

Novelists' Ink Novelists' Ink Novelists' Ink

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Taking It to the Next Level

BY SHIRLEY JUMP

When I was a wannabee author, I was inundated with learning resources. Tons of books for beginners, magazines filled with articles, conferences centered around newbie tracks—you name it, the product/book/person was there to teach me how to write. But this year, after selling and writing a dozen or so books, I realized that I wanted to spread my wings further and write better. That meant taking my current education about writing to the next level.

The problem? The world is filled with How Tos that are directed toward the don't-know-nothin' crowd. When it comes to writers who have a little experience under their belt, the pickings for education are slimmer. However, some fellow Nincers have found ways to gain that education, often without picking up a book.

For Ann Roth, sometimes that means going back to the beginning. "Believe it or not, now and then I find pearls of information in workshops for beginning writers. A speaker will make a comment that hits just right and gives me an 'aha' that changes how I think." Many times, revisiting

an old lecture or notes with the eyes of experience will give you an entirely new perspective on the same information. It takes on new meaning, deeper layers—because you are now ready to understand those layers.

Roth added that she often learns a great deal by watching other artists, particularly in interviews, as they explain what they do. "Watching James Lipton interview various actors on *Inside the Actors Studio* is a great example. Actors share fascinating gems of wisdom that apply both to acting and to the craft of writing. I [also] read and listen to interviews of musicians or other writers, sharing their views on their craft and gain all kinds of useful insights."

Read And Learn

Most authors said they learn by reading, particularly the work of authors who have been extremely successful or are well known for being strong, vibrant writers. Melanie Jackson said she'll read almost anything, because she's looking for craft, not trends. "I'm not so much after content (for instance, I don't care if pirates or vampires are popular) as I am reading for style. What does a writer do

(technically) that draws me in?"

That analysis can be key to helping you pinpoint where your weaknesses—and your strengths—are and then figuring out how to make changes accordingly. Anna Jacobs said she always reads with the additional goal of learning and manages to read three books a week. "I think I mentally analyze the plotting, characterization, and general impact as I read. There's no other way I can describe it. Then afterwards, if the book is what I call an 'A' class book, I think about it. Sometimes I re-read it later to see if it still has the same impact, and again, I'm studying how it's done."

She and I share the same all-time favorite emotional book: LaVyrle Spencer's *Morning Glory*. Jacobs said she has read it two or three times (me too!) and that it always makes her cry.

Kasey Michaels, on the other hand, isn't a how-to book kind of person and has never even read one, preferring to trust her gut. The author of 90 novels, she said the idea of a writing exercise is pointless to her: "If I can't hope to be paid for it, why write it?"

Instead, she, like other authors, learns a

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Novelists, Inc.

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President's Voice

Jumping the Shark

I have a confession to make. I watched the *Happy Days* reunion special. I wasn't going to. It's been a lot of years and those people have to be really old. I remember the *Gilligan's Island* reunion. Not pretty.

But Larry tuned it in, and I happened to be wandering past the TV when that old 45 started spinning and I heard *Monday, Tuesday, happy days*. I was hooked. Nostalgia hit like a sledgehammer on steroids.

My fears were not unfounded. Those people really *are* old. Unlike Ninc members—who keep themselves young and vibrant by making sure the good guys win and the bad guys get theirs—the *Happy Days* crowd is looking a little ragged around the edges. Sure, I knew Richie was bald, but I wasn't prepared for Potsie to be middle-aged.

I stuck it out, anyway. They showed clips, and I loved the clips. The live stuff I peeked at between spread fingers, but the clips were worth it all. In the process of watching the clips I learned something. Toward the end of the show's run, ratings began to fall, and those of us in the entertainment business (which we are, you know) understand what that means. Drastic measures.

They had Fonzie take up waterskiing, which is bizarre in itself. Then they set up a challenge. A shark was contained in a netted area and Fonzie had to jump over the shark. Not to give it away or anything, but he makes it. The ratings soared. Apparently the episode became a television legend, and now, whenever a show uses a spectacular incident to boost ratings, they call it Jumping the Shark.

I completely related, and I'm sure you will, too. We Jump the Shark all the time. Sometimes it's a little sand shark and sometimes it's a Great White, but every time we send in a proposal or a manuscript, we Jump the Shark. In my first Nerd book, I jumped Jaws. Shoot, I even had a shark as a character!

The thing is, we have to Jump the Shark or stagnate in this business. Play it safe, play it cozy, and you'll end up canceled. We're all risk-takers at heart or we wouldn't be here. I'm counting on that as you contemplate what I'm about to say.

As it turns out, Ninc Jumped the Shark last fall when we decided to incorporate online dues renewal and online conference registration into our website. It had to be done—we were behind the curve in that department. But as some of you know, the jump has not been without its problems.

By the time you read this, I'm confident we will have worked through the glitches. Our conference in New York is headed for greatness and maybe even a profit. Our membership is growing by leaps and bounds, and much of that can be attributed to jumping that blasted shark. But if you've had to put up with some frustrations through either your dues renewal or the conference registration, please know that it's in a good cause. Ninc is Jumping the Shark.

Bravely yours, Vicki

The 2005 Ninc
Members Roster
will be pub-
lished in the
May *NINK*.

The Ninc Board is
pleased to announce that
Jean Brashear is the
Nominating Committee
Chair for 2005.

Taking it to the Next Level

Continued from p. 1 ▶ great deal by observation. "I have always read voraciously; I speak with other writers; I watch television. I learn different ways of handling point of view from novels I read; heck, I learned a lot about pacing from *Seinfeld*. I also learn when I read books I do not particularly like, because those books make me ask myself, 'What would I have done differently?'"

Michaels calls the process "osmosis," and says the beauty of learning by observation is that she doesn't feel constrained by rules. She said staying away from how-to books saved her a lot of anxiety and gave her the freedom to trust her own instincts. As a result, her writing has evolved from "small" Regencies to single title mysteries.

When you're reading, you need to think of yourself as the pupil in a 400-page class taught by an experienced instructor, said Jo Beverley. She said reading with analysis, and appreciating the music that the author is playing (always cognizant of the fact that she is writing to her own beat), helps you to find the lessons in the book you are reading. "Most of the

work should come from the pupils; [they] should be willing to listen, even to the most boring ramble in the bar late at night, and attempt to glean wisdom and insight."

