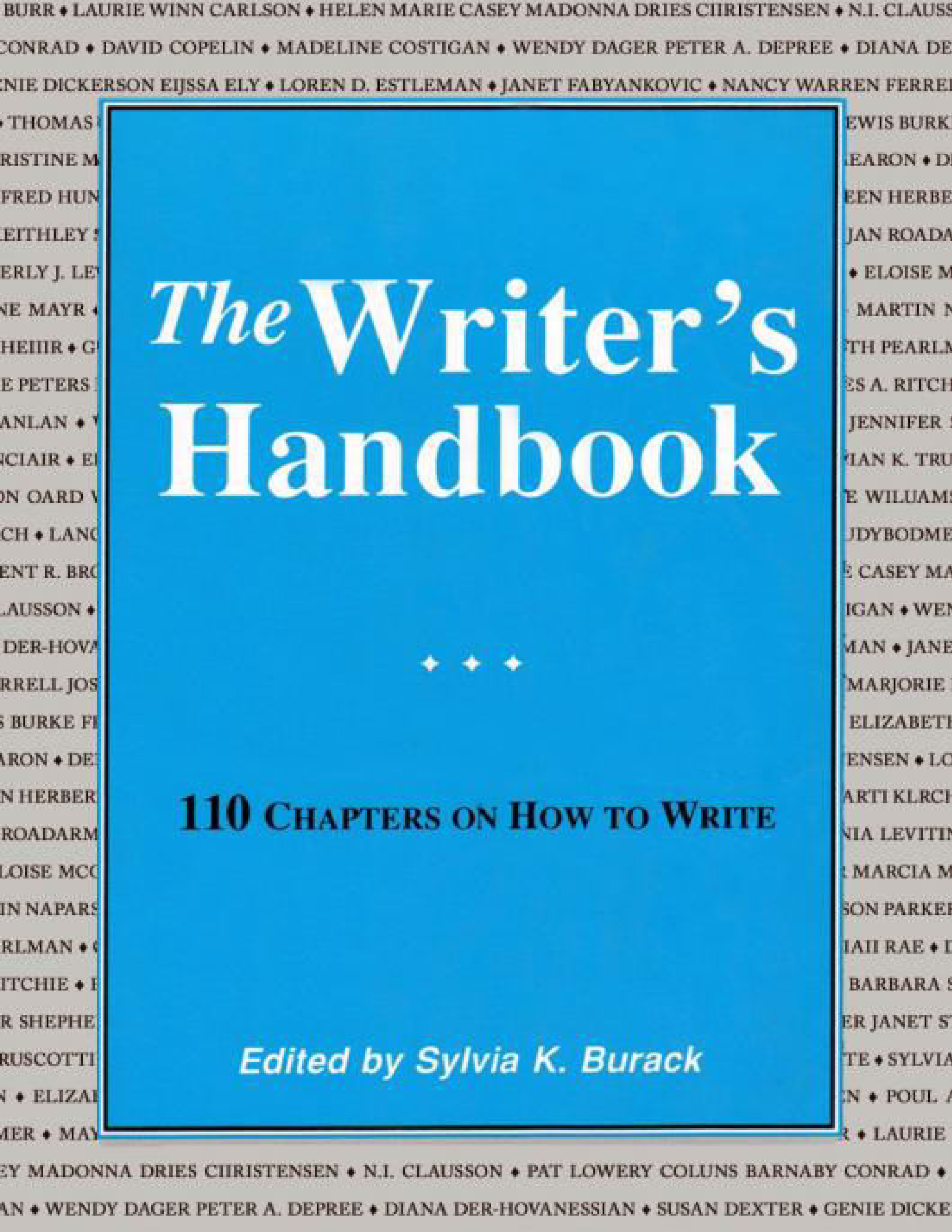
The Writer's Handbook
110 Chapters on How to Write
Edited by Sylvia K. Burack

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1999

BACKGROUND FOR WRITERS

1
TOOLS OF THE WRITER'S TRADE

By Christopher Scanlan

In Shakespeare's time, itinerant actors who took their plays from village to town carried bags bulging with the tools of their art— scraps of costume, props, jars of paint. A writer's tools can be every bit as colorful and creative, and they won't take up as much room. Rummage through your memory and imagination to see if you find long-forgotten tools you can dust off.

Here are the tools I found and use: a tightrope, a net, a pair of shoes, a loom, six words, an accelerator pedal, and a time clock.

A tightrope

Take a risk with your writing every day. Submit to the magazine of your dreams. Conceive the next Great American Novel. The risks I've taken as a writer—pitching an ambitious project, calling for an interview with a reputed mobster, sending a short story back out in the mail the day it returned in my self-addressed envelope—have opened new doors and, more important, encouraged me to take other risks. Stretch an imaginary tightrope above your desk and walk across it every day.

A net

The best writers I know cast trawler's nets on stories. And they cast them wide and deep. They'll interview ten people, listening and waiting, to get the one quote that sums up the theme. They'll spend hours trolling for the anecdote that reveals the story. They'll sift through records and reports, looking for the one specific that explains the universal or the detail that captures the person or conveys the setting. I once wrote a story about a family in Utah whose daughter was a suspected victim of serial murderer Ted Bundy. During my visit, I noticed that a light switch next to the front door had a piece of tape over it so no one could turn it off. When I asked about it, the mother said she always left the light on until her daughter came home. The light had been burning for twelve years, a symbol of one family's unending grief.

A pair of shoes

Empathy, an ability to feel what another person feels, may be the writer's most important tool. Empathy is different from sympathy: It's one thing to feel sorry for a rape victim; it's another to imagine and write persuasively to recreate the constant terrors and distrust sown in the victim's mind. To write about a young widow in my story "School Uniform," I had to imagine the problems of a woman coping with her own grief and that of her children:

> After the funeral, Maddy had made sure that each child had something of Jim's. It was torture to handle his things, but she spread them out on their bed one night after the children were asleep and made choices. Anna draped his rosary from the mirror on her makeup table; Martin kept his paper route money secured in his father's silver money clip. Brian filled the brass candy dish that Jim used as an ashtray with his POGS and Sega Genesis cartridges. Daniel kept his baseball cards in Jim's billfold. There were days she wished she could have thrown everything out, and had she been alone, she might have moved away, started somewhere fresh with nothing to remind her of what had been, all she had lost when he died, leaving her at 38 with four children. And on nights like this, when there was trouble with Daniel, again, she wanted to give up.

When you write about a character, try to walk in that person's shoes.

A loom

Writers, like all artists, help society understand the connections that bind us. They identify patterns. Raymond Carver said, "writing is just a process of connections. Things begin to connect. A line here, a word here." Are you weaving connections in your stories? In your reading? In your life? Are you asking yourself what line goes to what line, and what makes a whole? "Only connect!" urged E.M. Forster. Turn your computer into a loom that weaves stories.

Six words

Thinking is the hardest part about writing and the one writers are likeliest to bypass. When I'm writing nonfiction, I try not to start writing until I've answered two questions: "What's the news?" and "What's the story?" Whatever the genre—essay, article or short story—effective writing conveys a single dominant message. To discover that theme or focus, try to sum up your story in six words, a phrase that captures the tension of the story For a story about a teenage runaway hit by a train and rescued by another teen, my six words are "Lost, Then Found, On the Tracks." Why six words? No reason, except that in discipline, there is freedom.

An accelerator pedal

Free writing is the writer's equivalent of putting the pedal to the metal. I often start writing workshops by asking

participants to write about "My Favorite Soup." It loosens the fingers, memory, and imagination. I surprised myself recently by describing post-Thanksgiving turkey soup:

> Most holidays have a "Do Not Resuscitate" sign on them. At the end of Christmas everybody vows that next year will be different, we'll pick names, not buy for everybody. It's too expensive, too time-consuming. But turkey soup puts a holiday on a respirator for a few more days of life, enough time to remember and savor the memories of the family around the table.

Speeding on a highway is a sure-fire route to an accident, but doing it on the page or computer screen creates an opportunity for fortunate accidents—those flashes of unconscious irony or insight that can trigger a story or take you and your readers deeper into one.

A time clock

Writers write. It's that simple—and that hard. If you're not writing regularly and for *at least* 15 minutes before your day job, then you're not a writer. Many times I resist; the writing is terrible, I'm too tired, I have no ideas, and then I remember that words beget other words. I stifle my whining and set to work, just for a little while, I tell myself. Almost always, I discover writing I had never imagined before I began, and those are the times I feel most like a writer. Put an imaginary time clock on your desk, right next to your computer. Punch in.

2
BREAKING THE RULES

By Alison Sinclair

Hands up, everyone who has ever been told, "Write What You Know."

Hands up, everyone who has heard, "Show, Don't Tell."

If there's a writer who hasn't heard either at some point early in his or her career, I'd consider that person fortunate indeed.

(They've surely heard the third—Stand up, please, anyone who hasn't—"You'll Never Make a Living at It!")

Though intolerant of abusers of the common apostrophe, I am a tender-hearted soul. I will not advocate the slaughtering of sacred cows, even in metaphor, but I would advocate firmly turning them out to pasture. Here's why.

1) Writers should *not* be urged to write what they know. They should be urged to write what they care about, care about passionately, argu-mentatively, gracelessly, if need be. Knowledge can be acquired, whether through books, the world wide web, or stoking or stroking an expert. (People love to talk about their own personal passions.) Knowledge can be acquired in the absence of caring. Ask any diligent student working just for a grade, or a responsible adult making a living in a job he or she dislikes. But caring, unlike knowledge, cannot be acquired at second hand. Knowledge gives writing authority—I cannot dispute that—but caring gives writing life.

A few years ago, in Canada, where I now live, and in particular amongst the community of women writers, there came a call that women of the majority culture (i.e., white) should not impersonate, in writing, minority characters. It was an act of appropriation. In one respect, I could see the justice of it, that the way would be cleared for writers from minorities to speak in their own voice. In another, I could see that it struck at the fundamental nature of writing. By raising "write what you know (and ***only*** what you know)" to a formal impera-tive, the imaginative projection of experience unalike one's own—experience not known but imagined—was denied. The controversy has settled, but I remember it, the questions it raised about balancing social justice and imaginative liberties, and the threat I felt it posed to the life of the imagination.

2) Every writing book somewhere says, "Show, don't tell." That phrase should come with a health warning: "Keep out of reach of novices." Like cellophane wrapping, it can suffocate. As many beginning writers do, I believed it. In my first novel, a character went out to meet a woman about whom he'd heard a great deal. So he got out bed, got dressed, went downstairs, had a conversation with other people in the house, and he was given an errand, which he did, which led to another conversation, and he walked downhill. I described everything he saw on the way, and ten pages on he finally met her. It was a good meeting, if I say so myself, but when the book was accepted (not, I suspect, for what I had done, but for what the editor thought I might yet do), the editor decreed Cut. And cut I did. I discovered, under her rigorous tutelage, that you show only what you absolutely have to, tell what you can't avoid, and leave the rest out. The final version of that chapter had my couple face to face in two-and-a-half pages. They went on to have a turbulent though happy life together (most of it long after the final line of the book because that had nothing to do with the problem set up in the first chapter). Paragraphs and paragraphs of "showing" were dispensed with in a few sentences or even words. And the book was by far the better for it.

Even in a 150,000-word novel, there is no space for "show," no scenes that can be given over to "I just wanted to show that this society was egalitarian." If these things are part of the story, they will be revealed through the action. If they are not, they are irrelevant; they can be narrated, briefly, or left out. "Tell" is a powerful tool for keeping minor matters in their place.

3) There are any number of Rules propounded for writers (which in itself is probably a reflection of Maugham's Three Rules, noted below. Nothing generates regulation like uncertainty): One must write one thousand words every day (honored more in the breach than in the observance; writers have lives, too). Never start a novel with dialogue (did anybody tell Tolstoy?). Do not talk about your writing; you'll talk it out; or alternatively, If you can't tell someone else your plot, it's no good. Novels about (fill in the blank) do not sell, etc.

For every writer who swears by a Rule, there is one as good, as successful, as sagacious and temperate, who breaks it. For myself, I believe in Somerset Maugham's Three Rules, Le Guin's Advice, and Granny Weatherwax's Principle. Maugham observed that there were Three Rules of Writing; unfortunately, no one knows what they are. Le Guin's Advice (from *The Language of the Night):* "No matter how any story begins, it ends typed in good, clear, black text on

one side of white paper, with name and address on each page."[1]

Granny Weatherwax's Principle is: "When you break the rules, break 'em good and hard."

3
FACING UP TO TIME

By Elizabeth Yates

It was a startling question, and it came from a fourth-grader in a small group of children who had come to talk with me about writing: "Has aging improved your writing?" I had to think for a moment. The other questions had been fairly routine: How long does it take to write a book? What can I do when I get stuck in the middle? Where do I get an idea? But this was one directed at me, where I am now, even before that, the years of apprenticeship and the long years of work with their richness and their agony, even up to this very moment. Thinking back I found my answer, and it was unequivocal: "Yes, because life is a learning process, and the longer we live, the more we become aware of this."

I wanted to give these children an instance, so I told them of the time when an idea had come to me with such insistency that I had to act on it. It could not be shelved, or put away in a notebook. It was when I was standing by the stone that marked the grave of Amos Fortune in the old cemetery in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Reading the eloquent though brief words about a man whose life spanned from Africa in 1715 to America in 1801, I wanted to know more, to find the story within those lines. The idea took hold of me, or I of it, and I knew that nothing must keep me from following it. A line of William Blake's came to mind: "He who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in eternity's sunrise." Months of research were before me, months of work, the writing and then the careful revision, but finally when the words looked up at me from the page, I felt right about them. So, more than ever, I want to take hold of the idea that grips me, not because time may be running out on me, but because of the marvelous freshness.

Something else I have been learning has to do with the aptness of words. There are times when the one I think I want won't come to mind, so I leave a blank and decide to return to it when the flow of creativity has run itself out. James Barrie in *Sentimental Tommie* tells of a small boy in school (I'm sure it was Barrie himself) when the class was writing essays, and the word he wanted eluded him. Trying to find it, he forgot about time, but the clock did not, and when the hour was up, the boy had little on his page. However, much later he did find the word and returned to tell it to the teacher. I leave a blank, and when I get back with time to search the treasure trove of words tucked away in my mind, I come upon the one I want. I fill in the blank with it and smile inwardly, for it is right, so much better than the one I might hastily have used. Startling in its aptness, I cherish it and add it to my immediate store of words, but not until I have gone to my faithful *Webster's Collegiate* to confirm the meaning. Am I really right? Oh, dear delight, I am righter than right!

"Have you ever regretted anything you've written?" came the next question. Again, I sent my mind back over the years and their books. The answer was at hand, and it was *No,* for I have had a rule with myself that nothing ever leaves my desk unless it is the best I can do at the time with the material I have. Then I go back to Amos Fortune as an example.

The idea that took hold of me as I stood by that stone in the old churchyard and that became the book *Amos Fortune, Free Man* was written in 1949 and published a year later. All the pertinent, reliable material that I could find went into the book and became the story. It could not be a biography but an account of a man's life, with facts assured and some imaginative forays based on the temper of the times. The research, the writing, was done long before the Civil Rights upheavals of the 60's. I might today write a very different story, but that was then.

The final question, "How will I know when to stop?," was one that I did not have to search my mind to answer. "When you have said what you wanted to say and feel satisfied." I could see in these children's faces that they wanted me to go further. "Your story may take many pages, or not so many, but stop when you have told the story you set out to tell and are pleased with it, for you are the one who must be pleased." In my own thinking, I recalled words of Sydney Cox in his small book. *Indirections,* which, for me, says everything that needs to be said about writing: ". . . the end of a story should leave the reader with an upward impulse and a kind of peace."

Often a P.S. can be the most important part of a letter, and I had one for the children. It is something I have always known but not always heeded. It is listening to my inner voice, and I find myself giving it more and more attention. So, I am still learning.

4
DOING IT FOR LOVE

By Erica Jong

Despite all the cynical things writers have said about writing for money, the truth is we write for love. That is why it is so easy to exploit us. That is also why we pretend to be hard-boiled, saying things like "No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money" (Samuel Johnson). Not true. No one but a blockhead ever wrote except for love.

There are plenty of easier ways to make money. Almost anything is less labor-intensive and better paid than writing. Almost anything is safer. Reveal yourself on the page repeatedly, and you are likely to be rewarded with exile, prison or neglect. Ask Dante or Oscar Wilde or Emily Dickinson. Scheme and betray, and you are likely to be rewarded with wealth, publicity and homage. Tell the truth, and you are likely to be a pariah within your family, a semi-criminal to authorities and damned with faint praise by your peers. So why do we do it? Because saying what you think is the only freedom. "Liberty," said Camus, "is the right not to lie."

In a society in which everything is for sale, in which deals and auctions make the biggest news, doing it for love is the only remaining liberty. Do it for love and you cannot be censored. Do it for love and you cannot be stopped. Do it for love and the rich will envy no one more than you. In a world of tuxedos, the naked man is king. In a world of bookkeepers with spreadsheets, the one who gives it away without counting the cost is God.

I seem to have known this from my earliest years. I never remember a time when I didn't write. Notebooks, stories, journals, poems—the act of writing always made me feel centered and whole. It still does. It is my meditation, my medicine, my prayer, my solace. I was lucky enough to learn early (with my first two books of poetry and my first novel) that if you are relentlessly honest about what you feel and fear, you can become a mouthpiece for something more than your own feelings. People are remarkably similar at the heart level—where it counts. Writers are born to voice what we all feel. That is the gift. And we keep it alive by giving it away.

It is a sacred calling. The writers I am most drawn to understand it as such: Thomas Merton, Pablo Neruda, Emily Dickinson. But one doesn't always see the calling clearly as one labors in the fields of love. I often find myself puzzling over the choices a writer is given. When I am most perplexed, I return to my roots: poetry. The novel is elastic: It allows for social satire, cooking, toothbrushes, the way we live now. Poetry, on the contrary, boils down to essences. I feel privileged to have done both.

And I am grateful to have found my vocation early. I was also blessed to encounter criticism early. It forced me to listen to my inner voice, not the roar of the crowd. This is the most useful lesson a writer can learn.

Lately, we keep hearing dire warnings about the impending death of the novel. As one who has written frankly autobiographical fiction *(Fear of Flying*), historical fiction *(Fanny, Serenissima* or *Shylock's Daughter)* and memoir (*Fear of Fifty* and *The Devil at Large)*, I think I've begun to understand how the process of making fiction differs from that of making memoir. A memoir is tethered to one's own experience in a particularly limiting way: The observing consciousness of the book is rooted in a real person. That person may be fascinating, but he or she can never be as rich and subtle as the characters that grow out of aspects of the author. In the memoir, the "I" dominates. In the novel, the "I" is made up of many "I"s. More richness is possible, more points of view, deeper imitation of life.

When I finished *Fear of Fifty*, I felt I had quite exhausted my own life and might never write another book. What I eventually discovered was that the process had actually liberated me. Having shed my own autobiography, I now felt ready to invent in a new way. I wanted to write a novel about the 20th century and how it affected the lives of women. I wanted to write a novel about a Jewish family in the century' that nearly saw the destruction of the Jewish people.

I began by reading history and literature for a year. And when I started to write again, it was in the voice of a woman who might have been my great-grandmother. Liberated from my place and time, I found myself inventing a woman's voice quite different from my own. But as I began to fashion this alternate family history, I found myself at play in the fields of my imagination. Characters sprang up like mushrooms after the rain. I couldn't wait to get to work in the morning to see what I thought and who was going to embody it.

Eventually I found I had four heroines, born in different decades, and that they were all mothers and daughters. Each had a distinctive voice and way of looking at the world. Each was me and not me.

Graham Greene once said, "The more the author knows of his own character the more he can distance himself from his invented characters and the more room they have to grow in."

That seems to me precisely right. A novelist's identity is fixed. Her character, however, can fly.

A character may even access some deep memory in the writer's brain that seemed lost forever. Fictional characters excavate real memories. Flaubert, after all, claimed to be Emma Bovary and gave her his restlessness and discontent. In some ways an author may be freer to expose himself in a character unlike himself. There is liberty behind a mask. The mask may become the condition for speaking the truth.

The line between novel and autobiography has never been as blurry as it is in our century. And this is probably a good thing. The novel endures because it mimics truth. So if we find truths in autobiography in our age, even fiction will come to mimic that genre. And genres themselves matter less and less. The most enduring books of the modern era are, like *Ulysses,* full of exposition, narrative, dramatic writing and even poetry.

As a reader, I want a book to kidnap me into its world. Its world must make my so-called real world seem flimsy. Its world must lure me to return. When I close the book, I should feel bereft.

How rare this is and how grateful I am to find it. The utter trust that exists between reader and author is like the trust between lovers. If I feel betrayed by the author, I will never surrender to him or her again.

That trust is why it is so hard to start a new book. You must find the right voice (or voices) for the timbre that can convince the reader to give himself up to you. Sometimes it takes years to find the tone of voice that unlocks the story.

The books we love best kidnap us with the first line. "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (*David Copperfield).* "You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* but that ain't no matter" *(Huckleberry Finn).* It's not only the question of an arresting opening— the writer's best trick—but of letting the main character's quirks show, too. I tried it myself in *Fear of Flying:* "There were 117 analysts on the Pan Am flight to Vienna, and I'd been treated by at least six of them." And it's easier to do in the first person than in the third.

But as I said in the beginning, you must do it for love. If you do it for money, no money will ever be enough, and eventually you will start imitating your first successes, straining hot water through the same old teabag. It doesn't work with tea, and it doesn't work with writing. You must give all you have and never count the cost. ("Sit down at the typewriter and open a vein," as Red Smith said.)

Every book I have written has subsumed all the struggles of the years in which I wrote it. I don't know how to hold back. Editing comes only after the rush of initial feeling. I end up cutting hundreds of pages sometimes. But in the writing process, I let it all hang out. Later I and my editor chop.

Generosity is the soul of writing. You write to give something. To yourself. To your reader.

5
WHAT EMILY DICKINSON KNEW

By Helen Marie Casey

If there's one thing Emily Dickinson knew for sure, it was what a good poem should do. "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry," she wrote.

Dickinson was attempting to describe for her sister-in-law the power of poetry to envelop and even to devastate the reader (or listener). Her physical description was an effort to convey that successful poems are not effete passages or bookish exercises; they are chillingly annihilating. They have the power to alter us irrevocably.

Poetry, the Belle of Amherst knew, is that form of communication in which words are never simple equivalents of experience or perception. The words themselves, the words as words, have a life as sounds, as images, as the means for generating a series of associations.

Contemporary poet and critic Ann Lauterbach claims that "For poets, the world is apprehended *as* language . . . Every object in the world is simultaneously itself and its word." It is impossible to put too much weight on the importance of each individual word. Yet, paradoxically, poetry is that art form in which what is unsaid is often as important—or more important—than what is said. And, to the bewilderment of some, it is a literary genre in which the voice, the tone, the texture, and the poetic form—that is, the way of saying what the poem is saying—are also fundamental parts of what is being said.

Poets are certainly not the only writers to concern themselves with the simultaneous life of language as symbol *and* as nonreferential but it is poets who most seem to insist on seeing and hearing words as if each is a multi-faceted gem that has, in the hands of the skillful artist, the capacity to resonate and to go in multiple directions at once.

Take, for example, the lines that begin the Wallace Stevens poem, "The Course of a Particular":

> Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,
> Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
> It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

Syntactically, the lines are constructed like direct prose statements. Yet, we know that leaves do not, in fact, cry. We recognize that we are dealing with language used imaginatively, language used to do something other than simply deliver a message.

We recognize immediately that mood will be part of what we derive from the poem and that the images—*wind, winter, icy shades, snow, leaves crying*—will be part of the way the poem says what it wants to say.

We recognize in words like *still, shades,* and *shapen snow,* a recurrent "s" sound. Looking back over the first two lines we hear additional "s" sounds in the endings of the words *leaves, branches, nothingness, becomes, less,* and *shades.*

The repetition of "win" in *wind* and *winter* is the repetition of a sound that requires us to blow out as wind itself blows.

In poetry, the sounds, shadings, color, and associative values of the words are every bit as important as the specific denotative meanings. This does not mean that the language of poetry is imprecise. On the contrary, there is absolutely nothing arbitrary about a poet's choice of vocabulary or about the manner in which the poet arranges and juxtaposes the words selected. There is nothing superfluous in poems that work.

The reason many readers keep their distance from poetry is probably best captured by the observation of a student who wrote, "The trouble with poems is they start out to be about one thing, and then they end up being about something else." What the student understood is that part of the magic of poetry is its ability to sustain multiple levels of meaning, to be at once literally what it seems to be and also to exist, because of the power of suggestion, on a figurative level. What is frustrating to her is the richness and texture of a successful poem. What she thinks she would like is a straightforward description in which everything is laid out clearly.

It is the misperception that poems ought to be easy to apprehend that leads so many beginning poets to mistrust the powers of allusion and suggestion and to err by telling all. They bore readers and deny them the thrill of discovery. In addition, they often believe that ambiguity is some kind of writing sin and fail to see that, in fact, intentional ambiguity can be the source of irony, humor, foreboding, and thematic weight in a poem.

If there were a single question that might be a productive springboard to the creation of richer poems, it might well be

this: Have I wholly engaged the imagination of my readers by creating the path we shall traverse together and then purposefully stopped short on it, allowing the reader to go on without me?

There is, of course, no single solution to the question of how to write effectively, but I am inclined to trust Marianne Moore's observation in her poem, "Bowls": "Only so much colour shall be revealed as is necessary to the picture."

6
REWRITING

By Lucian K. Truscott IV

I suppose the term "rewriting" comes from my years as a journalist, but I think the notion of rewriting instead of mere revision also sums up my attitude about going at the work you have just done. I don't look at a second draft as revision. I look at it as doing the whole damn thing again.

I've lived in Hollywood for almost seven years now and have worked steadily writing screenplays ever since. I have learned a thing or two about rewriting from working under contract to the major studios. The way it works is this: You come up with an idea for a movie; you go around to various producers and/or studio executives and you pitch the idea, and if you're really, really, *really* lucky, somebody bites, you get a contract for a screen play, and you write the thing. You hand it in and wait a couple of weeks. They call you in for a meeting, and one of the executives says something like this (actually said to me in a meeting with a major studio executive): "You know the dead girl on page 18? She was incredibly sexy, and I think she'd make a great lead character. Don't you think we could have her solve the murder, and have somebody else get killed?"

Now if they insist on something like that, what you end up with is not *revision* but *rewriting,* which has been incredibly instructive to my life as a novelist.

I have learned one thing of immeasurable value in Hollywood: If a work can withstand such an elemental question as the one above, it can withstand anything. So, after a couple of years in the trenches, I concluded that the studio executives were not the only ones who could ask hard questions or raise outrageous points about my work.

So could I.

In this way, I learned to be my own worst critic. I started out doing it with screenplays, but the process bled naturally into work on novels.

You sit down and write a first draft, and you give it a rest for awhile— say a month or two, if you've got the time; if not, a week or two might suffice. Then you get back into the things and start to ask yourself hard questions: What is it that *works* about this piece, and what is it that *doesn't* work?

If you go at it hard enough, you'll come up with something, and having identified an element or two that doesn't work, you then throw out what doesn't work and start something new.

This can be quite a shock if you figure out that the crux of the movie or the book just isn't holding up, because that means you are very definitely going to be doing some rewriting and not mere revision.

This happened to me when I began working on rewriting my most recent novel. *Full Dress Gray,* the sequel to my first novel. *Dress Gray.* Because we were on a tight publication deadline, the publisher notified me that I would have to complete a second draft within two months. I sat down and started and went at it eight to ten hours a day. The first 102 pages were O.K. But from page 103 on, I ended up writing what amounted to an entirely new book, and by this I mean, everything got shifted around, nothing in the story ended up in the same sequence as in the first draft, new characters were created, and characters who had been minor players blossomed into superstars. In fact, the daughter of they guy who had been the main character started asserting herself and ended up taking over the book.

What I learned from rewriting movies is to let it happen. It's a bit daunting at first to look at 600 pages of manuscript and realize that every page from 102 to 702 is going to change, but the best thing to do is just let it rip. I have found when you ask yourself the hard questions the answers start coming, and when you let the answers take over, you are well on your way to making the novel everything it can be. When you start second-guessing yourself and try to protect what you have done too much, then you get in the way of your own creative energies and run the risk of defending the status quo at the cost of allowing something new and wonderful to be born.

There's one other thing I have learned writing movies, what I'd call the portability of scenes—in the case of novels, sometimes entire *chapters.* Just because you write chapter 15 after chapter 14 doesn't mean that it couldn't become chapter 12 when you're rewriting somewhere down the line. In my rewrite o*(Full Drew Gray* my editor spied a fault of logic in the story. Something that was explained in one way by the main characters about halfway through the book was again explained by a doctor one chapter later. So I exchanged the chapters, had the doctor make the discovery and explain the medical reasons for the event. In the next chapter, by changing about three sentences, I had the main characters reacting to this news and putting their own spin on it.

Of course in a movie, scenes can be much more discrete, self-contained, but there is a tendency in telling a story in the prose of a novel to believe that once your tale has been written, the sequence shouldn't be terribly disturbed in revision.

Balderdash. Rewrite the thing. Give it an entirely different order if for no other reason than just to see if you can do it. But better still, ask the difficult questions...what *works* and what *doesn't* work, and having learned the answers, go ahead and tell the tale another way.

7
CONFESSIONS OF A LAZY RESEARCHER

By Nancy Springer

I loathe research. all through school I knew I could never be a writer, because writers are supposed to love research, and I detest it. I *hate* digging for picky little facts! I want to tell stories; I don't want to worry about the *details!* My aversion to research paralyzed me so badly that I didn't start writing novels until I had a brain spasm in which I thought that I wouldn't have to worry about research if I wrote fantasy. (Wrong!) Since then I have published realistic novels for children and young adults, horror, mainstream, mystery, some non-fiction. Of necessity, I've learned to handle research. Want to know how? The lazy way, that's how.

The Internet, you're thinking? Nope. I surf not, nor have I yet set foot on the Information Super-Highway. I spend quite enough of my time hunched in front of a computer screen. Anyway, all the techno-hoopla annoys me. I'm contrary by nature; this trait has served me well as a fiction writer.

So, you're thinking, she spends of lot of time in the library. Not me. The air always seems gray in a library. And the book I need is always out, or the copy is missing, or it's at another library, and anyway, you can't keep the books long enough. Once every month or two I might venture into the library for something.

So how do I research? In a sense, my whole life is research: to try to pay attention, to be observant. The kinds of information you need for fiction writing you can't find in reference books—smells, textures, color nuances, slang, dialect, jokes, bumper stickers, tattoos, the taste of fast food. . . . Most of what you need to know, you learn best in your everyday life. I keep notebooks to help me remember what I have learned. Nothing's a total waste, not even visiting Aunt Marge; you might use her flamingo lamps in a book sometime. Moreover, being a writer gives you a great excuse to do fun things: horseback camping, scuba diving in a quarry, painting your body blue—whatever. Being a writer gives you all the more reason to have a life.

To supplement real life as research, I read nonfiction for pleasure. The more I write fiction, the more I hunger for intriguing, quirky non-fiction, and my taste in pleasure reading has become so esoteric it's almost pathological. I browse and prowl, I haunt book sales and yard sales and used bookstores. (I can never find the kind of book I want in a chain bookstore.) When everybody is saying, "I just want to read *Women Who Run With the Wolves*," I won't go near it. Instead, I read a book called *Frogs: Their Wonderful Wisdom, Follies and Foibles, Mysterious Powers, Strange Encounters, Private Lives, Symbolism & Meaning,* by Gerald Donaldson, and two books with frog themes eventually result.

At the time I read my finds, I have no idea how I will use them, if ever. It doesn't matter. I am reading for fun. Other favorite finds: *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste,* by Jane and Michael Stern: *Big Hair: A Journey into the Transformation of Self,* by Grant McCracken; and *The Book of Weird* (formerly *The Glass Harmonica),* by Barbara Ninde Byfield.

Other than this sort of goofing off, I do no research at all before I start to write a book. None.

I have my reasons for doing as little research as possible. One is financial. Time is money; I need to earn a living; I want to spend my work time writing, not researching. But the main reason I don't research before writing is simply that ideas don't stay fresh forever. When I get a book idea, I want to run with it, not diddle around gathering a lot of facts I might not even read.

When I'm ready with the idea for my next book, I sit down and write. As I write, I come up against research questions, of course. A lot of them I can finesse; over the years I've discovered that "facts" are not nearly as solid as I used to think—such as what kids wear, for instance, if I'm writing a YA. Ask ten different kids, and you'll get ten different answers, so I just ask one kid, my own, and let it go at that.

I take care of a lot of my research by yelling downstairs—my husband will tell me what model car the prospering pediatrician ought to drive this year. Other times, I might have to grab a book—over the years I have acquired a motley assortment of dictionaries and encyclopedias—or I might need to call that wonderful person, the reference librarian. Sometimes, though seldom, I have to write myself a note to verify something when I get time. Only very occasionally do I actually have to stop writing until I clear something up. Even then, the stoppage is usually only for a day, as compared to the three to six months a lot of writers spend on research before writing. In my not-so-humble opinion, there's a lot to be said for writing the book first, thereby finding out what you *really* need to find out. As a kind of fringe benefit, this method forces me to abide by that classic fiction-writing rule: Write What You Know.

After I finish the first draft, it usually takes me no more than a few days to get answers to any questions that might have come up, usually by means of that time-honored ploy of the lazy researcher: I ask somebody who is likely to know. For instance, with a question about guns, I call my brother, the ex-cop and quondam gunsmith. Chatting with him for ten minutes or so is a lot more pleasant and less time-consuming than reading a bunch of gun books. For a question about secondary sexual characteristics of turtles, I call a friend who's a naturalist. For medical questions, my sister-in-law the physician, et cetera .... The only drawback to this method is that sometimes it's hard to get the information you really need. Normal people don't think like writers, so even when you're asking a specific question—what color are toad guts?—they manage to give you a vague answer. For this reason, I often call fellow writers with research questions in their areas of expertise, and I find them much better than my sister-in-law at giving me the information I need.

Doing my research this way, I haven't spent an extra moment peering into a bilious computer screen. Instead, I have had an interesting conversation with a real human being.

That's how I handle my research, and I love it. I've published thirty books doing research this way. You might argue that I could write bigger books and make more money if I did more research, and you might be right. But I'm contrary: I'd rather write my books my way, and besides, I'd rather have a life.

8
THE STATUE IN THE SLAB

By Edith Pearlman

I am not one of those lucky writers into whose ears a thrilling tale is confided on a train, in front of whose eyes an anguished romance is enacted at a seaside hotel. My fictions begin as fragments, more irritating than inspiring. For instance: I find myself thinking of elderly Manhattan widows in apartments, resentfully growing frail. Or: In a dream a lost child and her mysteriously damaged younger sister, reunited, exchange a few surreal words. Also: I notice a patient waiting outside an X-ray office, shivering in his johnny. He is ignored by the surly attendant, who resembles a South American general.

No story yet—only pebbles in my shoe.

Standing at a distance from my desk, I glower. Then the ghost of Michelangelo taps me on the shoulder. Michelangelo claimed that he didn't create his statues but rather, released them. Find a slab of marble, he told younger artists; then take away everything that *isn't* the statue.

I need a slab of marble. And I can't order it from Carrara. I have to build it, myself, around one of those damned pebbles.

This slab, which will later be ruthlessly hacked at, must be first made pretty big. It must contain a believable city or village—I've set my tales all over the world. It must contain buildings with doors, roofs, back stairs—my stories have played themselves out in a tobacco shop, a soup kitchen, a museum, a pharmacy; in houses and lonely flats. The slab must hold history, and perhaps a vision of the future. Inside the slab lurk characters and their children and their handkerchiefs and their Uzis.

So I read. I read about the streets my characters walk in and the wars they endure; about the work they do; about the diseases hiding in their bodies; about the pills they crave and the drink they can't leave alone.

And I play. For the sake of one story, I lost innumerable games of chess. For the sake of another, I spent a week using my left hand only.

And I write. Sentences, paragraphs, pages; reminders on three-by-five cards; a string of adjectives on the back of a charge receipt. I arrange and rearrange my characters' biographies, and also their rooms. I imagine their fantasies and I dream their dreams. I turn them toward each other and then transcribe their stunned declarations of love, their helpless lies. I design their wardrobes, and I equip them with hobbies (more reading!) and enemies and possessions. This material will continue to pile up. Not a comma will be discarded until the story is finished, revised, ripped into pieces, begun again, finished again, revised again, submitted again *and* again, finally published. My manual typewriter does not know how to delete. My wastebasket holds pussy willows, not crumpled papers. My folders stretch and eventually split open; still, the dossier expands. Nothing leaves this room! That diamond pin which in an early draft seems too flashy for the heroine may, in the final draft, illuminate the entire story. That excessive metaphor, mercilessly pared, may become not only apt but irreplaceable.

What a mound of pages! At last it resembles a slab of marble. I walk around it, riffle silently through it—and, when I'm lucky, my tale's contour and its hinted truth reveal themselves in the depths of the slab. An elderly widow, visited wearily by her children one by one, will decide to leave her home: Independence can be cruelty. The lost child, before she finds her way back to her family, will foresee that her future is inseparable from her afflicted sister's: in chance begins responsibility. The X-ray technician, rattling on to a stranger about his bedeviled country, will learn from his own words and his own omissions the nature of loyalty: flexible as a snake.

