that can affect memory so dramatically?*

**Signed: Going Mental**

### Dear Mental:

Oh my gosh, yes, and yes! When I think about the kinds of things that can create brain freezes like you experienced, it's sort of scary, really. Aside from the super-obvious like brain damage or a disease such as Alzheimer's that actually destroys brain tissue, things like long-term stress, depression, hormone imbalances, certain medications, chemotherapy, and many illnesses that aren't directly related to brain functioning can and often do cause memory lapses. So does, ahem, aging. But let's don't go there.

When we're talking about memory loss, there are basically three different types we refer to:

- Short term memory loss—What's the name of that woman I just met? Where the *hell* did I put my keys/wallet/glasses?
- Long-term memory loss—Can't recall important dates, past events, things people have said.
- Something we refer to (aptly I think) as "brain fog"—Can't spell a familiar word, suddenly forget the name of an object, address, phone number, get stuck mid-sentence unable to finish a thought...

Most of the things I'm talking about here affect our short term memory or create brain fog. Long-term memory loss seems to happen most frequently either from severe psychological trauma or diseases such as Alzheimer's that actually destroy neural pathways and make large, pervasive amounts of previously stored information inaccessible (ie. no longer recognizing a loved one as opposed to a minor memory glitch like what you described).

There is a huge amount of scientific literature demonstrating that stress and depression affect memory. The interesting thing about stress is that acute episodes of stress actually hyper-focus memory. Anyone who's been in a car accident can relate to this, I'm sure. Even less severe stress often helps serve to imbed things in our minds.

It's long-term stress that's the memory thief, particularly of short term memory. People enduring ongoing stressors (such as a huge life change like you went through) often find their short term memory in particular is disrupted. It appears that the brain chemical changes induced by stress, illness, etc, interfere both with the creation of new memories and the retrieval of old ones. So, either you don't even store the memory that you set the car keys next to the fruit bowl in the kitchen when you raced to answer the phone or you actually did remember that bit of info initially, but now, half an hour later, you can't access it.

But that's about short term memory. The problems you described sound more like brain fog to me. That can certainly happen with stress, but it's generally less common than short term memory loss. Brain fog types of memory lapses happen quite often in women experiencing hormonal imbalances or changes. Pregnant women and women going through menopause frequently complain of brain fog symptoms.

Aside from normal (if uncomfortable) hormonal swings, illnesses, allergies, or other diseases that affect hormone balances or blood sugar levels can have profound affects on memory, again, usually disrupting short term memory or causing symptoms of brain fog.

There was quite a discussion on Ninlink a month or so back about food allergies causing people to have memory problems. Even my exceedingly rudimentary understanding of how gluticosteroids affect neurotransmitters in the brain tells me that makes sense.

But there's another whole issue here that sounds like what affected you. Memory is quite a context-dependent phenomenon. You changed, literally, a huge piece of the context of your life.

On a much smaller scale, this happens to me all the time. I can see a client I've not had contact with for *years* and as soon as she sits down, I can effortlessly recall details of her life down to the name of her second daughter's fiancé. But encounter her across a mound of broccoli in the produce section and it's all I can do to recall that she looks like someone vaguely familiar.

The good news about all of these memory issues is that, outside of serious disease issues and aging, recall abilities usually rebound quite well as we either solve our medical issues or as we adapt to our new situations. As you suggested, just knowing what's going on doesn't automatically improve your memory, but at least you can sleep better knowing you're not losing your mind. Or maybe you are, but we're all right there with you, I promise.

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





## *Sticky Notes from the Edge*

*Cheryl Anne Porter*

### *Fruitcakes: One Last Crumb*

I can pretty much promise you that this will be my last musings on fruitcakes; "'tis the season" having passed and all. But a couple of things just too rich (pun intended) happened over the holidays to let them slide, and I feel a perverse need to share them with you, my favorite captive audience.

My entire family (18 children and adults) was sitting around my Mom's house over Christmas, just enjoying the cheer, the football game on TV, the eggnog, the kids' delighted anticipation, and just being all together for the one time a year that we are. Heck, we looked like the inside scene in a house built by Thomas Kinkade. Then, suddenly, Mom said a hideous thing. "Oh, I almost forgot the fruitcake that's been wrapped in cheesecloth and fermenting for TWO MONTHS (capitals are my screaming) in the garage. Let me go get it. I want y'all to try some."