Beverley added that the truly great writers may not have the time or ability to be great teachers. "If one can write blockbuster novels, why would one put a lot of time into offering structured how-to lessons or writing books on the subject?" However, she added, studying their work and appreciating the individual talents of these authors can be as valuable as sitting in a college classroom.

Listen to a (Good) Editor

Laura Resnick said a good editor taught her some ways to improve her craft when Resnick was writing her 18th book. "This editor [taught me] to stop overwriting my dialogue tags by showing me that in many more places than I realized, the dialogue itself, if well written, was enough information about *how* the character was saying the line(s). I was giving descriptions of tone and attitude in many places where I didn't need to and 'less is more.' That's very much of a fine-

tuning thing, a subtle enough craft issue that it probably *is* only likely to come up with an attentive editor (or critiquer) later in one's development; and it had a noticeable effect on my writing thereafter."

Jackson credited her editor for encouraging her to strive harder. "He isn't heavy-handed in his edits, he just always makes me feel that I *can* do better. Nor does he flinch when I come to him with some wild idea that is not only outside the box but might not ever fit in any box anywhere. He understands that my goals in writing are less about bestseller lists than about striving for excellence and not digging myself a rut by repeating the same themes book after book. As long as I am commercial enough not to bankrupt the company he will let me go after my goals."

For Jacobs, having an editor who knew her stuff helped make one of Jacobs's books a lot hotter. Jacobs had revised a category manuscript that had been languishing in her desk specifically to work with a particular Australian editor because she knew she'd learn a lot from the experience. However, the one area Jacobs needed to beef up was the love scene—something she doesn't have a lot of in her historicals. "I'd not been ▶

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The 2005 Nominating Committee is ready to get to work, and we're coming to you for help. This wonderful organization we all love is in need of the next generation of volunteers who'll guide its path in 2006 and beyond.

Speaking as one who's been there, I'm happy to have had a chance to serve this terrific group and recommend the experience highly. You meet a lot of people, have some fun, and make a difference. It's a chance to give back to an organization that gives so much to us, whether through the support network of Ninlink or the ever-informative newsletter, or the amazing chance to come together which the annual conference conveys.

If you're interested in serving on the 2006 Board (president-elect, who then becomes president the next year; secretary; and treasurer) or Nominating Committee (those who will find officers and committee members for 2007), or would like to recommend someone you think would be a good choice, please contact one of the following committee members:

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*Jean Brashear, Chairman,
2005 Nominating Committee*

Taking it to the Next Level

▶ giving it my all and the editor prompted me to do this—and she did it well, too. It was still agony to me to write *the* sex scene. As a result, I think I got a little more depth in the physical encounters in my next historical saga. My readers of those books wouldn't want overt sex scenes, but better sexual tension and caresses don't go amiss."

If You Had to Pick a Book...

Some of the authors interviewed for this piece have favorite how-to books and seminars that they refer to time and again when they want to give their current projects a boost. Beverley said she likes Robert McKee's *Story* and Donald Maass's *Writing the Breakout Novel*. Maass's companion novel is also wonderful for helping you develop a more expanded character and plot.

Charlotte Hubbard said she has learned a great deal by attending lectures and workshops given by the how-to gurus. "James N. Frey, of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* fame, was sponsored by our little writer's guild a few years ago for an all-day event, and he was wonderful. Deb Dixon gives a fabulous GMC day-long workshop based on her book. Evan Marshall, who happens to be my agent, also teaches with his series, *The Marshall Plan* how-to-write things, although his is geared more toward the beginners."

Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* is another favorite among experienced authors. "I think it's worth noting that the author himself states in this book that this is *not* a how-to or step-by-step book, this is a book intended to be food for thought about how/where your story structure is weaker and could be stronger, or lacks impact and could develop more impact, etc. I'm not sure I've ever consciously incorporated his work ('Oh, I must write a Gatekeeper character into the plot!'), but there was material in

there that influenced my story thinking," Resnick said.

Those Who Can, Teach

Some authors learn a great deal by teaching, but more importantly, gain personal satisfaction by sharing what they know. Michaels taught an online class for my RWA chapter and did a fabulous job (our chapter members are still talking about the lessons they learned, months after she taught). Michaels didn't do a lecture built on steps and tips, rather she analyzed opening pages and gave the writers feedback. "This seems to work best for me, and for them, as I'm not making general comments, but specific ones, and I'm also not giving out 'rules' (because I don't much believe in them), so I can tailor my responses to whatever problems and/or possibilities I might see—in that particular work, because the only blanket 'rules' are those of grammar and double-spacing. The world doesn't need more writers who write like Kasey Michaels, or follow her rules—the world just needs more writers doing their own thing."

She said if there's one thing she wants to impart to other writers, it's that freedom to write the way *you* were meant to. Sometimes, too much learning can be a detriment because it turns out cookie-cutter books. Michaels said she tries to encourage writers in her classes to be themselves on the page, because that's what makes for truly breakout novels.

Can't Be a Virgin Twice

The one casualty with education is the loss of the joy and discovery in writing, the same awe we all felt when we first started writing. Resnick said learning more doesn't bring back that same enthusiasm especially after writing so many books, but to her, that's okay. "As my wise friend, novelist Robyn Carr, once said to me on this subject, 'You can't be a virgin twice.'"

However, as Resnick has learned new techniques and ways of improving her craft, coupled with an encour-

aging editor, her enthusiasm for writing and her self-confidence have improved, which has dramatically affected her zeal for her job. "The experience effectively demonstrated to me just how important it is to your craft—as well as your stamina and mental health!—to seek out editors with whom you *can* have a positive, productive writer-editor relationship and working process."

Jacobs found that continually honing her work has made her job more interesting, rather than less so, over the years. "What keeps me interested in writing (apart from the fact that I *have* to tell these stories seething in my head) is that you can always learn, always improve, and I try consciously to do that. If I was just repeating the same old stuff, I'd get bored. As it is, I love the challenge of trying to make something about each book better than the one before—and of writing in different genres."

If It Ain't Broke

In the end, Jo Beverley said sometimes authors need to take a step back and examine whether they really *need* to seek out more education. Other artists, like painters and musicians, take initial classes and then learn simply by doing. Writers should be the same way.