The story cannot be as dense as the slab of details I've constructed. No reader wants to know the name of the coffee shop the widow visits daily; or the etiology of the condition of the younger sister; or the succession of rulers in the country the X-ray technician has fled. These chunks of information would only encumber a short story.

But I know the chunks of information. I designed the coffee shop and installed its tolerant proprietor; my widow loves what she must leave. I read a shelf of books about the younger sister's affliction; her sweet face is properly vacant, her gestures properly vague. I invented the corrupt regimes that the X-ray technician refers to only by their soubriquets—The Coffee Revolution, The Month of the Colonels.

Now I chip away at whatever is not necessary, and polish and repol-ish what's left—leaving, I hope, characters who are affecting and a situation that is tense and a resolution that is satisfying.

What a mess, this way of writing. It is lengthy and indirect; it ignores the notion that art is a free expression of self; it slams the door on autobiography; it leaves shards all over the floor.

On the other hand, efficiency is a third-rate virtue. Self-expression is often self-indulgence, best kept in firm check. Autobiography knows all too well how to creep in through the keyhole. And those shards— sometimes they lodge like pebbles in my shoe, and become the centers of new slabs to be doggedly built up and then doggedly reduced, until all that is left is the story.

9
SERENDIPITY AND THE WRITER

By C. J. Newton

serendipity, *n.* [coined by Horace Walpole (c. 1754) after his tale *The Three Princes of Serendip* (i.e. Ceylon), who made such discoveries.] an apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally.

—Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged

Recently when discussing my writing with a friend I sketched out my plans to finish one novel and start another, and gave specific dates for each stage. My friend was rather surprised at this "conscious control" of creativity. After we spoke, I realized that a writer must combine rational structure and method—for example, writing at a certain hour every day, or committing to write so many words per week—with the unplanned, magical side of writing that so often surprises us. We need to be open to serendipity.

The unsummoned inspirational component of writing is a subject for research by psychologists, a source of wonder for those who see it happen, and a mystery frequently to writers ourselves. I am not recommending that you dissect every creative experience. However, it can be useful to look at the circumstances that led to your inspiration, to the particular time and place at which the sudden torrent of associations, images, and dialogues opened like a cloudburst. You may find the influence of serendipity.

In my own case serendipity prompted me to visit a town, which inspired a novel, which led to another novel, which led to my first fiction sale.

For years while living in San Francisco I "intended" to visit Half Moon Bay, about 30 miles south. After eight years of intending, I drove there one evening on a twisting road through groves of eucalyptus trees. Through a clearing, I beheld the Pacific Ocean, and a rich small town. In a flash I *felt* a mystery novel—characters, settings, and plot outline—set there. I still can't explain it.

Here is the serendipitous part. Half Moon Bay has a Portuguese community that sponsors a picturesque annual parade. As I subsequently researched the town for my mystery, I became interested in Portugal's history.

And later, when I wanted to write a novel satirizing attorneys, I was able to apply my knowledge of Portuguese names, references, and culture in a convincing depiction of a fictional republic founded by Portugal in Central America. The result was *Costa Azul*, which I wrote after the mystery (but which found a publisher first). Half Moon Bay was a "fortunate discovery" indeed.

Travel

If you can afford it, travel to faraway places is very stimulating. Hearing French spoken on the busy streets of Montreal, seeing otherwise-modern people in Montevideo enjoying *maté* tea made from traditional gourds, hiking cobblestoned streets in Lisbon, passing café patrons who may be lovers, spies, or solid civil servants—all these can add fuel to your creative fire.

Adventure can be as close as your neighboring town. Like most teenagers I yearned to escape from my hometown for more exciting places. Yet I wasn't far from New Windsor, New York, the site of George Washington's last winter as Continental commander. Less famous than Valley Forge, the New Windsor Cantonment offered high drama as Washington battled his final enemies, and intrigue and boredom, as he waited to sign the Treaty of Paris that ended the war. I felt that this would be a perfect setting for a historical novel.

Take a new look at your neighboring towns. You may find rich material for historical or contemporary fiction.

Getting there

Tour Books from the American Automobile Association are great resources. Free to members, they include richly informative descriptions of overlooked gems like local museums and historical houses, complete with opening hours and admission prices.

Use public transportation. Once you accept the waiting as constructive idleness—a gift of time when you are free to let your mind wander or compose—you may actually enjoy the journey as much as the destination. It is pleasurable to leave the driving to the bus or train driver, and to look out the window. If public transportation is not practical, then drive

to a reasonable point and walk the rest of the way. You'll gain many impressions exploring the site on foot. Always bring a notebook to record them.

Feeding your creativity

Here is an outline for using an excursion to feed your creativity:

1. Carefully observe the physical look of the place: the grade of descent to a beach, or, in an urban setting, the names of streets and the architecture.

2. As an exercise, narrate your own movements. Try a first-person point of view, then switch to third person to describe your actions from the outside.

3. Observe people buying, selling, fishing, talking on cell phones, cutting hair, or unloading trucks. File them as background to your fictional construction.

4. Sketch a fictional character and motive for his or her being there, and walk the character through a few scenes.

5. Collect brochures and newspapers. Visit local bookstores, libraries, and museums.

6. If possible, travel home by a different route from the one you took to get there.

By varying your routine journeys, you can stimulate that part of your mind where inspiration visits. All roads can lead to serendipity.

10
THE JOURNEY INWARD

By Katherine Paterson

"Do you keep a journal?" no, I answer a bit red-faced, because I know that *real* writers keep voluminous journals so fascinating that the world can hardly wait until they die to read the published versions. But it's not quite true. I do make journal-like entries in used schoolgirl spiral notebooks, on odd scraps of paper, in fairly anonymous computer files. These notations are all so embarrassing that I am hoping for at least a week's notice to hunt them down and destroy all the bits and pieces before my demise.

I write these entries, you see, only when I can't write what I want to write. If they were collected and published, the reader could logically conclude that I was not only totally inept as a writer but that I lacked integration of personality at best, and at worst, was dangerously depressed.

If I had kept a proper journal, these neurotic passages would be seen in context, but such is not the case. If my writing is going well, why would I waste time talking about it? I'd be doing it. So if these notes survive me, they will give whatever segment of posterity might happen upon them a very skewed view of my mental state.

The reason I am nattering on about this is that I have come to realize that I am not alone. As soon as my books (after years of struggle) began to be published, I started to get questions from people that I had trouble answering in any helpful way: "Do you use a pen and pad or do you write on a typewriter?" (Nowadays, "computer" is always included in this question, but I'm talking about twenty years ago.)

"Whatever works," I'd say. Which was true. Sometimes I wrote first drafts by hand, sometimes on the typewriter; often I'd switch back and forth in an attempt to keep the flow going. The questioner would thank me politely, but, looking back, I know now that I had failed her.

"Do you have a regular schedule everyday or do you just write when you feel inspired?" the person would ask earnestly. I am ashamed to say, I would often laugh at this. "If I wrote only when I was inspired," I'd say, "I'd write about three days a year. Books don't get written in three days a year."

Occasionally, the question (and now, I know, all these were the same question) would be framed more baldly. "How do you begin?" "Well," I would say, "you sit down in front of the typewriter, roll in a sheet of paper and ..."

If I ever gave any of you one of those answers, or if any other writer has ever given you similar tripe, I would like to apologize publicly. I was asked, in whatever disguise, a truly important question, and I finessed the answer into a one-liner.

How *do* you begin? It is not an idle or trick question. It is a cry from the heart.

I know. That's what all those aborted journal notes are about. They are the cry when I simply cannot begin. When no inspiration ever comes, when neither pen, nor pencil, nor typewriter, nor state-of-the-art computer can unloose what's raging about inside me.

So what happens? Well, something must. I've begun and ended over and over again through the years. There are several novels out there with my name on the cover. Somehow I figured out how to begin. Once the book is finished, the memory of the effort dims—until you're trying to begin the next one.

Well, I'm there now. I have to begin again. What have I done those other times? How have I gotten from that feeling of stony hopelessness? How do I break through that barrier as hard as sunbaked earth to the springs of creativity?

Sometimes, I know, I have a conversation with myself on paper:

What's the matter?

What do you mean "what's the matter?" You know perfectly well. I want to write, but I can't think of a thing to say.

Not a single thing?

Not a single thing worth saying.

You're scared what you might say won't be up to snuff? Scared people might laugh at you? Scared you might despise yourself?

Well, it is scary. How do I know there's still anything in here?

You don't. You just have to let it (low. II you start judging, you'll cut off the flow—you've already cut off the flow from all appearances— before it starts.

Grump.

Ah yes, we never learn, do we? Whatever happened to that wonderful idea of getting up so early in the morning that the critic in you was still asleep?

How do I know it will work this time?

You won't know if you don't try. But then, trying is risky, and you do seem a bit timid to me.

You don't know what it's like pouring out your guts to the world.

I don't?

Well, you don't care as much as I do.

Of course I do. I just happen to know that it is so important to my psychic health to do this that I'm willing to take the risk. You, my friend, seem to want all the creative juices inside you to curdle and poison the whole system.

You're nothing but a two-bit psychologist.

Well, I've been right before.

But how do I begin?

I don't know. Why don't we just get up at five tomorrow, come to the machine and type like fury for an hour and see what happens? Could be fun. Critic won't be up, and we won't ever have to show anybody what we've done.

Now you understand why I have to burn this stuff before I die. My posthumous reputation as a sane person of more than moderate intelligence hangs in the balance. But living writers, in order to keep writing, have to forget about posthumous reputations. We have to become, quite literally, like little children. We have to remember our early griefs and embarrassments. Talk aloud to ourselves. Make up imaginary companions. We have to play.

Have you ever watched children fooling with play dough or finger-paint? They mess around to see what will emerge, and they fiddle with what comes out. Occasionally, you will see a sad child, one that has decided beforehand what he wants to do. He stamps his foot because the picture on the page or the green blob on the table falls short of the vision in his head. But he is, thankfully, a rarity, already too concerned with adult approval.

The unspoiled child allows herself to be surprised with what comes out of herself. She takes joy in the material, patting it and rolling it and shaping it. She is not too quick to name it. And, unless some grownup interferes, she is not a judge but a lover of whatever comes from her heart through her hands. This child knows that what she has created is marvelous simply because she has made it. No one else could make this wonderful thing because it has come out of her.

What treasures we have inside ourselves—not just joy and delight but also pain and darkness. Only I can share the treasures of the human spirit that are within me. No one else has *these* thoughts, *these* feelings, *these* relationships, *these* experiences, *these* truths.

How do I begin? You could start, as I often do, by talking to yourself. The dialogue may help you understand what is holding you back. Are you afraid that deep down inside you are really shallow? That when you take that dark voyage deep within yourself, you will find there is no treasure to share? Trust me. There is. Don't let your fear stop you. Begin early in the morning before that critical adult within wakes up. Like a child, pour out what is inside you, not listening to anything but the stream of life within you. Read Dorothea Brande's classic *On Becoming a Writer*, in which she suggests that you put off for several days reading what you have written in the wee hours. Then when you do read it you may discern a repeated theme pointing you to what you want to begin writing about.

Begin, Anne Lamott suggests in her wonderful book *Bird by Bird*, in the form of a letter. Tell your child or a trusted friend stories from your past. Exploring childhood is almost always an effective wedge into what's inside you. And didn't you mean to share those stories with your children someday anyhow?

While I was in the midst of revising this article, my husband happened to bring home Julia Cameron's book. *The Artist's Way.* Cameron suggests three pages of longhand every morning as soon as you get up. I decided to give the "morning pages" a try and heartily recommend the practice, though these pages, too, will need to be destroyed before I die.

When I was trying to begin the book which finally became *Flip-Flop Girl* (and you should see the anguished notes along the way!), I just began writing down the name of every child I could remember from the fourth grade at Calvin H. Wiley School. Sometimes I appended a note that explained why that child's name was still in my head. Early-morning

exercises explored ways the story might go, and I rejected most of them, but out of those fourth-grade names and painful betrayals a story began to grow. Judging from the notes, it was over a year in developing and many more months in the actual writing. But I did begin, and I did finish. There's a bit of courage for the next journey inward.

Now it's your turn. Bon voyage.

11
AN IDEA IS ONLY THE BAIT

By Madonna Dries Christensen

Where do writers get their ideas? The short answer is: Ideas are everywhere and anywhere. William Styron says he dreamed about a woman with a number tattooed on her arm. He put aside the book he was having trouble writing and wrote *Sophie's Choice.*

Wherever ideas come from, they are only the bait. Because writers are curious and have an innate sense of imagination, they grab bait and let it lead them to plot, characters, point of view, and dialogue. The bait may end up as the title for a story, the beginning, middle, or end.

Writers have a keen awareness of their immediate surroundings and of those they remember. The people you observe become the ingredients for composite characters. No matter what else you are doing, you can be gleaning bits and pieces from what you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

The earthy smell of apples at the produce stand inspired my first published piece, "Simply Delicious." The fragrance of four o'clocks wafting from my husband's garden took me back to childhood, to my mother's window box. Out of that evoked memory came "Collected Scents," published in the anthology *Poems from Farmers Valley.*

Remembering the cloying smell and horrible taste of cod liver oil, I wrote, "It's Good for You," a humor piece on this "cure-all" of the 1940s. After hearing Bob Dylan mumble a song and unable to understand even one word, I wrote "With a Song in My Heart," a look at the generation gap in music.

Entering an old library in my hometown in Iowa, I was embraced by a distinctive essence so familiar that, had I been led blindfolded into the building, I would have known I was in my childhood library. A compatible blend of old books, book binding paste, newspaper ink, furniture oil, floor wax, and the dry, dusty odor steam radiators emit gave the library this inviting aromatic charm. I published "Guardian of the Books" as a reminiscence about the small-town library and its librarian. I expanded on the idea with a piece about my hometown, "I Still Call it Home," for the anthology *Where the Heart Is: A Celebration of Home.*

On a visit to my ancestral farm in Wisconsin, I stood alone in the doorway of the cavernous dilapidated barn, wrapped in the silence of the countryside. From nearby, the present owner's pronounced European accent helped me conjure up the presence of my German paternal great-grandfather and his family. These benevolent ghosts led me through a typical day at the farm as it had been one hundred years earlier. The energy from that imagined excursion and those spectral images led me to write "Sojourner in the Past" for *The Wind-Mill,* a genalogy magazine.

Family histories hold a treasure trove of stories. In 1951, my mother, who worked in a café, cooked supper for Henry Fonda and the stage cast of *Mr. Roberts,* who were stranded in town during a snowstorm. I published that story, "The Prince Dined at the Palace," as nonfiction and in a fictionalized version.

"The Last Dance" came from my family history. Published first in *Catholic Digest,* it tells of four sisters and their widowed mother, all of whom became nuns on the same day. The sisters were members of an all-girl band that was so popular in the 1930s, it was featured in *Billboard* and *Variety.*

With only scant information from two obituaries, I fictionalized a family event into a twice-published story, "Prairie Fire." It links my maternal great-grandfather's death in 1909 with that of his young daughter's death seventeen years earlier. Both were struck and killed by lightning.

Conversations with friends or strangers have yielded many ideas. Remarks about my given name, now so recognizable, provided anecdotes for "The Fame of the Name." A writer's comment about writers not being paid for their work prompted me to write "A Penny for Your Prose," about the pros and cons of paying and nonpaying markets. A remark by a man in my writer's group and an aside by another writer gave me an idea for a humor piece. One writer told me about her adoption in 1917 after being sent to Minnesota on the Orphan Train. I fictionalized her experience in "The End Game," for the literary journal *The ma.*

It's a cliché, but true; writers write what they know. They can't avoid it. Human beings are who they are because of what they know, what they've experienced thus far. Writers tap into what they know, explore it, and try to explain it to themselves and others through writing.

Much of my work is based in the Midwest. Born and raised there, I know the people, the climate, the flora and fauna.

The Midwest gives me my sense of place. Some of my fiction is written in the voice of children of the Depression years. I know those times; I know the children and their parents.

What writers don't know, they can learn. When I read Barbara Anton's novel *Egrets to the Flames*, I was impressed with her knowledge of the Florida sugar cane industry. I asked if she'd grown up on a sugar cane plantation. She said no, she'd researched the subject.

You can find ideas in writers magazines about contests and anthologies that solicit material on specific subjects. Even if you don't submit to these publications, you can use the idea. Ideas cannot be copyrighted. The journal *Thema* sets the theme for each issue. I would not have written any of the ten stories I've had published in *Thema* without a head start, the given idea.

Familiarize yourself with local and regional periodicals and the type of material they use. Some newspapers have a regular column featuring local writers; others solicit material on specific subjects, holidays, or anniversaries of local events. Every community has stories waiting to be told; you need only scan the paper for items about anniversaries of historical events and interesting places or people.

Writers are insatiable readers. Reading generates ideas, ideas generate writing. A word, a phrase, a picture can stoke the fires of your imagination. A haunting picture of a little immigrant girl at Ellis Island, combined with a *Thema* premise, led me to write and publish *In Mama's Footsteps.*

My first writing instructor advised, "Save articles and stories by writers whose work you admire or whose subject interests you. The clippings will provide ideas for stories of your own." She was right. Sifting through my collection triggers enough ideas to take me to the year 2(K)0. Come to think of it, why slop there? The possibilities are endless for stories about that coming event.

12
THE CREATIVE POWER OF DOING NOTHING

By Colleen Mariah Rae

Let's say you've been working on a story, it's coming, but it's not coming fast enough. What will speed things up? Surprisingly: *Doing nothing.* Now's the time to turn to your unconscious and to let it do the work for you.

This is often the hardest part of the writing process but an essential part of the creative process. For a week, allow the unconscious to do its work. And, paradoxically, without any conscious effort on your part, your creative product will grow.

The trick is to do nothing long enough for the work to come to fruition in your unconscious. But because this is hard, what follow are some tips for *what to do when you're doing nothing;* and *how to do nothing so effectively that your story will pop from you full-blown.*

So, for the first tip: *What to do when you're doing nothing.*

It's always important to know where you're going, if you have any hope of reaching your goal. Here, the goal's a finished story that pops like Athena from the head of Zeus, and the only way to achieve this is through doing things that unclutter the unconscious sufficiently to allow it to devote full-time to the job.

This is the time to cook, build a model, swim, play chess, hike, paint, play music, or repair a toaster—whatever it is that puts you into that "time out of time state," where you lose all track of time. What you're looking for are activities that allow you to *immerse* yourself in an experience without thought. Whatever takes you away from the ceaseless round of chatter unclutters the unconscious. What works for you? Include it in your day, every day, because each day takes you through the same cycle of creativity in an abbreviated way.

For me, painting is the best "immersion" activity. I can so lose myself in the process that when I stop, I discover surprisingly that hours have

passed. While I'm painting, I'm not thinking. But I'm not floating in a sea of no-thought: I'm doing what Aldous Huxley thought so important he had birds in his fictional country in *Island* crying "Attention, attention, attention." I am focused in on what I'm doing with a highly concentrated attention.

So that's what to do when you're doing nothing: anything that allows you to immerse yourself fully in the activity and at the same time challenges you enough, but not too much. Do anything, that is, but write. During this stage of the process, do anything but write—even tine word. And, don't tell your story to anyone. Telling it will dissipate the energy. Keeping your story inside creates a pressure-cooker sensation—eventually you will feel as though you're going to explode if you can't let your story out. And that's the sensation you're aiming for.

Now for the second tip: *How to do nothing so effectively that your story will pop from you full-blown.* This is often the most fun, because it isn't so "hands-off" as immersion. You can really feel you're doing something to work with your unconscious—even though you *are* letting go and trusting the unconscious to do the work for you. I call this *active incubation*, because you're building bridges between the conscious and the unconscious mind.

One of these bridges you probably know well: How often have you said, "Let me sleep on it"? It's one of the best problem-solving tools we have. And it works for writing so well that I've come to believe that I couldn't write a darn thing worth publishing if I couldn't sleep on it. I'll go to sleep unclear of how to proceed in a story and wake in the morning with the answer.

You can also build bridges during your waking hours. Either way, it's still the same process: You have to silence your analytical mind long enough to let the unconscious speak. You have probably had a few such experiences: Names you couldn't remember an hour before come to you as soon as you get into the mind-numbing rhythm of vacuuming, or as you're washing the car, you recall what it is you forgot to buy at the store.

I make use of active incubation every day I write. I don't take a shower until I get stuck in my writing stint for the day, because invariably it's in the shower that ideas pop up. My writing journals are filled with "shower thought" notations.

Other things that shift me from that "stuck" analytical place also include water: I love to sit by a waterfall or any running water—even the fountains in shopping malls will do. Find your own. Some writers get unstuck sitting by a fire; some with candlelight; some while they meditate. Others can't write if they aren't driving. One of my students puts Grieg on the car stereo and drives across the desert, preferably during lightning storms. Any activity that stops analytical

thought lets inspiration surface. And just a suggestion: Always keep a small notebook with you, so you won't forget your breakthroughs—write them down!

But there's more to active incubation than just getting out of your own way. This is the time to work actively with your unconscious. One way to do that is through what I call a "nightly recap." Lie in bed in the dark and try to visualize your story as clearly as possible; let all the details come alive for you. Summon the smells, tastes, textures, emotions, sounds. Make them as vivid as you can. You may find yourself in a state similar to Robert Louis Stevenson's, who was thrashing about in his bed one night, greatly alarming his wife. She woke him up, infuriating Stevenson, who yelled, "I was dreaming a fine bogey tale!" The nightmare from which he had been unwillingly awakened was the premise for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.*

When you wake in the morning after such a night, don't get out of bed. Stay there, moving only to pick up your already open notebook and uncapped pen. Write without thinking—anything about your story that comes to mind. Write for at least five minutes before you get up. Then close your notebook without reading what you've written. You'll read it later—when this period of doing nothing comes to an end. To read it too soon flips you into analytical thought.

"Silent movies" is another technique that helps build the pressure. Set a timer for ten minutes, and then sit without thinking until the timer rings. If thoughts do come, just let them move through your mind; don't hold onto them. Stay still. For the next ten minutes, see your story as a movie in your mind. Make it as vivid as you can; flesh out the details. Go back and forth, back and forth. Stop the projector, reverse the film, run it forward again. See it more and more clearly each time it reels by. Watch, but do not let yourself write—no matter how strong the urge.

Finally, for the last ten minutes, sit quietly without consciously thinking, until your urge to write is so strong that you just can't resist it. Then, and only then, pick up your pen and write.

Make these silent movies as often as you can during the days of this period of doing nothing. If you can't spend a full 30 minutes on it, cut hack to five-minute segments. Remember: Don't read anything you write.

There's another aspect to this part of the creative process that's often given short shrift: solitude. Give yourself time alone each day, even if it's only to take a walk. A quiet walk alone can help your writing more than you'll ever know.

What if you do all this, and no story seems ready to pop into your head? In his autobiography, *Education of a Wandering Man,* Louis I .'Amour said,

> There are so many wonderful stories to be written, and so much material to be used. When I hear people talking of writer's block, I am amazed. Start writing, no matter about what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on. You can sit and look at a page for a long time and nothing will happen. Start writing, and it will.

That's every writer's secret: not waiting for the muse. Give yourself a week at most to do nothing, then sit down to write.

Set yourself a schedule, and give yourself a goal. When I was writing fiction full-time, my writing hours were 7:00 a.m. till noon. My goal was to write five pages per day. Sometimes I finished the five pages *before* noon, and then I was free to stop. Sometimes I finished the five pages by noon, but even if I hadn't, I still stopped. It's a goal, not a stick.

When your writing is coming easily, it feels too good to stop. I rarely would stop if I had finished my five pages before noon, for instance. But I always remembered advice that came from a *Paris Review* interview with Ernest Hemingway. Although he wrote only in the morning, he said he would make a point of stopping before he'd written everything that was in him that day to write. It's great advice. If you know what's going to happen in the next scene, it'll prime your pump the following day.

Become aware of your own pattern. You may work best doing 16-hour-a-day stints for three weeks straight. Or you may find you can write only one hour a day without exhausting yourself. So schedule an hour and set a goal of a page a day. liven if you write only five pages a week, you'll still have produced 260 pages in one year. That's a whole book! The important thing is to find your own pattern—and then make it a habit. Good habits are just as hard to break as bad ones.

Rollo May's message in *The Courage to Create* is that for the creative person, fear never goes away. How can it? When we're working with the unconscious, as we must do in writing fiction, we walk up to the abyss every day and jump in. A very scary process! Allow yourself time to sharpen pencils or stare out the window for ten minutes or so before you start. After that, stay in your chair until your allotted hours are up, whether you've written anything or not. You'll find that the sheer boredom of doing nothing is often a catalyst to a remarkable gush of words.

13
A WRITER'S IMMORTALITY

By Elissa Ely

I found the recipe book in a cabin on an island off the coast of northern Maine. It was sandwiched between a pamphlet on edible plants and a bottle of insect repellent that could have told a few tales. I thought it was a handful of papers folded in half and forgotten. But it was a book. When I opened it, I heard the ring of a typewriter carriage at the end of the first yellow line.

The book was published in 1956 by the few dozen islanders who lived there year-round. The front page explained that profits were donated to the local library, which had been built 30 years earlier in memory of two children who had drowned off some cove rocks. The second page was a list of island contributors; those salty cooks themselves. There were asterisks by the names of those who had died before the book went to print.

Without further preface, the recipes begin on the third page. Each is signed. No space is wasted. The longest section ("Fish") is a stiff required course. Instructions for chowder are given without any pronouns; boiling a halibut is all business; fried mussels are dispensed with in two sentences ("Remove from shells. Fry."). A single name ends many of the recipes; some reluctant lobsterman, I presumed, egged into telegraphic authorship by his wife, the chairman of the library committee.

About halfway through Fish, the lobsterman suddenly pulls off his rubber boots. It's like when other men pull off their ties. Without explanation, he begins to loosen up. He adds prefaces and postscripts. Commentaries come thick and fast. At first they are understated and reasonable. Introducing Paella, he writes that the efforts required are "Good for when the fog comes in and stays a while." After an unappetizing recipe for Cod Tongues and Bisquik, he adds, "Not recommended by Wife." Of a tomato-based soup: "No New Englander would be caught eating this as a chowder." Then he starts to go wild. It is a little startling. His recipe for fish with walnuts is exuberant: one cup of nut meats must be broken with a hammer "so you can take good aim." On testing the doneness of a fish fillet, "take 'em out when the middle looks proud of itself." And finally, having warmed completely toward me, his unknown (and possibly his only) future reader, he offers this advice: "For those who find mackerel too rich in fats: Fry the fish in butter and forget your past aversions."

Forty years after he typed and signed the recipes, and quite possibly after he was no longer alive, I was shocked by his sudden expansiveness. It seemed so unlike the him I had read and accepted at the beginning. It was as if, by the end of Fish, he had gone naked, caught up in the delirium of happy self-exposure. I couldn't imagine what had caused it.

The question baffled me during island walks. Evenings on the porch, I reread the recipes. I thought of stealing the book and bringing it back to Boston for further scrutiny, even though that would have done nothing for the island library fund. But finally, late one night, the light went on.

It was those asterisks on Page 2, the contributor's page, beside the names of the dead. An asterisk was not easy to make on a manual typewriter 40 years ago. It required lifting the typewriter bar, pulling the paper up slightly but evenly when hitting the star key, then lowering the paper to exactly where it was.

On Page 2, asterisks, laboriously made, honored those who did not live long enough to have the pleasure of being known in print.

This is the key: the pleasure of being known in print. Even in a place where the ferry comes three times a week and readers are severely limited, being known in print matters; it is the assurance of an existence beyond the constraints of time.

When written thoughts are read, they take on worth beyond their thinking. It is a moment of mattering, in a world where we all want to matter.

I believe this is what happens to my taciturn lobsterman as he writes the Fish section of a recipe book on a remote island. He realizes that he is not muttering to his solitary self on the high seas: What he writes will be read by someone else. He does not know who it is, but some stranger is going to associate him with his words. That stranger will form an opinion of him. And that opinion, though he will never know what it is, matters to him. He cares to make himself transparent for viewing. He cares to be known.

On the ferry home, I listened aimlessly to conversations around me. ()nc eye was on the receding island; the other squinted stoically toward the mainland. Two women sat on the next bench. They had arrived separately, but in their last moments, with the ferry churning, they were coming to know each other. They would never meet again. They got down

to the business of essentials.

"I'm a novelist," one said.

"Isn't that amazing?" cried the other. "I am, too."

14
RHETORICALLY SPEAKING

By LouAnne Johnson

I peeked in the window. Thirty freshman honor students sat waiting, pens poised above their brand-new notebooks. They were ready. I wasn't sure I was, but I decided to go ahead and give my plan a shot. If they got it, fine. If they didn't, I'd think of something.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!" I shouted as I marched across the floor and slammed my briefcase down on the instructor's desk. Silence. "As you know," I went on, "this is an honors level composition course. You are here because you have high grade-point averages, and your high school teachers think you are good writers. Perhaps you are. I intend to find out." One boy in the back of the room put his head down on his desk. I ignored him.

"My name is Miss Johnson. I've been a writer for the past thirty years. I am also a former officer of the United States Marine Corps. I'm not used to taking any crap, and I don't intend to take any from you. If you expect to get an A in this course, you're going to have to earn it. If you aren't ready to work, the door is open. Make your choice, and make it now."

I could tell from their expressions, and their glances toward the door, that every student in the class wanted to leave. But they were smart kids, smart enough to know that walking out of a required course on the first day of college would not be an intelligent move. They sat still. Without saying anything further, I made a quick turnabout and marched out of the room, letting the door slam behind me. Before they had a chance to recover, I swung the door open again and sashayed daintily back inside.

"Hi," I said, as I giggled and patted my hair. "My name is, like, LouAnne, and I'm, like, your instructor, and I want everything to be, like, really cool, so everybody can, like, express himself or herself without, like, being afraid of any put-downs or anything. Oka-a-ay?"

The hoy who had put his head down on the desk during my drill sergeant routine sat up straight and glanced at the girl beside him. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. A few small smiles showed me that some of the students were starting to catch on. But most of them sat, staring at me, clearly confused. I giggled again and ran out of the room.

The third time I opened the door, I walked in and smiled pleasantly. Good morning. I am your instructor. My name is Lou Anne Johnson, and I hope that we will accomplish two things in this class. Number one, we will meet the requirements for this course. Number two, you will actually learn something about writing."

I picked up a marker and drew two vertical lines, dividing the white board behind me into thirds. I labeled the sections #1, #2 and #3, then asked the class members to vote which of my three different introductions represented "the real Miss Johnson." I recorded their votes on the board. The boy in the back voted for # 1, but the rest of the class voted for #3.

"Why did you pick the third one?" I asked. "Anybody? Just speak up."

"I could just tell," one young woman said.

"You seemed real," somebody added from the far corner. "Genuine."

"But why?" I insisted. "Can somebody try to explain it?"

There was such a long silence that I almost gave up. Then a young man in the front row adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. "I believe there was some element in your voice that matched the expression on your face and the look in your eye. They all matched, so to speak. I didn't sense any incongruity."

"Thank you very much," I said, and I meant it. His explanation was even better than the one I had planned. "Just as you can sense that a person is pretending, acting insincerely, you can also sense dishonesty in writing. I'm sure you've all read pretentious prose that put you off because it tried to impress you. And it's quite likely that you've thrown down some article or essay you'd started to read that may have contained a brilliant idea, but was so poorly presented and illogically organized that it wasn't worth the effort it would have taken to read it." A few nods encouraged me to continue.

"When you write compositions for me, don't try to sound like a textbook, or your high school English teacher, or your favorite author. While I'd encourage you to use techniques and writing styles that you admire, I don't mean for you to try to copy them. Learn how to use them; make them your own. Write in your own voice. Each of you has a particular combination of vocabulary, tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures that creates a distinct, individual personality when you express your ideas during a conversation. But when you write, you can rely only on language—word choice, sentence style, punctuation—to communicate your personality."

It worked. They got it. Instead of deluging me with the standard five-paragraph essay, written entirely in passive voice, using the longest possible words, these students learned to use language either to show or hide their personalities, depending upon the assignment. To project a sense of objectivity in her research paper, for example, one young woman, Suzette, chose relatively formal language and complex sentence structure:

> College campuses can be misleading, with their tree-lined walkways, stately lecture halls, and dormitories. Statistics have repeatedly demonstrated that America's colleges and universities are not the safe havens many parents believe them to be.

Later, Suzette wrote a personal essay on the same topic, but the voice was completely different.

> My parents think I'm safe here at NMSU. They don't know about the date rapes and muggings. And I'm not going to tell them. They would just worry about me, because they don't realize how much the whole world has changed since they went to college.

In this essay, colloquial phrases, first-person voice, and simpler sentence structure gave a good sense of Suzette's personality and attitude: She's young and scared, but she's determined to be independent.

Although all of my students agreed that finding their own voices was necessary, some of them needed extra time and practice before they finally "got it right." One young man became frustrated when his peer critique group pronounced that he was almost, but not quite, there.

"How do they know whether it's my voice or not?" he challenged me.

"Other people can critique your writing for form and content," I said, "but no one else can know whether you have said what you wanted to say, whether the message the reader receives is the one you meant to send."

"How will I know when it's right?" he asked.

I was tempted to say, "How do you know when you're in love?" But I realized that my voice might not be the one this particular student needed to hear. So I quoted from journalist Marya Mannes's essay, "How Do You Know It's Good?" Mannes's answer? "When you begin to detect the difference between freedom and sloppiness, between serious experimentation and egotherapy, between skill and slickness, between strength and violence, you are on your way. . . ."

My student frowned for a moment, digesting this new idea, then smiled. "Why didn't you say that before?"

15
KEEP YOUR WRITING ON TRACK

By Genie Dickerson

"What is the use of writing when you are on the wrong road?" said English writer and naturalist John Ray. A wrong turn—a seeming shortcut—may detour us and prove fatal to our writing.

Detour 1: Writers clubs, classes, and conferences. *Rationalization:* I always get fired up about writing by these groups, and I pick up pointers. *Rebuttal:* A little fire goes a long way. If social activities cut into your writing time, you have been sidetracked and may find it wise to return to the main road. As for picking up pointers from other writers, only firsthand experience will teach you which pointers are valid.

Detour 2: A book as first project. *Rationalization:* The money and satisfaction are in books. *Rebuttal:* Except for big-selling books, magazine writing offers writers more money, more readers, more contact with editors, as well as greater opportunities for developing your writing skills. For an inexperienced writer, the trap in writing a book first is procrastination. Magazine and newspaper work require all facets to be completed in a timely manner. With a book, it's easy to put off less-fun tasks.

Detour 3: Looking for an agent. *Rationalization:* A writer needs an agent to sell writing. *Rebuttal:* The search may be unnecessary. Virtually all novices start selling their writing without agents. After writers have sold work on their own, they find that agents are more receptive to them.

Detour 4: The presumption that editors have time to read every word sent to them. *Rationalization:* My piece will sell on the basis of the

beautiful last paragraph. *Rebuttal:* Editors and other readers are not inclined to drag themselves through slow material. Discounting the importance of a gripping lead is a dead end.

Detour 5: Co-authoring. *Rationalization:* I'm not sure enough of my ability to write something by myself. *Rebuttal:* Unless both authors are good workers and contribute complementary skills to the project, the partnership will produce nothing but false hopes.

Detour 6: Dependence on computer spelling and grammar checkers. *Rationalization:* I don't have time to waste on boring details—the computer can do it for me. *Rebuttal:* Spelling and grammar checkers miss a lot. Spelling and grammar are what make up English. Don't let computer aids replace what you need to know. Computers can flag typographical errors, but total dependence on spelling and grammar checkers is the wrong route.

Detour 7: Asking friends to read and comment on your unpublished writing. *Rationalization:* Even if my friends aren't experts, they can make comments like ordinary readers. *Rebuttal:* Unless your friends read your type of writing, they may not be the best judges of the salability of your manuscripts. Worse, they may flatter you or shoot you down, misleading you on the quality of your work.

Detour 8: Writer's block. *Rationalization:* I sit down at the computer but can't think of anything to write. *Rebuttal:* A sure barrier to Easy Street. Ignore the block, and jot down whatever you have done or talked about or thought up in the previous 24 hours. Publications buy essays about neighborhood walks, humorous pieces about incidents at the grocery store, and how-to articles about pulling weeds. Thoughts sell, just about any thoughts that are well presented. Once you begin to write, the creative change of pace will energize you to develop your thoughts.

Detour 9: Letterhead stationery, business cards, bumper stickers, and T-shirts that say "Writer." *Rationalization:* They define me as a serious professional. *Rebuttal:* Are you hornswoggling yourself? Are the stationery, business cards, bumper stickers, and what you wear more for convenience and fun?

Detour 10: Overemphasis on creativity. *Rationalization:* The more literary and creative your writing is, the less smooth, clear and logical it needs to be. *Rebuttal:* Writing is, above all, communication. If people have to exert themselves to understand a piece of writing, they won't read (or buy) it.

Detour 11: Treasure hunt. *Rationalization:* I refuse to write for small publications. Why should I do a piece for $25 when other writers get $2,500 from glossier magazines for the same amount of work? *Rebuttal:* Everyone starts at the beginning.