Let's review. A cheese-cloth-wrapped "cake" in the same garage where she keeps my books and her car. OK, to be fair, she has live plants, furniture, and original paintings hanging on the walls out in the garage and it's a quite lovely room, but come on, will ya! Oh, there are also two freezers out there. But the fruitcake was in neither of those. I swear she'd been using the "cake" as a tire-block to keep her Caddie from rolling down the driveway and into the street.

Well, anyway, when Mom said that about the fruitcake and the two months and the garage, the other 17 of us scattered—even down to one-year-old Jimi and the two three-year-olds, Marley and MacKenzie. No questions asked. We were playing the world's biggest game of hide-and-seek; it was enough for

them.

Of course, Mom stood in the vacated living room, having caught right on to this disappearing act, and threatened our status in her will and the cash gifts we all get for Christmas. Didn't work on me. I was under the bed in the back bedroom with baby Jimi, Marley, and Mackenzie. We were quietly playing with plastic blocks and were quite happy there, actually. Until Jimi exercised his right to use his diaper as a toilet. Even at that, MacKenzie and Marley and I required a vote to see if it was worth it to vacate our hiding spot and face the fruitcake-wielding grandma in the next room.

Now, if you think I'm making any of this up, you ask Mary Jo Putney, who calls to cheer me every Wednesday, no matter where I might be. Yeah, the poor kid got my mother on the phone and got to hear all about the fruitcake (sorry, MJ). She'll never call me again. Especially since her beloved John apparently developed a yearning for fruitcake and bought three of them.

God, I liked Mary Jo. I'm going to miss hearing from her.

Oh, wait. The other funny thing about fruitcakes. The airlines have just announced (I'm not kidding) they will begin checking fruitcakes, just like your shoes and your bra, for weapons! Dang, how about checking those "cakes" for edible ingredients, people?!

*The author would have you know she has been, and remains, warmed by your many, many messages of hope and encouragement. I have told Lorraine that as long as I have the strength and the world shows me its funny side, I will keep up this column. I love you all. Cheryl*



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

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

## Cooking Up a Life

It is generally acknowledged in my family that I am a lousy cook. It's unusual in that most of the women in my line are celebrated for their talents in this arena. My mother takes prizes for her breads and jams. My sister turns out lasagnas that will make you weep and cheesecakes that melt in your mouth. One of my aunts is a whiz at almost any food you care to name, from latkes to lamb curries.

I'm not sure where I picked up my aversion to it. I rather liked cooking in home economics class—I clearly remember the delight I found in making a roux the first time. The elegance of presentation required by my teacher made me feel cultured and clever. What I did not love was being required—when my mother was working—to fry hamburger for family meals. I did not love meal planning and cooking ordinary things. Boring, boring, boring.

Happily, not much cooking was required as I moved out on my own. I ate cereal and sandwiches or ate in the restaurants where I was employed for most of my teens and early twenties. Because of the service industry connection, there was a pleasant tendency to get mixed up with boyfriends who took cooking seriously. When I married, the man was a fantastic cook who jealously guarded his recipes like secret gold, and he did the creative cooking—the pies and special breakfast and elaborate Sunday dinners—in our house, while I handled the mundane daily meals. The boring parts. Meal planning on a budget, cooking for three males who needed 5,000 calories per day. Boring, boring, boring.

For some odd reason, I truly loved cooking breakfast for my boys on school mornings, and I've taken a lot of ribbing over it. It's not really done these days, is it? But I liked it. I made French toast, pancakes, sometimes crepes (one memorable recipe came out of a magazine, and remains one of my favorites: Pear crepes with brown sugar).

I digress. After 20 years of grocery shopping, meal planning, and suppers every night of the week, I suddenly realized I was still cooking meals I resented making, and the boys were not here to eat.

So, one day, I just stopped. Glory hallelujah! Free at last! Every so often I whirled into the grocery store to pick up more eggs or milk or coffee, Lean Cusines, and some apples. For a couple of years, I lived on Quaker Oats, coffee, apples, and frozen dinners. When it seemed it had been too long without a "family dinner," I'd gather up a boy or two, and we'd head out to IHOP for Sunday breakfast or Texas Roadhouse for a monster steak. When I was hungry for really *good* food (I never said I didn't appreciate eating), I met friends in a great restaurant and lingered over wine and roasted garlic, or splurged on giant margaritas and blue corn enchiladas. (An aside: those of you going to Santa Fe for the first time in March must try blue corn tortillas. They're wonderful.)