"Shouldn't it be true that by the time we are selling regularly and have a strong readership, we should have come to trust our talent and skills and simply improve by doing our own thing, rather than by trying to learn to do someone else's thing?" she asked.

For Beverley and the rest of us, striving for more and better, that's a question that leaves definite food for thought. Sometimes, spreading your wings is simply a matter of jumping out of the tree and seeing if you can fly—without the safety of the instructor beside you, coaching your every move. Of course, if you crash and burn, there's a whole slew of books waiting to show you how to get up again. ▲

Duo-logue

To Conference or Not to Conference...

Pat McLaughlin: How appropriate that I'm going to chew over the issue of conferences with Pat Van Wie aka Patricia Lewin, since we met at a conference. My first Romance Writers of America conference, in Boston back BN (before Ninc). We were standing in line to check in to the hotel. It was a long zig-zag of women with a whole lot of luggage. I started asking questions. Ah, yes, I remember it well. She doesn't. In fact, she didn't remember me at all the next time we talked. But that's okay. It didn't hurt my feelings. Not at all. I'm okay with not being memorable. Truly. Absolutely okay.

Since that Boston RWA in 1989 we've conferenced together many a time, sometimes rooming together: RWA Nationals, Georgia Romance Writers' Moonlight and Magnolias, Virginia Romance Writers' Conferences, Nincs, New England Chapter Conferences. But, now that I think about it, it's been a while since we were at a conference together.

So, my first question is, which conferences are you planning on going to in 2005 and early 2006? Maybe our schedules will overlap.

Pat Van Wie: I'm not doing many conferences this year, which is becoming more common for me. I used to do four to six a year. Now, I'm lucky if I get to three. But, that's not what you asked. I have three maybes for this year.

First, I'll probably go to Bouchercon, which is a mystery suspense fan conference.

Also, I may go to the local New England chapter conference in April and Moonlight and Magnolias in October. That's it.

Pat McL: The obvious question is how did you select those conferences? And what do you hope to achieve by going to them?

Pat VW: I'll go to Bouchercon because it's the premier fan conference for Mystery/Suspense readers and I like meeting and interacting with people who've read, or might read my books. This will be my fourth year, and it still amazes me to meet readers who are just that—readers, not writers or aspiring writers <g>. It makes me think I've been going to writers' conferences too long.

The NEC (New England Conference) is put on by my local RWA chapter, so it's close. I have a lot of friends there, so I go to see them and to support the chapter. I'm also a long-time member of GRW (Georgia Romance Writers) and their Moonlight and Magnolias Conference. Again, I go for the camaraderie more than anything else. As for what I hope to get out of either of these last two conferences, it's hard to say. Even though I no longer write romance, you never know what connection with an editor, agent, or another author you'll make that will help you down the road.

Pat McL: The different genres do seem to organize different kinds of conferences, don't they. Mystery, suspense, sf/f, horror, tending toward reader events (where writers can promote) and romance tending toward writer events (where writers can network). I wonder why it divides like that? I remember going to a Sisters in Crime national mystery-writing conference in Houston several years ago, but that's the last one I heard about.

What do you mean when you say, "It makes me think I've been going to writers' conferences too long?"

PAT VW: At some point in your career you begin to realize it's readers you need to be successful, not other, or aspiring, authors. In other words, if you're looking to expand your readership and visibility in the marketplace, you need to stop ▶

Duo-logue

To Conference or Not ...

- ▶ spending your time courting other authors. We're a very small segment of the reading population, yet a lot of us focus our promotional energy on each other.

Now, I'm not saying we don't need each other for support, but most of us have our support network already in place.

So, with limited time and energy, I've been cutting out the writers' conferences in favor of fan conferences.

Pat McL: I remember at one of our earlier RWA conferences together asking you one of my favorite conference questions: What do you hope to accomplish at this conference? You had a list of about eight professional/career type goals. I was so impressed, because everything I wanted to accomplish had to do with catching up with buddies.

And you're still much better about those business aspects than I am. I never think of conferences as an opportunity to promote myself or my books.

Conferences, for me, have been an opportunity to make and renew friendships, to hear war stories and to brainstorm career solutions. Maybe I can call that networking, and it certainly has brought me wonderful friends, fascinating conversations, and a widespread support system (oh, those long distance phone bills <g>). But I've also wondered if that approach has been partly because I didn't want to put myself on the line professionally at conferences.

It sounds now as if you know exactly what you want to get out of Bouchercon, but you're less clear on the romance conferences. Do you think that's:

- ▶ because of the changes in your career? Those changes having to do with the fact that you are no longer writing romance? And/or because you're established now?
- ▶ because of the differences in the conferences related to the different genres?

PAT VW: First, I have to laugh at your assumption that I'm established. Too funny. You're a good friend.

But to answer your questions.

Yes, I know what I want out of Bouchercon. In general, I go to raise my visibility within the mystery/suspense world. Specifically, I go to meet booksellers, readers, and other authors writing in the genre.

How does this differ from a writer's conference?

First the panels are writers talking to readers about their books instead of writers educating other writers. Also, there is a large trade show that runs the length of the conference. It's a good place to put your face in front of sometimes dozens of booksellers. Then there are the usual conference events: cocktail parties, dinners, lunches, hotel lobby bars, that we all know and love. Only those places are populated with more readers than writers. People actually get excited about an author badge. It's fun.

Pat McL: Boy, I'd much rather be in the hotel lobby bar with a bunch of fellow writers than readers. With readers I'd feel like I was being judged, or at the very least like I'd have to be on my good behavior, and charming so I didn't turn anyone off my books. It's hard work being charming.

Just thinking about this makes me want to pull into a shell. And this is not just about a shortage of being-charming endurance. I know it's counter to the celebrity culture, but I don't want to know about the people who provide my entertainment—singers, actors, artists. I want the interaction to be between me and what they've created, and I don't want their personal life to intrude. The same goes for my books. Why do the readers want to know me? It's the books that count.

Intellectually I can certainly see the benefit of connecting with readers. Heck, I used to say that I wished there were more opportunities in the romance genre to connect with readers. But then, when Celebrate Romance was not far away from me in March, and I was thinking, I really should go, I found myself dreading it.