Detour 12: Lost in research. *Rationalization:* I love hunting for background facts. *Rebuttal:* Research can be a form of procrastination. Once you find the information you need, you can return to the drawing board, which is more fun anyway.

Detour 13: Computer roadblock. *Rationalization:* I have to get my new word processor up and running before I can write. *Rebuttal:* Dust off your typewriter, and use it. Or do rough drafts by hand. Conquer your computer after you get at least some writing done.

Detour 14: Avoid submitting manuscript. *Rationalizations:* a) Publishers won't pay me, a beginner, enough to cover my time, b) My work isn't good enough to submit yet. c) I don't need to see my byline in print in order to be a writer, d) Researching markets takes too much time, e) Contemporary literature isn't very good, so editors wouldn't recognize or appreciate my writing, f) I submitted a few things, but they were rejected. *Rebuttal:* Despite imperfections, the best way to improve your writing and develop into a professional is to submit your manuscripts frequently to editors. By saying yes or no, and often with specific helpful comments, editors are our best teachers. Inventors work much the same way as writers do, by trial and error, and experimentation with modifications. And who knows? You just might earn that $2,500 on your first manuscript submission.

Detour 15: Not including an SASE with submissions. *Rationalization:* Stamps are expensive, and editors ought to pay for half of the cost of submissions. Why would I want my manuscript returned? If the editor doesn't buy my story, I can run off a fresh copy on my printer. *Rebuttal:* Publishers don't believe they owe free lancers anything. Most editors will not read or return a manuscript if you don't enclose a stamped return envelope. Send an SASE to make sure the editor received your piece, to show professionalism, and to invite helpful comments from the editor. To economize on manuscripts mailed flat, enclose a business-size SASE (#10) and a note saying that you don't need your manuscript returned.

To succeed as a writer, you must stay on track. Every writer needs self-discipline. Detours are paved with rationalizations, but common sense keeps writers on the main road.

16
A GUIDE TO DEALING WITH REJECTIONS

By Fred Hunter

All of your favorite authors, all best-selling authors, and all of the authors you love who have not yet been discovered by the general public have two things in common: Their work has at one time been rejected, and they've managed to go beyond that rejection to earn their respective places in the literary spectrum.

Rejection is an unfortunate fact of life for writers, and it's never easy to take. Although it's true that all writers suffer rejection, that fact can seem like little more than a useless bromide to a writer who's just opened his mail to find a form letter saying, "don't call us, we'll call you" (and believe it or not, I've actually received one that said that).

When I finished writing my first mystery, *Presence of Mind,* I decided that instead of using an agent I would attempt to sell the book myself. I put together cover letters and samples (the first three chapters) and sent them to ten publishers at a time until the book was accepted. I was very fortunate in that it sold to one of the first five publishers to whom it was sent, but by the time that happened I had sent out thirty samples, so for over a year afterward I was still receiving rejections for a book that was already accepted for publication. This gave me the unique luxury of being able to take an objective look at the business of rejection. Even though rejection letters are rarely personalized, from the editors who have taken the time to offer comments I've gleaned a few hints on how to handle rejection.

• Editors are people

Although writers often think of editors as unfeeling ogres, they really are basically just people with particular tastes who select books much the way any other reader would. It helps to think of how you read novels: When you're reading a book by a new author, even one that was recommended to you, you will either like or dislike the book, and your gut feeling will help you decide whether or not you will ever to visit that author's work.

Writers would like to think that editors can go beyond their personal taste and objectively recognize fine writing, and I have news for you: They do. But they will still rarely buy a book that doesn't appeal to them personally, any more than you would.

One rejection letter I received particularly illustrates this. It said, "Your writing is better than 90% of what crosses my desk . . . but I found the detective too smug (in the same way that Hercule Poirot is, and I didn't like him, either)." I hardly needed to point out to this editor how well the Poirot books have sold; she certainly knew that. I 'he fact remained that my style just didn't appeal to that editor. It was comforting, though, to know that she wouldn't have bought Agatha Christie, either.

To give you an idea of how subjective editorial reactions are, I received one rejection letter that said, "There's too much character development in this book, and not enough plot," while another editor commenting on the same manuscript said, "The plot is very strong, but I thought the characters were a bit thin."

The fact that the responses of different editors are often so contradictory points up how important it is that you are satisfied with your own work, and that you have faith in it before submitting it. Obviously, it would be foolhardy to attempt to rewrite your manuscript based on the comments of one editor; however, if three editors tell you, "This manuscript is too wordy," I would do some heavy cutting before sending it out again.

• Rejection is part of a writer's life

Carolyn Hart, author of several award-winning mystery novels, says, "To be a writer, you have to be willing to fail. Even exceptional writers have their work rejected." Once you've completed your masterpiece, you've left the artistic part of writing and entered the business side, and it's best to approach it as you would any other business. You're a salesman, and your product is your work. As with any other product, some will buy it, some won't. It's O.K. to be disappointed when you don't make a sale to a particular editor, but you shouldn't be devastated. An editor will not buy a product that he doesn't believe he can sell to his audience. But there's always another editor and another audience.

• Always be working on something else

Start writing your next piece the minute you drop your current completed manuscript in the mailbox. Barbara D'Amato, author of the popular Cat Marsala mysteries, says, "I know many otherwise sane people who will write something, send it off, and then wait and wait and wait for it to be accepted somewhere before starting on something else. You have to start your next book right away, otherwise you're putting all your emotional stock in one thing."

Madeleine L'Engle, the highly esteemed author of both fiction and nonfiction, suffered a ten-year stretch of not being able to get her work published *after* the success of her earlier novels. She writes very candidly about that decade of rejection in her book *A Circle of Quiet.* During that period she continued to write, eventually going on to win the Newbery Medal for *A Wrinkle in Time.*

Far from finding these examples discouraging, writers should realize how large a role perseverance plays in the business of getting published. In my own work, even though I had some early success, I wasn't quite so fortunate when I tried to launch my second series. I submitted the first book in the series to publisher after publisher for almost two years before it was accepted. Even with a track record, I still had to find an editor who liked the book enough to take a chance on it. By the time the first book was sold, I'd completed the second and started the third. I found continuing to write was infinitely preferable to sitting at home developing ulcers.

But how do you go on writing without the encouragement of success? You must focus on the writing itself, not on the possible rewards. It's like the old joke about the restaurant with no prices on the menu: If you have to ask the price, you can't afford to eat there. Similarly, if your goal as a writer is anything other than the work itself, you can't afford to be one.

• Never give up

"I like to think it's a fortuitous world," says Carolyn Hart. "You can be an excellent writer and still fail, but you should never, never give up, because you never know when things will turn around—and the only way for that to happen is to keep writing."

Keep believing that things will turn around. Though it may take years, you *will* eventually find that editor who falls in love with your work . . . but that editor will never get to see your work if you allow rejections to make you give up along the road.

Disraeli said it better than anyone else: "The secret of success is constancy of purpose."

I wish I'd written that.

17
MYTHS OF THE WRITING LIFE

By James A. Ritchie

Recently I've found that many of the old tried and true rules of fiction writing, and the writing life in general, have come under attack. So I think it's time to set the record straight.

Myth: You don't have to write everyday.

Fact: Well, no, you don't. You don't have to write at all. There probably isn't a soul in the world who will care if you never write another word.

And, yes it is possible to sell a few short stories, a few articles, a little of this and a pinch of that, if you write only on Saturday, or during the full moon, or whenever the mood hits. You may even legitimately call yourself a writer—small "w"—by working in this manner.

But unless you work at least five or six days a week, no excuses, you will never be able to call yourself a Professional Writer, meaning a writer who earns a living from writing fiction. And because writing, like playing the violin, requires hundreds and thousands of hours of practice to get right, you will never develop your talent to the fullest unless you write nearly everyday.

Even if you succeed financially, the first million or so words you write will screech and jangle the nerves as will a violin played by a rank beginner.

And anyone who tells you otherwise is a dilettante, a dabbler.

Myth: Procrastination is no more than your subconscious telling you the story isn't ready to be written.

Fact: No, procrastination is your way of telling the world you're too lazy and too soft to stick it out when the writing gets tough. Good writing is always difficult, always hard work. Anytime the words are flowing too easily you'd better look at your hole card.

Unless, when you're old and gray, you're certain you'll be content looking back and realizing you published only a tiny fraction of what you might have, and that most of it was mediocre at best, get over the notion that procrastination is ever a good thing.

Myth: It isn't the writing that matters, it's the act of creating, and since a writer works all the time, you're creating even when you're fishing, crocheting, or watching a football game, as long as you're *thinking* about writing.

Fact: Horse hockey. There may be some truth to the statement that a writer works all the time, but it's only at the keyboard that a writer creates anything.

At best, the work a writer does in his or her mind between stints at the keyboard is only planning to create. It's easy to justify anything, but justified or not, I can guarantee Joe Blow, that writer down the street with half your talent but twice your drive, is going to succeed much sooner that you do if you buy into this one.

Myth: It's the editor's job to fix my bad grammar (style, paragraph, plot line, etc.).

Fact: Why should he? **I** was once—briefly and small time—an editor. I quickly learned two things. One: many, many would-be writers expect editors to do everything, from correcting horrific spelling to transcribing handwritten manuscripts, to teaching them how to write basic English.

An editor's job is actually pretty simple when it comes to manuscripts: Keep the ones good enough to publish and reject the others. That's all there is to it.

Yes, once an editor finds a good story, one that really could see publication as is, he or she will say, "Now, let's see what we can do to make this story even better."

But, that's it. Editors should not be expected to rewrite, correct grammar or spelling (except for an occasional typo), or give writing lessons. And they do not ever read handwritten manuscripts.

I also learned that editors do not enjoy rejecting stories. Editors, in fact, love finding stories good enough to publish. So don't blame the editor if you receive a rejection slip instead of an acceptance letter.

Myth: You can't get an agent until you've been published, and you can't get published until you have an agent.

Fact: This one is nonsense. Agents are in the business of finding new, publishable writers. It's how agents, at least reputable agents, earn their money. But the key word is *publishable.* Almost all agents read queries, and so do many publishers.

Myth: Big name writers get such large advances there's no money left over for the rest of us.

Fact: There's a grain of truth in this, but there is a reason for it. Simply, big name writers get big bucks because they write big novels that sell in big numbers.

But remember that just about every big name writer out there was once an obscure, unpublished writer who earned very little or nothing. They may even have believed the same myth.

Instead of wasting energy griping about how much money somebody else makes, study what she does and how she does it. Then, one of these days, you may pull down huge advances while others gripe about you.

Myth: You must have a college education to be a professional writer.

Fact: I hope not. I dropped out of school in the eighth grade. I did take a G.E.D. test years later, but that's it. I tried college for a few months, quickly realized my time would be much better spent writing, and dropped out without taking a single writing course.

And I'm now working on my sixth novel.

Myth: A would-be fiction writer shouldn't read other people's fiction because it will unduly influence his own writing.

Fact: If you don't read other people's fiction, and lots of it, you will never, ever succeed as a writer. Period.

You *want* to be influenced. In the early stages of your career, and even when you're established, studying other writers, and imitating their style, is exactly how you learn to write well yourself. There is no other way. So read everything, and read often.

Myth: Writing fiction is an art, and rewriting only obscures the artist's spontaneous vision.

Fact: Yes, writing fiction is an art. But it's also a craft. Failure to rewrite will guarantee that the artist's vision will never be seen by anyone except those unfortunate friends and family members forced to read it.

How much rewriting is enough? Beats me. Dean Koontz claims to rewrite each page an average of 26 times. Ernest Hemingway is said to have rewritten *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times.

My own rule is to rewrite until it's either as good as I can get it, or until I'm so sick of the process I can't take it any more. As Hemingway explained in an interview, you rewrite until you get the words right, then you stop.

The competition is fierce. Getting the words "almost right" isn't going to get you anything except rejection slips to paper your office walls.

Myth: You must be certifiably insane to be a fiction writer.

Facts: All right, so this one is true.

18
THE WORD POLICE

By Beth Levine

It's sunday night and the smell of chinese food hangs low over the city. Two figures are poised outside of a neon-lit overpriced specialty food store.

"Look, Joe, here's another one: 'Gormet Pastries,'" Lisa observes.

"Don't these people have any respect for the law? Let's take him in," Joe sighs, exasperated.

Joe pulls down on his snap brim hat. He and Lisa (and that's *Lisa;* not Leesa, Lysa, or Lise), a woman with determinedly clicking high heels, enter the aforementioned "Gormet Pastries."

The owner, a member of the I-Dress-Only-In-Black-And-Not-Be-cause-It's-Slimming tribe, eyes them disdainfully. "Can I help you?" he asks faintly.

"Are you the proprietor of . . . *Gourmet* Pastries?" Lisa inquires, annoyed. This jerk can't spell and he's looking down on *her?*

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

The couple looks at each other meaningfully before whipping out their pocket-sized New Webster's Dictionaries.

"Word Police," Joe says with a penetrating stare. The owner turns pale, and his eyes start to dart around the store. Joe points to the back of the sign in the window and sure enough, there is *GORMET* in all its purple shame. The owner pales. "I . . . uh . . . guess I never noticed," he stammers.

"No, you people never do!" Joe exclaims. "Don't you ever *proof* things before shelling out your money? Day after day, you come in here and you never *noticed* a sign three feet high?"

Lisa puts her hand on his arm. "Easy, Joe," she says quietly. Turning to the owner, she asks, "What's your name, buddy?"

"Lonnee. L O N N . . ." He stops when he sees Joe and Lisa's faces turn pale. They are looking at a sign behind the counter that reads *Baking Done on Premise.*

"What is that?" Joe asks curtly. "You bake with the hope that it might come out right?" Lonnee looks confused, as Joe begins to tie two copies of *The Chicago Manual of Style* to Lonnee's wrists. The three begin to shuffle to the door, while Lisa reads him his rights.

"You have the right to remain silent—something we prefer, actually. You have the right to remain literate. In the absence of this ability, you have the right to an English professor, which the court will provide."

Lonnee raises his head in defiance. "Ha! I just catered an affair for Edwin Newman; he'll defend me! He owes me!"

"I don't think so. The man has principles—and that's *pies* not *pals,"* snaps Joe. He sadly shakes his head and looks at Lisa. "Pathetic, isn't it?"

As they pass, the customers of the soon-to-be renamed Gourmet Pastries watch in open-mouthed horror. "He seemed to pay such attention to details. Who knew?" says one.

A mother looks down at her ashen-faced 10-year-old son. "See, sonny? He probably cheated his way through spelling class, too. Thought he could get away with it. See? It always catches up to you." The boy bursts into tears. (When he grows up, he will produce an Academy Award-winning documentary on his experiences, "Scared Grammatical.")

Later, Joe and Lisa emerge from the New York Public Library as the former owner of Gormet Pastries is bundled off into a library bus.

"What a dope," says Joe. "I'm glad they threw the book at him, not that he could read it. Imagine—dragging Edwin Newman's name into it!"

"Let's go get a cup of coffee," says Lisa. She takes Joe's arm, and they proceed to Bagels 'N Stuff. Joe balks when he sees the sign.

Lisa reassures him, "Well, it's a little cutesy, but I think colloquially it's correct." Joe stares at her intently as they enter the restaurant.

Ten minutes later, the two are relaxing in a booth.

"How'd you get into this crazy business, Joe?" Lisa asks meditatively.

"I started as a copy editor at a book publisher. I loved the job, but then to save money, the publisher . . ." Lisa leans over and pats his hand. Joe bravely continues, "The publisher started allowing books to go to press with *Britishisms* intact so they wouldn't have to spend money to reset type. *Colour* instead of *color*, that sort of thing. I said no. This far I will bend and no further.

"Turns out my boss used to work for McDonald's and was the one responsible for 'Over 5 billion sold,' not even knowing it should be 'More than 5 billion.' He was that sloppy. So he fired me! That's when I realized my true vocation: Cleaning up this ungrammatical city of ours."

Lisa sighs. "Sometimes I wonder if it really does matter."

Joe spills his coffee. "What? How can you possibly say that?"

"Oh, *more than, over. Gourmet* with or without a u, does it really amount to," she pauses before uttering the cliché, "a hill of beans?"

Now it's Joe's turn to reach for her hand. "Don't burn out on me now, baby. It happens to others, but not to us. It's in our blood."

Lisa's eyes well up. "I can't take it anymore. Everywhere I go—the bank, the sandwich shops, dry cleaners—there are typos everywhere. I went to buy a co-op, but when I saw the awning said 'Two Fourty,' I couldn't do it. I have no friends, because I'm always correcting them. Countermen hate me, because I'm forever pointing out that it's iced tea, not *ice* tea. And don't even talk to me about apostrophes; they show up everywhere but where they are supposed to. Joe," Lisa's tears spill out, "I want to be like other people. I want to be sloppy."

Joe takes his hand away. "But we can't be like other people. We're a breed. We're . . . The Word Police. If we slip, it's the end of the civilized world, the demise of the society of Safire and Newman and Webster. It means the Lonnees and McDonald's of the world win."

Restlessly, Joe taps the end of his pencil on the tabletop. "Language defines what we can think," he continues. "I believe undisciplined, careless writing makes for undisciplined, careless thinking. How can you formulate ideas without appropriate tools—clarity, attention to detail? Without them, the world's thinking becomes muddled and uninformed. The mind is a muscle. Use it or lose it."

"We could go away, Joe," Lisa says plaintively through her sobs. "We could go to France. We don't speak French, so we'd never know when something was incorrect."

"Sorry, Lisa, I can't turn my back on murderers of the mother tongue. I need the facts, ma'am." Joe gives Lisa a despairing look, and then throws a dollar on the table. Coat collar up, hat brim pulled down, he sadly leaves Lisa and Bagels 'N Stuff behind, but not before pointing out to the amazed proprietor that *decaffeinated* has two Fs in it.

"I'll let you off with a warning this time," he says, exiting to chase a passing exterminator's truck with *MICES, TERMITES AND ROACHES* written on the side.

Hack at the table, Lisa watches him go and says softly to herself, "I'll miss ya, Joe. Paris would of been swell." She shudders after mouthing the foul words of her new world. Picking up her decaffeinated coffee, she drinks the bitter cup.

HOW TO WRITE TECHNIQUES

GENERAL FICTION

19
THE MANY HATS OF A FICTION WRITER

By Madeleine Costigan

As a fiction writer today, you wear many hats. you're your own boss, your own editor, and probably your own agent. When you play so many roles how do you keep them all in balance? It isn't easy, but it can be done.

1. Be a realistic boss.

You have to take yourself seriously as a writer before you can expect anyone else to take you seriously. Establish professional work habits early on, and believe in yourself enough to stick to them. Even if your office is a corner of the basement or an alcove under the eaves, do everything you can to make it as user-friendly as possible. Something wonderful is happening here.

Write every day. The more you write, the more fluent your writing will become. In the beginning you may be writing around what you want to say instead of getting to the core. Keep writing. The route may be circuitous but after you zero in on what you truly want to say, you'll see that during all those false starts and detoured storylines, you weren't wasting time, as you feared. You were developing as a writer, developing a discerning eye and ear, finding your own voice, learning to respect self-imposed deadlines.

You may be the only person who knows you're working when you're doing what your grandmother would call woolgathering, but who else needs to know? Alice Munro says that when her family sees her staring at the wall, she tells them she's thinking, even though she knows she's somewhere between thinking and a trancelike state. Toni Morrison refers to entering a space she can only call nonsecular. Every writer has such moments of reaching deeper and deeper levels of concentration, and whatever label you use to describe what you're doing, you soon learn that during such moments answers frequently come to nagging problems that days of writing won't solve. That's part of the mystery of writing fiction.

Some days you may become so immersed in your work that you lose all sense of time; there are those who might "say all sense. For some writers the best course is to work until the vein is exhausted. Ernest Hemingway liked to stop when he knew what was going to happen next. Choose the method that suits you.

Other days nothing you write seems to work. Here's where keeping a notebook can be useful. Not only does it get you into the habit of writing every day, but while browsing through it you may come across a scene written at random, or a snatch of conversation that regenerates your enthusiasm for the work-in-progress, and changes your perspective. For me, it has always been fascinating to see how unrelated bits and pieces can meld to form a symmetrical whole.

In the beginning, you really need professional reaction to your work, but that's when it's most difficult to get. A plain rejection slip tells you nothing. If possible, join a local writers' group or go to a writers' conference. It can be most illuminating to listen to other writers discuss your work, and, if you've done your homework, probably not nearly so painful as you fear. The company of other writers can be wonderfully sustaining and exhilarating throughout your writing life.

2. Be a tough editor.

The first time you submit a story to a magazine you're competing with professionals. Most new writers send work out too soon. The hope is that it will quickly find a home at a top magazine. When instead, it meets with rejection, the writer may easily become discouraged. It may be that what you had hoped was a well-turned short story is actually a first draft. While a first draft is not finished work, it is tangible, concrete, and best of all, something to revise. Sidney Sheldon says he writes as many as a dozen drafts.

Take your story scene by scene and put it to the test: Does each scene unfold naturally, move the story forward? If a scene is static, work on it until it crystallizes. One way to do this may be to get your characters talking.

Or it may be that a scene is unnecessary. What you really need is a smooth transition. Sometimes beginning writers include a scene because they don't know how to get a character from here to there without explaining. When you find yourself having difficulty getting a character from the telephone to the agreed-upon meeting, you might well consider skipping the interim scene.

Is your opening compelling? If you were reading a story while standing at the airport magazine rack, waiting for your plane to be called, would you be unable to put the magazine back after reading only the lust few lines? Toni Morrison has

said that her favorite opening line is from *Tar Baby: He thought he was safe.* He isn't safe. Why isn't he? With five short words Toni Morrison has involved the reader in her character's dilemma.

Is your language fresh? Or cliché bound?

Reading fine writing is a good way to develop your ear for the precise word. What a difference if instead of writing, *They persevered in their conversation,* Jane Austen had chosen a different verb.

Is your setting an integral part of the story? Is it reader oriented? Oiler a few telling details and the reader will extrapolate. In a story that lakes place in a school building, mentioning the scarred, pitted lockers or the smell of linseed oil may be enough to suggest authenticity. In a different school, the sight of students hunched at computer terminals or passing through metal detectors might do it.

Are your characters real? Does your reader know and care about them? Many writers work with the contrast between a character's thoughts and words to reveal a character. When I was writing "A Small But Perfect Crime," I used this technique. Harold Burgoyne, principal of Howell Middle School has discovered that Charlie Patch, son of Hurgoyne's cardiologist, has been vandalizing the school. The following conversation takes place between Burgoyne and Karl Webb, a teacher at the school:

"Fraley is steamed over the vandalism," Burgoyne said. "It's ruining our image."

Image was the stuff of life to Burgoyne. "Vandalism can't be tolerated." Karl said, wailing for Burgoyne to show his hand.

"I've never considered Charlie to be Howell Middle School material," Burgoyne continued. "We've got to finesse this one. Webb. Sending Charlie to the youth center would be a grave mistake. Keeping him here is not in the best interest of Howell." Burgoyne's watery blue eyes gave Karl a searching look. "You know how dedicated I am to this school's best interest?"

"Indeed." To himself, Karl called the language he spoke to Burgoyne, 'pedageese.'

Burgoyne leaned forward, his hands taut. "Charlie Patch is a year older than his classmates. It would be helpful to all concerned if' two of his teachers recommended that Charlie be skipped into Jefferson High, where it won't be quite so easy for him to dominate the other students. I'm counting on your recommendation, Webb, and Ira Carpenter's as well."

"Brilliant," Karl said.

Does your dialogue ring true? It may be that your character says what a real person would say in a given situation, but that isn't a sufficient test for good dialogue. True, your dialogue should create the illusion of real speech, but it should also advance the plot, economically characterize, or evoke an emotional response from the reader. It must also be much shorter than real conversation.

Try listening with even more concentration than you give to talking. You want more than the gist of what you're hearing. Listen for cadence, word order, flavor, figures of speech, all the revelations each of us makes on a daily basis. And then write in your notebook whatever strikes you as useful.

Do you have a good title?

Many editors consider a title to be an editorial decision. They know their readers and what will attract those readers. Sometimes a title has to fit with an illustration, and must be changed because of space limitations. Even though it may be discarded, you still need an intriguing title for your work. It's the first thing the editor sees.

3. Be a tireless agent.

Many major magazines have stopped publishing fiction. Very few literary agents today handle short stories. It's up to you to place your own work.

First, do some research at the library. Read several issues of any magazine you think might find your story suitable. Skimming only one issue can be misleading and cause you to waste time and postage.

List the magazines according to your order of preference, making sure you've chosen the appropriate editor's name from the masthead. What's in a name? Maybe the difference between acceptance and rejection. You don't want to address your manuscript in the generic, or risk mailing it off to the magazine trusting that someone there will route it to the proper person. It's too easy for that someone to whip out a rejection slip and send your story winging back.

Not all magazines, particularly literary journals, are available at the local library or bookstore. Study writers' magazines for information about these and send for sample copies. While literary magazines offer little financial compensation for your work, they are valuable showcases, read by publishers, editors, and agents.

I low long should you wait to hear from an editor concerning the fate of your story? I used to advise six weeks, but I

now think three months is more realistic. Before a manuscript is accepted it is usually read by several editors. Very few editors can afford to read in the course of the business day; they do most of their manuscript reading after hours.

And yes, there are gradations of rejections. The most disappointing is the plain rejection slip. Even a handwritten note is encouraging.

A signed letter from an editor indicates more interest. And a detailed letter referring to your story's strengths and weaknesses demonstrates thoughtful consideration.

Close, but no cigar, you may think. Think again. You are now being (liken seriously as a writer. Several people on the editorial staff have probably read your story, seen its merit, and passed it on to the editor who wrote to you. Editors do not have time to write letters to writers unless they see promise and real talent in the manuscript.

Now it's your turn to accept and reject. If you find more than one editor making the same criticism, take the editors' words to heart and rework the story accordingly. Incorporate the suggestions you find worthwhile. Those that seem irrelevant, file for later review. You can always throw them away after you sell the story. Like a good stew, ciriticism is best evaluated after it simmers a while.

When an editor expresses an interest in seeing more of your work, respond with a new story in a timely manner. This story may meet with acceptance—which is why it's so very important to work on something new while you're waiting. Which brings us back to being a realistic boss.

20
SAGGING MIDDLES AND DEAD ENDS

By Sid Fleischman

Throughout a long writing life, I have had my problems with middles and endings—to say nothing of beginnings. I have never written a story in which the rain didn't fall somewhere along the way. But there is a sunny side to this weather. In solving a gnarly story problem I find that inevitably I run into fresh scenes I wouldn't otherwise have thought of.

In this regard, story problems (I tell myself while beating my head against the wall) are the writer's best friend. I am, in fact, always suspicious of a story that comes dancing out of the computer without any trips or falls.

Well, what does one do when the middle of a story begins to sag? I experienced this in the first novel I ever wrote—a long-forgotten detective novel.

About a third of the way along, I could feel the story tension go slack. I was too inexperienced to know what to do, so I impulsively killed off another character. That brightened up the story wonderfully! The incident brought to my attention what a powerful ploy it is to add something new to a story in trouble. More than once this sort of CPR has kept one of my novels alive and kicking. A stranger turns up. A storm blows in. A villain appears. A character disappears. Something, something new. I know a prominent author who, feeling her story becalmed, burned down the character's house. That livened things up.

But looking for a new element is not the only area I turn my mind to these days. When the story battery goes dead, I immediately reexamine the opening chapters to see if I have made a wrong move somewhere. Often, even a slight change in relationships will act like a jumper cable and revive the tale. The technique is much like giving a slight shake to a kaleidoscope, for a different story pattern will inevitably reveal itself.

Let me cite personal examples of these solutions.

When I began a children's novel, *Humbug Mountain* (Dell), I was working with the idea of doing a Robinson Crusoe or Swiss Family Robinson survival tale set on the vast frontier of what once was called The Great American Desert.

I established a family, traveling up the Missouri River to the Dakota boom town of Humbug Mountain. When my characters arrive, they see nothing but weathered real estate stakes in the ground and a beached old river boat. The town went bust before it could boom. The characters were "shipwrecked" on the prairie, and I had my Swiss Family Robinson set up.

Or did I? The story turned to ashes. The next chapter simply wouldn't write. I considered having the kids catch a catfish for supper, but that would not exactly be a show stopper. Why, I muttered to myself, didn't the family just wait out the next river boat and hurry back to civilization?

They couldn't, *only* because if they did I'd have to throw away several dazzling chapters. They dazzled me, at any rate.

Instead, I threw out Robinson Crusoe and I turned to something new. I brought onstage a couple of ghastly villains. When the kids are exploring the dead old river boat, they sense that someone else is aboard. They are right, and they soon come face to face with Shagnasty John and the Fool Killer, two unwashed nightmares hiding from the law. From that point on, the story took off like a runaway horse, and went on to become a finalist for the National Book Awards.

The stranger need not be a villain, as I was to discover when trying to write a picture book story, *The Scarebird* (Greenwillow).

I set up a strong but tender story about an isolated old man and a scarecrow he puts up. He begins to talk to it, to clothe it against the winds and stormy weather, and even to mumble through a game of checkers with it.

Suddenly, I was in quicksand. What do I do with the situation? Nothing wanted to happen next. The story had become a still life. I don't remember how long I wandered around in the dark before the obvious occurred to me. Why not bring on a stranger? What would happen?

I introduced a farmhand down on his luck and looking for work. Little by little. Lonesome John gives the unwelcome young man the scarebird's hat against the blazing sun. On other days, he takes pity and gives the young man the scarebird's shoes and then its gloves against the thorny brambles. The scarebird is transformed, day by day and bit by bit, into a living being—with whom finally we see the old man play a real game of checkers.

To a writer who feels locked and bolted to an outline, the ability to turn on a dime, to change a key story element, may give one the vapors. But with a project in trouble, one has no choice but to look the outline in its bloodshot eyes—and to revise it as necessary. Only this sort of flexibility will spare the reader, who cares nothing about outlines or preliminary inspirations, from sagging middles or dead ends.

Endings require a different sort of acrobatics. It's too late in the story to lay in new backflips. One must work with what's already on paper.

My endings grow organically out of materials I established early— and as often as not, *quite by accident.* By that I mean I don't see ahead how important marginal details or props will prove to be at the end.

Early in *The 13th Floor* (Greenwillow), a time travel novel, my main character. Buddy, is seen practicing Spanish with a small tape recorder for a school test. It was a passing detail; I absolutely had no further plans for it. But it reappeared, as surprising to me as a jack-in-the-box.

Just before the final curtain Buddy sees a chance to shove the tape recorder down the throat of a freshly-caught fish. The gasping cod starts talking in Spanish, the 17th-century villain jumps out of his buckle shoes, and in the confusion my lead characters are able to make a final escape.

If I hadn't so casually introduced the pocket tape recorder early on, I still might be hunting for an ending to *The 13th Floor*. Props have been lifesavers for me.

A marginal detail gave me the ending for a gold rush novel. *By the Great Horn Spoon!* (Little, Brown). I had read that ships rounding the Horn were often boarded by stray cats in the seaports of South America. I slipped this in as little more than local color. To my immense surprise, the cats popped up importantly at the end.

While my characters, young Jack and his butler, Praiseworthy, store up a few pouches of gold dust, they lose everything in a boat explosion. But wait! What about those Peruvian cats breeding aboard the now abandoned ship in the bay? I'd read that San Francisco was overrun with rats and that cats were worth their weight in gold. Jack and Praiseworthy strike it rich, at last, by selling Peruvian cats. Happy last-minute thought! Those felines have been continuously in print for almost thirty-five years.

As I never plot my endings in advance (I don't want to know how things turn out; that's why I write the story), I seem always to be glancing back over my shoulder for the ending.

In *Jim Ugly* (Greenwillow), I had no dramatic curtain until I recalled the chicken ranch I had introduced only for background early on. Why couldn't the chickens have pecked up the hidden diamonds—and then gotten loose across the Nevada landscape?

They could, they did, and I had the comic ending I'd been searching for.

Every story problem that it is possible to have, together with these solving techniques, came into play in my recent novel, *Bandit's Moon* (Greenwillow). The story is about a girl, Annyrose, who attaches herself to the legendary California highwayman of the last century, Joaquin Murieta.

Posters were nailed to the trees all over California offering a reward for the head of Joaquin. The posters didn't say Joaquin Murieta. Just Joaquin.

Now, there were plenty of honest Joaquins, a fairly common Mexican name, and alas, a few of them were strung up in hasty error.

That, I thought, would be my story. I'd have Annyrose become involved with the wrong Joaquin, an innocent man destined for a hanging tree.

A couple of chapters in, and I felt I was up to my eyebrows in marshmallows.

So I gave the kaleidoscope a slight turn. What if Annyrose becomes involved, instead, with the real Joaquin? Say he saves her life and becomes her friend and protector, bandit or not. And then, what if, what if—what if she learns that in the past he has killed her father or brother or someone close? Sudden hatred would drive her to turn him in, wouldn't it?

I started the novel from scratch again. I could feel so much story tension I needed tranquilizers. Hut I hit a sudden sag in the middle. I needed something new to happen. I brought in a stranger, a Chilean, a Joaquin impostor, and wrote a scene in which he tries to hold up the real Joaquin. I never expected to see the impostor again. I was wrong.

As the pages of *Bandit's Moon* piled up I began to worry in earnest about the final curtain ahead. I was unable to come up with a dramatic scene to wrap up the story.

Eyes fixed firmly over my shoulder, I reexamined my opening moves. My eyes lit on a passing detail.

As I wanted my heroine and her older brother to be penniless, I established in the first chapter that his pocket had been picked: His money and papers were gone. I had no further plans for the incident.

But I now saw how perfectly it could become part of the ending. I had already written that Annyrose, now separated from her brother, reads in the paper that he had been shot during a stagecoach holdup at the hands of the legendary bandit. In tears, she turns in her friend, Joaquin.

But what about the pickpocket lurking in the first chapter? Why couldn't he be misidentified because of the stolen papers in "his pocket? What if *he* were the one killed in the stagecoach holdup? I could then bring the brother back to life in the end. Seeing him alive, Annyrose would realize that she had turned in her great friend Joaquin—by mistake.

Now I had a gutsy end scene.

And remember that Chilean impostor, that throwaway character I had introduced to fix a sag in the middle of the story?

I won't tell you how *he* turns up in the end. But count on it.

Don't underestimate the power of props and minor details, of kaleidoscopes and strangers and villains and jack-in-the-boxes. I couldn't write my books without them.

21
MATTERS OF FACT: FICTION WRITERS AS RESEARCHERS

By Sharon Oard Warner

An interesting facts on honey bees:

1. Worker bees irritate the queen to prepare her to fly. She has to lose a little weight before she can take to the air.

2. The queen flies only once, going a distance of seven or eight miles so as not to mate with her brothers.

3. Mating occurs in the air, and after the act is completed, the drone dies and falls to the ground. (I could make all sorts of wise cracks here, but I'll refrain.)

This is the first use I've had for a whole legal pad full of notes I took in a beekeeping class a few summers ago. I registered for the class because I intended to write about a beekeeper, and to that end, I look faithful notes. More than two years have passed, and my beekeeper has yet to show himself. I do have firm possession of a radiologist who reads tarot cards, and I'm hoping to give her the beekeeper for a husband. As of this morning, she has yet to embrace him, but I'm optimistic about working it out. I intend to use some of this material on bees, but it's obvious that I'm not going to do all of it justice. If you need a stray bee fact or two, you're welcome to the above. Interesting though these facts are, I doubt that I'll find a place for them.

A few additional facts:

1. Bees don't like carbon dioxide, so when you work with them, be sure to breathe out the side of your mouth. (Try doing that, just to see how it feels.)

2. When a bee stings, she will die, but in the process she'll leave a "mad bee" smell on your skin, a smell that makes other bees want to sting you as well.

3. The mad bee smell is easy to identify: It smells for all the world like bananas with a little solvent mixed in.

Keep your hands off these facts. I can almost guarantee I'll use them sooner or later, and probably sooner. These are the kinds of facts

That authenticate character and offer opportunities to advance a plot. They're active facts that carry a sensory charge. Let me show you what I mean: Once the radiologist acquiesces and agrees to be married to the beekeeper, one of the first things he'll do is lumber out to the hives and check on his bees. Maybe he has someone else with him, his daughter Sophie say, and he'll tell her a little about how to handle the combs. Already, I can predict that Sophie will insist on getting stung. She's that sort of girl. And there we have it: the "mad bee" smell all over Sophie, enticing the other bees to sink their stingers into the soft skin of her upper arm and to swarm menacingly about her face. "Get away, Sophie!" her father will yell, wresting the comb from her hands. But Sophie will refuse because she's sixteen and more hormones than good sense.

This one little scene requires more facts than might be readily apparent. The three I've listed will launch the scene, but they won't complete it. Almost immediately, others will be necessary. Without them, the scene will lose steam, and the plot will stall. As it turns out, fiction and fictional characters take their vitality from facts, from real-life detail, which means that writers of fiction are in the business of research. We're fact hoarders—accumulating, sorting, and storing details that give our stories life.

Some of the fact-finding is rather mundane, but research need not be dull. The beekeeping class and my trip to the beekeeper's house to "handle" the bees were recent highlights. (No, I did not get stung while I held the combs, nor did I wear gloves or a veil. Are you impressed? Well, you shouldn't be. These were gentle bees.) I think of this early research as a sort of "grounding" because I use these facts to situate my main characters in their milieu. Where do these people I'm writing about live? In which city, on what street, in this house or that? What do they do for a living? What are their hobbies, besides beekeeping, of course? Their fears? Their joys? To answer these questions, it's necessary to leave the computer and enter the world.