For a couple of years, I don't think I cooked anything. I know that every time I thought about it, all the ingredients that used to be in such plentiful and ordinary supply were ruined—weevils in the flour and pasta, freezer burn on the pork roast. It was too much trouble to keep things in the house so I didn't bother.

In time, however, I started to miss certain feelings: Winter afternoons with the kitchen steamy from a stew burbling away on the back burner. Fajitas on summer Saturday evenings, made from peppers and onions I grew in my own garden. My simple little favorites: marinated, roasted red peppers and goat cheese over spinach linguine. Soups. I was always grand at soups, because they were easy and could be made in the morning and were hearty and enriching.

I still didn't cook much. Until I started writing the manuscript in progress.

Now, this might make sense if I were writing a novel with lots of food in it, and in spite of my long aversion to cooking, kitchens and food and cooking are threads that run through nearly all of my books in one way or another.

This particular book is remarkable for the very absence of it. The characters are on the road.

But from the very first, I've been in the kitchen with this book, and it bemused me enough that I've nearly written about it before in this column more than once.

In September, I set up a "power writing" week. Thanks to six weeks of non-stop travel and/or visitors, I was somewhat behind on the current deadline and felt anxious about getting down the rough draft so there would be plenty of time to rewrite. It's a tricky storyline and there's a character who keeps threatening to take over and I needed that very messy rough draft so I could actually see what I've got.

Power writing weeks originated with a group of us back in the days when Genie, the on-line service that crashed with Y2K, was still thriving. The idea is simple: you block out a period of seven days, clear the calendar of everything non-essential, and focus entirely on writing. No appointments, no distractions, just writing as many pages or hours per day as you possibly can. Generally, you stock up on supplies, have healthy food on hand, get plenty of sleep, turn off the phone, and resist writing emails until the day is finished. I always set outrageously high page goals for each day. I know I'll never meet them, but simply setting them means I'll stay at the computer longer than I would otherwise. April Kihlstrom teaches this method as Book-In-A-Week, and she can actually almost do it. I've never come anywhere close, but that doesn't mean it doesn't work very well as a blitz week.

I recruited some fellow deadline-challenged writer friends, and we agreed to check in with each other morning and evening. On the first morning, I was ready—sat down at the appointed time and started working. Even the simple, luxurious pleasure of putting work first, before anything else, felt amazing. It wasn't, as I'd feared, at all difficult to get moving. I started at nine and didn't break until eleven, when I opened a can of cherries I'd been keeping in the fridge for a snack. Real cherries would be better, of course, but my kitchen, as already established, was wretchedly stocked.

For the first time, it made me feel a bit sad. The night before, I'd downloaded a recipe for roasted garlic soup, and it suddenly seemed like it might not be such a bad thing to make a soup for my supper. Nibbling on cherries, I made a list. The chicken stock would need to be done from scratch, of course, and I'd want to roast the garlic very slowly in the oven. Happily, I tucked the list in my purse and sat back down to do a few more pages, promising myself I could go to the market when I hit a certain number. I'd get the soup on the stove and get back to writing. Beautiful.

The grocery store is only a few blocks away. I took a few minutes, ran out for ingredients and a nice bottle of white wine to go with it, and was back in the house in twenty minutes. Humming my favorite little classical

pieces under my breath, I chopped the celery and onions and browned them in olive oil, and dropped in the chicken to start bubbling, then prepared the garlic for roasting and tucked it in the oven. It took a little longer than I expected, but with the scents of supper and soup in the air, I did sit down and do a few more pages. The bubbling stock smelled lovely, and drew me into the steamy kitchen around three, and then I was lost. It made me feel a little bit guilty, but the pleasure of the immediate—shredding the chicken for another meal, straining the stock, squeezing out the cloves of garlic from their skins, proved to be more lure than words. I played music and scribbled these notes for a column, ate my rich, rich garlicky soup, listened to Frank Sinatra, and was so mellow and well-tended I couldn't bear to go back to work afterward. The girls, sated, fell into a stupor in the basement, their bellies full of something of our own choosing for the first time in...ages.