My work schedule at the *Post* and a new deadline gave me the out. So I didn't go, and I felt only relief at that decision.

Give me a writer's conference any time.

Pat VW: It's amazing that you don't enjoy interacting with readers. I've watched you schmooze with readers, and you're very good at it. That said, the fan conferences *do* take a lot of energy, but so do writers' conferences. Talk about being on your best behavior. There's nothing more exhausting than chatting it up with an editor or agent.

Pat McL: True. But, on the other hand, you mentioned earlier that you never know what connection might help you down the road. (Ha! <g>) So, writers' conferences can also have professional benefits. How do you decide how much energy to devote to such possibilities?

PAT VW: I think that depends on where you are at the moment in your career.

Are you deliriously happy with your current publisher and/or agent, or, are you miserable? Chances are, you're somewhere in between. So, I believe you need to assess where you are and decide whether this is the time to freshen old connections and make new ones. IOW, there's no simple answer to this. It's something you need to decide for yourself.

Pat McL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Well, I'm also cutting back on conferences right now. My plan is after Ninc, I'll go to Moonlight & Magnolias (I've been invited to speak) in 2005, and Phoenix RWA's Desert Dreams in spring 2006, again because I've been asked to speak. And I've talked to a number of other writers who are also cutting back.

Some of it, I suspect is the press of time for all of us. (Also the press of dog-care for this Pat.) And then there's the money factor. As we get more established, are we less willing to pay our way (some or part) for the privilege of giving workshops that might or might not make our name better known among aspiring writers?

PAT VW: Good point, Pat. Like most authors, I've given workshops for years, and I've always felt like I was giving back. After all, before I sold my first book, I was one of those aspiring authors who learned from published authors.

However, when have you given back enough? When is the time and money involved better put to use elsewhere? This is my career, my job, and in order to be successful at it, I need to reach readers. Which brings me back to my earlier point about Bouchercon and reaching out to fans.

Pat McL: Shudder. For now I'll stick to reaching out to fans primarily through cyberspace (where the

redoubtable Patricia Lewin has frequently dragged me by the hair, for which I thank her. I think.)

I wonder if the Internet also has something to do with our feeling less conference yearning. By keeping us connected with other writers we feel less pent-up need to gather in some hotel to exchange news, woes, and hope. (Though, sadly, cyberspace doesn't offer a lobby bar.)

I also suspect the ongoing communities on the Internet are partly responsible for a shaking out of the conference market, at least in the RWA. Used to be that it seemed every chapter had one every year. But several have stopped entirely and others are going to every other year.

And I wonder if there's a natural cycle writers go through.

► First snarfing up all the conferences they can get to because they're taking in so much new information and making so many new connections and friends. Because the writer's job at the start is learning.

► Then becoming choosier under the press of time and knowing their support system is already established. Because the writer's job now is writing.

► Finally, assessing each opportunity against individual needs/goals that can shift as careers mature, stumble, recover. Because the writer's job now is to persevere.

Where I seem to be right now is an intermediate stage. I just want to stay home. You all can come and sit on my screen porch and we'll talk, okay?

Pat McLaughlin (aka Patricia McLinn) wonders why she's not getting more writing done with all that staying home. But she does have two Silhouette Special Editions out this year: Least Likely Wedding? in April and Baby Blues and Wedding Bells in June.

Pat Van Wie (aka Patricia Lewin) writes for Ballantine Books. She's the author of Blind Run and Out of Reach. Her next book, Out of Time, will be released later this year.



“You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”

Ray Bradbury

www.artistsforliteracy.org



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

Emily Bestler and Pocket

Emily Bestler's love for books shines through when she talks about her work. Vice President and Executive Editorial Director of Pocket, she relishes working with her authors and revels in the idea of discovering new ones.

A native of Rochester, New York, Bestler grew up in Virginia and attended Barnard at Columbia University (NY). Her introduction to publishing came at the small Chelsea House where she did literary criticism.

Bestler's a dynamo who moved quickly through the ranks. She has edited a wide range of nonfiction as well as fiction, and has worked with notable talents such as Elizabeth Berg and Dan Brown.

She's approachable, knowledgeable, and disarmingly forthright—the kind of editor I'd love to invite to sit a spell on my front porch swing and share a glass of iced mint tea.

Here's what she had to say about this wonderful, crazy roller coaster ride editors and authors are on together.

NINK: Emily, what do you do to relax? What are your hobbies?

Emily Bestler: I know this is a huge cliché, but I read. I think it's important to read in general. I read bestseller lists, but I also read classics regularly because I need to remind myself of what a great book is. Being steeped in the classics helps me recognize a great new book.

In terms of bestseller lists, I want to constantly freshen my mind about what everybody else is reading. In the end I'll buy what I love; but because of my job I think of myself as being the Every American Reader. It's not unlikely that what everybody loves I'll love as well. It's easy to sit in New York and guess what people like, but it doesn't necessarily translate into what everybody else wants.

I adore books, reading, and authors, and I would read, no matter what.

NINK: If my information is correct, you've edited an amazing range of books that includes cookbooks (*The Lazy Days of Summer Cookbook* by Jane Watson Hopping, published by Villard); nonfiction such as *Angel Answers: A Joyful Guide to Creating Heaven and Earth* by Andrew Ramer (published by Richmond Hill); *Social Security: The Crisis in America's Social Security System and How to Plan now for Your Own Financial Survival* by whistleblowers Dorcas Hardy and C. Colburn, and *Guinevere: The True Story of One Woman's Quest for Her Past Life Identity and the Healing of Her Eternal Soul* by Laurel Phelan; as well as fiction that includes Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* and *True to Form, Never*

Change and Say When by my favorite author, Elizabeth Berg.

EB: Until recently I edited half fiction and half nonfiction. I've loved child care, parenting, health, and quirky humor books. I'm lucky enough to work in a place where I don't have to be penned down to nonfiction.

My fiction is very commercial. In that sense it is wide-ranging, but I would be unlikely to do literary fiction. It's not what we do at Atria. But within that category, I do male and female thrillers, high end commercial fiction like Elizabeth Berg and psychological thrillers by such authors as Jodi Picoult, whose book *My Sister's Keeper* was on the *New York Times* list for eight weeks. Her new book, *Vanishing Acts*, is coming out soon.

NINK: Tell me about your career path. How did you get started?