Sometimes, these forays take me only as far as the local library or bookstore. Books, newspapers, and magazines often provide sufficient information. For instance, I recently bought a book called *Beekeeping,* which advertises itself as a "Complete Owner's Manual," all you need to be a beekeeper or to create one. Like everything else, it's not what it claims to be, but it will answer some of my questions. What sort of questions? Well, here's one: To write the scene where stubborn Sophie invites a bee sting, I need to know the season, and the decision can't be arbitrary. From my bee class, I

learned that bees winter, a state akin to hibernation, and that wintering lasts longer in certain areas of the country than in others. The farther north you live, the trickier this wintering process can be, but I digress.

And digress again: It's important to know facts, yes. but it's just as important to recognize when enough is enough. Lengthy and in-depth research carries its own liabilities. Think about it. Having spent time, energy and *el dinero* on acquiring precious facts, how likely are you lo squander them? Not bloody likely. Which leads perfectly good writerss to stuff their narratives with tangential information, just to justify that expensive tome on medieval bedroom practices or the weekend trip to Amarillo for local color. Don't overdo it; that's my advice. I almost quit reading that wonderful novel *Snow Falling on Cedar*s for exactly this reason. There's only so much I want to know about fishing boats, and David Guterson tested my patience more than once. (I realize he won the PEN Faulkner and all, but no one is perfect.)

But don't let's go to Puget Sound, beautiful though it is. Let's stay in arid Albuquerque with the beekeeper. He lives right in town with inc. in the North Valley, on the other side of the Rio Grande. So we've established place. What about the season? Checking my handy-dandy beekeeping book, I note that by mid-April the hive will be quite active. The desert is blooming, and nectar is plentiful. (Before I write this scene, I'll need to know exactly which plants bloom in April in Albuquerque, because the beekeeper is not only concerned with his insects; he's also concerned with their food sources. Lumbering out to check the hive, he'll be thinking about goldenrod, prickly pear, and Palmer lupine.) By April, the old bees that wintered over are dying off, and the young bees are taking their place. The brood nest will have swelled lo six to eight combs, providing the beekeeper with something to t heck. And I'm guessing that the young bees are more likely to sting. I'll have to check to make sure, but if they're anything like teenage Sophie, they're hotheaded and impulsive.

To tell the truth, Sophie is the real subject of my book, and I'll let you in on a secret not even her parents know. Sophie's pregnant. Now I've been pregnant, twice actually, so I don't need to research the various stages of pregnancy. I remember them all too well. But I've never been pregnant as a teenager, and certainly not as a teenager in 1998, and this does require some investigation. Before I began to work on this project—so far, I've written two short stories on these characters, and the stories themselves are a kind of research, a way of developing characters and familiarizing myself with the material—I read *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls.* The author, Mary Pipher, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Lincoln, Nebraska. I also went to a reading and talk Ms. Pipher gave at a local bookstore, which proved helpful in a larger sense. It provided context and some sense of urgency. Ms. Pipher is very concerned about plight of teenage girls in the 1990s.

> Girls know they are losing themselves. One girl said, "Everything good in me died in junior high." Wholeness is shattered by the chaos of adolescence. Girls become fragments, their selves split into mysterious contradictions. They are sensitive and tenderhearted, mean and competitive, superficial and idealistic. They are confident in the morning, and overwhelmed with anxiety by nightfall. They rush through their days with wild energy and then collapse into lethargy. They try on new roles every week—this week the good student, next week the delinquent, and the next, the artist. . . . Much of their behavior is unreadable. Their problems are complicated and metaphorical—eating disorders, school phobias, and self-inflicted injuries. I need to ask again and again in a dozen different ways, "What are you trying to tell me?"

This is precisely the question I'm asking of Sophie, again and again, and the answers she provides will do much to shape the material for the novel. Thus, *Reviving Ophelia* provides me with a necessary cultural perspective, one I will certainly find useful, but this "grounding" I'm talking about is something more elemental. It's a matter of territory, of the actual earth on which a character walks.

So where does Sophie walk? Well, she walks around high school for one thing. Sophie goes to Valley High School in Albuquerque, which is, not so coincidentally, where my son goes to school as well. My son Corey is a sophomore, and Sophie is a senior, so it's not likely they'll run into one another, which is just as well because Sophie is not, as mothers say, a "good influence." She's got troubles, that girl. Still, my son's attendance at Valley is as useful to me as Ms. Pipher's book. Maybe more useful. I go to the high school frequently, and whenever I do, I take note of the place itself and of the kids who spend their days there.

Valley is one of the oldest high schools in Albuquerque. From all appearances, the main buildings date from the fifties. The campus has been maintained over the years, but in piecemeal fashion: In "senior circle," new picnic tables hunker up to crumbling cement benches. The library is now labeled the Media Center, but it houses a modest collection of moldy-looking books, not a computer in plain sight. The carpet in the Media Center is a horrible shade of puke green, and appears to have been laid down in the late sixties or early seventies when all the adults went temporarily color blind. I was around then, but still coming of age, and so I don't have to take responsibility for that carpet. At the last meeting of the Parent's Advisory Council—yes, I'm a member - the principal, a gracious and energetic man named Toby Herrera, voiced his hope that the carpet would soon be replaced. We all nodded vigorously and tried not to look down.

At an earlier meeting this year, Mr. Herrera happened to mention that Albuquerque has a high school specifically designed for pregnant teens. (Is this a step forward or backward? I can't decide.) The school is called New Futures, and the facility includes counseling for new and expectant mothers as well as on-site day care. When Mr. Herrera mentioned this school, I thought of Sophie, for whom New Futures will be an option, and I also thought of my own high-school

career, when the girls who got pregnant had no options whatsoever. By and large, they did not have abortions, unless they crossed the border into Mexico—we're talking pre-Roe vs. Wade here—and they did not stay in school. What they did do, I suppose, was to get married, if the boy in question had the presence of mind or the generosity to propose, or else they slipped away to a home for unwed mothers in Fort Worth. I used to hear girls whisper about that place. It might have been, might still be, a humane and cheerful alternative to living at home or jumping off a cliff; I don't know. But at the time, it seemed a sort of prison where everything was stripped away, first your identity, your family and your friends, and finally, your baby, as well.

But Sophie lives in a different world, and it's one I need to know about. As Mr. Herrera was quick to point out, pregnant girls can choose to go to school at New Futures or they can stay at their home school. In other words, Sophie can continue to attend Valley, and knowing Sophie, I imagine that's what she'll do. Of course, that decision will simplify my research tasks a bit because it means I won't have to scout out New Futures. One of the most important aspects of this "grounding" is to gain a firm sense of place, and here we're talking about everything from the time period to the city to the weather.

Naturally, Sophie blames her several bee stings on Daddy, then runs sobbing into the house. Ahh, yes, the house. What color is the back door Sophie slams behind her? And is her room at the front of the house or the back? For me, identifying home is one of the most important early research tasks. Before I can accomplish much in the way of characterization and plot, I must know where my characters live, and by this, I mean a particular house with particular windows that look out on particular plants and alleys and streets. Imagining the house does not work for me. It's too ephemeral—made-up people in a made-up house. The walls begin to waver and shift before my eyes, the kitchen to slide from one end of the house to the other, the garage to attach then unattach. Just where did I put that third bedroom, I wonder, and what was on the walls? Sooner or later, the occupants feel a tremor beneath their feet; they're threatened with imaginary collapse. Everything has its limits, you see, my imagination included.

So where to find a real house? My own doesn't work. I live there, my husband and children live there. We don't have room for a fictional family, and besides, they're bound to have entirely different tastes from mine. They're better housekeepers; they find time to dust thoroughly and not just swipe at the surfaces of things. Or maybe they're worse: Maybe pet hair gathers in the corners of the rooms, and dirty plates and coffee cups collect beside the bed and on top of the toilet tank. What I need, you see, is somebody else's home, full of furniture and magazines and knick knacks, but without occupants. A ready-made set.

For my first novel, I had a piece of luck. My family was in Austin, Texas, for the holidays, which is where the novel takes place, and my husband and I spent New Year's Eve with a friend who just happened to be house-sitting for an entire year. So there we were, drinking a little wine and listening to The Gypsy Kings, my husband and his friend Mark discussing, yawn, the University of Texas basketball team. An hour passed, and they moved on to the Dallas Cowboys. To keep from nodding off, I got up and had a look around. I took note of the flamingoes in the study, a whole motley crew of flamingoes—plastic ones, metal ones, and a wooden flamingo that swung from the ceiling. I puzzled over a small black and white TV on the counter in the bathroom, and the red tile floor in the kitchen. I peered out the bedroom windows and weighed myself on the scales. Nosy, you say. Yes, you're absolutely right, but I didn't open the medicine chest or any of the drawers. I didn't try on clothes, like the main character in Raymond (in ver's story, "Neighbors." I just made a leisurely stroll around the premises. Later, when the characters in my first novel took up resilience in this house, I had only to turn on The Gypsy Kings to bring it all back. Perfect.

For the second novel, I had to take action. No gift houses this time around. So I "feigned" and pretended to be a potential home buyer. Dagging my husband along to make it look good, I scouted several houses. I had ideas about where the beekeeper and his family would live For one thing, I wanted them to reside in the North Valley, because I like it there, and because Sophie is already enrolled at Valley High School. She has friends there. We wouldn't want to move her at this late date. And the beekeeper requires land with flowering plants around his house, as well as a nearby water source. Bees have to drink.

Beforehand, I studied newspaper ads, choosing houses for description, location, price, and size. All these houses were occupied and previously owned. In each case, a real estate person was hosting an open house, so no one would be inconvenienced. The first houses we saw were all wrong. In a strange turn of events, we happened to go to a house which was the scene of a terrible murder, a story that had been on the news and in the papers for weeks, a death befitting a Dostoevsky novel. I won't go into details, as they will plunge you into despair. The real estate agent, who was clearly ill at ease, referred to the crime obliquely, mentioning it to us in order to be "up front." He'd been ordered by the court to sell the house, he said. What could he do? Indeed, I thought. His situation deserved its own novel. Before, the house had seemed dreary, broken up in odd ways, old and neglected. But afterwards, it seemed more than gloomy; it seemed down right haunted. Naturally, my husband and I hightailed it out of there, retreating to the car where we sat in shock for a few minutes before pulling slowly away, leaving the real estate agent to pace back and forth in the family room, an honest man who would surely be trapped in this tragic house for countless Sundays to come.

Quite naturally, we were tempted to abandon house hunting, for that day anyway, but we decided to forge on, and now I'm glad we did.

The third house was perfect, or close to perfect, more expensive than the house I imagined for Sophie and her parents, but otherwise ideal. I took away a real estate brochure that I covered with notes. Here's the realtor's description: "This wonderful custom adobe home offers a quiet private retreat with views, Northern New Mexico decor, and room for horses." Or bees, lots of bees. The house is situated on 1.3 acres. It's a territorial style home with a pitched metal roof, a long front porch, brick floors and window ledges, vigas, latillas, and tile accents. (Live in Albuquerque for a few years, and you'll be able to sling these terms, too.) The house is shaped in an L; one wing is eighteen years old, the other only seven, but it was constructed to look old. The upstairs windows offer a view of the bosque, which is Spanish for woods. Whenever you see the bosque, you know the river is close by. Beyond the bosque, two inactive volcanoes rise like the humps of a camel's back. You want to move there, right? So did I, but I didn't have an extra $332,500. Yep, that was the asking price.

Though I can't have the house in reality, I've taken possession of it in my imagination. Sophie and her parents live there, and in order to give the family the financial wherewithal to afford this little hacienda in the midst of the city, I gave the mother, Peggy, a career that would bring in the big bucks, or at least the medium-sized bucks. Hence, her job as a radiologist. Actually, my reasons for making her a radiologist are a bit more complicated. I imagine Peggy to be a woman of extraordinary insight, someone who can see into people, very nearly a psychic.

Not surprisingly, Peggy's profession and her interest in tarot cards were suggested to me by some of the paraphernalia I noted in the house. The back upstairs bedroom was occupied by a young woman named Zoe (test papers in evidence), whose interests in Buddhism and acupuncture were also on display. An altar stood at one end of the room, and among the books on Zoe's desk was *The Book of Shiatsu* as well as a plastic body model for both the meridianal and extraordinary points. I made notes quickly because my husband insisted we not linger. He had compunctions about my nosiness, but I maintain that I did no one any harm, and again, I only looked at the things that were out in the open. Already, I've altered the particulars. Peggy is not a Buddhist, nor does she do acupuncture. But she does concern herself with what can't be seen on the surface, and it was Zoe's room that put this idea in my head. Thank you, Zoe.

But nothing comes free. I know about tarot cards because I took a class when I was seventeen and intent on the future. I still have the cards and the books. But here's a piece of research I have yet to do. I have to learn about the daily life of a radiologist: hours, tasks, and so forth. Having been to one fairly recently, I have a general sense of what radiologists do, but I need to know a great deal more. Already, I've lined up a lunch date with an acquaintance who used to work for a group of radiologists. And I have library sources. That won't be enough, of course, but it will get me started. The task is to find out how radiologists *think*, how they integrate their work in their day to day lives. Because radiologists aren't just radiologists at work. Like the rest of us, they carry their work away with them, and use it to understand the world.

The same is true for writers, of course, and for visual artists, photographers, assistant principals, day care workers, police officers, and doctors. A few years back, I asked my gynecologist so many questions about abortion that he quipped I could write off the visit as research, which, not so coincidentally, is exactly what it was.

Fiction writers are researchers. We can't help it. It's part and parcel of who we are. In restaurants, we crane our heads to listen to conversations taking place around us; we note accents and idiosyncratic speech patterns. At the mall, we stare at the strangers milling about, all of them people with homes to go to, children to care for, lives to lead. They have secrets these strangers, and we imagine what they are. It turns out that research isn't a distinct process, something with a beginning and end. It's ongoing, part and parcel of our lives. It is, in some sense, *our* secret.

One more interesting bee fact:

When working with bees, wear white or light-colored clothing. Bees are attracted to red and black.

They're bees, you see. They can't help it.

22
MAKE YOUR MINOR CHARACTERS WORK FOR YOU

By Barnaby Conrad

How do we know that scarlett o'hara is catnip to men?

The Tarleton twins *show* us in the first scene of *Gone With the Wind* by their adulation of her. The author doesn't tell us—she has minor characters do it for her.

In *The Godfather,* Mario Puzo doesn't *tell* us that Don Corleone is powerful and ruthless and lives outside the law, he shows us. In the very first chapter, the author skillfully establishes the eponymous Godfather's character and position by giving us brief vignettes of three minor characters in deep trouble: the wronged undertaker, Amerigo Bonasera; the washed-up crooner, John Fontaine; and an anguished father, the baker Nazorine. Who do they decide is the only person to come up with illegal solutions to their woes? Don Corleone. And in the next sequence we see them reverently approach the Don himself with their pleas and see him solve their problems savagely. And later that day, we hear Kay, another minor figure, speaking to Michael, the Don's son:

> Kay said thoughtfully, "Are you sure you're not jealous of your father? Everything you've told me about him shows him doing something for other people. He must be good-hearted." She smiled wryly. "Of course, his methods are not exactly constitutional."

How much more convincing this method is than if the author himself had ticked off a list of the Don's characteristics and background information.

Never fail to use your secondary characters wherever possible to characterize your protagonist and to further your plot.

What would Detective Steve Carella, of Ed McBain's many books about the 87th precinct, do without Meyer Meyer and the other minor characters who illuminate his lively pages? And in Nelson DeMille's best seller. *Plum Island,* Detective John Corey goes from minor charactrer to minor character, each with his or her own life and agenda, until he flinally uncovers the identity of the murderer.

Books about criminal activities usually lean heavily on secondary characters. In *Silent Witness,* Richard North Patterson's bestseller, the young attorney depends greatly on his old mentor's advice—and so do the readers—to find out necessary information of a technical nature about the murder:

Saul gave him a sour smile. "Don't you find it a little funny that we're the ones having this conversation?"

I stopped laughing about an hour ago, Saul. When Stella Marz told me about the blood on Sam's steering wheel."

Saul's smile vanished. "There are a thousand possible explanations, my son. Even if it's hers. They can't convict on that."

I know. But that's not enough to make me feel better."

Saul reached for the bottle, pacing himself a precise two inches, neat, in a tumbler.

Some secondary characters are dead before the story even starts, viz., the ghost of Hamlet's father; Mrs. Maximilian de Winters in Daphne Du Maurier's classic novel, *Rebecca;* and the writer Terry O'Ncal in Olivia Goldsmith's 1996 novel *The Bestseller.*

What would playwrights have done over the years without minor characters? The curtain goes up:

BUTLER (*Dusting the furniture):* We've best get this parlour spick and span wot wif the young master comin' 'ome from the war! MAID (*Arranging some flowers):* And 'im bringin' 'ome some French floozie he wants to marry and the missus sayin' over m'dead body and all.

Just as the playwrights did and do (and, one hopes, more subtly than the above example), so can novelists and short story writers use minor characters to let the readers in on who the protagonists are and what their problem is.

Homer knew the significant role minor characters could play. In *The Iliad,* the soldiers are grumbling about the war; they've been in Troy ten long years, and they want to go back home to Greece. This is the only war in history where both sides knew *exactly* what they were lighting for—Helen of Troy—but the soldiers are battle-weary and homesick. Then radiant Helen walks by. Wow! The men stare at her unbelievable beauty, then grab their weapons enthusiastically and charge back into the fight, home and hearth forgotten.

Now we have been made to believe that Helen is indeed the most beautiful creature in the world in a way that all the adjectives in the dictionary could not accomplish.

Which would convince you more of a character's goodness? Consider the following:

Old Daniel Badger seemed a cold aloof man, but actually he was quite kind and did many nice things for people in town.

Or do you prefer this:

When Daniel Badger shuffled out of the barber shop. Max growled, "Old sourpuss!"

"Yeah?" said Bill. "When my little girl took sick with cancer last year I got an anonymous check in the mail for five grand for the treatment. Saved her life. Just found out yesterday—my son works in the bank—he told me who sent it. Old man Badger! And I barely know the guy."

Of course, the second is more convincing because no conniving, manipulative writer told you about Badger; you just happened to overhear it at the barber shop.

Secondary characters can be invaluable in describing your main character's looks. The narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic, *The Great Gatsby*, is a minor player in the story, but is important in helping us *see* the people and events. Here we get our first look at the protagonist:

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd.

The narrator in *Gatsby* also serves as sort of a Greek chorus, briefly summing up the meaning of the novel, and ending with the lovely line:

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

In this way, a minor character can perform a valuable function for. The author, subtly expressing some final thought or emotion for the reader. In my novel *Matador*, when the hero dies, a very minor character, Cascabel, a banderillero, sums up the tragedy and the heartlessness off the crowd—"the only beast in the arena," as Blasco Ibanez wrote *in Mood and Sand:*

> More and more," said Cascabel dully, the tears spilling down his face. "They kept demanding more and more—and more was his life, so he gave it to them."

Sometimes minor characters achieve a life of their own, "pad their parts," and become pivotal in the plot even to the point of altering the outcome of the story. Such a character is the oily Uriah Heep in Dickens's *David Copperfield;* the murderer in Joseph Kanon's bestseller, *Los Alamos;* and many characters in Elmore Leonard's books.

So take care with your minor characters; as factors in your story they can be *major*. Be sure to invest them with human idiosyncrasies, foibles, and agendas of their own. They can enhance your main characters, provide your plot with unanticipated twists, and let your readers know that they are in the hands of a professional writer.

23
THE PLOT THICKENS

By Barbara Shapiro

Some writers can sit down and begin a novel without knowing where it will end, trusting in the process to bring their story to a successful conclusion. I'm not that trusting. And I'm not that brave. I don't have the guts to begin a book until I know there *is* an end— and a middle, too. I need to have a rough outline that allows me to believe my idea might someday be transformed into a successful novel. Some writers need a working title; I need a working plot.

A substantial segment of the writing community turns its collective nose up at the mere mention of the word "plot"— particularly if that plot is devised before writing has begun. "Plot is not what novels are about," they claim. "Novels are about feelings and characters and ideas. Plot is for TV movies." Novels *are* about feelings and characters and ideas, but novels are, above all else, stories, and it is through the story that the characters' feelings and the author's ideas are revealed. A handy equation is: Story equals plot equals novel. But what exactly *is* a story?

A story is a tale with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's a quest. Your protagonist goes after something she wants very badly— something she gets, or doesn't get, by the end. Whether it's returning to Kansas (Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz)* or killing the witch ("Hansel and Gretel"), this journey is the story, the plot, the means by which your characters' strengths and weaknesses are unveiled, his or her lessons learned. It is the trip you and your protagonist and your reader all make together.

All human beings have the same features, yet the magic of the human race is that we all look different. The same holds true for plot. While the specifics of your plot are unique, there is an underlying structure that it shares with other stories—and it is this structure that you can use to develop your working plot.

Human beings have been telling stories and listening to stories as lung as there have been human beings, and there is a structure to these lories. Tell the story without the right structure and risk losing your listeners. Find this structure, and your job as a novelist will be easier; you will understand your readers' expectations and be able to meet Hu m. Follow this plot structure and add your own voice, your own words, your own creativity, and you will have a unique novel that works.

Discovering and understanding the underlying structure of the novel will help you develop your working plot even before you begin writing. It will get you moving by assuring you that you are on the right path. In my career, I have used this concept to come up with a number of tricks to help me discover where my novel is going—and to get myself going. These tricks can be translated into four exercises: (1) classical structure; (2) plot statement; (3) the disturbance; and (4) the crisis.

Step 1: Classical structure

There is a long-running argument among writers as to exactly how many different stories there are. Some say there are an infinite number, some say there are 47 or 36 or 103, and others say there is only one. I am a member of the "only one story" school. I believe this one story is the skeleton upon which almost all successful novels are hung—this story *is* the underlying structure. If I can figure out how *my* story hangs on this skeleton, I can begin to move forward. This is how the story goes:

> There once was a woman who had a terrible problem enter her life (*the disturbance).* She decided that she was going to solve/get rid of her problem so she devised a plan *(goal).* But whenever she put this plan into action, everything around her worked against her (*conflicts*) until the problem had grown even worse and she seemed even further then ever from reaching her goal. At this darkest moment *(crisis),* the woman made a decision based on who she was and what she had learned in the story. Through this decision and the resulting action *(climax),* her problem was resolved *(resolution)* in either a positive *(happy ending)* or negative way *(unhappy ending).*

The first step to understanding and using story structure is to break the classic story into its component parts. The key elements are: the disturbance; the goal; the conflicts; the crisis; the climax—the sacrifice and the unconscious need filled from the backstory; and the resolution. Once this is clear to you, then you can transpose these components into your particular story. To accomplish this, ask yourself the following five questions:

What is the disturbance? Some terrible or wonderful or serendipitous event that comes into your protagonist's life, upsets her equilibrium and causes her to develop a goal that propels her through your story. A tornado, for instance.

What is the protagonist's goal? To get out of Oz and return to Kansas.

What are some of the conflicts that stand in her way? The key to creating a successful story is putting obstacles in your protagonist's path—external, internal, and interpersonal. Create opposition and frustration to force her to fall back

on who she is, and what she knows, to overcome the hurdles you have created. No hurdles, no conflict, no story. Conflict is what moves your story forward and what develops your protagonist's character.

What specific crisis will she face in the end?

How will she resolve this crisis?

Once you have answered these questions, you will have the skeletal outline for a story that is the basis for almost every successful novel written, and you may find you are ready to begin. If this is the case, dive right in. Unfortunately, for me, this is not enough. I need to do a bit more.

Step 2: Plot statement

A plot statement is a one-sentence, high-concept summary of the set-up of your story. It is what you might pitch to a producer to whom you were trying to sell a movie—or to an agent to whom you are trying to sell a book. To write this statement all you need to know is your protagonist, the disturbance, his goal, and what is at stake.

"Dorothy Gale (protagonist) must find her way home (goal/stakes) after a tornado blows her into the strange land (disturbance) full of evil witches and magical wizards," is the plot statement for Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz.*

"Jay Gatsby (protagonist) must win back the love of Daisy Buchanan (goal) to give meaning to his meaningless life (stakes) after he buys a mansion across the water from the one in which Daisy lives (disturbance)," is the plot statement for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatshy.*

Delia Grinstead (protagonist) must create a new life for herself (goal/stakes) untill she impulsively walks away from her three children and long-term marriage." is the plot statement for Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years.*

Sukı Jacobs (protagonist) must discover what really happened on the night Jonah Ward was killed (goal) before her teenage daughter is arrested for a murder she didn't commit (stakes), but that she did predict (disturbance)," is the plot statement for my latest book, *Blind Spot.*

What's the plot statement for yours?

Step 3: The disturbance

Although you already have a rough idea of what the disturbance of yom story is, it is useful to make it more specific. This isn't just any disturbance: It is a particular event that begins the action of your particular story, throws your protagonist into turmoil, and forces her to devise a specific goal that will place her on the path that will lead her to *her crisis*. It is the "particular" aspect of these events that makes your story unique. To discover your disturbance—and, in many ways, your character—ask yourself the following question: "What is the worst thing that can happen to my protagonist, but will ultimately be the best thing that could happen to her?"

What does your protagonist need to learn? Her lesson is your readers' lesson: It is the theme of your book. What life lesson do you want to teach? Once you have answered these questions, you will be able to develop a character whose story resonates to your theme—a character whose backstory reflects what she needs to learn and whose journey within your story teaches it to her.

The disturbance in my second book, *Blameless,* occurs when Dr. Diana Marcus' patient, James Hutchins, commits suicide. It is the worst thing for Diana because it tears her life apart:

She begins to question herself as a psychologist.

A wrongful death and malpractice suit is filed by the Hutchins family, jeopardizing Diana's teaching position and practice as a psychologist.

She is publicly humiliated when the media disclose her unprofessional behavior.

Her husband Craig becomes suspicious, and their marriage is jeopardized.

Diana's inability to save James mirrors her childhood tragedy when she was unable to save her younger sister, and taps into all of her deepest insecurities.

This all sounds pretty terrible, but, like life, it's not all bad. James' death is also a good thing for Diana, because it forces her to face her tragic flaws and try to correct them:

She acknowledges her professional mistakes, making her a better therapist.

She and her husband rediscover their relationship.

She learns that she cannot cure everyone.

She forgives herself for her sister's death.

In order to come up with this disturbance, I had to delve deeply into Diana's present life and develop a past for her that would create a character who needed to learn this lesson. This process deepened both Diana and my plot.

How is your disturbance the best and worst thing that could happen to your protagonist?

Step 4: The crisis

The crisis of your novel is the major decision point for your protagonist. It reveals who she really is and what the experience has taught her. Its seeds are in the disturbance, and all the conflicts lead inexorably to this specific crisis, this specific decision and its specific resolution. But the decision can't be a simple one. If the choice is too easy, your reader will be unsatisfied. Therefore, you must create a decision that has both good and bad consequences, that has both gains and sacrifices, so that your reader will not know which choice your protagonist will make. To determine the crisis in your story, ask yourself the following questions:

What is the event that precipitates the crisis?

What is the decision the protagonist must make?

What does she learn in the decision-making process?

How does the decision reveal who she is (the backstory)?

How does her decision reflect on what happened to her in this story?

What does she lose in the decision (the sacrifice)?

What does she gain from her decision?

How is the decision turned into action?

How does the decision resolve the plot?

When I was developing the plot for *Blameless*, I asked myself the above questions and came up with these answers:

James shows up at Diana's apartment and holds a gun to his head; he tells her that if she tells him not to shoot himself, he won't.

Diana must decide whether to stop James from killing himself.

Diana learns that everyone cannot be saved, that she cannot save everyone, and she is not responsible for James.

Diana overcomes her belief that it is her mission to save everyone, realizes that she is not responsible for her sister's death, and ultimately forgives herself for it.

Diana struggles with her need to control her career, her marriage, her patients, and herself.

James will be dead, and she will be responsible for not stopping him.

A dangerous murderer will be dead, and Diana will remove the threat to herself and her unborn baby.

Diana doesn't say anything, and James blows his brains out.

James really is dead, and Diana is cleared of his murder.

So if you aren't as brave a writer as you'd like to be—or if that mythical muse just won't appear—try these four exercises. You just might discover that you aren't that cowardly after all. And that novel might just get finished.

24
SEVEN KEYS TO EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE

By Martin Naparsteck

Good dialogue makes characters in a story sound like real people talking, yet no one I know talks like a character, even in the best novels. This seeming contradiction can be explained by examining the seven attributes of good dialogue.

1. Every voice is unique.

In my novel *A Hero's Welcome,* Culver and Mabel talk:

"Hi," she said softly. "Hi."

"You feeling better?" "Yeah."

"You had too much to drink." "I know."

"Maybe you should go back to your room and sleep it off." "I would miss the party." "It's not much fun anyway." "Maybe I should have some coffee?"

Although both characters are products of middle-class, Eastern America, they are individuals, and I tried to keep that in mind. I tried to reflect Mabel's caring for Culver's condition and to capture Culver's condition—near-drunkenness—and a desire to continue the conversation. She speaks in longer sentences and controls the subject; he often speaks in incomplete sentences and only in response to her verbal initiatives. The differences may be subtle, but readers are unlikely to confuse who is speaking, despite the lack of attribution. Any time you have two or more characters speaking, make their rhythms differ. Some can speak staccato, some can speak with flow, some can use profanity, others can use big and fancy words. Assign a different voice to each character.

2. Don't make speeches.

Unless your character is running for president or teaching a litera-lure class or is pompous, don't let him rant on for more than three or four sentences without being interrupted by another character. In my novel *War Song,* Fernandez says,

"In case you never heard, war is hell. War is hell. Some people got to get killed so others can live in freedom. I know that might sound corny to you, but if enough people believed it this world would be a lot better off."

Then he's cut off by a character who finds his little speech pompous.

In real life we don't usually tolerate being lectured at. Sitting in a classroom or in a church, we might have to, but not always even then. We prefer a chance to respond. In a bar or a living room, we're likely to respond with our own opinion before the speaker gets too carried away. Your characters should display the same intolerance.

3. Authors are not tape recorders.

In "Deep in the Hole," a short story published in *Aethlon,* I have Mickey, a member of his college's baseball team, say to his literature professor, "I have a game on Wednesday and I wonder if it would be all right if I skipped the class. I can read all the. . . ." Because it's a highly autobiographical story, and because I was tremendously awkward in speech in the late 60's, I feel certain the real-life dialogue this hit of fiction is based upon went something like this: "Eh, I have, eh, you know, a game on Wednesday and I, eh, wonder, would it be. eh, all right. . . ." All those "ehs" and that "you know" may be O.K. for a sentence or two, but for a whole story it would not only annoy most readers, but would distract them to the point of losing them. A fiction writer is not a journalist, and he has no obligation to act like a stenographer or a tape recorder. The idea is to capture both the essence and the underlying emotion of what's said, not to reproduce a transcript.

4. People tell more little lies than big ones.

Probably most people who commit a murder will tell the police they didn't do it. Big lies are part of life and should be part of stories. But most of us don't get that much opportunity to tell big lies (most of us will never be asked by the police if we committed a murder). But smaller lies are part of our everyday conversations. In my *Ellery Queen* short story, "The 9:13," two men are alone in a train station, and one tells the other his name is Thunder, but two pages later he says:

"My name ain't Thunder."

"What?"

"My name ain't Thunder."

"No?"

"No, it ain't."

"Oh."

"Ain't you curious what it is?"

Joe stammered a bit.

"It's Eddie."

"I—I see."

"Ain't you curious why I told ya it was Thunder?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you tell me your name was Thunder?"

"I ain't gonna tell ya."

Eddie's lie has no real purpose, but the fact that he chose to tell this particular lie in this particular manner reveals something about his character. Not everyone's playfulness is malevolent. Have your characters lie about small things in a manner that reveals who they are.

5. Dialogue is made up of monologues.

When someone is speaking to you, consider how you typically devote part of your attention to what she's saying, but you are also focused on what you're going to say when it's your turn to speak. In "Getting Shot," a short story of mine published in *Mississippi Review*, a soldier who has been wounded in Vietnam is told by his lieutenant:

"You're gonna get a Purple Heart out of this. What do you think about that?"

"Not much." I'm smiling like a teenage kid just got his first lay, and the Louey, he knows it.

He pats my right shoulder. "Sure, sure." He adds, "Sure."

Although the narrator responds to what the lieutenant has said, he clearly has something else on his mind, part of which reflects the false bravado he assumes the situation requires. The lieutenant, while detecting that and playing along, uses a bit of staccato speech to end that portion of the conversation so he can move on to other things.

6. Every word in dialogue represents a choice.

Every word you ever spoke in your life represented a choice. You could have chosen to be silent. You could have used another word. Consider this bit of dialogue (from *War Song):* "Don't you wanna go home?" It could have been, "Do you not desire to return to your home?" Or, "Have you no desire to go home again?" The choice is based on who the character is. One test that works for me is to write the same bit of dialogue a dozen or more times, at least in my mind, soetimes on my computer screen, and then, only then, to decide which is most appropriate for a particular character under this particular circumstance. Chances are the first words you choose are not the ones that best reflect the character. As with all other writing, nothing improves dialogue like rewriting.

7. All dialogue should reveal character and/or advance plot.

I have never included a piece of dialogue like this in any story I've ever written (thank the great muse):

> He told me how to get to Salt Lake City from Logan, lake Valley West Highway until you come to the Interstate 15 interchange and proceed on to the interstate, going south, for about 90 miles, and when you come to the exit marked 600 north, get off and follow the signs to downtown." Thanks to his accurate and detailed directions I found my way to Salt I like City safely.

Any dialogue that simply exchanges information between characters (who was the 26th president of the U.S., what does antidisestablishment mean) is static. Stories need to move forward. Just as you never need to say the character walked to the other side of the room (unless if s the first time this guy has walked in 10 years), you never need to t reveal how someone learned the directions from here to there. Just assume, as your readers will, that there are some bits of conversation we know take place in real life but which are far too boring to include in a story.

But do let a character say, "You're fired," even though it reveals a bit of information the listener didn't know, because it changes the life of the poor guy. If the dialogue doesn't change the listener's life, no matter how slightly, or help us better understand who the speaker is, leave it out.

Each of the first six examples I've given help make the speakers sound like real people. But only the seventh one is

likely to reflect accurately a real bit of conversation. And that's the one you should never use.

25
THE NOVEL—YOU DO IT YOUR WAY, I'LL DO IT MINE

By Dorothy Uhnak

I admit to being an eccentric writer. I've yet to meet another writer who works as I do, so don't consider this an instructional article. But do take from it whatever methods will serve you best. And don't permit *anyone* to tell you that *your method* of working is wrong. It is the work itself that counts.

Years ago, as a fairly accomplished knitter, I undertook to copy a very complicated Irish-fisherman quilt. It contained at least seven different patterns: twists and cables and popcorns and secret family weaves. Looking at the picture of the quilt in question, I stopped cold. Never, not in a million years, could I do this. It then occurred to me, you don't knit a whole quilt all at once. One stitch at a time; one line at a time; one pattern at a time.

Maybe this isn't a very good analogy for writing a novel, but after all, we do write one word at a time, one line at a time, one paragraph and one page at a time. The unifying force of all the pieces, in the novel as in the quilt, draws the whole thing together.

The unifying force in my novels has always been the characters. I care about their growth or regression, about the circumstances that change them and move them through the story, much as life molds and shapes each of us.

What I must know, absolutely, before I start a novel is who each character is at the beginning and who he will be at the end. I'm never really sure how the characters will get from the first place to the last, but I am positive where they will end up.

The Ryer Avenue Story (St. Martin's Press, 1993) had six characters not of equal importance but essential, since the story belonged to all of them. We meet them as children, 11- and 12-year-olds. What I knew about them was simple. They lived and played together on the Avenue in The Bronx where I grew up. In middle age, all five boys and one girl were successful, accomplished people, some more than others. They moved in life from when we meet them on the street of a cold snowy night until they are confronted in mid-life with a problem set in motion when they were kids.

The first thing I had to know about these people was what they looked and sounded like. My characters have to be named absolutely on target. Megan Magee could not be Mary Reardon; Danny DeAngelo could not be Bobby Russelli. They become as real to me as people I actually know and speak to day after day. (You wouldn't want to address your best friend Sally as Luanne, would you?)

Here is my first eccentricity: I work on a standard Hermes 45 typewriter. I have three machines carefully stored away —don't ask how one gets ribbons—you remember ribbons? No? Well, anyway—I don't go near my heavy, trusty machine for quite a while.

First, I research as meticulously as possible in order to know the world in which my people live. For Ryer Avenue, I used the neighborhood where I was born and raised. But I never did go to their Catholic School (St. Simon Stock in the Bronx). Some of my friends did, and I absorbed their stories, peeked through their school windows and stole into their church when I was a child. I didn't know why I did these things until years later: It was material I would need to draw on one day.

To describe accurately a scene in the death camps of WWII, I read almost more than my mind could hold of horror stories. There is no way I could write substantially about any of this. But I had the good fortune of talking with an older friend who told me he had been one of the young American lieutenants in the advanced group entering the death camps and opening them up for our troops. He lent me that part of his life in one long, dark, horrible conversation, during which we left our cake uneaten and the coffee cold. He gave me this part of himself to use in my novel, and later when he read the book, he said I had made him nicer than he really was, but I don't think so.