And so it has gone through the writing of the whole book: cooking and cooking. Green chile stew one night, made from scratch, starting with a pork roast cooked very slowly in the oven. Other nights there was potato-leek and cream, corn chowder, a lovely beef and barley. I froze the leftovers in portions and actually ate them later. As the autumn advanced (and I quit smoking again, so had to have something to do with my hands), I moved up to my little pasta dishes, fresh tomatoes and spinach; to some quiches I had forgotten. The soups were the main thing, though—the more steps the better. (The only reason I didn't make tamales is because I no longer have the strength in my hands to stir the dough. I'll have to invest in a heavy-duty mixer one of these days.)

In December, I happened to stumble over a wonderful blog about cooking at Salon.com. Probably many of you have already read it or heard about it—I highly recommend it if you have not, partly because it is a fine example of the form of blogging (web logs, a sort of diary, for those who don't know the term), which will be a subject for a future column here—and partly because it's simply a treat to read—The Julie/Julia Project. A young woman, restless in her life, set herself a goal to cook all the recipes in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in a year and keep a blog.

Oh, joy! Oh, delirium! Steps—there are steps and steps and *steps* in French cooking. That weekend in a used bookstore, I just *happened* upon a Child cookbook based on her cooking show, and somehow, it made its way into my kitchen, and that week, it was spinach and mushroom crepes. Then seafood crepes for my son when he came home for Christmas. Then pastries. My mother, darling woman, heard my babbling and gave me a copy of the excruciatingly expensive hardcover of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (thank you Julie and Julia) along with a lovely thing to prop it up and keep it clean. My eldest child loves to cook, and we've been experimenting with recipes this week. Tonight, we're trying the ▶▶▶▶



▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ stuffed tomatoes and Child's version of French onion soup, which is making my mouth water even imagining it.

I said to a visiting uncle at Christmas, "I've been cooking like mad. The more steps the better!" He, being a writer himself,

raised a brow, "Oh, avoiding the work, are we?"

And I had to stop and think. Am I using cooking as a way to get out of writing? God knows I've done worse—I have torn out walls in my old house to avoid writing. Is this just another trick to get out of it?

It's true that I've been cooking, that my kitchen is stocked in a way it has not been since my youngest son got his driver's license and started eating fast food six meals per day. I don't have to keep the flour in the freezer any more, and I can't remember the last meal I ate at a restaurant. It's more fun to cook.

But was I using it to avoid writing? No. The truth is quite the opposite. This is the most productive period I've known in years and years. Somehow, cooking is a part of that. While I'm chopping celery and slowly, slowly sautéing the onions until they are *just* translucent, not brown, the girls can whisper up a little tidbit I might have overlooked. While I'm peeling potatoes to expose the white cool flesh, I think of the feet of the man in my story. When I'm stirring the multitude of ingredients together in my green chile stew, I scent the winter day and the mood of snow and see a piece of the journey I had not seen. When I hold the softly sensual heft of a ripe red tomato in my hand, I'm connected to life now, and the girls are all holding that tomato along with me, each of them fitting it into plots and moments of future writing they have planned, or will have. Cooking has become a creative act, like painting or singing, and creativity thrives on itself.

More than that, though, it seems to me that I gave up cooking for awhile because there wasn't anyone to cook *for*, and I lost a certain frame of order and tranquility when I gave it up. A writer's days can be as formless as a blob of spilled jelly. Cooking is a way to give a day body—the planning, the care and tending, the delight of knowing there will be good nourishment at the end of the hard work. I have started cooking for the girls these days, and they're eating quite well. They're rewarding me with a rush of ideas, words, dreams, plans, sentences, theories, new interests.

Cooking isn't the only way to key into this well of life and order, of course. There are as many ways as there are writers, and the form is not as important as the nourishment to be found in the pursuit of color, form, ritual.

Oh, by the way, Julie/Julia landed a juicy book contract. The book will be published in the spring of 2005. Another great example of pursuing something creative and having something terrific come out of it—she was restless and frustrated because she was an aspiring author who'd not been able to publish. Sweet. **NINK**

## Bits'n'Pieces

### Public Library Association meets in Seattle

Exhibit Hours:

Wednesday, February 25 4:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.

Thursday, February 26 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Friday, February 27 8:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

[http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/PLA/Conferences,\\_Events\\_and\\_Online\\_Learning/National\\_Conference/Exhibits1/Exhibitor\\_List/Exhibitor\\_List.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/PLA/Conferences,_Events_and_Online_Learning/National_Conference/Exhibits1/Exhibitor_List/Exhibitor_List.htm)

— **Sally Hawkes**

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