EB: I went to graduate school, and then got a job at a tiny publishing house (Chelsea House) doing literary criticism. I worked with Harold Bloom for a year doing a series of critical essays, but I really wanted to be in trade. I went to McMillan as an assistant to the assistant manager, and quickly found I was not cut out to be in a business office because it's about schedules and dates and times. I didn't care for any of those things. I moved to Random House as editorial assistant. I left when I was senior editor at Villard to come to Pocket.

Pocket was hard/soft then. Later it became only paper, so the hardcover line was renamed Atria. It's a separate company within the larger parent company of Simon and Schuster.

NINK: What type of fiction are you actively looking for at Pocket? What do you not want to see?

EB: Women's fiction. I have a lot of male thrillers—and I'm always happy to find more—but I have fewer female, and I would love a great suspense novel by a women, a great dark thriller. I'd also like some more literary, accessible women such as Jodi Picoult or Elizabeth Berg.

I want something to fall in love with. The favorite part of my job is discovering somebody new; the next favorite is editing them.

NINK: What is your response time on submissions?

EB: I try to be quick. My response time is certainly within a month, often sooner. I don't ever want to keep anybody waiting, but sometimes it just happens. Too many things come in at once.

I usually know within the first few pages if I love a

book. I'll keep reading, but usually that first impression is the one that sticks.

NINK: Is it true that publishers will pay more for a completed manuscript than a partial? If so, why? Which type of submission do you prefer and why?

EB: I am leery of buying a partial. I want to read the whole thing. I don't want to see three chapters and an outline. That's a far cry from writing a fantastic novel. Lots of publishers feel that way.

Publishers are less likely to spend money on a partial than they are on a completed book they believe they can take to the bestseller lists.

When I read a partial I often think, why didn't you write the whole book? Were you thinking more along the lines of letting me experiment? I find it hard to imagine William Faulkner writing three chapters because the book was in him and had to come out.

My own authors, of course, don't need to produce a whole book for the next contract.

NINK: Explain the process from submission to contract at Pocket. (Do you buy based on one editor's opinion? Do you have to have a consensus, etc?)

EB: I read a submission, and if I love it I go to my boss, tell her I love it and we decide together what we can pay. I'm one of the luckiest people in the business in that regard.

I judge on a submission-by-submission basis whether I want to get another opinion. I go to Pocket if I have a great commercial piece. Then I want their input. I want their money to make a hard/soft buy. Their opinion will definitely affect what I do next. Hopefully I hear, that's great, let's go for it.

I love buying a great book and pushing it on to the next step.

NINK: What role does an author's publishing history play in a contract? If the author is changing genres (for example, moving from romance to mystery), is the publishing history a factor?

EB: It plays a big role for different reasons. If an author comes with a history that is troubled, no matter how much I like that book I take the sales history into account.

All computers have memories. When a sales force comes into bookstores and sees that an author's last few books didn't sell, it makes the publisher's job very difficult to sell another one by that author. I need to know what my obstacles will be. It's very important to know the sales history.

If an author with wonderful sales wants to try something broader and I love the book, that's great. Good track records are a plus no matter what.

Sometimes an author can change names and leave a bad history behind. Or if the track record occurred ten years ago, then it doesn't matter. Often an editor has to weigh an author's sales against the quality of the book and the

chances of building, overcoming or ignoring the history.

If an author moves from a different house, I get suspicious. I wonder what was happening. I wonder if this is somebody who will leave me after a book or two. I want long-term relationships.

NINK: How do you feel about follow-up calls from an agent? Response deadlines? Do you prefer working with agents who aggressively pursue a contract or those who submit and then wait for you to call?

EB: I don't know how you can be an agent and not make follow-up calls. I'm very friendly with agents. We talk all the time in general.

I have a lot on my plate and often need a reminder from them. They can say, I just called to let you know that you got slow. I would do that if I were an agent. I think they should be aggressive. If you love something, you're aggressive about it.

NINK: How do you decide which books and authors will get a big marketing campaign?

EB: Again, there are lots of different answers. If I have an author whose sales have been growing, I decide to break this person out. Now is his moment. If I have an author who is working well and then writes a book exponentially better, I might say, let's go for it. If I buy a new novelist, especially a thriller writer (commercial fiction) I really need to make a splash right away because competition is tough. When you buy a first-time novelist, you can't be quiet about it.

On the other hand, we're not Hollywood. I have to be careful about spending too much money, in general. I'm focusing on writers who will become huge bestsellers, so I'm prepared at the outset to spend a good amount of money.

In literary fiction you can get a lot of attention with reviews, but you have to go for it in commercial fiction. Often, though, you won't achieve your goal on the first book. But you have to remain loyal and build on that momentum.

Success isn't going to happen by accident. There is a lot of luck involved in publishing, but you can't depend on luck to get you through.

NINK: What's currently hot in fiction and what's not?

EB: All sorts of things are on the bestseller lists. Historical fiction is making a comeback. Philippa Gregory is on the list. It's been a long time since historical fiction was on. Publishers are taking note and looking for more.

NINK: What do you foresee as the next big trend in fiction?

EB: I can't look down that road and say for sure. Historical fiction never should have fallen off. I think a few years from now we'll be seeing a lot of Dan Brown clones.

Somebody's going to write an amazing, quirky novel, and that will be a huge bestseller and that will be the next trend. I only hope it's mine. ▲

Writing



Tech

Attention:

Eyes Right —or Left?

BY KAREN HARPER

Like most of us who are veteran authors (read survivors in this demanding business), I have put in many hours staring alternately between the monitor, where my characters and stories come to life in words, and then down at research or plot notes. And like most of us who have written for years, certain parts of the anatomy ache, to put it politely.

I have battled lower back spasms through neutral back exercise and glucosamine. So lately, I have read with more diligence articles which focus on avoiding neck pain, wrist wrenches, and all the other bodily harm which can come from just sitting and writing.

So I was amazed to read information about something I was totally unaware of—something that seemed so simple. Perhaps some of you are up on this, but the idea of all humans being either right-eye or left-eye dominant was news to me. At first, I just read the article as an item of interest, until I got to the bottom line which explains that knowledge about this can be power—the power to avoid straining not only your eyes, but your neck and shoulders.