In my Ryer Avenue story, one of my characters becomes a big shot m the movie industry; one a leading light of the church; one a promising, rising politician; the woman becomes a psychiatrist. Each area had to be researched. If Gene O'Brien was to work in the Vatican, I needed to be very sure I knew what his physical surroundings would be and what his daily routines would encompass. I consult my research notes until I'm thoroughly familiar with the material and can place my people in an environment formerly alien to me.

Before setting one word on paper, I had to visualize scenes that would define each character as a child: Megan in the classroom; Dante in his father's shoe repair shop; Eugene at church; Willie losing himself in the world of movies. Since the novel begins in the childhood of my characters, I walked around with each kid in my head, one at a time. I needed to

know how the characters looked, sounded, acted, reacted, what they showed of themselves and what they hid. Only then did I sit, fingers on the trusty faithful noisy Hermes 45 keys, and pound out the chapters, one at a time.

I have the whole scene completely worked out before I begin to work: no notes (except for background research), just a scene that comes as I walk, rest, stare blankly at TV, even as I read a book by another writer. When I place the character in the scene, he or she knows how to move, what to think, what to say. By this time, I can hear each individual voice. No character sounds exactly like any other. They may all use certain phrases, expressions, and expletives, but each voice belongs only to the speaker.

Sometimes the scene I'm describing leads directly to the next scene, sometimes not. There are times when I get a whole chapter down on paper; other times, only two or three pages. And then I walk away. I've been known to work for fifteen minutes at a stretch or for ten hours. It is the story going on in my head that dictates my working hours. No nine-to-five for me!

The creative work for me is not done at the typewriter. It's done through all the long hours of listening, imagining, getting to know and trust my characters as they move through their lives toward the resolutions I know they must reach. Sometimes, I am surprised by the routes they take, the diversions they encounter.

One time when I was working on a television script, my producer called to ask about Act Five. I told him it was terrific; worked out exactly right. He asked me to send it to him. One problem—I hadn't typed it. I buckled down and did the annoying job of putting words to paper.

I don't wait for "inspiration," unless inspiration can be described as continuous, uninterrupted thinking, living with the story, and the fictional people who are taking on their own lives. With this strange method of working, I accomplish more than if I sat down at a given hour and stayed put for four or five hours, without knowing what I was going to write. I usually wait until the scene, chapter, or event is practically bursting from my head—then I form the scene into words on paper.

This process occurs during the first draft. I do go over every page before beginning a new session. I make my notations; slash things out and cram things in. I usually try to stop work when I have a strong feeling about what will come next; save it, walk it, think it, let it have free flow until the pictures, words, and actions must absolutely be on paper.

My working habits on the second draft are more typical of other writers', and I work long hours. I change, rewrite, or leave untouched pages and pages of the manuscript. I see where a character has taken over and where he or she shouldn't have; where I have interfered when I shouldn't have.

In the second draft, sometimes incredible moments happen when I find myself reworking something I hadn't intended to, and the descriptions and conversations soar. I feel myself to be the medium by which the story is told. I just write what I feel I'm supposed to write. Magic. Sometimes it's absolutely wonderful. (Sometimes it isn't!)

In my novel, *Codes of Betrayal*, a very strange thing happened. My heroine, Laura Santangelo, comes into her apartment, stunned and angry to find one Richie Ventura sitting on her couch, his feet up on her coffee table. The chapter ends with Laura saying, "Richie, what the hell are you doing here?"

I didn't know what he was doing there. I hadn't a clue. I just instinctively felt his presence was absolutely necessary. I had to let my mind Mow to find the logic for the scene. I would not invent some fraudulent reason just because I liked the slam-bang last sentence in that chapter. I skipped ahead, did a few chapters, and suddenly it came to me: Richie was in her apartment for a very specific reason, and he had a very valid excuse to offer Laura. I backtracked and let them work it out.

One thing my publisher asked me to do with that novel was to give him an outline of the last half of the book. I told him it was impossible; the work would proceed step by step from what came before. He insisted; I wrote an outline. It was cold, bloodless, meaningless. The characters were sticks with wooden personalities. If I had followed it, my book would have sunk. My publisher returned the outline and said, "I guess you don't do outlines."

A very strange thing happens when I finish a book. I send it off to a woman who puts it on her computer to get it into wonderful-looking condition. It goes to the publisher who loves it and makes a few suggestions here and there. Then I handle the three-hundred-plus-page manuscript, all neatly and professionally typed, and have the eerie feeling that I didn't write this book, that I didn't put in any *real* time. I didn't work hours and days in my little workroom. I feel that I started at the sea down the hill from our house; I walked the dogs and the cats; I stared at the television; I knitted; I read books. When and how did that book get written?

At that point, I have to just let the whole thing go. It's out of my hands. It belongs to others now. I need to get free of all emotion about it. Yes, I did write it; yes, I did work hard on it; yes, I did agonize and complain and question myself and my talent and the worth of the story itself. Yes, I did actually write it, if in my own particularly eccentric way.

I've knitted only one Irish quilt, but I have written ten novels, so I guess I just keep at it, one word at a time, one line at a time, one paragraph, one page and chapter at a time.

The big problem now is the very beginning of the search for the next group of people, floating around, trying to get my attention. Or rather, trying to take over my life, body, and soul. You do it your way, I'll do it mine.

26
BRINGING YOUR SETTINGS TO LIFE

By Moira Allen

God, it's been said, is in the details. So, too, is much of the work of a writer. Too little detail leaves your characters wandering through the narrative equivalent of an empty stage. Too much, and you risk the tombstone effect: gray blocks of description that tempt the reader to skip and skim, looking for action.

To set your stage properly, it's important to choose the most appropriate, vivid details possible. It's equally important, however, to present those details in a way that will engage your reader. The following techniques can help you keep your reader focused both on your descriptions and on your story.

Reveal setting through motion

Few people walk into a room and instantly absorb every detail of their surroundings. Often, however, we expect the reader to do just that by introducing a scene with a block of text that completely halts the action.

As an alternative, let your description unfold as the character moves through the scene. Ask yourself which details your character would notice immediately and which might register more slowly.

Suppose, for example, that your heroine, a secretary of humble origins, has just entered the mansion of a millionaire. What would she notice first? How would she react to her surroundings?

Let her observe how soft the rich Persian carpet feels underfoot, how it muffles her footfalls, how she's almost tempted to remove her shoes. Does she recognize any of the masterpieces on the walls, or do they make her feel even more out of place because she doesn't know a Cezanne from a Monet? Don't tell readers the sofa is soft until she actually sinks into it. Let her smell the leather cushions, mingling with the fragrance of hothouse flowers filling a cut-crystal vase on a nearby table.

Use active verbs to set the scene—but use them wisely. Don't inform the reader that "a heavy marble table dominated the room"; force your character to detour around it. Instead of explaining that "light glittered and danced from the crystal chandelier," let your character blink, dazzled by the prismatic display.

"Walking through" a description breaks the details into small nuggets and scatters them throughout the scene, so the reader never feels overwhelmed or bored. However, doing this raises another important question: Which character should do the walking?

Reveal setting through a character's level of experience

What your character knows will directly influence what she sees. Suppose, for example, that your humble secretary really doesn't know a Cezanne from a Monet, or whether the carpet is Persian or Moroccan. Perhaps she doesn't even know whether it's wool or polyester. If these details are important, how can you convey them?

You could, of course, introduce the haughty owner of the mansion and allow him to reveal your heroine's ignorance. Or, you could write the scene entirely from the owner's perspective. Keep in mind, however, that different characters will perceive the same surroundings in very different ways, depending on the character's familiarity (or lack of familiarity) with the setting.

Imagine, for example, that you're describing a stretch of windswept coastline from the perspective of a fisherman who has spent his entire life in the region. What would he notice? From the color of the sky or changes in the wind, he might make deductions about the next day's weather and sailing conditions. When he observes seabirds wheeling against the clouds, they are not "gulls" to him, but terns and gannets and petrels—easily identified by his experienced eye by the shape of their wings or pattern of their flight.

Equally important, however, are the things he might not notice. Being so familiar with the area, he might pay little attention to the fantastic shapes of the rocks, or the gnarled driftwood littering the beach. He hardly notices the bite of the wind through his cable-knit sweater or the tang of salt in the air, and he's oblivious to the stench of rotting kelp-mats that have washed ashore.

Now suppose an accountant from the big city is trudging along that same beach. Bundled up in the latest Northwest Outfitters down jacket, he's still shivering—and can't imagine why the fisherman beside him, who isn't even wearing a sweater, isn't freezing to death. He keeps stumbling over half-buried pieces of driftwood and knows that the sand is ruining his Italian loafers. From the way the waves pound against the beach, it's obvious a major storm is brewing. The

very thought of bad weather makes him nauseous, as does the stench of rotting seaweed (he doesn't think of it as "kelp") and dead fish.

Each of these characters' perceptions of the beach will be profoundly influenced by his background and experience. Bear in mind, however, that "familiar" doesn't imply a positive outlook, nor is the "unfamiliar" necessarily synonymous with "negative." Your accountant may, in fact, regard the beach as an idyllic vacation spot—rugged, romantic, isolated, just the place to make him feel as if he's really getting in touch with nature and leaving the rat race of the city behind. The fisherman, on the other hand, may loathe the ocean, feeling trapped by the whims of the wind and weather that he must battle each day for his livelihood. This bring us to the next point.

Reveal setting through the mood of your character

What we see is profoundly influenced by what we feel. The same should be true for our characters. Filtering a scene through a character's feelings can profoundly influence what the reader "sees." Two characters, for example, could "see" exactly the same setting, yet perceive it in opposite ways.

Suppose, for example, that a motorist has strolled a short distance into an archetypical stretch of British moorland. Across a stretch of blossoming gorse, she sees ruins of some ancient watch tower, now little more than a jumble of stones crowning the next hill (or "tor," as her guidebook puts it).

The temptation is irresistible. Flicking at dandelion heads with her walking stick, our intrepid motorist hikes up the slope, breathing in the scents of grass and clover, admiring the lichen patterns on the gray granite boulders. At last, warmed by the sun and her exertions, she leans back against a rock and watches clouds drift overhead like fuzzy sheep herded by a gentle wind. A falcon shrills from a nearby hollow, its cry a pleasant reminder of how far she has come from the roar and rumble of the city.

A pleasant picture? By now, your reader might be considering travel arrangements to Dartmoor. But what if your motorist is in a different mood? What if her car has broken down, and she has been unable to find help? Perhaps she started across the moor because she thought she saw a house or hut, but was dismayed to find that it was only a ruin, and a creepy one at that. The tower's scattered stones, half-buried in weeds and tangled grasses, remind her of grave markers worn faceless with time. Its silent emptiness speaks of secrets, of desolation that welcomes no trespassers. Though the sun is high, scudding clouds cast a pall over the landscape, and the eerie, lonesome cry of some unseen bird reminds her just how far she has strayed from civilization.

When this traveler looks at the gorse, she sees thorns, not blossoms. When she looks at clouds, she sees no faithful shapes, only the threat of rain to add to her troubles. She wants to get out of this situation, while your reader is on the edge of his seat, expecting something far worse than a creepy ruin to appear on this character's horizon!

Reveal setting through the senses

A character's familiarity with a setting and his or her emotional perception of that setting will influence and be influenced by the senses. Our stranded motorist, for example, may not notice the fragrance of the grass, but she will be keenly aware of the cold wind. Our accountant notices odors the fisherman ignores, while the fisherman detects subtle variations in the color of the sky that are meaningless to the accountant.

Different sensory details evoke different reactions. For example, people process visual information primarily at the cognitive level: We make decisions and take action based on what we see. When writers describe a scene in terms of visual observations, they are appealing to the reader's intellect.

Emotions, however, are often affected by what we hear. Think of the effects of a favorite piece of music, the sound of a person's voice, the whistle of a train. In conversation, tone of voice is a more reliable indicator of mood and meaning than words alone. Sounds can make us shudder, shiver, jump—or relax and smile. Scenes that include sounds—fingers scraping a blackboard, the distant baying of a hound— are more likely to evoke an emotional response.

Smell has the remarkable ability to evoke memories. While not everyone is taken back to childhood by "the smell of bread baking," we all have olfactory memories that can trigger a scene, a recollection of an event or person. Think of someone's perfume, the smell of new-car leather, the odor of wet dog. Then describe that smell so that your reader is *there.*

Touch evokes a sensory response. Romance writers know they'll get more mileage out of writing "he trailed his fingertips along her spine" than "he whispered sweet nothings in her ear." The first can evoke a shiver of shared sensory pleasure; the second is just words. Let your reader feel the silkiness of a cat's fur, the roughness of castle stones, the prickly warmth of your hero's flannel shirt beneath his lover's fingertips. Let your heroine's feet ache, let the wind raise goosebumps on her flesh, let the gorse thorns draw blood.

Finally, there is taste, which is closely related to smell in its ability to evoke memories. Taste, however, is perhaps the

most difficult to incorporate into a setting; often, it simply doesn't belong there. Your heroine isn't going to start licking the castle stones, and it isn't time for lunch. "Taste" images should be used sparingly and appropriately, or you may end up with a character who seems more preoccupied with food than with the issues of the story.

The goal of description is to create a well-designed set that provides the perfect background for your characters—a setting that *stays* in the background, without overwhelming the scene or interrupting the story. In real life, we explore our surroundings through our actions, experience them through our senses, understand (or fail to understand) them through our knowledge and experience, and respond to them through our emotions. When your characters do the same, readers will keep turning pages—and not just because they're waiting for something interesting to happen!

27
TURNING YOUR EXPERIENCE INTO FICTION

By Edward Hower

"That would make a good story—you ought to write it!" How many times have you heard people say this, after you've told them about some interesting experience?

But if you're like me, you may not *want* to write directly about yourself, except perhaps in your private journal. This doesn't mean, however, that your own life can't be used as material for fiction. Using your own experiences as starting places for stories or novels gives your work an authenticity that made-up adventures may lack. A great many fiction writers have mined their own pasts—some of them over and over throughout their careers.

Advantages of starting with yourself

Writing stories that are similar to real-life occurrences allows you to relive and to re-examine your life. In fiction, you can explore all the might-have-beens of your past. You can experience the loves that didn't quite happen but that might have proved blissful or (more interestingly) disastrous in tragic or amusing ways. You can delve into your worst fears, describing what might have happened if you hadn't been so careful about trusting strangers or about avoiding life's dark alleys.

And by creating characters similar to yourself and to people you've known, you can get a perspective on your past that couldn't come from direct, analytic examination. One of the most gratifying experiences I had in writing my last novel was getting to know my family all over again in ways I'd never previously considered. Some anger resurfaced, but so did a lot of compassion. And I finally got a kind of closure on my sometimes painful childhood that had eluded me before.

I've emphasized writing about the past here rather than about the

present. This is because I think it's a lot more productive to deal wit! material from which you have psychic distance.

Selective memory can produce interesting, emotionally charged ma terial for fiction. Recent events, however, are hard to deal with crea tively. Immediate reality intrudes, and issues unresolved in life resisi resolution in fiction.

Searching your life

Here's an exercise I used while I was writing my semi autobiographical novel. *Night Train Blues.* I've frequently given the exercise to students in my creative writing workshops, too. It's designed to help retrieve buried memories and then transform them into usable images, characters, and episodes for stories or longer fiction.

First, decide on a period in your life you'd like to write about. A year in your past in which emotionally intense experiences happened is often the best one. This doesn't mean that the events need to be melodramatic. Small traumas and triumphs often make the best material for fiction, especially if they involve people you've had strong feelings about. Events that caused you to change your attitude toward yourself and other people are especially good. For this reason, many writers choose a period from childhood or adolescence—the times of many emotional changes.

Start the exercise in a quiet place, alone. Get comfortable, close your eyes, and take slow deep breaths. Now imagine yourself going home during the time period you've chosen. Picture yourself approaching the place where you lived. Imagine entering it. What do you see . . . hear . . . smell? Go into the next room. What's there? Now go into the room in which you kept your personal possessions. Stand in the middle of the floor and look around. What do you see . . . hear . . . smell? Now go to some object that was especially precious to you. Hold it. Feel it. Turn it around. Get to know it again with as many senses as possible. Then ask yourself: Why did I choose this object?

As soon as you're ready, open your eyes and start writing as fast as you can. First describe the object in great detail. If you want to discuss people and events associated with it, that's fine, too. Finally, write about the object's importance to you. You might give yourself ten to fifteen minutes for the entire exercise. Don't edit what you write. Don't even pause to look back over it—fill as much paper as you can. If you write fast, you'll fill at least a page, probably more.

When I did this exercise, the object I found was an old wooden radio with a cloth dial and an orange light that glowed behind it. I mentally ran my fingers over its smooth, rounded surfaces. I put my nose up to it and smelled the dusty cloth warmed by the pale bulb behind it. I twisted the dial, and listened to my favorite childhood stations.

Thinking about the radio's meaning for me, I remembered the warm relationship I'd had with the person who gave it to me. The radio also re-acquainted me with country songs I later came to associate with an important character in my novel, my young hero's wandering older brother. So I gave my fictional narrator a radio similar to the one I'd had, and I

let him find solace in its music, too.

My students have also come up with radios given to them by important people in their lives. Dolls and stuffed animals, sports equipment, pictures, china figurines, tools, articles of clothing—all have been highly evocative objects that eventually radiated emotions not only for the writers but for their fictional characters as well. Cars, records, and clothes were important items for people returning to adolescence. Each freshly-recalled object resonated with feelings about rebellion, first love, and newfound freedoms.

Transforming truth into fiction

Now it's time to turn this object into the central image of a story or novel chapter. Write "If this were fiction . . ." at the top of a page. Give yourself a different name. You are now a fictional character, one who resembles you but who will gradually develop his or her own personality as you continue working.

Then jot down some answers to these questions:

Character development

1. What does the choice of this object tell about the character

(A—"you") who chose it?

• Who is A? Describe this person quickly.

2. Imagine that another character (B) gave A the object.

• Who is B? Describe B quickly.

• What is B's relationship to A?

3. Imagine that yet another character (C) wants the object.

• Who is C? Describe C quickly.

• What is C's relationship to B and A?

When trying to imagine B and C, you might choose people from your own life or people like them who might have given you the object or might have coveted it. Characters often come from composites of several people you knew—the physical attributes of one person, the voice of another, the sense of humor or the mannerisms of another.

One way to get to know characters not modeled after yourself is to start the visualization exercise again, this time treating someone you knew as you did the object in the previous exercise. Follow the person around in your visualization, observing and listening closely. Then write a fast page or two about what you discovered.

Another good way to understand a character is to make lists of his or her attributes and preferences. Jot down his or her favorite clothes, food, TV show, brand of car, breed of dog, film hero, period in history, childhood memory, and so forth. Say what religious, political, and ethical beliefs the character has. Expand the list until you feel you know as much about this fictional person as you do about your best friend. You may not use much of this material in the actual story, but it gives you the background of the character that you need in order to write with authority.

Plot development

The treasured object can give you some ideas about what storyline to follow. Try answering these questions:

1. A and the object

• Why does A treasure it? What will A do with it?

• What problems might result from his having it?

2. **B and the object**

• Where did B get the object? Why did B give it to A?

• What problems might result from B giving it to A?

3. C and the object

• Why does C want the object?

• What problems might result from C trying to get it?

All plots involve conflicts—thus the emphasis on problems. Once you've listed some conflicts, choose one that interests you and try answering some more questions:

1. What events might foreshadow this conflict?

2. What dramatic action might result from this conflict?

3. How might the conflict be resolved?

By this time, you've probably discovered that although the story has ostensibly been about an object, it's really about people. One is a central character who probably resembles you in some ways, and one or more other characters are based —closely or loosely, it doesn't matter—on people you've known.

Deciding on a setting

To become familiar with your fictional locale, try closing your eyes and visualizing the place where you found the object in the original exercise. Observe the details of the room, the sounds you hear from the other rooms, and the view from the windows. Then, as if you were a bird, fly out a window to observe the neighborhood, the town or city, the county or region. Pay attention to details—the clothes people are wearing, the kinds of cars in the streets, the signs in shop windows. Smell the smells. Listen to the sounds of life. Feel the energy given off by ball parks, bars, beaches, playgrounds, political rallies. After you've flown around for a while, return to your region . . . neighborhood . . . dwelling . . . and room—for a last look-around.

Then start writing as fast as you can about things you've discovered on your journey. You might want to draw a quick map with concentric circles radiating out from your own small world. You don't need to include everything you found—this isn't a memory test. But do go into detail about discoveries that stand out sharply. Be aware that the best details of a setting give off strong emotions, providing atmosphere for your characters to move around in. The way they respond to their environment will help define who they are and what they do.

Development of a theme

To get a grip on the story's meaning, it will be helpful to go back to the treasured object at least one more time and answer these questions:

1. How does the object resemble

• You

• character A

• character B and/or C

2. What effect does the object have on the relationship

• between A and B

• between B and C

• between A and C

Again, you'll probably discover that whatever your story means, it has to do with people developing relationships with each other, entering into conflicts, and trying to find resolutions to them. The treasured object may fade in importance by the time you've finished the story's last draft. But it will have served its purpose.

Truth and invention

What if the characters and plot of your fiction closely resemble real people and/or events that have actually occurred? Does it matter?

I don't think it does. If you use the *techniques* of fiction-writing— characterization, plot, conflict, dialogue, description, and so on—then what you'll have at the end will be fiction, regardless of its source.

But you may still find that similarities between your life and your fiction inhibit your creative writing. You might also worry that readers who know you could be disturbed by what you write. In this case, you can do what a great many authors have done throughout history (sometimes on the advice of their attorneys)—make alterations in their fiction to avoid resemblances to actual people, places, and events.

• With characters, change one or more of these attributes: size, shape, hair color, accent, nationality, clothes

• Change the story's setting to a different region

• Move the story backward or forward in time

Having made these changes, you'll probably have to change other details of the fictional work in order to fit in the new material. This in it self can become part of the creative process, helping you to imagine more and remember less. At the

end, even those who know you best may not be clear about what you've recalled and what you've made up. And you may not be sure, yourself.

If this happens, you may be certain you've moved from autobiography to fiction—one of the most interesting and satisfying ways in which your writing can develop.

28
DIALOGUE AND CHARACTERIZATION

By Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

"Show, don't tell" is one of the first rules of the fictional road, yet one of the hardest to master. How do you show the reader your protagonist is strong-minded to the point of being argumentative or that your heroine tends to bite off more than she can chew? Yes, you could just *say* it: "Justin was strong-minded to the point of being argumentative." "Matilda had a tendency to bite off more than she could chew." But these statements are meaningless if Justin doesn't insist on his own way of doing things or Matilda doesn't constantly try to overreach her abilities.

Before you can either tell or show the reader anything about your characters, you must know them yourself: their history, their educational level, their loves and hates and foibles. You must know how they feel about life, the universe, everything.

The puppet master

Knowing these things, you must be able to portray your characters as individuals, which means that they should be distinctive. Further, the reader should never see the "strings" by which you, the writer, are manipulating the characters. Your heroine is strong-willed, savvy self-assured . . . until a scene requires her to whine and grovel. So she whines and grovels. You are playing (evil laughter) the puppet master.

Like a real human being, a fictional character must seem to be the product of both nature and nurture. Some of the best moments of high drama, in real life and in literature, occur when flawed human beings do incredible things. By having a character's flaws imposed from *outside* the story by the (evil laughter) puppet master, you rob yourself and your reader of this drama.

If you really *need* this character to whine and grovel at this point, let the weakness come from *inside*, and show the reader the genesis of that weakness. Perhaps you can have your strong-willed, savvy, young protagonist be weakened by grief over the loss of a loved one. This weakness is contrary to her self-image, which in turn makes her angry at herself and the universe, and results in guilt. These forces can make a normally rock-solid personality resemble gelatin. This character's greatest struggle may be to rediscover herself, and she may be less than consistent as she goes about it.

"I'm wounded!" she said lightly.

Dialogue is, at once, one of the most essential tools of characterization and one of the easiest ways to undermine it.

The title line of this section was in a manuscript I was given at a writer's conference some years back. In the context of this story, the coupling of this exclamation with an inappropriate modifier suggested that the speaker had ceased to have a human appreciation of pain. Since this was not the case, it made the narrative voice (and hence the writer) seem unreliable.

"You're so smart!" he snorted wryly.

They call it "said-book-ism": People *snort* and *exhort* when perhaps they ought to just *say* something. Snorts are fine once in a while, but unwatched, they proliferate like March hares.

> A close companion of said-book-ism is "adverbitis," which can affect both dialogue and action. Mark Twain is supposed to have said, "If you see an adverb, kill it." Extreme, but some stories have led me to suggest that if the writer cut about three-quarters of the adverbs, the manuscript would improve dramatically.
>
> In the kitchen, he found Constance preparing their meal. He watched her quietly. He found that he was still anxious and closed his eyes tightly and sighed loudly.
>
> Constance jumped. "Jerrod!" she cried anxiously.
>
> "I'm sorry, Constance." Jerrod smiled nervously.

The adverbs here disrupt the dialogue and produce shallow characterization. We know these people are nervous or anxious, but couched in weak adverbs instead of strong verbs their anxiety is barely felt.

Here's the same passage, reworded:

> Constance was in the kitchen preparing a simple meal. He watched her in silence for a moment, anxiety digging pitons into the wall of his stomach. What he meant as a cleansing breath came out as a melodramatic sigh.
>
> Constance jumped and turned to face him. "Jerrod!" His smile dried and set on his lips. "I'm sorry, Constance."

Using mountain-climbing gear to evoke a mental image of anxiety for the reader conveys much more than "he said

anxiously." It's through dialogue, thought, and action that your reader knows your characters and gauges their feelings. If these essentials are not fully formed, your characters will not be fully formed. If your dialogue lacks emotional depth, so will your characters. Strong verbs are better tools for building depth into dialogue than are weak verbs qualified by adverbs.

I challenge thee to a duel (of words).

Poorly constructed dialogue can reduce reader comprehension, hamper pacing, and make characters seem like bad high school actors flogging their way through scenes in which no one understands his lines or motivation. Worse, it may seem as if the lines have been forgotten altogether and the characters have resorted to ad-libbing without listening to each other. Here's an example:

> JERROD: "Constance, I'd like you to meet my friend, Peter Harrar." CONSTANCE: "I'm glad to meet you."
>
> PETER: "The pleasure is all mine, my lady. *(He tries to read her mind.)* Oh,
>
> that was dumb!"
>
> JERROD: "I agree!"
>
> PETER: "I apologize, my lady."
>
> CONSTANCE: "No need, sir."
>
> JERROD: "What's the matter, Peter? Forget that she's a level five Psi?" PETER: "One of these days, friend! Would it be too rude just to bow?" CONSTANCE: "No ... no. I don't think so." JERROD: "Don't you think you're overdoing it a bit?" PETER: "No, I don't think so."
>
> CONSTANCE: "I don't think so either. Leave him alone, Jerrod. At least he knows the meaning of the word respect." JERROD: "Him???" PETER: "Yeah, me."

What's wrong with this conversation? Simply that it's not a conversation—it's a duel (or the three-participant equivalent). It's also repetitive, trivial, and long.

The original scene staggered under the weight of stage business that seemed to exist only to give the characters something to do with their bodies. When I stripped away all the aimless movement that accompanied this dialogue, what was left was a barrage of small talk that took up several pages and failed either to advance the story or reveal character.

"It is a matter of life and death!"

Avoiding the use of contractions in an academic paper or essay may be a good idea, but in fictional dialogue it is a bad idea simply because real people generally do use contractions in their speech.

> "I have to talk to Matilda." Justin tried not to let his desperation show.
>
> "She is not receiving visitors," the guard told him.
>
> Justin balled his fists against the desire to use them. "This cannot wait. I have got to speak to her. I am telling you-it is a matter of life and death."

The lack of contractions here stiffens the prose and removes any urgency from the scene. Ultimately, poor Justin does not come across as a man desperate to see his beloved. The narration—his suppressed desperation, his desire to manhandle the guard—is at odds with the preciseness of the dialogue. Desperate people are not precise in their speech. They're, well, desperate.

Will the real Dinsdale please speak up?

Speech and thoughts should reveal character, show strength or weakness; truth, falsehood or ambiguity. They must seem like thoughts the readers have or, at the very least, thoughts they can imagine others could have. Also, the words a writer uses should be those that readers imagine a particular character would use.

If a character is supposed to be callous, then the words he uses should reveal his callousness.

> Ariel followed Dinsdale down the long, dark flight of stairs. At the top of the third landing, she slipped and fell.
>
> Below her, Dinsdale stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. "What's the matter?" he asked callously. Good God, she might have broken her neck!

Dinsdale's dialogue could just as easily have read: *"What's the matter?" he asked fearfully.*

The only difference between Dinsdale's being a rogue or a gentleman is in the adverb chosen to modify "asked." This should raise a few red flags.

Let's try a different approach:

> Ariel followed Dinsdale down the long, dark flight of stairs. At the top of the third landing she slipped and fell.
>
> Below her, Dinsdale stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. Hell, he thought, she might have broken her neck and stuck him with having to dispose of the body. "Trying to reach the bottom more quickly, my lady?" he asked.

I don't have to tell you that Dinsdale spoke callously; his thoughts and words are snide and uncaring. They make even a simple glance over the shoulder seem heartless. An acid test for dialogue, then, might be to ask: If I strip away all

modifiers, what do these words tell me about the character?

Get real!

You have to develop an ear for dialogue. You can do several things when you write dialogue to make it sound real:

• *Strip away all stage business and action.* Try to write dialogue as if you were eavesdropping in the dark. No movement, just people talking.

• *Read your dialogue aloud to see what it sounds like if spoken by a real person.* Imagine your characters in a real-life situation, saying these words.

• *Ask if everything you've written is necessary.* Does it advance the plot or reveal character? Real people "urn" and "uh" and "y'know" their way through life, and they indulge in conversations that wander. Fictional characters can't afford those luxuries.

• *"Run the scene" in your mind and put in the action and atmosphere only after you're satisfied that the words work.* If necessary, modify the pacing of the dialogue to work with the action.

Obviously, there are other ways to make your dialogue realistic. Here are a few of them:

Get your plot straight. If you don't know where your characters are going or where they've been, it will be reflected in what they say. Don't contradict yourself or your characters. Make sure the plot is convincing, that the elements are clear and flow logically. Then, cut any elements that don't advance the plot, develop or reveal character, or give the reader necessary information. A single plot flaw can make your entire story unravel.

Establish a definite point of view. You may wish to write dialogue from one character's viewpoint, allowing the viewpoint character's thoughts to reveal to the reader who he is.

Watch the pace. If the pacing of a scene is off, the gist of conversations can be lost, and important clues about character missed. Don't let "stage business" get in the way of dialogue. We don't need to know whether a character brandished his revolver in his left or right hand. Nor, once informed of a fact, do we need to be reminded of it every time he speaks.

Tighten your prose. Good dialogue can be the very embodiment of the phrase "elegant in its simplicity." Unless you've created a character who is known by his very penchant for tangled phrases, keep the dialogue as direct as possible. The purpose of speech is communication: Characters communicate with each other and through your characters, *you* communicate with your reader.

Know your characters. Learn who they are, then introduce them to the reader. Put words in their mouths that will make us like or dislike them (depending on their roles in your story), but their words must, above all, make us *care* what happens to them for better or worse. Above all, don't pull their strings. Give them distinctive personalities and motivation, put them in a situation, then stand back and watch what they do and listen to what they say.

There's a story in that.

29
USING REAL PEOPLE IN YOUR STORIES

By Eileen Herbert Jordan

When Henry James described his writing methods, he wrote of how fitting he had found it to place a willful heroine in the gardens of an estate he had long admired, and thus capture her, thereby introducing his readers to Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady.* That may have been fine for Henry James, but it's not going to help you much. Your story is about your willful mother-in-law, who doesn't want to be captured in print, and no matter where you place her, when she reads your story, she's not going to like it, and God knows what it will do to your family relationships!

There isn't a writer, dead or alive, who has not had this problem. In fact, through the years there has been so much conflict between writers and those they write about (or those who *think* they are written about) that I don't presume to come up with a solution. But a few things *have* worked for me when I have had an idea for a story and been stopped by the thought, *Oh, I can't say that about her—she'll never speak to me again. ...* a thought that has stopped me a lot. And it's no wonder—the dilemma is very real.

If all good writing comes from life—and I believe it does—and we fail to tap the source, we end with cardboard figures whose every move is unreal, and whose story is usually unpublishable. Still, in the world we live in, most of us are not misogynists (or man haters, either); in fact, we court approval and dislike living in alienation. Yet writing is what we do, the thing that defines us, and we have to do it the best we can.

Writing instructors are fond of suggesting that the psyches of two or three people we know can be mingled to produce one in a story. Like many similar suggestions, this one *doesn't* work more often that it *does,* and at best, it takes considerable skill. We are, after all, en-gaged in the business of mixing the characteristics of different people— not in making soup. But before you despair, try these approaches:

Change genders. This doesn't always work, of course, but it does more often than you would think. Recall the family situations you have observed in which daughters behaved exactly as their fathers had, sons mirrored the reactions of mothers, etc. When a character's emotions and actions are not solely motivated by his gender, it is perfectly viable to make the switch and get away with it.

Do a makeover. It's often been said that inside every short, fat person there lies a tall and willowy one, yearning to be free. Well, you can do it. I have done it often and have not been found out yet, although once it did boomerang and work in reverse. I wrote a story about the romance of a friend of mine. Aware that magazines crave youth and beauty, I made my heroine younger, slimmer, taller, and quite a bit more lissome than my friend.

I also set the romance in Manhattan (it actually took place in the suburbs) because I knew the area, and I knew the sneaky magic of liaisons that begin there. The story was published, but not right away, having been rejected the first time around by an editor I knew slightly. She admitted later that the problem was she couldn't bear the thought of seeing it in print because she felt that I had invaded her privacy and written *her* story. Her reaction was a total surprise to me, and ironic, too—after all my duplicity in fashioning the characters! The second editor, without the same baggage, bought it.

Despite the above example, however, a makeover does not consist merely of a few cosmetic touches. It is a process of imbuing your protagonist with a star quality she did not have before. Most of us don't believe we are stars and never recognize ourselves as such.

Change the label. We are captives of our identity, defined by labels we have acquired, sometimes by choice, often not. We are mothers, daughters, sisters, neighbors. This can be changed. After you have explored the gender possibilities, making your mother your father, try making your neighbor your sister, your daughter your roommate, your mother your best friend. Simply take the person you know, foibles intact, and give her a new identity.

Recently, I wrote a story that I felt might not be popular with the person who inspired it. I solved the problem by identifying her at the beginning as a grandmother. Except for the age requirement, grand-motherhood had nothing whatsoever to do with my story, so it didn't matter. What I did know was that the person in question was *not* a grandmother and had no urge to become one; her eyes would glaze over as she read the word, and she never would connect any part of what followed with herself. I was right.

Change the skill. To many people a skill or talent is as much a part of them as a thumbprint. So, in fact, is a lack of ability—we are all very aware of what we *can't* do. Let me give you an example. I have two sons, and I write about them often. But in a short story, you should not have too many characters, or you will lose your reader in the crowd. I write

about my sons, therefore, as one person. They try to guess who's who and sometimes succeed, but sometimes I fool them. The main character in one of my recent stories was a dead ringer for my younger boy, until the climax, which involved his swimming across a lake.

"Well, Mom," he said, "this one's not me—I know that. You know I don't swim."

Obviously, if what you are writing is totally involved with a crosscountry skier, a ballroom dancer, or the soul of a poet, you can't do much about it. But if the skill doesn't matter to the plot, taking it away, changing it, or, perhaps, conferring it on another character can blur recognition with no harm done.

Don't think "Know Thyself" works for everyone. You may be surprised at the number of people who believe they could never be fooled; they're sure they would recognize themselves—but they don't. If you write a story that you know may expose someone, remember that— then cross your fingers.

I know a successful writer who was determined never to exploit friends, family, or acquaintances, and she never did until she completed a novel, reread it, and found, to her horror, that one of the main characters was a clone of somebody she knew, a character who had somehow slipped from the writer's unconscious onto the printed page. Not only that, the character was not a flattering clone, either; she was Matilda, the evil force who drove the story. And it was too late to do anything about it—except wait and see.

That did not take long. Shortly after the book was published, at a party, the writer gazed across the room and her eyes locked with those of her nemesis. She stopped still and just stood there silently, racking her brains for an approach as the other woman began walking toward her. What to do?

Should she start the conversation with a burst of pleasantries, ignoring the issue?

Should she apologize right away, call writers like herself insensitive clods—and see what happens?

Should she just lie?

The woman reached her side, and grabbing her arm, she said, "I've lead your novel. I couldn't put it down. It's just wonderful. . . ." There was a pause. "Just one thing . . ."

My friend swallowed hard.

"How do you ever dream up those characters? I could never do that. ()r maybe I just never meet people like that. That Matilda is a monster—and so real! Congratulations!"

So she got away with it—by a stroke of sheer luck. And you may, loo. For a writer it is the ideal solution to the problem, and it is not one he forgets, either. It has been almost forty years since Neil Simon's lit st play, *Come Blow Your Horn,* opened and he can still remember how worried he was that the character of the household head would be offensive to his father, upon whom the play was entirely based. Worried, that is, until his father came to him afterwards, shook his head and said, "I know so many men just like him."

On the other hand, Truman Capote lost all his friends when he made their identities obvious in a short story. So if you would rather take precautions, try some I have suggested. It gets easier with practice— in fact, the characters you create grow so real, you feel as if you've made new friends!

30
NOVEL WRITING: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

By Sidney Sheldon

Q. *At what age did you think about becoming a writer?*

A. I began writing when I was very young. My first poem was published by a children's magazine when I was ten years old. I have always enjoyed working with language and ideas.

q. *How long, on average, does it take you to write a novel—from idea to finished manuscript? Do you ever work on two books simultaneously?*

A. I take anywhere from a year to two years to write a novel. I may finish a draft in 3 to 4 months. I then spend the rest of the time rewriting until the manuscript is as good as I know how to make it, before the publisher ever sees a word. When I was writing TV and motion picture scripts, I used to work on 3 or 4 projects simultaneously. When I write a novel, I work only on the novel.

q. *Do your books ever take unexpected twists as you are writing them? How far should a beginning writer follow a tangent when it presents itself in the course of writing a novel?*

A. The twists in my books are constantly surprising me. I never know what is going to happen next, since I don't work with an outline. If a beginning writer finds himself thinking about an unexpected tangent, he or she should follow it. That's the character talking.

q. *How have your experiences and relationships with people been reflected in your novels?*

A. Some wise person once said that writers paper their walls with

themselves. Everything that a writer sees or hears usually winds up in some form in his or her work. Many novels are autobiographical to a large extent. I've used incidents in my life in many of my books.

Q. *Your protagonists are morally strong individuals, and likewise, the endings of your novels leave the reader with the sense of justice having been served. How essential to modern storytelling is the element of good vs. evil?*

A. I think the element of good vs. evil goes back to the most ancient storytellers. I believe that if evil triumphs, the reader is left with a feeling of disappointment. It's like a sonata where the last chord is dissonant.

Q. *Why are so many of your main characters female? What are the options with and limitations of female and male protagonists?*

A. Most of the protagonists in my novels are females. I enjoy writing about women. I think they're more interesting than men, more complex and more vulnerable. Since my novels have an element of suspense and danger in them, vulnerability is important.

Q. *When a character completely absorbs you, do you find yourself almost chameleon-like, taking on a character's personality as you write, or shifting from one to another?*

A. The characters in my novels are very real to me while I'm writing their story, but life goes on, and I meet new characters every few years. I've had a few murderers in my books, so if I took on their personality, I'd be in real trouble!

Q. *Why do so many successful first novelists have difficulties writing their second novels?*

A. One of the reasons that some successful first novelists have problems writing their second novel is that they are intimidated, afraid that they can't live up to their first success. Some writers seem to have only one novel in them, especially if that novel is autobiographical. C'arl Reiner wrote a wonderful play called *Exit Laughing,* about a playwright who wrote a smash hit and had trouble writing a second play until he moved back into the poverty-stricken life he was living when he wrote his hit play.

q. *What tactics do you recommend for overcoming the dreaded writer's block?*

A. One of the most practical suggestions I have for trying to prevent writer's block is to end each day's work with the beginning of the following day's scene, so that when you sit down to write the next morning, your scene has already been started.

q. *What characteristics do novels and films have in common ? What has to be left out when a novel is turned into a*

film? What does a novel gain from being a film?

A. Novels and films both tell stories. What has been left out when a novel is turned into a film is a lot of description, extraneous scenes, and extraneous characters. When a novel is turned into a film, it's usually wonderful publicity for the book, and will gain a wider audience for the author.

q. *Do you write scenes in the order they will appear in the novel? Or do you write key scenes first and arrange them later?*

A. Many writers will plot out their books in advance. I read that Jerzy Kosinski used to get up in the morning and look at the huge board he had, where each scene in the book was numbered. He would then pick out the number (a love scene, a murder scene, etc.) and write the scene he was in the mood to do that day. I write my books in sequence from beginning to end.

q. *Do you have any strong feelings about the use of flashbacks, how they should be used, or when? What devices do you use for transitions from past to present?*

A. Flashbacks are very tricky and have to be handled carefully. When you jump backward or forward in time, it is easy to confuse the reader. There are mechanical devices like asterisks and leaving extra space between paragraphs, but it is a mistake to rely solely on those methods. You have to phrase your sentences so that it is clear to the reader that you are now taking him back in time or forward in time, or that you have returned to the present. These are important guide-posts, so handle them carefully.

Q. *How attentively should a beginning writer listen to his critics? How seriously do you take reviews of your work?*

A. I learned long ago never to ignore a specific criticism of my work. I used to say, "but don't you see what I meant was," but I realized that if you have to explain, it's not the reader's problem, it's your problem. As far as how seriously I take reviews of my books, it depends on the reviewer. I look for constructive criticism. I don't hold the general critical community in very high regard.

31
MAKING EVERY WORD COUNT IN YOUR STORY

By Diane Lefer

Years ago, when my stories started coming back in the mail with written comments instead of form rejection slips, I was both elated and frustrated. "Needs tightening," I read again and again. I pictured a screwdriver and hadn't the slightest idea what these editors wanted me to do.

I didn't see anything wrong with a sentence like, *She squeezed the trigger and fired a shot from the gun held in her hand.* These days, I can't stop myself from thinking, "Well, gosh, I didn't think she fired it by licking the trigger with her tongue." But even as I now laugh at the sentence, I'm not making fun of the writer. From experience with my own writing, from reading manuscripts in slush piles, and from working with students at various stages of development, I'm convinced we pick up the habit of being long-winded because we've often won praise for it. I've isolated some of these habits to keep my students and myself alert.

The getting A's in high school English habit

George Bernard Shaw said you're not a writer till you know five synonyms for every word. That may be true, but I suggest that a writer who knows five synonyms should also know enough not to use them, because there are very few true synonyms. I can't tell you how many stories I've read in magazine slush piles in which a character makes herself a cup of coffee and then—I'm already cringing in anticipation of the language that all too often follows—*she brings the cup of hot brown liquid to her lips and savors the aromatic beverage.* Personally, I often crave a cup of coffee. I do not crave a cup of hot brown liquid!

Why do we do it? In part, because we've been taught that word repetition is bad, but in creative writing, word repetition is often good.

Repetition may create an incantatory effect. When the same word shifts its meaning slightly in the text, it may add depth to a story. There are much worse sins than using a word twice. The only caution I would advise is: if you see a word repeated again and again in a paragraph, you may be dragging out the scene, and this is place where your manuscript can be tightened or condensed. For example, when the character drinks her morning coffee, you probably don't need the details of her making it, pouring it, inhaling the aroma, and finally drinking it. Unless there's something very unusual about her coffee routine, this is a conventional scene that does not require details.

We also stretch out our sentences to show off our extensive vocabularies because substitution, euphemism, and indirect statement are stylistic features of much of the writing of earlier times. Novels considered classics have admirable features, but the language and style come from a world very different from our own. Many writers, trying to model their own writing on work they've been taught is great, end up writing in old-fashioned language that isn't natural or comfortable for them—or for their characters.

So why did your English teachers love it? Why did you get A's for writing that way? In part, because your teachers studied and respected classics, in part because such writing indicates a fascination with language that should be encouraged in a young writer. They often praised you for writing that later, as literary writers, you learned to drop or use with caution.

The creative writing rules habit

One problem I often see in manuscripts is a description of ordinary actions, such as leaving or entering rooms, presented in excruciating detail:

> His thigh muscles contracted as he rose from his chair. He approached the door, placed his hand on the doorknob, the smooth surface against his right palm as his fingers grasped. He turned the knob, pushed against the wood, opening the door, and paused a moment on the threshold before walking out, turning, closing and locking the door behind him by inserting and turning the key he had at the appropriate moment removed from his pocket.

When I read such a passage, I know the writer has heard the rule, "Show, Don't Tell" so many times, she or he is afraid to summarize anything and is thinking of the rule rather than its effect. I think the show-don't-tell rule is overapplied most often in portrayals of emotion. Think of the opening sentence to Ford Maddox Ford's novel, *The Good Soldier:* "This is the saddest story I have ever heard."

The story the narrator goes on to tell certainly isn't the saddest I have ever heard, but I found that stark assertion irresistible as an opening. I would not have read on if the narrator had begun with a conventional show-don't-tell portrayal of sadness: *When I heard the story I'm about to tell you, my eyes clouded with tears, my throat constricted,*

muffled sobs and a deep sigh rose from somewhere within me, and I shuddered with the chill of the saddest feeling I had ever known.

Obviously, this example is exaggerated, but many writers do feel they're not allowed to say, *He cried*, or *He felt sad*, but must illustrate the emotion with the wetness of tears and tightness in the throat. I'm not suggesting that emotion must always be presented through a direct statement.

One of my favorite sentences of all time comes from "The Johnstown Polka," a short story by Sharon Sheehe Stark (from *The Dealer's Yard and Other Stories*, (Morrow, 1985). It's about Francine, who years earlier lost her husband and children in the Johnstown flood and whose continuing emotional wound is invisible to those around her:

> But what they perceive as tranquility, Francine experiences as a sort of unpleasant limpness, her heart a slack muscle, as if after having delivered an outsized grief, it never quite snapped back and stubbornly holds, if not sorrow itself, then the soft shape of it.

That's the kind of line that makes me stop short. I have to put down the book. Pick it up again and reread the sentence. Which is one great advantage a story has over a movie: If you're overwhelmed, you can stop and catch your breath. The written story can't go on without you.

This sentence illustrates why I love literary fiction. Looking at this sentence, I know I can't duplicate it. But maybe I can say something else. Everyone has thoughts, feelings, ideas that truly matter. If, as writers, we're going to have something as a standard, something to strive toward, Stark's sentence is an example of what language can do. But no one, not even a literary genius, has something profound to say all the time. When you don't, spare the reader the carefully crafted restatement of what everyone already knows (e.g, tears are wet); you're better off writing, "I felt sad."

The speech and presentation habit

Many of us have experience in lecturing, giving speeches, making presentations. In this context, we learn to *Tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you've told them.*

The technique of redundancy is reinforced by TV news. The an-chorperson says:

> An early morning fire destroyed three buildings and left twenty families homeless in Mayberry. And now we go to Mary Jones, live on the scene. . . . Mary?
>
> "I'm here in Mayberry, at the scene of an early morning fire that destroyed three buildings and left twenty families homeless."

Then Mary briefly interviews a man who says,

> "We lost everything and we're homeless, but we're alive and that's what counts."

Then back to the anchor, who says,

> " Terrible situation, all those people homeless after the fire. But they're alive, and that's what counts."

I see this pattern again and again in short stories. The writer explains in the first paragraph what the story's going to be about and what's going to happen. The last paragraph sums up the material and repeats the meaning to be drawn from it. Not only does this kill suspense, but it detracts from the meaning. A wonderful short story can't be summarized in a paragraph. There is no one single meaning or lesson readers should take from it. Of course, this problem can be easily solved by cutting the first and last paragraphs, but I find that many writers also fall into this pattern throughout the development of the story. They will often begin a scene by telling what is about to happen. Then, after presenting the interaction between characters, they won't let the moment speak for itself but will summarize it. For example:

> On Sunday morning, Glenn and Linda had a fight about how much he'd had to drink at the party.
>
> "Why did you have to get drunk at that party?" Linda asked.
>
> "I had two drinks. Big deal. Just two drinks," Glenn said.
>
> Linda threw up her hands in despair. She was upset over Glenn's drinking iiiul that they were fighting about it.

Editing can solve this problem, but when there's an overall effect of redundancy, the manuscript may become tedious, and it's less likely that an editor will want to bother.

Most important, you're tightening your prose not only to improve your chances of publication; you're also doing it for your reader. Sentences that develop obvious information encourage the reader to skim. Wouldn't you rather have your readers pay attention because every word counts?

32
PUTTING EMOTION INTO YOUR FICTION

By Bharti Kirchner

Laugh, scream and weep before your keyboard; make your reader feel. I kept this in mind when I started writing my first novel, *Shiva Dancing.* In developing characters, plot, and setting, I looked for every opportunity to make an emotional impact on the reader. Often, as I composed a sentence or paragraph, I felt the emotion myself.

Why are emotions important? Because they're more compelling than ideas, facts, and reasoning, which are the stuff of nonfiction. In fiction, the character must act from emotion, rather than from reason. And emotional truth is the reward readers hope to get from a novel. They will not turn to the next chapter or even the next page unless the material engages their emotions.

What emotions? Love and hate, joy and despair, fear and hope. I hose are the significant ones to develop over a novel or chapter. But there are others—pride, timidity, shame, and humiliation—that move people and characters minute to minute, word to word.

Whether simple and understated or complex and dramatic, emotions need to be conveyed in a story, first by developing sympathetic characters. The more readers identify or sympathize with your protagonist, the more they'll feel her emotions and be curious enough to turn the page.

In the first chapter of *Shiva Dancing,* for example, seven-year-old Meena is kidnapped by bandits from her village in Rajasthan on the night of her wedding. The girl cries as she's snatched away from her mother's loving embrace by two big men on camels. Her old grandfather, who shuffled after them, looks on helplessly. This incident is meant to draw an emotional response from the reader. At the end of the chapter Meena's found by an American couple in a train far away from her village. They're about to take her to their home in New Delhi, where they're temporarily posted, when the chapter ends. The reader is likely to ask at this point: What's going to happen to Meena? Will she ever find her village? Where will she end up?

Turn to the next chapter.

If emotion is important, the question is: How do you, the writer, actually depict it on paper? And how does the reader know what that emotion is? The cardinal rule is: *Show, don't tell.* In other words, stating a mental condition directly may not convince the reader. For example:

> She was anxious.

In real life, you observe someone's behavior and draw appropriate conclusions. The example below from *The Power of the Sword* by Wilbur Smith *shows* that the character is agitated:

> Centaine was too keyed up to sit down. She stood in the center of the floor and looked at the pictures on the fireplace wall without actually seeing them.

You can also *show* an emotion through a character's thought. This is often effective, since a person may not reveal his true feeling in his speech. Use a simile, as Alice Hoffman does in *Second Nature:*

He just couldn't shake the feeling of dread; he was like an old woman, waiting for disaster to strike.

Notice how much more effective the above is than saying:

> He was afraid.

Use physical symptoms. Readers are convinced of an emotion only when they recognize a physical reaction similar to one they've experienced themselves: a racing heart, stiff legs, or cold palms. Here's one of Meena's reactions in *Shiva Dancing,* but first a bit about the story and the scene where she finds herself.

Meena is adopted by the American couple, who raise her in San Francisco. When we meet her again, she's 35, a software techie, working for a Bay Area company. In one scene, Meena goes to a bookstore to attend a reading by Antoine Peterson, a celebrity novelist she has met briefly on one previous occasion. After the reading, he invites her for tea. Just when the chai is tasting "creamy smooth," and the tabla music has reached a crescendo, Antoine mentions his upcoming marriage to Liv and their honeymoon. Meena's reaction?

> Her tea tasted cold and weak. She set her cup down, trying to keep her hand steady.

An emotion, however, is not an end in itself. Describing it in a vacuum is never enough. You have to combine facts and action with emotion to create an illusion of reality. Here's an example from *The Rest of Life* by Mary Gordon.

She gets into the train, one of the first to board, [action and fact) Everything is still and quiet, [fact] Then the train starts up with an insulting lurch, [emotion]

Though I try to bring out a character's feelings even during the first draft, I find I never catch them one hundred per cent. Revision is the perfect time to check for the following: What are the various emotional situations in which the protagonist has found herself? How does she react to the stimulus? Look for a sentence, some piece of dialogue, or a flashback where emotions can be injected. Nostalgia, a milestone in life, a return to some place previously visited, are potential sources.

In *Shiva Dancing*, Meena returns to her village after an absence of three decades. As she arrives with her driver, she notices that the thatched-roof houses have been replaced by newer buildings. She can't recognize any of the sights. She's eager to find her mother. The reader knows—but Meena doesn't—that her mother is long dead. Meena meets a schoolboy on the street and asks, in one poignant moment, about her mother:

"My mother made clothes for the kids. She embroidered their names on their baby sari. Everyone in the village came to her."

The shocking reply that comes to Meena through her driver is:

His mother buys ready-made clothes for him.

Use sizzle in your dialogue: Inane comments, yes-and-no answers might do in real life, but speech in fiction must have the effect of potential shockers. In *Shiva Dancing*, Antoine returns from a book tour and immediately goes to visit Meena at her apartment. There, he finds Carlos, a close friend of Meena's, who tells him Meena has left for India. Antoine doesn't like Carlos in the first place, and now he has the task of finding out where she is actually staying. Carlos, protective of Meena, has been unwilling up to this point to share any information about her. Finally, the outwardly polite Carlos explodes:

"She had strong feelings for you. I've never seen Meena get so excited about a man. And what do you do? You build up her hopes, then dump her the day Liv comes back. Pardon me if I'm getting a little emotional. Meena's my friend. It hurts me to see her cut up like that."

"I didn't mean to hurt her," Antoine said. "My situation is different now."

"It better be."

The words used in a dialogue can be simple, but just repeating a phrase can intensify the emotion. Here's Alice Hoffman in *Second Nature:*

"Help me up," Richard Aaron shouted over the sound of the hooves hitting against the earth. "Just help me up."

A person's words may be a smoke screen, but her voice, facial expression, and gestures can be a dead giveaway. Notice how Gail Godwin does this in *The Finishing School:*

Her chin shot up so fast that it set in motion the crest of her feathery haircut. "Where did you hear about them?"

Another place where an emotional quality can be imparted is in the setting. *Create an atmosphere:* A dark house on a stormy night has a sinister connotation, whereas a sunny day on a beach is quite the opposite. You can make effective use of the environment to set a mood. This is equivalent to using background music in a movie to highlight the action on the screen. In this example from *Shiva Dancing,* Meena is about to attend a staff meeting at Software International Company. There's tension among her coworkers. The scene opens with a short description of the conference room:

Sunlight streamed in through the room's only window, casting shadows of the saucerlike leaves of the potted plants on the wall *without warming the room.*

The italics is mine. When selecting from a number of details in a surrounding, pick only those elements relevant for the character, those that bring an emotional surge. Here's novelist Antoine in *Shiva Dancing* arriving in Calcutta in pursuit of Meena. He feels lonely and uncertain. Everything he sees through his taxi window on the way to the hotel is colored by his present mental condition:

Antoine's eyes watered as acrid charcoal smoke from a clay oven on the sidewalk drifted in through the open car window. Along with the smoke came the smell of freshly baked flat bread. A young woman in a yellow-orange sari browned the puffy *roti* rounds over the fire. Her deep eyes and rhythmic gestures reminded him of Meena. He yearned for fresh bread made just for him.

Use symbolism. A symbol is a habit, an object, an event, almost anything charged with a hidden meaning that stems from association. In *Shiva Dancing,* a symbol used for Meena is her thirst, which, in effect, is her longing for her desert homeland. In her San Francisco office, she always keeps a glass of water on her desk and sips from it often. The true meaning of this ritualistic habit is revealed to her only after she finally returns to her village.

"Tubewell," the boy said, pointing. He rushed to it and levered the handle until water gushed out. Meena made a cup of her hands, drank deeply and splashed the remainder on her face. As she did so, she went back in time when she was tiny. Mataji would hold a glass of well water to her mouth. This clear earth water tasted the same. She had missed it. Without knowing it, she had been thirsty all these years.

Collect "feeling" words: Avoid overusing common words, such as "loving," "calm," or "blissful." Consider cataloguing your own feelings in a notebook and using them for your characters. Here are some examples: paragraphs all broadcast to readers how they should feel. In general, short sentences and paragraphs heighten the drama, whereas

longer, more leisurely writing gives the reader more breathing space.

Animated	Exasperated
Diffident	Sated
Bubbly	Petrified
Refreshed	Crushed

Regardless of what techniques are used, ultimately it's the writer's own emotions that set the tone of a scene or piece of fiction. As a preparation for writing, it might be necessary for you to revisit an incident in the past and try to identify and relive an emotion. Or, like an actor, you might assume a new role and experience a new set of emotions. The choice of words, the length of a sentence, the pacing of

Avoid sentimentality. As important as emotions are, don't overemphasize powerful ones such as loss and grief. Readers feel manipulated when presented with one misery after another. You may summarize such happenings or provide relief by using humor and insight. In general, the stronger the emotion, the more you need to restrain your passion in describing it.

To sum up, don't be afraid to transfer one or more emotional experiences of laughter, pain, or agony to your readers. They may curse you because they burned the rice, dropped their aerobics routine, and were late for work, but they won't put your book down.

33
PITCH-PERFECT DIALOGUE

By Shelby Hearon

I'm an inveterate eavesdropper. Nothing is more fun than going out for an early-morning muffin or a late-night plate of fried eggs and listening to the couple or the family in the booth behind you. A few lines of conversation, scraps of talk, and you know at once what the relationship between the people is, what the problem is, where they're coming from. All without even turning your head.

Achieving the same instant sense of "knowing all about" fictional people is more difficult. For one thing, you don't have the tone of voice, which is so revealing. In real life, the transaction—"I think I'll have the pancakes" and "I'm looking at the waffles"—can be heard with several different undertones, inflections, nuances. But on the page it's hard to convey what the listener knows is the subtext. Yet, the secret of pitch-perfect dialogue begins there: with trying to figure out what you know and how you know it when you're listening in on other lives.

Private eyes and spies provide unbeatable "eavesdropping" opportunities on the printed page. Who could confuse a character from P. D. James saying, "That was preternaturally slow," with one from Elmore Leonard asking, "Wha' took you so long?"

But in addition to these obvious clues in vocabulary and syntax, I always start on a new character by asking myself what I want to tell the reader first about the person. How to tell something is not nearly as difficult as deciding what is the crucial trait to reveal. But, say you decide to show right at the start how your character (let's take a father-type of guy) feels about his body and how he feels about authority: If you're dealing with men, you know they spend a lot of time wishing their bodies were different, and a lot of emotion on their relation to the guy in charge.

So you decide—two birds with one stone—to have your father-type in the hospital about to have his gallbladder out. He's prepped, waiting on that tight, white-sheeted bed, and in comes John Archer, abdominal surgeon.

Your man says:

"Hey, Arch, watch out when you're messing around down there below the belt you don't remove anything I may need. Ha ha."

Or he says:

"Jeez, Dr. Archer, I'm scared blue. I can't help it, look at me, I'm cold as a fish. My old man, he flat out died from this same trouble. Younger than me."

Or he says:

"Morning, John. I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Maybe taking some of my gall out will make me easier to live with. I know a few who'd agree with that."

Or he says:

"Well, Doc, don't take this as lack of confidence, but my law partners, malpractice litigators par excellence, will be looking over your shoulder when you pick up that knife."

Let's take another example. Say you want to show that the way a young woman feels about her man goes right back to how she feels about her mom. So maybe you start with her having lunch with him in a public place.

She says:

"The pastrami was O.K., I don't care all that much, the corned beef probably isn't any better, but just once I'd like to order for myself. Just once I'd like to open my mouth and say exactly what I want."

Or she says:

"You're sure? Gosh, you're always paying for everything. Lunch, the trip to Cancun, that totally gorgeous pink sweater. Really, I mean it, you make me feel really special."

Or she says:

"Here, I'll read it for you. I think you left your glasses on the dashboard. You like that soup, remember? The sort of borsch. It agrees with you, you said last time."

From here, it's just a matter of a phone call to Mom, in which we overhear a few snippets of conversation, to make your point that history, at least in our love life, always repeats.

An aid to writing convincing dialogue, and one you'll unconsciously pick up when you're listening in, is to give your character her or his own special metaphors. I often do this, as an exercise, just to get new voices clearly in my head: Have each character say, "It's hot as _____,"

"I'm mad as _____," "It's time to _____," "No point in _____." And I always have my ear out for phrases I have never heard before. One I picked up when I moved to Vermont (writers love to move around to new places for this reason!) and I'm sure to put to use soon is: "He may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but _____." And almost anything can follow _ "he's a true friend," "steady as night and day," "somebody you can trust," etc. I jot down every sentence like that I overhear.

Another choice the writer can make in deciding how to reveal character through dialogue is selecting who gets to say what lines. My own preference is to "cast against type," to use a film term. For example, listen to a couple fighting: One of them wants to get married, the other doesn't. One of them has been hurt to the quick by the cavalier attitude of the other. Readers will be more apt to hear the fight and really feel they have come to know these two people, if you do the unexpected. *He* wants to get married; *she* wants to play around. He's been wounded by her; she has grown tired of all the talk about commitment.

"I want marriage. I want the whole baggage. The dirty socks and pink toothbrush and recycle bins."

"Place an ad."

"Do you know how comments like that hurt? Do you have a clue how words can bruise?"

Read them with *she said* and then *he said*, then reverse it and read *he said* and *she said*, and you hear the impasse between them in a new way.

Or try a parent and child.

"I never know where you are or when you're coming home."

"Lighten up. What are my options in this burg, anyways?"

Spoken by a parent to a child, the reader doesn't really hear the words, because expected scenarios get in the way. But spoken by a twelve-year-old boy to his forty-five-year-old mother, the two lines seem fresh, and a new situation is suggested. The reader is drawn into the story.

A lot of times, real life suggests these switches on the expected. I can recall when I was a young mother, driving to the trailhead in the

Rockies to pick up my backpacking son, gone sometimes for days at a time. Then, three years ago, I went back to Aspen after a long absence, to see if I could do the day hikes I'd done years before. (To prove that if I wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, at least I wasn't rusty.) And there my son was, grown, driving me to the trailhead, setting a time when I had to return, checking to be sure I had a wind-breaker in case of a summer storm, and proper gear. And I'm sure our conversation mirrored the ones we'd had in the past, with the roles reversed.

Go back to the thrillers I mentioned earlier. What if Elmore Leonard's guy on the lam in Florida says, "That was preternaturally slow," and R D. James's man in London asks, "Wha' took you so long?" There would be a sense of having met someone unexpected and the surprise would engage the reader.

In my current novel, *Footprints*, I have a couple whose daughter died in a car wreck, and her heart is transplanted into a southern preacher's chest. The father (a brain scientist) is devastated; he clings to the belief his daughter is still alive, and becomes very mystical about the transplant. His wife, in turn, becomes quite scientific in her handling of loss, exploring in a cool, investigative manner the theories of what life is, what the mind or self really is, considering the transplant almost akin to Frankenstein's borrowed life.

But why not imagine you are listening to them talk over coffee in the booth behind you. What does she say to him? What does he say to her? What does the reader overhear?

34
CHARACTERS THAT MOVE

By Alyce Miller

While conflict is certainly at the heart of all good fiction, one might argue that character lies at its soul. Fiction is generally only as interesting as the people in it. One famous writer said that you need just enough plot to hang your characters on. Complex, developed, animated characters versus simple, stock, static characters may well he one of the defining distinctions between literary and popular fiction. The multiple meanings of "Characters That Move" suggest several possible kinds of motion essential to presenting interesting characters: physical or emotional (as in change or revelation), as well as the evocation of emotion in the reader.

In my own reading, it is character that time and again draws me back to a story or novel, and character that lives on my mind, resurfacing and informing my memory of the work. A curious thing about fiction is that it often can approach certain truths that nonfiction can't. So what is our attraction as both readers and writers to the lives of imaginary people? And why is that some fictional characters are indelible and continue to evolve in our memory, and others are quickly forgotten?

Character may be one of the least understood and most challenging elements of fiction writing. Poets talk a lot about voice. Fiction writers talk a lot about character. Voice is often the start of a fictional character, and even in third-person narratives, the two are inseparable. Voice may begin in fragments, as in a phrase, an inflection, a question, or an observation. You might be walking down the street when something starts in your head, thoughts that don't exactly belong to you, or you hear a voice distinct from your own internal monologues. When that happens, it's time to grow quiet and listen, to allow the voice to take shape and the language to develop. And if the voice persists, pick up a pen and follow it.

This can often be a writer's introduction to a character. Ultimately, fiction is about invention, and most characters are probably composites of real and imagined people transformed through the writer's imagination. The best characters, it seems to me, are those that the writer seems to live, much like an actor inhabiting a role. Perhaps it's helpful to move away from the idea that we "write about" characters and instead that we "become them." In this way, writing has a performance aspect, even though not publicly staged. The actual process of writing is performative, with characters speaking and acting and doing, and events unfolding.

Some writers swear by writing biographies for characters or making lists of attributes. I have seen impressive numbers of pages filled by writers, with all sorts of notes about their characters. Many books on writing seem to encourage this, even offering lists of questions like, "Does your character believe in God?" or "Has your character traveled a lot?" I have never found this strategy useful and, in most cases, I believe it can be distracting—partly, I think, because the exercise isolates character from the rest of the work and treats it mechanically, as an accumulation of details. It also may encourage a kind of imposed development of the character, rather than allowing the character to unfold and reveal herself naturally. A character is much more than the sum of her parts. Imposed attributes often lead to chunky characterization.

How can you possibly know if your character believes in God, or at least not until the situation arises? And even if she does, how does that belief affect the development of the story? It may be completely unimportant. It's my sense that we discover what is important to our characters by writing, not the other way around. If we begin to impose attributes too early, we squelch other possibilities and eliminate surprises. We place a template over the story and insist it has to go a certain way, tugging and pulling it into place. Sometimes the less you know when starting out, the better; sometimes just the germ of an idea is enough to launch a piece of fiction.

Ultimately, though, you do need to know much more about your character than may end up in the story or the novel you are writing. Say, for example, your character is a doctor. In your mind you may picture what medical school the character attended, but it may not ever need to be mentioned in the story. You might add it at a certain point and then strike it, unless it serves a larger purpose beyond exposition. Or you may find yourself writing a scene that you later discover is unnecessary, but it served the important purpose of getting you closer to the character.

In his discussions of character, E.M. Forster introduced the famous terms "flat" and "round." Simply put, a flat character is often a fixed (static) or stock character, or a person we might think of as one-dimensional who generally functions in a secondary role. Charles Dickens was a master of flat characters, skilled at finding the one detail (often ironic or humorous) that defined the character. Dickens was also a master of round characters, those who are dynamic, complex, mobile, and most important, capable of some change (usually subtle). There is certainly a place for both types of characters in a work of fiction, but generally, the main characters should be in the round category: They not only exist

or act, but have emotions, thoughts, mixed motives, dreams, hopes, disappointments, and, important, flaws. In other words, they are human, and they are individualized through particulars rather than painted with the broad brush of generalities.

Getting inside a character's head is essential. Even a despicable character requires empathy and understanding. There needs to be the connection that keeps the reader reading. This is different from approval. The writer's role is not to sit back and make pronouncements of moral judgment, though issues of morality may surface naturally in the course of the story. In fact, some of fiction's most notorious, wicked, or difficult characters are some of readers' favorites. For example, Humbert Humbert, Nabokov's lecherous narrator in *Lolita*, exudes charm and wit and intelligence in the telling of his first-person narrative, despite the fact that he is finally morally reprehensible. He is funny and observant, and his facility with language and word play is more than entertaining. Or consider how as readers, our attitudes toward a character change through the course of a novel or story, as we get more and more information. It has been said that a bit of the writer is in every character, and this is why characters behave in less than noble ways.

There's an old adage "write what you know," and many writers take it literally. There are many ways of "knowing." Writers are people upon whom little that goes on in the world is lost. They listen, they pay attention, they watch, they make mental notes. Many writers may not be aware of when writing stops and life begins, so intertwined the two become. In the movie *Sybil*, about the woman with multiple personalities, there is a wonderful scene in which a small child who witnesses Sybil accessing other personalities, runs home and ecstatically exclaims, "Mama, Sybil's just stuffed with people!"

Perhaps the writer is also stuffed with people, and there are no limits to what a writer can write, as long as the particulars of character are there. Often, if a writer reaches too far out of his experience (real, borrowed, or imagined), he may run into the temptation to draw on stereotypes. For example, he may start with a limited understanding of how something works in another culture or social structure, and run headlong into stereotypes. The interesting thing about stereotypes is that there is often a kernel of truth at the core, but it is a truth the observer has not adequately processed, and it becomes distorted and ultimately misunderstood or misinterpreted. Sometimes, it's sheer laziness on the part of a writer, inattention to detail, inability to absorb without judgment.

Fiction works in the territory of the imagination. It is about transformation, not transcription. Characters, therefore, even those who may be composites of real people, or based loosely on people the writer has known, become transformed through imagination and language. Part of the key to creating characters is being willing to learn. The know-it-all writer often flattens a character faster than a speeding train. Characters need room to move around; they need space to stretch their legs. Most of all, they need an attentive writer, one who is willing to take the time to observe and chronicle what is being revealed.

35
PIQUING THE READER'S CURIOSITY

By Joan Aiken

Once when I was sitting in a packed London Underground train, I heard the following snatch of conversation between two men who were standing close by me, but I never saw their faces among the crowd of rush-hour passengers. The first voice, the sort that alerts you at once to listen, asked, "Did I ever tell you the story of the mushroom?"

"No, what was it?" the other voice asked.

"Well, there were only two officers in charge. A couple of days before this happened they had vacuumed the parade ground. Lord, those Germans are thorough! You could have rolled out pastry on that parade ground."

"But what about the mushroom?"

"1 was coming to that. There was this white flagpole in the middle of (he parade ground. . . . Ah, Charing Cross, here we are."

The train stopped, the two men got out, taking with them forever the secret of what happened to the mushroom. That was about thirty years ago, but I still wake sometimes in the small hours and occupy myself with speculations as to where and in what circumstances the mushroom turned up.

Curiosity is the main characteristic that divides human beings from other animals. Of course some animals are inquisitive, too, but not to the ruinous degree that has brought the human race to its present precarious clutch on atomic development and other undesirable areas of knowledge. If only our earliest ancestor had not rubbed two sticks together and discovered how to light a campfire. . . . But here we are, cngenitally inquisitive, and there is no going back. We long to find out what began it all, and what happened in the end. Ancient myths and folk tales give warnings about the perils incurred from prying into other people's business: Prometheus stealing fire from the gods; Psyche spilling hot oil from the lamp on Cupid in her eagerness to discover the identity of her nightly visitor; the terrible revelations of Bluebeard's chamber.

Magic—a dangerous force, like electricity, like radiation—is unleashed by attempts to discover what lies ahead, to divine the future, to skip all the tedious intervening chapters and turn on to the very last page. Why do we read stories? Because we long to find out what happened next. Any writer who can evoke this curiosity is sure of an audience. But how is it done? How can you keep your readers atwitter with suspense? Some authors can relate the most wonderful, hair-raising events in such a flat, disinterested manner that they might just as well be recounting the annals of the local archaeological society, while others make the most trifling event full of entertainment and surprise. The important factors are who is telling and who is listening.

One way to arouse curiosity, and a very good one, is to imply that there is a secret waiting to be revealed. What kind of secret? Well, it must be an important, a crucial one, or it would not have been kept secret in the first place. The revelation must then be postponed for as long as possible. This is a matter of judgment, for if you delay the revelation *too* long, the reader may become impatient, and close the book, or turn on to the end; or, even worse, when the disclosure comes, it comes as an anti-climax and the disappointed reader may feel that it was not worth waiting for.

Dickens was a very shrewd hand at delayed-action disclosure: A main part of his technique was to provide half a dozen subplots, each with its own mystery, so that, in *Our Mutual Friend,* for instance, there is the mystery of the dead man found in the Thames, the mystery of Silas Wegg's evil hold over Mr. Boffin, and Mr. Boffin's peculiar behavior, the involved goings-on of the Lammles and Veneerings and their financial dealings, the paranoid behavior of Bradley Headstone, and the very odd, inscrutable relationship of Fledgeby and Riah—and a wealth of other oddities. The reader is given continual short glimpses of all these strange connections, enough to whet curiosity. But it is not until well after the halfway mark of the book that any explanations are forthcoming, and, as fast as one mystery is unravelled, another is brought back, to keep the reader turning the pages until the very end. Dickens's work had to be planned in installments for serial publication, so there was an obligation to provide a cliffhanger for the end of each part.

Fiction writing in Dickens's day had undergone a total change from the tranquil pace of the eighteenth century, before the Industrial Revolution, when readers, living mostly in the country, had unlimited reading time and were prepared for a novel to begin in a leisurely manner.

Writers then had all the time in the world to convey their message, and readers could settle down comfortably for a nice peaceful three-volume reading orgy in the long lamplit winter evenings.

All this came to an abrupt end in 1859 with the publication of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White,* which appeared serially in *All the Year Round.* A mass audience of middle-class readers had arrived. They wanted action. Stories had to begin with a bang: the Dover coach on a foggy night brought to a halt by a lone horseman; an escaped convict confronting a terrified boy in a lonely churchyard; wills, legacies, deathbed dramas. Wilkie Collins was a master hand at a gripping beginning. The protagonist in *The Woman in White* is first seen fleeing from her persecutors across Hampstead Heath. *The Moonstone* (not actually a moonstone, but a yellow diamond) opens with the storming of Seringapatam and the theft of the jewel from the forehead of the Brahmin god.

The only problem with such a rousing start is that not every writer has the ability to maintain the tension at this pitch for the rest of the story. Wilkie Collins at his best could do so, but he was not always *at* his best, and sometimes the tension began to sag as the plot became almost too formidably complicated.