As I share this information, I should note that the article I read was not attributed to a particular person, but did appear in our local newspaper, *The Naples Daily News*. I'm assuming it might have been syndicated, but it didn't say.

According to this information, everyone is either right- or left-eye dominant. Like being right handed, those who are right-eye dominant are in the majority, about 65% to 35% for left-eye. However, the fact you are right- or left-handed does not necessarily correlate with being right- or left-eye dominant. This also has no relation to one of your eyes having stronger vision than the other.

The dominant eye is the one that looks directly at an object, while the non-dominant one looks at an object from the side. I never knew that; at first, it didn't even make sense.

But here's how to tell which you are. "With both eyes open, raise your right arm and point to an object in the dis-

tance. Anything more than about 20 feet away is ideal. Continue to look at and point at the object and cover the left eye. Did your pointing finger seem to move off the target?

"Continue pointing and cover your right eye. Did your pointing finger seem to move off the target with your right eye covered? Your dominant eye is the eye you use when the pointing finger does not seem to move."

Interesting, right, but what's the point of all this pointing? Because, unless you are aware of which eye is dominant, you could be harming your neck and shoulder muscles without realizing how. Right-eye dominants should read from pages placed to the right of the monitor, or they over twist their necks, trying to get that dominant eye a direct look at the object. This means, of course, that left-eye dominants should have their materials placed to the left.

Granted, sometimes our work areas are not laid out to accommodate this, but it is worth switching if at all possible, especially if you feel any neck or shoulder strain. (No, I have found no articles on dominant shoulders!)

According to Emil Pascarelli, M.D., professor of clinical medicine at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, correct placement of materials can make a real difference. Evidently, this is not only of concern for writers who log hours at their task but also for athletes. Archers, baseball players, and other athletes have exercises to overcome the problem of one eye being overly dominant, because that can weaken their depth perception in trying to catch balls, for example.

Further reading on this, of course, is available online at various search engines under *dominant eye*. But remember, if you take notes, to write and read on the "dominant side."

Karen Harper is a right-eye dominant who gets so lost in her writing that she sometimes has to set a timer to remember to look up and get up. She currently writes romantic suspense for Mira Books and a historical mystery series for St. Martin's Press.

Crayon on my Key board

Cut it up . . . and stitch it together

BY JANELLE CLARE SCHNEIDER

Two years I took up quilting. It began as a means of connecting with my mom who was dying. It quickly became a joyous obsession. I love color, and quilting enables me to touch it, play with it, revel in it. I lose track of entire hours, something that rarely happens in any of my other endeavors, other than reading. I always walk away from my quilting projects feeling more at peace and more energized than when I began.

To my surprise, quilting even gives my writing a boost. Whenever I feel stuck with a story, I go play around with my scraps and bits of fabric. The story almost always untangles itself while I work.

I've discovered many similarities between my new hobby and writing. Both begin with the fun of selecting a pattern (plot) and fabrics (characters). The next step is to cut the fabric into small pieces, which is somewhat like the rough draft of a story. There are times it looks like nothing more than a mess, but you keep going because you know there's no way to make the quilt without creating these pieces which bear little resemblance to what you want the finished product to be.

Then comes the sewing, which I liken to the revision and polishing stages. Sometimes things don't fit quite right, and I have to pick out the seam. (Veteran quilters call this "reverse sewing".) I keep sewing and piecing and fitting, and the beauty I hoped for begins to emerge.

My quilting instructor says her quilts rarely look exactly like what she envisioned when she began. The blending of colors and shapes often creates an effect you can't expect, which is why quilters don't select their border fabrics until they have the quilt blocks sewn together. The fabric I thought would be a perfect border at the beginning might not suit the finished project as well as something I find after the piecing is complete.

Many quilters send their finished projects to a

professional for the final stage, that of the actual "quilting" or the process of using decorative stitching to fasten the backing, the batting, and the quilt top together. This is similar to the process of sending our stories off to the publisher, although I have yet to hear of a quilter being told to change a color or pattern before the professional will do her work! On the other hand, the decorative stitching often enhances the pattern, or sometimes even causes previously hidden elements to become more visible. We've all worked with editors who have helped our stories become more than we originally thought they'd be.

There's one more analogy which I've found helpful in the overall rhythm of my writing. In finishing a quilt, I'm focused on the big picture. When I begin a new one, I'm back to creating little pieces. Rough drafts are always borderline-traumatic for me, and now I know why. I'm having to make that shift from the big picture view of a completed project back down to the details of a new one. The contrast between the finished design of the old and the mess of little pieces in the new is stark and scary.

In both situations, there's nothing like the delicious high of unhindered creativity. Whether it's fabric or words, putting the elements together to create the picture that's in my mind satisfies something deep within.

Yeah, I've had moments in both where I've been tempted to scoop the whole mess into the garbage can. That's when I go take a nap.

When I come back, the challenge isn't quite so huge, and I can usually make my way over or around whatever the obstacle was.

The creative life... there's nothing like it.

Janelle Clare Schneider has managed to get two proposals finished recently, for which she's rewarding herself with several days in the sewing room... at least those portions of days when dog, children, and husband don't require care and attention. She's hoping for an hour a day.

Bits'n'Pieces

Et Tu, Harlequin?

NEXT from Harlequin will be launching in July with the Trade-Mass (Mass-Trade) size. The new size will be 7" in height, increasing from 6-5/8", but not increasing in width. (It does have to fit the shelf or rack.) The price at the moment will be \$5.50. This will be a test for taller editions before tampering with other imprints.

ChickLit Takes on Another Genre?

Red Dress took a full page in *PW* Feb. 14 (pink, of course) for Kyra Davis's *Sex, Murder and a Double Latte* with the header—"What Happens When You Cross Chick Lit with Murder Mystery?"

Is it crossover PR or the beginning of a new trend?

Protecting Privacy

Rep. Bernie Sanders (I.-VT) is getting back into the fray by re-introducing the Freedom to Read Protection Act. This is to help restore privacy safeguards that were reduced by the USA Patriot Act, particularly Section 215. The previous bill that put safeguards back on customer records from bookstores and libraries never came to a vote.