How can this kind of lapse be avoided—apart from having a simpler plot? Keep your tale peppered with odd, unexplained episodes. You can have characters behave seemingly out of character, turn nasty, be seen in unexpected places in unlikely company. Your hero, for instance, meets an old friend who greets him with a blank stare, with no sign of recognition; a faithful hound growls at his master of ten years; two old women are seen in a village street looking at photographs, and one of them suddenly shrieks in astonishment.

To keep the reader's attention focused on your hero (who is engaged in a struggle against apparently insuperable odds), it can be useful to endow him with an unexpected minor attribute that will stand him in good stead in confronting a vital crisis. He is a qualified tea-taster; or she has perfect musical pitch; he speaks ten different African languages; she is an expert on the kind of paint Velasquez used. The reader must, of course, have been previously informed of this specialized knowledge or skill, but in a passing, offhand way. If it comes as a complete surprise to the reader at the moment of crisis (he was the only man in England who could undo a particular knot), the reader could be justifiably annoyed. "Author's convenience" must be avoided at all costs. The author's real skill lies in creating the type of situation that would require the hero or heroine's unique expertise to be brought into play. There is a folk-tale model based on exactly this pattern: The hero is sent into the world on a seemingly hopeless quest, accompanied by six friends. One can run faster than anyone in the world; another is a champion archer . . . and so on. Here, of course, the pleasure for the reader lies in anticipating the triumph of the hero and his friends.

I had a good time writing my children's book, *The Whispering Mountain,* in which the hero, a short-sighted, delicate, unathletic boy, has to contend with a gang of local bullies and with a couple of London criminals. He always carries with him a tiny *Book of Knowledge,* which invariably provides him with the precise bit of know-how to meet each emergency. I happen to own such a book, and so was able to tailor the emergencies in the story to fit the information it provided. The idea, of course, is not new: I adopted it from *The Swiss Family Robinson,* in which the calmly competent mother of the family is always able to produce from her reticule the necessary ball of string, pair of pliers, or sticking plaster to deal with a problem.

Naturally, a story need not be presented on such a simplistic physical level to keep the reader's curiosity stimulated. Jane Austen arouses and maintains interest easily and spontaneously with her basic problem situations. How will the Bennets ever manage to marry off all those five daughters? How will Anne Elliot manage to endure the painful ordeal of encountering her lost lover again after eight years of heartbreak? What is the mystery attached to Jane Fairfax? Why wouldn't she go to Ireland? How will poor little Fanny Price make out when she is sent to live among those rich scornful relatives?

A tremendously important element of readability is the solid basis of the plot. A well-balanced, strong story generally has one or perhaps two crucial events in it. One, fairly early on, is to give you a foretaste of what the writer is able to provide. Charlotte Bronte whets your appetite by telling about Jane Eyre's incarceration in the Red Room and the consequent ghostly terrors. The 11 the story settles down to sober reality until the second explosion with the mad Mrs. Rochester in the attic. Mystery novelist Reginald Hill, in one of his Detective Dalziel mysteries, teases the aghast reader early on with a wild description of a crazed gunman and mayhem in a village street; then he rewinds the story to an earlier point of time, and so keeps readers on tenterhooks, waiting while he leads up again to the moment when all hell is going to break loose. And then he deals the expectant reader another shattering surprise.

Readers today are much more sophisticated than they used to be. They are accustomed to fictional trickery, guessing games, speeding up and slowing down of action, even unresolved questions and crises. They have only to walk along the street or into a supermarket or bookstore to see racks and racks of paperbacks and hardbacks, all screaming their messages of drama and sensationalism. But it is still possible to find a simple straight-forward story that will keep the reader breathless, attentive, and compulsively turning the pages. The novels of Sara Paretsky, Tony Hillerman, Reginald Hill, Dick Francis, and Rosamund Pilcher are good examples.

Fiction today has to compete with television, videotapes, films, rock music, virtual reality; and the horrors and crises in world news, exciting discoveries and inventions, and human deeds and misdeeds.

Sometimes a story depends for its momentum on a single character, or on the relationship between two characters. We love Character A and would like to see him on good terms with Character B, but they have always been at odds. How can an agreement between them be brought about? The relationship between Beatrice and Benedict in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is a fine example of such a story.

In *Little Lord Fauntleroy,* Frances Hodgson Burnett accomplishes this in a domestic setting. Character A won't love B, but B wins him over. The crusty old Earl of Dorincourt is unwillingly obliged by law to accept his unknown American grandson as his heir; how long will it take the gallant little fellow and his gentle gracious American mother to win their rightful places in the old aristocrat's rugged heart? Of course, it does not take very long, but the course of the story is pure pleasure for the reader all the way, even with the end so clearly in view.

Another heroine who achieves her end by possessing startlingly unexpected attributes and winning hearts all the way is Dorothy Gilman's

Mrs. Pollifax, a senior citizen spy. Often teamed with tough male colleagues who at first deeply mistrust and resent her, she breaches their defenses by candor, practical good sense, humor, courage, and a touch of mysticism that is irresistible. We all love to read about good triumphing over evil, and to be given the certainty that it will do so, with a touch of humor thrown in, is an unbeatable combination.

Unrecognized love must always command the fascinated attention of readers, and Rebecca West makes tantalizing use of this knowledge in her magnificent novel, *The Birds Fall Down.* In this story, the clever but repulsive double agent Kamensky is infatuated by the teenage heroine Laura, but she is wholly unaware of this from first to last, believing that he intends to assassinate her. The unacknowledged duel between them builds up to an almost intolerably suspenseful climax, heightened by the fact that most of the other characters, Russians, are given to immense, loquacious, red-herring monologues on every conceivable topic, always just at the moment when some catastrophe seems imminent, or a train is about to leave.

Virginia Woolf had an idea for a play, never actually written: "I'm going to have a man and a woman . . . never meeting, not knowing each other, but all the time you'll feel them coming nearer and nearer. This will be the really exciting part, but when they *almost* meet—only a door between—you see how they just miss." Perhaps not surprisingly, she never did put the idea into a play or story. But Mary Wesley, in her novel, *An Imaginative Experience,* used a similar plot, except that she does finally permit her couple to meet. This kind of scheme for a story clearly displays that fiction is a kind of teasing game carried on between writer and reader, a game like Grandmother's Footsteps, in which I, the writer, try to steal up on you, the reader, without allowing you to find out beforehand what I intend to do.

And the theme of *curiosity,* dangerous, misplaced, unwarrantable curiosity, takes us, by way of myth and folklore, to ghost stories and the supernatural. "A Warning to the Curious" is the title of one of M.R. James's best-known ghost stories, and a very terrifying story it is, yet entirely convincing. Who could resist the possibility of discovering one of the legendary three royal crowns, buried somewhere, long ago, on the Suffolk coast "to keep off the Danes or the French or the Germans." But the surviving crown has a ghostly guardian, and the fate of the inquisitive rabbity young man who goes after it is very awful indeed. All the details in this story are exactly right: the foggy, sandy countryside, and the character of Paxton, the silly young man who has dug up the crown and now wishes he hadn't. The narrator and his friend try to help, but "all the same the snares of death overtook him," James states, but then proceeds to describe a harrowing chase through the fog, poor Paxton pursued by a creature "with more bones than flesh" and a "lungless laugh." Paxton is finally found with his mouth full of sand, his teeth and jaws broken to bits. . . .

Operas have overtures, in which snatches of all the best arias are beguilingly introduced, giving the audience a taste of the pleasures to come. In the same way, the shrewd writer will, by an opening sentence, sound the *voice* of his story, suggest what is likely to happen, and so whet the reader's appetite: "The marriage wasn't going well and I decided to leave my husband," says Anne Tyler at the start of *Earthly Possessions;* "I went to the bank to get cash for the trip." And so she set the style and tempo for a wildly free-wheeling and funny plot.

Your voice can be humorous or terrifying, sad, wild, or romantic; only *you* can give it utterance, only you can lead your reader by a cobweb thread through the windings of your own particular story. What did happen to the mushroom? Each of us has his own theory as to that.

36
STORYTELLING, OLD AND NEW

By Elizabeth Spencer

Being a Southerner, a Mississippian, had a good deal to do, I now believe, with my ever having started to write at all, though I did not have any notion about this at the time it all began. Having had stories read to me and having listened to them being told aloud since I could understand speech, I began quite naturally as soon as I could write to fashion stories of my own. I now can see that my kind of part-country, part-small-town Southerners *believed* in stories and still remain, in my experience, unique in this regard. They believed, that is, in events and the people concerned in them, both from the near and distant past, and paid attention to getting things straight, a habit which alone can give true dignity to character, for it defeats the snap judgment, the easy answer, the label and the smear. Bible stories, thus, which were heard at home and in church, were taken literally, and though the Greek and Roman myths that were read aloud to me, along with Arthurian legend and many others, were described as "just" stories, the distinction was one I found easy to escape; maybe I did not want to make it. And we heard oral stories, too: Civil War accounts and tragic things, some relating to people we could actually see uptown almost any day. All ran together in my head at that magic time—I trace any good books I have written, or stories, right back to them.

Starting at the other end of things, however, is what the writer who daily faces the blank sheet must do: that is to say, O.K. about childhood, what about now?

From motion to repose

The work of fiction begins for the writer and reader alike, I feel, when the confusing outer show of things can be swept aside, when something happens that gives access to the dangerous secret pulse of life. What is really going on? This is the question that continually tantalizes and excites. For the fiction writer, the way of getting the answer is by telling the story.

Right back to stories. You see how quick it was.

A story is a thing in itself. It has a right to be without making any apology about what it means, or how its politics and religion and pedigree and nationality may be labeled. The name of the writer can be guessed at by the stories he puts down, but the writer is not the story any more than an architect is a building. The events in a true—that is to say, real—story are a complex of many things, inexhaustibly rich, able to be circled around like a statue or made at a touch to create new patterns like a kaleidoscope. Such a story may be absorbed sensually or pondered about reasonably; it may be talked about by friends or strangers in the presence or the absence of the writer. The story should be allowed to take in all its basic wants. It may want discipline, but it may not get it, depending upon how greedy it is or how obsessed the writer is about it. A story has the curious, twofold quality of seeming all in motion and at times even in upheaval while it is being told, but when finished, of having reached its natural confines and attained repose. Many times characters seem to have life outside the story in which they engage. So much the better; the story will not question this.

A silent magnetism

Each story I have written commenced in a moment, usually unforeseen, when out of some puzzlement, bewilderment, or wonder, some response to actual happening, my total imagination was drawn up out of itself; a silent magnetism, without my willing it, had taken charge. What was it all about? It is just as well for the writer to pause here and consider. Not that the writer will take the imprint, literally, of people and event—though for some writers the main worry falls here. To me, it is rather the power of the story that one should be warned about: Don't enter that lion's cage without knowing about lions. For the writer enters alone. He may be eaten up, or mauled, or decide to get the hell out of there, but even if all goes splendidly and ends in fine form, the person who comes out is not the same one who went in.

Anyone who takes stories as an essential part of life is only recognizing the obvious. Religion, love, psychiatry, families, nations, wars and history have all become deeply mixed up with stories and so find no way to shed them without violating or even destroying their own natures. Every human being is deeply involved with at least one story—his own. (The Southern tendency to get involved with family stories has accounted for the larger part of Southern fiction—if we add to this hunting stories and war stories, then we have just about accounted for all of it.) The present faint-hearted tone that some critics now adopt when discussing the future of fiction is surprising, for stories, being part of the primal nature of human expression, are in one way or another going to continue to be told. What disturbs us all, I believe, is the debasement of the story into something mass-made, machine-tooled, slick and false. (The lion was stuffed or drugged or doctored some way.) At its highest level, a story is a free art form, daring to explore and risk, to claim that it

recognizes truth . . . and that even when inventive, what it imagines is, in terms it can splendidly determine, true.

A common note

At a level short of this highest fiction, but shared by it, many group stories exist, the bulk of which never get written down. They are told every day, repeated, embellished, continued, or allowed to die, and some are better than others; inventive and factual at once, both commonplace and myth-like, they grow among humanity like mistletoe in oaks. They are much better than average TV fare, and anyone who wants to write should start collecting everyday accounts that are passed about offices, campuses, neighborhoods, or within family situations, noticing whatever there is to be found of humor and terror, character, achievement, failure, triumph, tragedy, irony and delight. The modern theme of self-exploration with heavy emphasis on the private sexual nature and fantasy has been done to the point of weariness. Can we think of ourselves again in communion with others, in communities either small, medium or large, which may be torn apart disastrously or find a common note, an accord? One word for it maybe, is love.

37
MAKING THE READER CARE

By Marjorie Franco

Emotion, or a state of feeling, is something we all experience, and for most of us our persistent memories are of situations or happenings that aroused a powerful emotion. When writing a story, the author uses a variety of emotions, trusting the reader to experience them along with the character. The character needs to be convincing enough to cause the reader to recall his or her own emotions, though not necessarily the specific experience that aroused them.

A friend once told me that her brother's favorite memory of childhood was of a summer night when he and the other members of his family stood around in the kitchen eating ice cream cones. Happiness, no doubt, was the emotion he connected to the scene, and this simple emotion resulted from many factors, including the summer night, the kitchen, the cold sweetness of the ice cream on his tongue, and above all. the sharing of pleasure with a loving family.

Although this memory from real life is different from the world of fiction, it is an example of how we remember moments that affect us. Our storehouse of memory continues to grow from childhood on, providing us with ideas for characters, setting, and conflicts, which, with the help of imagination, craft, and an appropriate tone, we weave together to create a story we hope will make the reader care.

Not an easy task, and one that beginning writers sometimes sidestep by having emotion occur off scene, or by simply stating it in narrative.

In *Lectures on Literature,* Vladimir Nabokov writes that memory causes the perfect fusion of past and present; that inspiration adds a third ingredient, the future. The writer, he believes, see the world as the potentiality of fiction.

An observant writer once saw a woman getting off a bus, and was so struck by something about her appearance and manner, she became the inspiration for a character in his story.

Henry James, sitting next to a woman at a dinner party, listening to her describe an event that actually took place, began thinking along fictional lines, sowing the seeds for what would become his novella *The Aspern Papers.* Once the idea had formed in his mind, he didn't want to hear the woman's entire story, for he was already creating his own.

We may begin creating a fictional character with a real person in mind, but the end result is never a duplicate of that person, because it's impossible to get inside another person's head, no matter how well we may know him or her. But it is necessary to get inside our characters, to know their personalities, strengths and weakness, what will make them feel love, hate, joy, anger, fear and pain; what experiences will affect their lives, and how they will deal with their problems. Much of this is revealed by showing them interacting with other characters in particular situations; with scene and dialogue; and with conflict.

The idea for my story "Between Friends" (*Good Housekeeping)* began with a real person in mind, but the character of Janet quickly took on her own personality and became fictional. The protagonist, Alison, welcomes new arrival, Janet, to the neighborhood, and they become friends. The conflict begins with Janet's casual criticism of Benny, Alison's son. Gradually, it escalates to the point where Janet says, "Maybe you've put your job before the interests of your child. Maybe if you'd stayed home more things would have been better." Words are exchanged, and the friendship ends with bitter feelings on both sides.

I believe the reader can relate to this confrontation, for we have all experienced criticism, as well as the hurt and feeling of rejection that accompany it. And when the critic is a friend, we may feel doubly rejected. Alison, who has gone out of her way for Janet, feels she's been treated unfairly, just as the reader may have felt at some time, even though the situation might have been different. Here, again, I trust the reader to tap into emotions that may be latent and experience them vicariously with the character.

The climax of the story occurs when a desperate Janet comes to Alison for help. Alison is about to leave for an important job interview, but when Janet says, "It's Andy, he ate a whole bottle of aspirin," she is horrified, and putting aside their differences (as well as her interview), she immediately drives Janet and Andy to the hospital.

Here, Alison has to make a quick decision, and the one she chooses says something about her character, her sense of right and wrong. Another person, unwilling to sacrifice an important interview for someone who has treated her badly, might have called an ambulance and left Janet and her son to wait for its arrival.

In addition to trying to show insight into the main character, I was also trying to establish empathy for Janet, the

antagonist. Janet has her own problems. Perhaps she regrets having given up her job to stay home with her children; perhaps her criticism of Alison is grounded in envy; and, most important of all, perhaps she feels responsible for placing her son in danger, guilty of an act of negligence, the same kind of negligence of which she had accused Alison's son. Anger, envy, and guilt are emotions that have touched us all.

In our attempt to make the reader care, I believe we must keep in mind the difference between identifying with and relating to characters. The definition of identify is "to be, or become the same." Writers who create unique characters shouldn't expect the reader to identify with them. I take the view that though there is a universality in human beings, still each of us is different in a unique way. In contrast, the definition of relate is "to have a relationship or connection," a better goal, I think, for making the reader care.

As important as characters are to a story, they would not hold the reader's attention without some form of conflict. Conflict moves the story and keeps the reader interested while waiting to discover what happens next. Conflict generates emotion and requires the character cither to solve the problem or to deal with it in a satisfactory way.

In my story "Midnight Caller" (*Good Housekeeping)* Dianne, a teacher and recently divorced mother of an infant son, is receiving anonymous phone calls, usually at midnight. She lives on the second floor of a three-story building; her friend Greta lives upstairs with her teenaged son, and another friend. Hank, lives on the first floor. Safety is of great importance to Dianne: On her own, and responsible for her infant son as well as for herself, she has tried to protect herself by choosing to live near friends. When the phone calls begin, she persuades herself that her name was picked at random from the phone book; still, they represent a threat to her feeling of safety and cause her a sense of unease. Then one snowy night, with all the roads blocked, all feelings of safety vanish and uncase gives way to outright fear.

> "What are you wearing?" the voice on the phone says. "Is it the yellow nightgown with the ruffles, or the white one with the lace?" Slowly, as if in a dream, she touches the neck of her nightgown and runs her fingers over the yellow ruffles. She hangs up, heart pounding, wide awake after being startled out of a sound sleep, and goes to her son's room.

The setting contributes to the tension—the apartment building surrounded by snow "thick on the rooftops and the bare trees, high where it had drifted against fences in backyards"—and so does the detail: the nightgown with the ruffles, her son's room "small, shadowy and warm, smelling of baby powder and freshly washed blankets. Clean."

Dianne's desire for safety is in conflict with the outside threat, the fact that she is interacting with an unknown person. By using certain words, abstractions are made concrete: "pounding" and "startled" contrast with "warm," "baby powder," and "clean."

In the end, Dianne discovers the identity of the midnight caller. It is not Hank, her neighbor, or one of her students at school, possibilities she had considered. It is Greta's son, who has often baby-sat for her. Like Alison in the first story I mentioned, Dianne is faced with a difficult and very important decision.

In these two stories, I've tried to show how characters, conflicts, and settings can generate emotion in the reader. But the emotion expressed through the character must first be felt by the writer who uses memory, experience and observations together with creative imagination to write the story and present it with clarity so the reader will understand.

Readers don't need to have conscious memory of events in their lives that aroused certain feelings in order to imagine a fictional situation and relate to it either positively or negatively. But those feelings can be touched by the characters in a story and the events in their lives, and when that happens, readers begin to care.

SPECIALIZED FICTION

38
HOW REAL HISTORY FITS INTO THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

By Thomas Fleming

Too many writers—and not a few readers—tend to think of nonfiction and fiction as opposites—a twain that should never meet. Throughout my career, I have taken a very different approach. While I am writing a nonfiction book or article, I am constantly looking for situations, events, characters, that present an opening to the imagination.

For example, I received an assignment to write an article about the 1942 Battle of Savo Island, the disastrous naval engagement off Guadalcanal in which the Japanese inflicted a stunning defeat on the Americans. As I assembled the research, I discovered that the *USS Chicago,* the acting flagship of the American cruiser squadron, had unaccountably sailed *away* from the attacking Japanese soon after the midnight assault began. The other American cruisers were sunk. The *Chicago's* captain was relieved of duty and later shot himself rather than face a court of inquiry.

I asked myself: What if the captain of that disgraced ship was replaced by his Annapolis roommate, his closest friend? How would the new captain handle the job? Would he investigate what had happened aboard the ship on that terrible night, and perhaps destroy his friend's career? In a flash, the plot of my novel, *Time and Tide,* leaped into my mind. I created an imaginary cruiser, the *USS Jefferson City,* which became the guilt-haunted ship. I peopled it with a crew tormented by the memory of Savo Island. As they struggled to redeem themselves and the Captain tried to redefine his relationship with his friend, who had always been the superior voice, the naval war in the Pacific unfolded around them, seen from a dramatic new perspective.

Sometimes it is a special insight into a historical character that triggers an imaginative explosion. While working on a profile of General

John J. Pershing, the American commander in World War I, I discovered that shortly before he went to France, his wife and three children were killed in a fire at the Presidio, the San Francisco army base. What did that tragedy do to the general's soul? I wondered. Did it have an impact on his conduct in France? How could that be dramatized?

What if Pershing had a close army friend who had sustained a similar loss? Enter Colonel Malvern Hill Bliss, the central character of my novel, *Over There.* He is speeding down a highway outside San Antonio, drunk and demoralized by the death of his wife and son from a terrorist machete in the Philippines. Before this opening chapter ends, Pershing has dragged Bliss out of a brothel and ordered him to prepare to depart for France with him in 24 hours. The Pershing that Bliss reveals to the reader is a very different man from the Iron General in the history books—and so is the World War that both of them fight.

My novel *Dreams of Glory* is another novel whose genesis was derived from a nonfiction book. I was writing *The Forgotten Victory,* an account of the 1780 battle of Springfield, when I came across the story of a black American soldier found in a snowdrift outside George Washington's headquarters in Morristown, with a bayonet in his chest. Washington's army was about 15% black by this time. Who had killed this man? Apparently no one ever found out.

Again, this fact exploded into a whole novel in my imagination. What if the black soldier was a spy who was killed in the intelligence war that raged between the two armies? The result was a book that reveals a dark underside of the Revolutionary struggle.

By now it should be apparent that a historical novel is not "made up." Its vitality can and should come from history itself, and the deeper its roots in reality, the better.

Another trigger to the imagination may be the discovery of a little-known set of historical facts or a situation that has relevance to our own time. I believe a prime function of the historical novel is to surprise as well as intrigue the reader.

A few years ago, I was fascinated to discover that before the American Revolution, New York City was 25% black—mostly slaves. In the 1740s the blacks concocted a plot to sack the city and hand it over to the French in exchange for their freedom.

How would this startling set of facts fit into a novel? I wanted to tell the story from the inside, retaining sympathy for the slaves, yet seeing the episode in all its complexity. What if there were someone in the conspiracy who saw it differently? I created Clara Flowers, a beautiful black woman who was captured and raised by Seneca Indians, then repatriated to the white world at seventeen. She became the main character of my recently published novel. *Remember The Morning.*

Growing up in the so-called middle ground around the Great Lakes, where whites and Indians mingled, Clara has a different view of race relations. As her role grew in my mind, I saw she could also illuminate women's experience in pre-revolutionary America. I created a Dutch woman, Catalyntie Van Vorst, with whom Clara shared her Indian captivity. Catalyntie becomes a successful merchant, not unusual among the American Dutch. Although the slave revolt strains their relationship, their early bonding as Senecas and their common identity as women enable them to continue their friendship.

To make this work, I had to learn the mores and customs of the "middle ground," the intricacies of the fur trade, the local politics of colonial New York, and the global politics of the struggle for world supremacy between Catholic France and Protestant England. It all began with the seed of my original discovery about the startling role of the blacks in New York, two hundred years before Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant. As good historical novels should, this book resonates in our own time, making us think about our present dilemmas in a new way.

Similarly, one of the primary insights of my twenty-five years of research into the American Revolution was the little-known fact that in some states, such as New Jersey, the struggle was a civil war. Brothers fought brothers and sisters fell in love with their brothers' or their fathers' enemies.

Swiftly, my imagination created a character who could convey this startling ambiguity. What if an ex-British officer named Jonathan Gif-ford married an American widow, adopted her two children, and opened a tavern on the Kings Highway in New Jersey? Into the tavern—and the story—would swirl loyalists and neutrals and ferocious rebels, eager to hang every waverer in sight. It would be especially poignant if Gilford's stepson, Kemble Stapleton, was the local Robespierre. Thus was born my novel *Liberty Tavern,* which told the story of Gifford's gradual conversion to the American cause—and Kemble's education in the complexities of Revolutionary politics.

Crucial to the success of every work of historical fiction is a thorough knowledge of the period, so that the imaginary events fit plausibly into the known history of the time. This "veracious imagination" (a term coined by English novelist George Eliot and revived by Cornell critic Cushing Stout) is a vital ingredient in meshing real history and the imaginative, symbolic events that the novelist is adding to the story. Without this background knowledge, the writer may create "improbable truths," something the father of the American historical novel, James Fenimore Cooper, felt was a primary danger in interweaving the imaginative and the real.

Achieving this fit is not as daunting as it seems at first. Rich as the historical record is, it is not so crowded with information that the creation of an imaginary character like Malvern Hill Bliss or Clara Flowers strains plausibility. On the contrary, by giving the reader a closeup of the historical experience, it may make the story even more plausible.

Real characters, such as Pershing, George Washington, Adolf Hitler, Franklin D. Roosevelt have appeared in my novels, alongside the imaginary ones. It is extremely important to present such historical figures accurately. To portray Washington as a drunk or Pershing as a coward, for instance, would be a serious violation of the novelist's historical responsibilities.

But dialogue *can* be invented for these historical figures. In my novel *Loyalties,* for instance, I have a scene in which F.D.R. reveals his pathological hatred of the German people—a little-known fact that plays a large part in the novel's plot (and was a major factor in prolonging World War II). I put words in F.D.R.'s mouth that are based on extensive research, making them not only plausible but probable.

There is another reason for grasping the great issues and inner spiritual and psychological struggles of a whole period. *Remember the Morning,* for instance, is more than the story of Clara Flowers' and Catalyntie Van Vorst's search for security and love. As the story unfolds, they both get emotionally involved with a raw young would-be soldier named Malcolm Stapleton. The growing American dissatisfaction with England's corrupt imperial control of America becomes the book's leitmotif. Out of the racial and personal turmoil in the forefront of the novel, an awakening sense of a separate American destiny emerges. The drums of the American Revolution are thudding in the distance as the story ends, adding substance and a deeper meaning to the book.

The historical novelist has to be even more selective than the historian in constructing his narrative. His goal is emotional truth—a considerable leap beyond factual truth. Historians seldom deal with personal emotions in history. In the novel, such emotions are the primary focus of the story. This means that you cannot describe every battle of World War I while writing about Bliss and Pershing in France. You have to choose one or two battles in which their inner anguish becomes visible. It means you can shift the timing of a historical event a few years in either direction in order to increase the emotional intensity—as I did with the black revolt in *Dreams of Glory.*

Perhaps the least understood role of reality in the historical novel is the way research can supply you with details that deepen and otherwise improve the story you are telling. In *Loyalties,* the main character, Berthe Von Hoffmann, an agent for the German Resistance to Hitler, is kidnapped from Madrid by her former lover, who is working for the Nazis. The American protagonist Jonathan Talbot follows them to Grenada. The imperatives of the plot require Talbot to kill the

Nazi.

I found myself recoiling from a scene which was routine spy novel huggermugger. Something else was needed. In another day's research on Grenada, I discovered that inside the famed Moslem palace, the Alhambra, was a crude Spanish palace built by King Charles V. On one of its walls was an enormous painting of a column of refugees plodding into the distance. "The Expulsion of the Jews" by Emilio Sala depicted the decision of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to banish the Jews from Spain in 1492.

I had the ingredient I needed to create an original scene that fit perfectly into the story. While the Nazi gazes up at the painting and remarks that he hoped to persuade the Spanish government to let him bring it to Berlin, Talbot slips a silken cord around the Nazi's throat and strangles him. It was not my imagination that transformed this scene from cliché to meaningful drama; it was research—reality—fact.

More and more, I have come to think of these two sides of a historical novel as competing themes in a piece of music. Ultimately, fact can and should be woven into fiction so seamlessly, readers never stop to ask what is true in the literal sense and what is imaginative. All that should matter is the conviction that they are being taken inside events in a new revelatory, personal way. It takes hard work—but it is tremendously satisfying to write a book that engages readers' heads and hearts.

39
PARTNERS IN GRIME

By Marcia Muller

Like many crime writers, I came to the genre through my love of reading, and the novels that most appealed to me were those featuring private investigators. Possibly because I don't respond well to any type of authority, I was fascinated by detectives who, unhampered by regulations and procedure, would set off down the mean streets to right wrongs, strong and unafraid. As one who had always wanted to write, I'd then dream of creating my own character who would walk those streets, strong and unafraid.

Unfortunately, almost all the fictional models at that time were male, and while I could empathize with men and understand them on an individual basis, of course I didn't know the slightest thing about actually *being* male. Thus, the character I'd dream of creating was always a woman.

By the time I'd seriously begun to consider writing a novel featuring a private investigator of my own,I'd discovered several authors who were doing excellent characterization within the framework of the crime novel. Bill Pronzini (whom I did not know at the time, but to whom I'm now married) wrote about a detective who had no name, yet I knew intimate details about him that made him more real to me than many characters *with* names. Lillian O'Donnell had created New York City policewoman Norah Mulcahaney who, in addition to a lively professional life, found time to marry; her family life provided a rich backdrop to the cases she solved.

When I sat down to write my first (never published, and quite horrible) Sharon McCone novel, I was well aware that I could create a woman who would conform to the stereotype of the hard-bitten loner with the whiskey bottle in the desk drawer. Or I could make her a camera who observed the world around her without fully reacting or interacting. Or, at the far end of the spectrum, I could create a woman who would be a fully developed individual.

Sharon McCone, I decided, was to he as close to a real person as possible. Like real people she would age, grow, change; experience joy and sorrow, love and hatred—in short, the full range of human emotions. In addition, McCone was to live within the same framework most of us do, complete with family, friends, coworkers, and lovers; each of her cases would constitute one more major event in an ongoing biography. This choice also had a practical basis. In writing crime fiction, the author frequently asks the reader to suspend disbelief in situations that are not likely to occur in real life. Private investigators do not, as a rule, solve dozens of murder cases over the course of their careers. And what few criminals they do encounter do not tend to be as clever and intelligent as their fictional counterparts. To make the story convincing to the reader, the character and day-to-day details of her life had to be firmly grounded in reality.

The choice made, I realized I hadn't a clue as to how to go about creating such an individual. I had a name: Sharon, for my college roommate; McCone, for the late John McCone, former head of the CIA (a joke, since politically Sharon is as far from any CIA employee as one can get). I also had a location, San Francisco, my adopted home city. But as for the rest . . . ?

Should I make my character like me in background, lifestyle, appearance, and spirit? Certainly not! At the time I had no job, no recognizable skills, no prospects, a failing marriage, and was afraid of my own shadow. I longed to be three or four inches taller, to be fifteen to twenty pounds lighter, to be able to eat all the ice cream I wanted and never gain an ounce. And I was vehemently opposed to making Sharon's background similar to mine, lest I fall into the trap of undisciplined autobiographical writing.

I therefore began building McCone's character by giving her a background as different from mine as I could make it. She is a native Californian; I am not. She comes from a large blue-collar family; I do not. She put herself through the University of California at Berkeley by working as a security guard; I was supported by my parents during my six years at the University of Michigan. And Sharon has exotic Native American features and long black hair, is enviably tall and slender, and can eat whatever she likes without gaining weight. Since I don't possess such qualities, I wanted to spend time with a character who did.

At the time I was developing McCone, I was participating in an informal writers' workshop that met every week; fear of having nothing to read aloud at the sessions drove me daily to the typewriter. I chose to take the suggestion of the group leader (a published author) to work up a biographical sheet on McCone, in which I fine-tuned the other details of her life: names of parents and siblings; likes and dislikes; religious and political attitudes; talents and weaknesses; even the circumstances of her first sexual experience.

By the time I'd completed the biographical sheet, McCone finally emerged as real to me. Still, it was in a form that

was more like a questionnaire than a work of fiction. At this point I was forced to face the fact that the only way to develop a character fully is to write her. And write her, and write her. . . .

Anyone who claims that first manuscripts aren't simply learning exercises is either exceptionally gifted or completely deluded. My early efforts were stiff and wooden and—with the exception of McCone's narrative voice, which was the same from the very first—totally different from what eventually saw publication.

I was insecure as to how to go about constructing a mystery, and in spite of my resolve to let the events flow from character, I found the stories becoming very plot-driven. I manipulated secondary characters and their actions to fit the plot; kept elaborate charts showing what every person was doing at every moment during the story; wrote long accounts of the back story (the events that set the crime in motion). I wasted paper, time, and energy concocting cryptic clues, red herrings, and unnecessary complications. Even after my third novel manuscript was accepted for publication, I continued to fall back on stock scenes and situations: ongoing antagonism between private investigator and police; the standard body-finding scene; the obligatory talk about the case in the office of Sharon's boss.

Fortunately, through all of this, McCone came into her own as a person and also became my full partner in fictional crime. I take little credit for this; it simply happened. Writers constantly talk about how their characters "just take over," and when I hear myself doing the same, I feel vaguely embarrassed, but it *does* happen, and is vitally important to any long-running series.

My theory about this phenomenon is that knowing one's character intimately allows the writer to tap into her subconscious, which usually works far ahead of the conscious mind. The fictional character's actions and reactions often have little to do with the writer's original intention. In this area, McCone has served me well.

I first experienced her determination to be her own person while writing the second book in the series. *Ask the Cards a Question* (1982). In my previous efforts, Sharon had many analytical conversations about her cases with her boss, Hank Zahn, and they inevitably took place in his office at All Souls Legal Cooperative, the poverty law firm where she worked. A third of the way through *Cards*, it seemed time for one of these talks, so I had Sharon leave her office for Hank's. But contrary to my intentions, she detoured down the hall to the desk of the co-op's secretary, Ted, to ask him where Hank was, and in doing so, she—and I—took a look around the big Victorian that housed All Souls. What I saw was a goldmine in terms of places to set scenes and characters to play in them: There were rooms, lots of them; there were attorneys and paralegal workers and other support staff, some of whom lived there communally, and often had potlucks and parties and poker games. As in any situation where people live and work at close quarters, there was the opportunity for conflict and resolution.

Where Hank Zahn had once been the only partner who had an identity, I now began to flesh out others. A number of them became important in McCone's life. They began to demand more important roles, and soon I realized that they—as well as McCone—would determine the direction that the series as a whole would take.

The development of fully realized characters is essential to creating a strong series. Without them, the author is simply manipulating cardboard people aimed at a specific—and usually contrived—end. Eventually the writer will become bored with the artificiality of the story and lose all sense of identification with the characters. And if the writer is bored, imagine the poor reader!

Over the twenty years I've been writing the McCone series, I've made a number of choices and changes, and each of these came from within Sharon's character and her reactions and interactions with others. This involves a firm commitment on my part to remain flexible, willing to switch directions mid-stream. Initially, this was a rather frightening process, but the rewards have proved considerable.

Different facets of McCone's character have been revealed to me by her interactions with other characters. A violent confrontation with a man she considered the most evil person she'd ever encountered, and the choice she made in dealing with him, affirmed that she was unable to step over the line into pointless violence. Another confrontation, this time when the lives of people she cared about were at stake, demonstrated that she could take violent action when the circumstances justified it.

During the past four years, McCone has revealed feelings and attitudes that have dictated radical changes in the overall direction of the series—long before I considered making any. When the All Souls partners threatened to confine Sharon to a desk job (*Wolf in the Shadows*, 1993), I'd originally intended for them to work out some sort of compromise, coupled with expanding the scope of her responsibilities. At the end of the novel, I was still undecided as to the nature of that compromise. But at the beginning of the next novel in the series, *Till the Butchers Cut Him Down* (1994), McCone made the decision for me: She decided to leave the co-op and establish her own agency, while retaining offices in the house—thus permitting her to continue her association with people for whom she cared.

But only months after her new office furniture was delivered, McCone began to doubt the wisdom of her decision. As

I was writing a scene in *A Wild and Lonely Place* (1995), I found her saying, "No wonder I avoided having clients come to the office. . . . Actually, a lot of things about All Souls were beginning to pale for me." Her doubts mirrored my own, which I'd scarcely confronted until that point. She decided for me that the time had come to leave All Souls; time, in fact, for All Souls to become defunct. With roots in the 1970s, it was an outmoded institution; my attempts to bring it into the 1990s with its virtues intact had failed.

But in what direction to go? And where? Certainly not a stereotypical seedy office where McCone would keep a bottle in her desk drawer. And certainly not a suite in a high-rent building; she is too frugal for that.

The answer came to me while I was walking on the Embarcadero, San Francisco's waterfront boulevard, with a friend who was talking about some people she knew who had offices in a renovated pier. I looked around, spotted the San Francisco fireboat station, and noted a space between it and Pier 24 that was almost large enough for a fictional Pier 24Vi. The surrounding area was an exciting one, undergoing a renaissance; artists' lofts, lively clubs, trendy restaurants, and unusual sorts of enterprises abounded. And there was also San Francisco's rich maritime history, which offered many possibilities. Immediately, Sharon McCone made the decision to move her offices to Pier 24h.