<http://www.readerprivacy.org>

The Ultimate Crossover Promotion

A character in *One Life to Live* writes a mystery called *The Killing Club* and gets both the president and executive editor to do a cameo on the soap opera. The book was actually written by Michael Malone, a former head writer on the show. Although the characters in the book aren't on the show, viewers have been following the "author's" story for about a year.

Book Signings - Heaven or Hell?

Remember that book signing when only your mother showed up, or the one that didn't have any books for you to sign, or the bookstore that didn't believe you were the author? A recent *Hartford Courant* article that JoAnn Ross mentioned on NINCLINK covers author's tales of signings that should help heal the wounds.

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<http://click.email-publisher.com/maadf9SabeQQOa2wP0tbaeQxXH/>

You Spent How Much on Promotion This Year?

A recent UK survey written in conjunction with World Book Day says you really might be spending too much on promotion; just tell someone to buy the book. One third of readers under 35 who responded said that the most important indicator is a personal recommendation. About 25% said they chose a book because they had read the author before. So, how important is the \$100,000 + spent on marketing budgets for publisher and booksellers? *The Guardian* reports that advertising only determines 6% of sales, 7% are swayed by the cover, while 16% say the blurb has influenced the reader to take the book.

<http://click.email-publisher.com/maadfvnabeKXaa8Yg22caeQxXH/>

Speaking of Publicists - Is This the Beginning of a Trend?

Three publicists have left Regnery to start MNS Publicity, described as a boutique shop in Washington DC to handle the overflow of the house's conservative titles. The book promos will be handled by only three employees. The speculation is that growth in the freelance publicity industry means other publishing houses may not be able to handle the bulk of their own promotions.

Harper Builds Single Kitchen

The Wm. Morrow and HarperCollins merger continues with cookbooks. Beginning in Winter 2006 all cooking titles will be published as William Morrow Cookbooks.

Reaching the YA and Teen Market - Can You Hear Me Now?

Random House has made an investment in Vocol, a California based company. Vocol is a software developer whose product enables transmitting text-based interactive messages on cell phones. An additional investment is Living

Bits'n'Pieces

Language and Prima Games imprints that also have licensing agreements with Vocel. Cell phones messages are best at short text and one application would have teens viewing material from Prima Guide while playing games on their cell.

The Trail Lead to Random House

Former Putnam editorial director Jennifer Hershey has stepped into the same position at Random House. Hershey's background in fiction seems to quiet talk that RH was moving toward more nonfiction when Lee Boudreaux left.

Jane von Mehren is leaving as Penquin's editor-in-chief and associate publisher to become publisher of trade paperbacks for Little Random.

SimonSaysShop.com

The direct sales link online for Simon and Schuster is expected to be up by the end of 2005. Customers will have access to purchase 17,000 titles from the backlist, but will also be directed to traditional retail sites.

Meanwhile Back at Penquin . . .

Cuts have begun in the U.S. and the U.K. with the U.S. staff reduced by 2%, about 40 positions, in response to year-end 2004 figures. Most cuts seem to be in sales, which underwent restructuring due to lower numbers in mass market sales. Other cuts came in children's editorial positions and the DK division.

BITS Compiled by Sally Hawkes

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:

Lori Avocato, Meriden, CT
Douglas Clegg (*Andrew Harper*), Groton Long Point, CT
Alisa Kwitney, Stanfordville, NY
Stephanie Lehmann, New York, NY
Jo Manning, Miami Beach, FL
Terri Reed, Portland, OR

New Members:

Kathryn Caskie, Waterford, VA
Kathie DeNosky, Herrin, IL
Christie Golden (*Jadrien Bell*), Loveland, CO
Rosemary Heim, Minneapolis, MN
Wendy Hilton (*Corinne Everett*), Vienna, VA
Sarah Hoyt, Colorado Springs, CO
Tracey Lyons, Clayton, CA
Ashley McConnell, Albuquerque, NM
(returning member)
Sandy Parks (*Sandy Moffett*), Melbourne, FL
Diane Perkins (*Diane Gaston*), Burke, VA
Phyllis Irene Radford (*Irene Radford*), Welches, OR
Matilda Rodrigues (*Delilah Dawson*), Elk Grove, CA
Crystal Stovall, Tulsa, OK
Karen White, Atlanta, GA

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

Stay in Touch with Ninc online.

Visit the website at www.ninc.com. Join the neverNinlink. If you have questions, email moderator Brenda Hiatt Barber at BrendaHB@aol.com

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

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

TIDE

I am writing this from a turn-of-the-century hotel room in Vancouver, British Columbia. A writers' group invited me to speak on Vancouver Island, and the chapter in this town invited me to speak in Vancouver (city). (I'm probably not as geographically savvy as many of the brilliant minds in Ninc, so this confused me a lot at first. Vancouver the city is on the west coast of the mainland of British Columbia, while Vancouver Island is off the coast a little way.) With a little help from the chapters, I was able to arrange the two talks to be on successive weekends so I might have some down time. It's been ages since I had any real down time or vacation of any sort, really. A few days here and there, a long weekend now and then, but mostly attached to other obligations.

So, I'm sitting in this graceful old hotel room, with the window open to the breeze blowing in over English Bay. There are cherry trees and daffodils blooming everywhere, and the grass is green. Back home, winter still has its grip on Colorado, and the sudden immersion into spring has made the girls in the basement

quite happy. They're lazing around with me, drinking coffee from one of the more than 130 Starbucks (I counted) in town, admiring the blossoms, ambling along the seawall and pointing out sights to each other.

They deserve it. We all do. We've been working very, very hard.

Mostly, as usual, they are doing the work, but I've had to provide the body. It's a lot of work, all sorts of different things, the fertile period following a fallow one. I'm grateful, happy for all the ideas popping up and things pouring out needing to be written, but well, it's just been awhile since I've worked like this, and I'm observing the process with a measure of bemusement.

One thing I've had to do is finish a book that's been in progress for more than a year. It's the end. It has to be finished. There is no more noodling around with plot points while I clean the farthest reaches of my kitchen cabinets; no more ducking the reality that books are *written*, not thought. The girls and I know, all through those weeks when we're kind of messing around, thinking the whole thing is pretty fun, that it's not such a bad thing to be a writer, that we will, eventually, have to

enter a period of blazing, deep immersion in the work, where nothing in the outside world is real.

Here is my confession: I'm a burst writer. No matter how I try to be a sensible sort, one who sits down and reliably produces my five pages per day, five days a week, week in, week out; no matter how often I lie to myself and say that I am that kind of disciplined person, and no matter how much Roberta, the pigeon-bosomed grandmother who shepherds the girls into shape, would *like* me to be that kind of a writer, I'm just not. My books are mostly written in bursts.

I write all the time, you understand, probably at least a few pages, sometimes quite a lot of them, every single day between journals (always written long hand), emails (I only count the longish ones to friends as real writing, not the little bits we all do nearly every day now), columns for my website and this newsletter, character notes and free writing on books in progress. I've thought sometimes there's something a teeny bit wrong with me that I have such a compulsion to put everything on the page. On days when I'm working

particularly hard on books, I notice I turn to writing emails in the evenings to decompress, or I write a long, free-form, ambling journal.

Day in, day out, I write

pages on books, too, of course. Two or six or nine. I noodle around with plot points. I draw charts and map out character journeys in a combination of colored markers. I collect things like the vintage Max Factor cat holding its bottle of *Hypnotique* perfume and the postcards that contributed to another book.

But there comes a point, every time, when a book requires a kind of immersion that takes me into a world I find fairly difficult to live in for very long—two or three weeks at most. While I'm there, the only real world is Book World. I am quite disoriented through this period, very scattered, very irresponsible. The immersion period makes it as hard to live in the real world as it must to be mentally ill. (And I was going to add an addendum to that, and say, except my world is pleasant, but I suspect the worlds of some people who are mentally ill have a very pleasant alternate universe, and my book worlds are sometimes not.)

Until five days ago, that's where I was—in Book World. This particular one was a dark place, a grimy European backdrop, much of it taking place late at night, or in the rain, on lonely roads. The girls were having a grand time of it, I must tell you. They put up

world maps on the walls with little colored pins stuck in various locations: Paris, Arran Island off the west coast of Scotland, Bucharest (did you know there is a jewel of a park in downtown Bucharest, with a lovely lake?). My teenager, Hilary, went into total French mode and smoked long dark cigarettes and found a bunch of great scarves to wear. She dug three red lipsticks from the back of my makeup drawer, and wore a different one every day, and when I was casting about for a neighborhood for the sort-of hero to live in, she reminded me of the medieval house my friend and I found in the Marais district.

It was what Natalie Goldberg calls “wild mind” for all of us, full-throttle, full speed ahead *play*. It has to get to that point, to wild mind immersion, in order to get the book done. For the final two weeks, I was doing almost nothing but writing. My son and his friends were on notice, and crept into the house with lowered voices, and scurried to the back rooms away from my office as quickly as possible. Several times, I wrote late into the night and woke up again three or four hours later, ready for the page again. Twice, I decamped to a friend's empty house to write away from my phone, my email, my dogs and cats and the boy. In repayment, I crawled out of my hole at the end of the day and picked up soup and bread at Whole Foods (which looked robust and brilliant after the darkness of my pages, the tomatoes so absurdly huge and red, the bread so hearty and nourishing, the scent of brewing coffee so very reassuringly American). Even I, even on deadline, cannot screw up store-bought soup and bread.

Not the same story back at home, where I'm less likely to pay attention to meals, and tend to graze all day instead, an egg for breakfast, some peanut butter toast, 10 billion pumpkin seeds that turn the inside of my mouth to wrinkles, four gallons of hot tea, another two of coffee, and four big bottles of Pellegrino with fresh lime because it makes me feel virtuous (and probably rehydrates me after all that coffee and tea). Back at home, I awakened one morning to discover there was no more whole milk for my coffee. I'd poured out the last drops of skim the day before, and I didn't have a cracker, piece of bread, or scrap of cheese to eat. How did that happen? I stood there in the decimated kitchen, wondering when everything got so demolished.

It was just Book World. Lacking the luxury of a housekeeper or secretary or cook and bottle washer, I am required to show up in the real world on a regular basis, but living in that book world means I'm not really HERE, I'm THERE.

Which is why it can only last a few weeks. While I might be a somewhat eccentric sort at times, and I really can eat chicken noodle soup and peanut butter crackers and apples (notice none of these items ▶





The Girls in the Basement . . .

► spoil) for lunch every single day when I'm in immersion mode, after a few weeks, I start to feel disoriented and upset by the need to straddle both worlds.

For whatever reason, the process requires me to go live in the book world for a little while, so I do. The girls and I camp in whatever world it is. We live, eat, sleep, dream, walk in Book World. This is when I make mistakes buying clothes, and eat things it would never occur to me to eat under other circumstances, and forget that I have blond hair, not dark. Like an Alzheimer's patient who is living in the past of her own life, I forget this reality and leave the burners on the stove.

So I have learned to be a burst writer, and let the pages come spilling out in great heaps over a few weeks toward the end of a book. Then I crawl away. Sometimes it's only upstairs to my bedroom where I watch movies for days, or read and read and nap endlessly. Sometimes, I'm lucky enough to get away completely, as now, to recharge and regroup. The point is to give the girls some new thoughts, images, dreams, objects to put into the emptied drawers of our imagination.

And get ready to start again.

Barbara Samuel collected green sea glass, took a ferry ride and a float plane, and hiked many miles in Vancouver and Vancouver Island and Victoria before coming back to Colorado, where it is snowing and the girls are whining.

Bits'n'Pieces

HarperPerennial Breaks in Two

In July 2005 the Perennial imprint will present a smaller list of 6,000 literary fiction and *serious* nonfiction titles for reading groups and other readers with like profiles.

The titles previous under Perennial, more in the pop culture vein from fiction to sports (your not serious non-fiction), will have a quiet launch in the fall under a paperback list called Harper, and a bigger launch sometime in 2006. According to executives their more sought-after readers also read the *New Yorker*, seek out Salon.com, listen to NPR and watch BBC America on cable. Their "clearer editorial focus" came from profiles collected from over 700,000 consumers as they signed up for author tour updates and reader's newsletters.

Stephen King on Pulp Fiction

"Hard Case Crime presents good, clean, bare-knuckled storytelling, and even though *The Colorado Kid* is probably more bleu than outright noir, I think it has some of those old-fashioned kick-ass story-telling virtues. It ought to; this is where I started out, and I'm pleased to be back."

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