But would I be forced to abandon Hank Zahn, his wife Anne-Marie Altman, Rae Kelleher, and Ted Smalley? Of course not. The co-op had paled for Anne-Marie several books before; it would now do the same for Hank, and they would decide to form their own law firm, then ask McCone to share a suite of offices with them. As for Rae and Ted, they would need jobs when All Souls went under, so Ted would come along as office manager, Rae as the first of what McCone hoped would be many operatives. Without delay, Sharon, Hank, and Anne-Marie signed a lease for space at Pier 24!4.

A long and intimate association with well-rounded characters can not only enrich a series, but also an author's life. Over the years, I've found myself moving closer to McCone in spirit. Where she was once the independent, strong, brave half of the partnership, I've now become more independent, strong, and brave myself.

It's strange but gratifying to know that my own creation has empowered me. That's what the series is all about: to entertain and inspire the reader; perhaps to make some readers think more seriously about an issue that's important to McCone and me; and to give escape and pleasure to those who buy our books.

40
THE GRAFT OF THE ESPIONAGE THRILLER

By Joseph Finder

When I was in my mid-twenties and struggling to write my first novel, *The Moscow Club*, I got to know another aspiring writer, a cynical and embittered (but very funny) man, and told him I was immersed in the research for a spy thriller I hadn't begun to write. He shook his head slowly and scowled. "That's a sign of desperation," he intoned ominously. "Research is an excuse for not writing."

This ex-friend has given up trying to write and is working at some job he despises, while I'm making a living writing novels, so I think there may be a moral here. That old dictum writers are always accosted by—"Write what you know"—is, in the espionage-thriller genre, at least, a fallacy.

Obviously, research is no substitute for good writing, good storytelling, or the ability to create flesh-and-blood characters. But even the masters of the spy novel plunge into research for the worlds they create. John le Carré (the pen name for David Cornwell) was for a short while a spy for the British secret service, but nevertheless, he assiduously researches his spy tales. In the extensive acknowledgements at the end of *The Night Manager*, he thanks numerous sources in the u.s. Drug Enforcement Agency and the u.s. Treasury, mercenary soldiers, antiques dealers, and the "arms dealers who opened their doors to me." The novel only *reads* effortlessly.

I suppose you can just make it up, but it will always show, if you do, and the spy thriller must always evoke an authentic, fully realized world. Readers want to believe that the author is an authority, an expert, an insider who's willing to let them in on a shattering secret or two.

But no one can be expert in everything. My first novel was about a CIA analyst who learns of an impending coup attempt in Moscow and

is drawn into the conspiracy. In the first draft, however, the hero, Charles Stone, was instead a ghostwriter for a legendary American statesman. Luckily, my agent persuaded me that no one wants to read about the exploits of a ghostwriter.

Transforming Charlie into a CIA officer took a lot of rethinking, but fortunately, I had sources: While a student at Yale, I'd been recruited by the CIA (but decided against it), and I had some friends in the intelligence community. They helped me make Charlie Stone a far more interesting, more appealing and believable character.

The best ideas, I believe, spring from real-life events, from reading newspapers and books, and from conducting interviews. Frederick Forsyth came up with the idea for his classic thriller. *The Day of the Jackal* (a fictional plot on the life of Charles de Gaulle), from his experience working as a Reuters correspondent in Paris in the early 1960s, when rumors kept circulating about assassination attempts on de Gaulle. Robert Ludlum was watching TV news in a Paris hotel when he happened to catch a report about an international terrorist named Carlos; this became the seed for one of his best novels, *The Bourne Identity.*

When I first began thinking about writing the novel that later became *The Moscow Club*, I was a graduate student at the Harvard Russian Research Center, studying the politics of the Soviet Union. I remember reading Forsyth's *The Devil's Alternative*, which concerns intrigue in the Kremlin. Why not try my hand at this? I thought. After Mikhail Gorbachev became head of the Soviet Union and began the slow-motion revolution that would eventually lead to the collapse of that empire, I began to hear bizarre rumors about attempts in Moscow to unseat Gorbachev. The rumors didn't seem so far-fetched to me. But when *The Moscow Club* came out at the beginning of 1991, I was chided for my overly active imagination. Then, in August of that year, the real thing happened: The KGB and the military banded together to try to overthrow the Gorbachev government—and suddenly, I was a prophet!

My second novel, however, was a significant departure from this political background. *Extraordinary Powers* concerns Ben Ellison, an attorney for a prestigious Boston law firm (and former clandestine operative for the CIA). He is lured into a top-secret government experiment and emerges with a limited ability to "hear" the thoughts of others. This sprang from a reference I'd come across in a study of the KGB to some highly secret programs in the U.S. and Soviet governments that attempted to locate people with telepathic ability to serve in various espionage undertakings. Whether or not one believes in ESP, the fact that such projects really do exist was irresistible to me. I sent *Extraordinary Powers* to a friend who does contract work for the CIA; he confided in me that he'd received a call from a highly placed person in a government agency who actually runs such a project and had used psychics during the Gulf War. He wanted to know whether I'd been the recipient of a leak.

With this seemingly fantastic premise at the center of my novel, it was crucially important that the world in which this plot takes place be a very real, very well-grounded one. Because I wanted the telepathy project to hew as closely to reality as possible, I spent a great deal of time talking to patent lawyers, helicopter pilots, gold experts, and even neurologists. I was relieved to get letters from a world-famous neurobiologist and from the editor of *The New England Journal of Medicine* saying that they were persuaded that such an experiment was within the realm of possibility.

In one crucial scene in *The Moscow Club,* Charlie had to smuggle a gun through airport security, but I had no idea how this might actually work, so I tracked a knowledgeable gun dealer, and after I'd convinced him I was a writer, not a criminal, he became intrigued by the scenario and agreed to help. It turned out that this fellow had a friend who used to be in the Secret Service and had actually taken a Glock pistol and got it past the metal detectors and X-ray machines in security at Washington's National Airport and onto a plane to Boston. He then showed me exactly how he'd done it, so I could write about it accurately. (I left out a few key details to foil any potential hijacker.)

Can readers tell when a scene or a detail is authentic? I believe so. I'm convinced that painstaking research can yield a texture, an atmosphere of authenticity, that average readers can feel and smell. (There will always be a few experts waiting to pounce. In *Extraordinary Powers,* I mistakenly described a Glock 19 as having a safety, and I continue to get angry letters about it.)

The longer I write, it seems, the more research I do. For my forthcoming novel. *Prince of Darkness,* whose hero is a female FBI counter-terrorism specialist, I managed to wangle official cooperation from the FBI, and I spent a lot of time talking to several FBI Special Agents. I also interviewed past and present terrorism experts for the CIA, asking them such questions as, would they really be able to catch a skilled professional terrorist—as well as some seemingly trivial ones.

Since the other main character in *Prince of Darkness* is a professional terrorist-for-hire, I thought it was important to talk to someone who's actually been a terrorist. This was not easy. In fact, it took me months to locate an ex-terrorist (through a friend of a friend) who was willing to talk. But it was worth the time and effort: My fictional terrorist is now, I think, far more credible than he'd have been if I'd simply invented him.

I've done interviews with a convicted forger for details on how to falsify a U.S. passport; with a bomb disposal expert about how to construct bombs; with an expert in satellite surveillance to help me describe authentically how the U.S. government is able to listen in on telephone conversations. I've often called upon the expertise of police homicide detectives, retired FBI agents, helicopter pilots, pathologists, even experts in embalming (or "applied arts," as they are called).

Since an important character in *Prince of Darkness* is a high-priced call girl, I spent a lot of time interviewing prostitutes, expensive call girls, and madams. As a result of this groundwork, I think this particular character is more sympathetic, more believable, than I'd have drawn her otherwise.

Because international settings are often integral parts of spy novels, I strongly believe that travel—really being there in Paris, say, or Rome, or wherever—not only can help you create plausible settings, make them look and smell and feel real, but can suggest scenes and ideas that would otherwise never occur to you. But not everyone can afford to travel (or likes to; ironically, Robert Ludlum, whose plots traverse the globe, abhors traveling). No doubt you can get by tolerably well consulting a good guidebook or two.

Gathering research material is a strange obsession, but it's by far the best part of writing thrillers. I will admit, however, that this passion can go too far. In Rome, I was pickpocketed while standing in a *gelato* shop. When I realized that my passport and all my cash and travelers checks were gone, I panicked. I searched for the perpetrator and came upon a man who looked somewhat shifty. I approached him and pleaded, in my pathetic Italian, *"Per J'avore, signore! Per favore!* My passport! *Per piacere!"* When the man responded by unzipping his travel bag to prove he didn't have my belongings, that he was innocent, I knew I'd found my man. I told him quietly: "Look, I'm on my honeymoon. If you give me back my passport and my money, I promise I won't turn you in."

He looked around and furtively put my passport and wallet back in my bag.

At this point any sane tourist would flee, but, I went on, "One more thing. If you'll agree to be interviewed, I won't call the police."

He looked at me as if I were out of my mind. "I'm quite serious," I said. "Let me buy you an espresso."

He sat down at a table with me as I explained that I was doing research for a novel partly set in Rome. Flattered that a writer would take an interest in his life, he began to tell me all about how he got into this line of work, about his childhood in Palermo spent snatching purses, about how he travels around Europe frequenting international gatherings of the rich and famous, how he lives in hotels and is often lonely. He explained how he spots an easy mark, how he fences passports, which travelers checks he has no interest in. He demonstrated how he picks pockets and handbags, and taught me how to make sure it never happened to me again.

Much of the information I gleaned from this pickpocket later turned up in the Italy sequence in *Extraordinary Powers.*

I'm certainly not suggesting that a committed espionage novelist must go out of his way to get his pockets picked in Rome, or consort with convicted forgers, assassins, or terrorists. But the longer I write espionage fiction, the more strongly I'm convinced that if you're going to write about unusual people and circumstances in a compelling and plausible way, there's really no substitute for firsthand experience.

41
MISTAKES TO AVOID IN WRITING MYSTERIES

By Eleanor Hyde

No doubt you've heard some editor publicly proclaim that he or she is looking for the good book, that true talent will out, and they'll spot it immediately. I'm sure they believe this. But in their scramble to compete out there in the marketplace, they just might miss it. Most of us know of some very talented writer (you?) whose book was overlooked while the mediocre or less was published. So what happened?

In a confidential mood, an editor once told me that he looked for reasons to turn a book down, and the sooner he found something wrong, the better. This wasn't a person who enjoyed hurting others' feelings; this was merely someone who had too many manuscripts to read and too little time in which to read them. Maybe the big book was in the pile and maybe he missed it. Possibly, a lot of editors do: Maybe in their hurry to get through that pile of manuscripts and on to the next one, the big book was bypassed because of some slip up, some inaccuracy that made the editor think the book wasn't worth wasting precious time on.

Once a manuscript is out of your hands there's nothing to be done. The book you slaved over, rewrote, cut, expanded, cut again, and re-re-rewrote; the book you got up at five in the morning to work on before the kids woke up or before you left for work; the book for which you sacrificed your weekends and vacation time; the book you neglected your nearest and dearest for is now there in some editor's office, an editor who doesn't care that the book practically caused a nervous breakdown or a divorce. Confronting that editor is a stack of floor-to-ceiling manuscripts that have to be read. From then on, what happens to your book is, alas, as much matter of luck and timing as talent. But there are some crucial things you can do before you submit your manuscript to guarantee it gets the best possible chance.

For three years I chaired the Mentor Program[2] for the New York region of the Mystery Writers of America, a program in which published writers (mentors) critiqued fifty manuscript pages submitted by beginners and/or unpublished writers. In reading the mentor's critiques, I saw a pattern emerge—the same errors cropping up over and over again. Following are the mistakes cited most often by the mentors—after first finding something good in the manuscript to sugar coat the pill.

Inaccuracies: The winner, or loser, hands down. In murder mysteries, which run the gamut from cozies to hard-boiled police procédurals, suspending disbelief is important, since there's a lot of disbelief to suspend. Although murders occur all too often in real life, they're still, fortunately, something we hear or read about, not something we witness firsthand.

Inaccuracies varied from the obvious to the oblivious. In the obvious, the writer lost track of some minor detail—he or she changed a character's name or age but neglected to make the changes throughout. Such inconsistencies can be confusing to the editor, who is, don't forget, reading a lot of manuscripts at once and can't waste time figuring things out. "Sloppy," the editor thinks, and goes on to the next one.

The manuscript might contain oblivious mistakes cited so often by the mentors—facts that the writer failed to check out. Maybe he or she didn't know the subject well enough to know they'd committed a blooper, or maybe the writer didn't bother looking something up. Such inaccuracy occurred when one writer had a scene set in Manhattan with a car going east on 73rd Street, a one-way street on which cars can go only west—a mistake an editor living in Manhattan would be likely to notice. I'm sure you can cite examples of some well-known writer committing a similar glaring error in a book you read recently, but well-known writers don't generally have to worry about rejection slips!

One-dimensional characters. Mentor comments: "You never physi-cally described Matt. All of your characters are sketched well, but 'sketched' is the operative word."

Although inaccuracies were cited most often, failure to portray a well-rounded protagonist is far more serious. This resulted when the characters strayed out of character, lost their "voice." In one manuscript, a paper boy poetically referred to a star-crammed sky and a moon perched on the tip of a church spire. "Nice image," the mentor wrote, "but not a paper boy's." It's certainly not how Mark Twain would have done it.

Some writers chose protagonists fields unfamiliar to them (for example, a newspaper journalist who had no deadlines and failed to report a murder she witnessed). It's easier and generally more effective to write about someone and something you know. But even when your main character is someone whose voice, virtues, failings, longings, quirks, and favorite food are totally unfamiliar, you can still go wrong if you commit the folly cited below by any number of mentors:

Introducing too many characters at once. When this happens, the protagonist is slighted, lost in the shuffle. Unless you're a household name, no editor is going to bother sorting people out. Often, the mentor has to ask who the main character was supposed to be. Don't overload your beginning with too many people too soon. Ask yourself, too, how important each character is to the plot. You might be surprised how many you can cut out.

Shifting viewpoint confusion. Mentor's comments: "The mixing of viewpoints in the same chapter was confusing."

"The changing of tenses and shifting of viewpoints make the narrative difficult to follow."

"Your problem is abruptly changing POV, sometimes in mid-sentence. You have to be good to get away with this."

For "good," read experienced. Still, switching viewpoints is something many accomplished writers avoid. All too often beginning writers rush in where experienced writers fear to tread, mainly because they don't like what they're letting themselves in for. The more difficult the technique, the more likely an inexperienced writer will be to use it. It's O.K. to experiment. Try all the techniques. Play at work. Enjoy it. Learn from it. Show it to your friends and family. But don't show it to your editor. Isaac Singer once observed that a writer's best friend was his wastebasket.

Telling instead of showing. Writer: "He had brushed disaster several times." Mentor: "How? In some of his earlier, high profile cases? About which we heard nothing?"

"Show, don't tell" is a cliché that every writer knows but sometimes ignores, including some of the mentors who cited this infraction of the rules; they just don't ignore it as often. Be concrete. Although writers will take their time to search for the right verb, they don't always bother to search for the right example, lapsing into something vague, or reaching for the nearest convenient cliché. There were times when the beginning writer went one better, or rather, one worse, and not only didn't show, but also scarcely told, as in the following:

Sidestepping the big scene. The big scene, the murder, is the pivotal point of the mystery, but, according to a number of mentors, got short shrift from certain writers, one of whom dismissed the murder in a brief paragraph but devoted a page to finding a cat in a closet.

Certainly, confronting the dramatic scene can be intimidating. The only writers I know who can plow through a dramatic scene without fear and trembling, or even a qualm, are those who have never met a cliché they didn't like. But at least they deal with the murder scene, recognize its importance. Unfortunately, many beginning writers distance themselves, their protagonist, and, consequently, the reader, from the scene by sidling up to it, taking a quick peek, and scurrying off. If the protagonist has just encountered a dead body, it comes almost as an afterthought so that there is no unique, personal reaction. Or maybe the writer dreams up some arty imagery or throws in a few clever, nightmarish details, then hurries back to safe ground to deal with a something not so emotionally challenging, something the protagonist, and the writer, can handle. Bringing off the big scene ranks up there with a great plot and good characterization.

Length of description. When description was used, it was often abused. Either it was too sketchy or too long, interfering with the action. One mentor remarked: "You give the reader information concerning the local lore, Indian names, families' politics, etc., but your protagonist is lost in all the characters. After three chapters and 9,000 words, would a casual reader—or more important, an editor—say, "Phis is a great set up' or 'This book is too talky?' My gut feeling is that the response would be the latter." Another mentor put it more succinctly: "Your story slows down here—too much description. Cut."

Mistakes in dialogue. Mentor comment: "Your characters sound too much alike." Keep your dialogue in character. A school's dropout won't sound like a doctor of philosophy. Many writers give their characters distinct speech patterns, a "verbal tic," perhaps, such as an overuse of a certain word or phrase so that the reader knows immediately who is speaking. Avoid using crutch words, a dead giveaway that the writer is a beginner. Use "he said" or "she said," not "she hissed" or "he thundered." If the dialogue is apt, no explanation is needed. Another frequent fault found by mentors was dialogue crammed with so much information, it sounded unnatural. Read the dialogue out loud to see if it sounds "right." Also, in depicting a character with a distinct dialect, don't overdo it. Remember that suggestion is all.

Too many digressions. Another oft-cited mistake. A mainstream novelist might digress freely, but pace is all-important in mysteries. Stick to the subject.

Beginning too early. An error many mentors found in manuscripts. A mystery should begin near the point of attack, either when the murder occurs, or when someone ventures upon the scene of the crime. Often, this didn't happen until the third chapter. Mentors advised changing chapters three to chapter one and weaving in the previous information. Oddly enough, in no instance was the writer told to begin the book earlier.

Grammatical lapses. If the writer is in a character's head, the grammar will be loose, informal, and less than perfect, the sentence incomplete.

And, in depicting a character with little schooling, it's O.K. to break the rules of grammar. However, all too many manuscripts contained grammatical errors in straight narrative, indicating that the writer was either careless or needed a refresher course in composition.

Pronoun confusion. Although it may have been clear in some writers' minds who was doing what, the mentor didn't have a clue. It's better to risk repeating a character's name too often than to confuse the reader.

Too many modifiers. Again, an oft cited criticism. One mentor put it succinctly: "When it comes to adverbs and adjectives, less is more." Go for the active verbs.

Sloppy copy. This occurred far too often: type too light to read, creative spelling, single spacing. Don't give the editor an excuse to push your manuscript aside after all the work you've put into it.

Often, the above mistakes occur because the writer is too familiar with the material. A good idea is to have someone else read your manuscript before sending it out, preferably someone who reads a lot of mysteries.

42
IDEAS IN SCIENCE FICTION

By Poul Anderson

"Where do you get your ideas?"

Probably every sort of writer hears this question once in a while, but science fiction writers surely more than most. In the past it often took the form, "Where do you get those crazy ideas?" but since then the field has become quite widely accepted, even respectable. Discoveries in science and advances in technology have given dazzling proof that science fiction's visions are not absurd. Meanwhile, such popular shows as "Star Trek" and *Star Wars* have made many of those concepts—space travel, time travel, alien intelligences, artificial intelligences, genetic engineering, and much more—common currency.

Now, nobody claims that science fiction predicts the future or explores the universe. No "future history" has matched the actual course of events. We writers failed to anticipate a heap of developments, all the way from the Internet and its revolutionary impact, to the use of galaxies as gravitational lenses. We seized on them only as they came to pass. The few times a story has come near the mark, it's been on the shotgun principle: Put out enough different notions, and you have a chance of making an occasional hit. Moreover, a number of our standard motifs—most obviously time travel and travel faster than light—may well prove to be forever impossible.

But then, we aren't in the business of prophecy; we're storytellers. We look at the cosmos around us, wonder what this or that *might* imply, and express our thoughts in fictional, human terms.

The question "Where do you get your ideas?" is legitimate. Science fiction is preeminently a literature of ideas. The answer is: the world. Anything whatsoever may spark a story—a personal experience, something that happened to someone else, something read or seen or heard or watched on a screen, a news item, a mathematical calculation, a dream, a chance remark—anything. What counts is what you do with it. This tie to reality, however remote and unlikely it may become, is perhaps what distinguishes science fiction from fantasy. (Not that fantasy doesn't include many fine works, but it isn't what I shall be discussing.)

Admittedly, there's a lot of bad science fiction around, most conspicuously in the movies and on television, but also abundant on the newsstands and in bookstores. Characters are cardboard; plots are cookie-cutter; the underlying ideas, if any, are either ridiculous or old and worn-out, with no attempt made at the touch of originality that would freshen them a bit. We won't say more about this. If you want to write science fiction, you want it to be good, don't you?

You'll find yourself in excellent company. A significant amount of what appears in print meets high literary as well as intellectual standards while being a pleasure to read. The sheer volume of published science fiction nowadays is such that some of the good science fiction gets overlooked, lost in the pile of trash. However, some does deservedly well. Editors remain eager to discover strong new voices. In addition, although novels dominate, the science fiction (and mystery) magazines and anthologies are almost the only surviving homes for short stories. A budding writer would do well to start with them, gaining experience and reputation before making the investment of time and effort that a book requires.

First, though, you had better be reasonably familiar with the field and enjoy it. Life's too short to struggle with stuff that bores you. Also, if you don't know what's been done, you're too apt to waste your energy reinventing the wheel. Thus, "attack from outer space" is an ancient theme. Set forth baldly, it will only draw yawns. Yet it can still succeed, if the author presents unique, thought-provoking aspects. What are the aliens like? You can design interesting, hitherto unknown beings. Why are they here? After all, a technology capable of crossing interstellar space should be able to produce everything its people want at home. How do humans react? It won't be uniformly. For instance, throughout history on Earth, again and again a local faction has allied itself with foreign invaders, hoping they will crush its hated neighbors.

In my opinion, two streams run through science fiction. The first truces back to Jules Verne. It is "the idea as hero." His tales are mainly concerned with the concept—a submarine, a journey to the center of **the** planet, and so on. The second derives from H.G. Wells. His own ideas were brilliant, but he didn't care how implausible they might be, an invisible man or a time machine or whatever. He concentrated on the characters, their emotions and interactions.

Today, we usually speak of these two streams as "hard" and "soft" science fiction. Needless to say, they were never completely separate. Verne's characters are lively, sometimes memorable. When he chose to, Wells could write a story focused on a future development: for example, "The Land Ironclads," which foresaw the military tank. Ideally, the streams unify in a tale that meets both scientific and conventional literary standards. Though this is not exactly common,

our best writers have achieved it oftener than one might think.

Indeed, not just the quantity but the diversity of current science fiction is amazing. You can find everything from the wonderfully conceived and carefully executed planets of Hal Clement to the far-flung romances of Jack Vance, from the gritty sociology of Frederick Pohl through the headlong adventure of S.M. Stirling, to the humor and sensitivity of Gordon R. Dickson—all of them, and many more, first-class reading. This is another reason for writers to know what their colleagues have been doing. It inspires.

In this short piece I can't take up the purely literary side. I'm not sure that any "how to" about it can be taught, except for advising that you experience widely, meditate on that experience, learn something about everything, and read the great works of world literature. But perhaps I can offer a few suggestions about sources of ideas and what can be accomplished by taking thought.

We begin with science and technology. You want to keep up with these fields anyway. In this day and age, I don't see how any person can be called educated who doesn't. Besides, they're boundlessly rich fountainheads of exciting story possibilities. You don't need a professional degree. Yes, Gregory Benford is a physicist who as a sideline writes novels of high literary quality; but Greg Bear is a layman whose work, equally well-written, also goes believably to the frontiers of our knowledge and beyond. We have no dearth of fascinating, authoritative books and periodicals that report from these frontiers. Prowl the bookstores and libraries; consider joining the Library of Science book club. Among magazines, I'll list *Science News, Discover, Scientific American,* and the British *New Scientist.* I subscribe to several others, too, but these four, especially the first, have the most general coverage that I know of.

All fiction deals with people. Even the rare story that has no humans in it is necessarily told from a human viewpoint. I've mentioned personal experience and the masterworks of the world as means of gaining a deeper understanding. We acquire knowledge of a more structured kind from history, anthropology, psychology, and other studies of our species. Among the benefits, we find that our twentieth-century Western civilization is not the only expression of human variousness, and probably won't be the final one. What we learn we can transmute into exotic story situations.

We can't do this mechanically. At least, attempts to generate a setting by simply changing names have had pretty dismal results. The writer's imagination must come into play, along with hard thought.

As an example of how different sources flow together, doubtless not the best but closely known to me, let me bring in my novel *The People of the Wind.* For a long time I'd wanted to write a story about a planet colonized jointly by humans and a nonhuman race. Traveling in France, I happened on the Alsatian city of Belfort. Although ethnically German, the Alsatians are fiercely patriotic French citizens. The heroic resistance of Belfort during the Franco-Prussian War caused it to be spared the annexation to Germany that the rest of the province suffered from 1871 to 1918. Ah-ha! Subjecting my planet to this kind of stress should dramatically highlight its mixed society.

In my last conversation with the late John Campbell, editor of *Analog* magazine, he tossed off the idea that post-mammalian evolution may produce a kind of biological supercharger, powered by the animal's motion and conferring tremendous cursive ability. I saw at once that this would also enable a man-sized creature with a man-sized brain to fly on a planet similar to Earth. Such a species would be satisfyingly alien to ours, but communication and cooperation were not ruled out.

These elements were a bare beginning. The planet, while habitable, would not be a copy of Earth. It would have its own characteristics and its own native life. In addition, human and nonhuman colonists would introduce plants and animals from their home worlds. Thus we'd get a mixed ecology, too. All of this needed working out in detail. Likewise did the aliens. Their anatomy had to be functional. The power of Might would basically influence their psyches. So would its energy demands; they'd be obligate carnivores, highly territorial. What social arrangements could they make? What would their languages sound like? What religions might they have? How would they and the humans influence each other? And the humans themselves wouldn't be the same as us today, when the story was set centuries in the future.

A great deal of effort went into such questions before any actual writing started, but I've seldom had more fun, and I hope the end product was interesting and vivid.

Be prepared for arguments. Science fiction readers are bright, well-informed, and good-naturedly scrappy. Thus, Larry Niven's *Ringworld* is a marvelously complete visualization of a splendid concept, a world in the form of a gigantic ring around its sun and the myriad cultures that could arise on so vast an area. It deserved the sales and awards it won. Nevertheless, several persons pointed out that he'd gotten the rotation of the Earth backward, others that the structure would be gravitationally unstable. He corrected the first mistake in a second edition. To explain how Ringworld was kept in orbit, he wrote a sequel, which naturally became more of a tour and which also was a publishing success. I too have received valuable critiques, information, and suggestions from readers—almost as much as from the conversations with my wife. Contacts like these are a major reward of writing science fiction.

Note well, Niven didn't wish tedious lectures on us. He never does. People and places come to life in the course of story events. Often a hint is enough. Robert Heinlein was an absolute master of this technique. Such casual-looking phrases as "The door dilated" or "A police car was balanced on the rooftop" throw us straight into the future. He could do this because he had very fully developed his background. He could pick and choose what items to show.

In a way, we science fiction writers are professional daydreamers. We give our readers what we have imagined. But that imagining should spring from reality, which is infinitely varied and surprising; and beneath the color, suspense, stylistic experimentation, and all else, it should make sense.

43
CREATING SUSPENSE

By Sarah Lovett

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who was in the business of pondering life's big questions, is often quoted, "A man's character is his fate." While you may disagree with Heraclitus when it comes to life, in fiction, plot begins with character. Desperate characters. With impossible goals. Facing forces of antagonism. In the course of writing three novels, my understanding of plot and character has evolved until both elements are inseparably intertwined in the process of creating a story.

Desperate characters

Plot begins with hungry, vulnerable characters who are desperately driven. Your protagonist steps out of the ordinary world and into the extraordinary world when she or he moves into action. Clarisse Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* is a rookie F.B.I, agent put to the test on a serial murder investigation; Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* strives to clear her family name and to overcome her own prejudice in order to find true love. Both of these literary heroines are unique and fully developed characters, and each *actively* makes choices, in motion, working toward a goal.

1 spend months developing my characters and their fictional world. I make stacks of notes and fill in details of their lives, writing down questions and answers: Where were they born? What was their childhood like? Are they from lower-, middle-, or upper-class backgrounds? Are their parents alive or dead? Do they have siblings? Do they believe in God, country, and apple pie? What do they dream about? What is their work? What is their passion? Just when I think I know a character, I ask more questions.

I like to focus on my protagonist first because the *who* will affect the *what.* For example, in *Dangerous Attachments* and *Acquired Motives,* my series protagonist Sylvia Strange is a forensic psychologist who is haunted by issues of family. She needs to find out what happened to her father who abandoned her and her mother years earlier. She is estranged from her mother; she is afraid of love and commitment. Because of that, I know that Sylvia's adventures will in some way concern questions of family pathology, which also happens to be a classic motif for the crime genre. My protagonist's desperate need to know the truth leads her toward her main story goal.

Impossible, valuable goals

A worthy protagonist must be driven to reach a crucial and *almost* impossible goal. If the reader knows absolutely that the hero will succeed, ho hum. But a story becomes instantly suspenseful if the protagonist might not reach her goal. In *The Silence of the Lambs* Thomas Harris created a young and untested heroine in Clarisse Starling, and it will take incredible strength of character for her to save the killer's next victim. Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett is so smart and so smug she almost fails to recognize her own prejudice, thereby missing the opportunity to achieve real love.

Goals may be noble: the search for the truth or the protection of the innocent. Or, at first glance, they may be foolish and superficial: the quest for money or treasure. But if you want the reader to root for the protagonist, monetary gain must finally be used for good, for redemption, for a socially approved purpose: to save a life, or to protect the innocent, for instance. Remember, impossible, *valuable* goals.

As soon as I know where my protagonist is headed—into a secret diamond mine to recover a lost treasure, into the killer's lair to save a loved one, into a murky psyche to unravel a mystery—then I can start to imagine the mind-sets, people, and circumstances that will stand in my hero's way. These are the story's forces of antagonism, and they play a crucial role in plot and character development.

Forces of antagonism

Internal, human, and/or environmental antagonists must also be actively driven, or they must provide a powerful barrier. If the protagonist and the antagonist are worthy opponents, the story instantly gains suspenseeither force could win. These antagonistic forces will provide the ultimate test for the protagonist, and they will also tell the reader what kind of human being the protagonist truly is. In fiction—and in life—a person's accomplishments are measured against the obstacles they overcome.

Clarisse Starling is up against a deadly serial killer. She's a woman in a man's world, and she must make herself vulnerable to another dangerous killer—Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lecter—in order to reach her goal. It is Hannibal who demands to know her deepest secrets, her vulnerabilities, before he will offer clues to the killer's identity. In *The Silence of the Lambs,* Starling faces both psychic and external dangers. When the rookie FBI agent reveals herself to Hannibal,

she reveals herself to the reader. In both action and thought, Starling is a hero worth rooting for.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the forces opposing Elizabeth Bennett are those of an entire social structure—rigid and restrictive—in which women are not allowed to inherit property, and people do not marry outside their social class.

A protagonist's vulnerabilities, her weak points, should be exploited to gain reader empathy. It sounds calculated, and it is, but it works. If I have a heroine who is afraid of heights, I'll make sure she has to climb Mount Everest or swing from the Eiffel Tower in order to reach her goal. That goes double for psychological vulnerability. As a child. Sylvia Strange lost her father; as an adult, she suffers the death of a mentor and father-figure. In *Dangerous Attachments,* is she seeing the picture clearly when a prison inmate and his politically powerful father are both implicated in a family murder? Or is she prejudiced by her personal history?

Now that I have some idea of my important characters, their world, their ultimate goal and therefore, their conflicts, I need to set up a basic framework for the story.

Simple structure

A story needs a basic shape—a scaffold—the simpler the better. Divide your story into *acts*—a beginning (Act I), a middle (Act II), and an end (Act III).

Act I, the story's beginning, sets up driven characters and their valuable and almost-impossible goals. The set-up raises questions: Who is good? Who is bad? What are the goals of the protagonist and the antagonist? What drives them? Who will reach the goal first? And most important, the set-up asks the central question of the story: Will Sylvia Strange discover the killer's identity in time to prevent another death? In a highly structured class-conscious society, will Elizabeth Bennett's wit and intelligence win her true love? When these questions beg answers, they keep us in suspense.

The middle of the story. Act II, is a series of escalating conflicts between opposing forces. This section develops the story, raising the stakes. It often contains an important crisis where the protagonist's ability to reach her goal is called into deeper question.

Act III, the end of the story, is the climax, the pay-off, the big bang before the story's central question is finally resolved, before the reader knows who will ultimately win. This is where protagonist and antagonist face each other in a fight to the death—or at least to metaphorical death—where only one will be victorious.

This basic structure—these bones—should free the writer so the shape of the story doesn't get overwhelmed or lost after many drafts. Sometimes it's called the story map. Once I have a good sense of the story's basic overall structure, I can begin to break acts into chapters, chapters into scenes. This structuring tells me where to put the twists and turns that keep readers interested—and keep the story spinning.

Spin

This is what should happen to the story in a major way at the end of each act: An action should occur that sends the story into a new and surprising direction. Spin points are those moments in life when the world tilts on its axis, when what the protagonist thought she *knew* was reality is probably not reality at all.

Clarisse Starling discovers a human head preserved in a jar. This occurs at the end of Act I, spinning the story into Act II. She wonders who the man was, and who killed him—Buffalo Bill or Hannibal Lecter? This discovery spins her back to Lecter and cements their working "partnership."

At the end of Act II, Elizabeth Bennett faces disgrace as a result of her sister's illicit affair with a Colonel Wickham and the loss of contact with Mr. Darcy, the man she has grown to love deeply. In both these cases, the world has shifted, and what seemed clear before is now seen in new light.

Subplots, colliding and otherwise

Fiction, like life, has more than one strand of action occurring at one time. A good, strong subplot colliding with the main plot changes its course in the process. A subplot can also add tone and color to the story, allowing for love, identity, personal history, and the reinforcement of the story's motif. Sometimes, subplot seems to be where the unconscious mind of the story lives, while main plot is the domain of the active conscious mind. A subplot has a beginning, middle, and end, just like the main plot. It allows for a change of pace and tonal variety.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the story of one Mr. Wickham and his wooing of and ultimate marriage to Elizabeth Bennett's sister Lydia is an example of a subplot that collides directly with the main plot. The scandal of this affair is a crucial obstacle between the heroine and the man she loves, an obstacle that tests the quality of true love.

In my novels, because I use a cast of continuing characters who inhabit the world of my protagonist, Dr. Sylvia Strange, I often use a subplot to develop secondary characters. In this way, I can also expand on thematic material and carry forward the story of Sylvia's missing father from book to book. I've also created a love interest for Sylvia, as well as

a close friendship with a female penitentiary investigator.

A crisis

Every story needs a crisis, the moment at which the heroine should die or the moment at which it looks as if she will fail to achieve her goal. Somehow she survives physically, but psychologically this may be a very negative time. This is her darkest moment before the push to the final climax. Classically, this confrontation occurs midway in the story, somewhere in the second half of Act II, ending with a spin.

The Act II crisis in *The Silence of the Lambs* is a variation from the norm because the action does not center around protagonist Starling. Instead, the crisis is Hannibal Lecter's gory escape from the authorities. Although Starling is not featured in this dramatic set-piece, Lecter has left her with a gift—a clue that will lead her to Buffalo Bill in Act III.

A final death-defying climax

This is the most dangerous face-off between antagonist and protagonist. It is often a final play-out of the Act II crisis. Perhaps the heroine met the villain in the crisis, failed to defeat the villain, and faces her opponent once more in this climactic moment. This is what the entire story has been building toward.

At the climax of *Dangerous Attachments*, Sylvia Strange faces a psychotic killer who has kidnapped a young and fatherless child. She is willing to fight to the death to save the boy. Elizabeth Bennett stands up to prevailing social values personified by the imperious Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Clarisse Starling is hunted by Buffalo Bill. These climatic pay-offs have been promised from the very beginning of each story.

Until I know the story's beginning and its ending, I can't truly immerse myself in the writing process. I have to have a very good idea where my story is headed, and where my characters will end up (although events do shift as I write). I know some writers who have to write from beginning to end before they know their ending. Then they go back and rework the story. Although everyone's process is unique, it's smart to spend weeks, even months, figuring out an exciting climax before you begin the actual chapter-by-chapter or scene-by-scene writing process.

These are some basics for creating suspense with your characters and your plot. The two elements go hand in hand, character driving the story and characters affected by events in the story. It's a constant tug-of-war, an interaction that can be used to maintain suspense and pacing and to surprise the reader.

44
TWILIGHT FOR HIGH NOON: TODAY'S WESTERN

By Loren D. Estleman

Pardon me while I indulge in some self-congratulation: I was right. In 1981, when TV sitcoms and big-screen space operas had all but crowded out the traditional western, and Louis L'Amour's career was drawing to a close with Tom Clancy's ascendant, I went out on a limb in an article for *The Writer* Magazine and predicted the triumphant return of frontier fiction.

Only four years later, Larry McMurtry's monumental tale of a cattle drive, *Lonesome Dove,* swept to the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list and captured the Pulitzer Prize. The subsequent TV adaptation gunned down the ratings competition, saved the endangered television miniseries from extinction, and spawned three successful sequels and a regular series. In the meantime. *Dances with Wolves,* Kevin Costner's epic motion picture based on Michael Blake's acclaimed novel about a white man living with Indians, recovered its investment ten times over and took seven Academy Awards. Next in the chute was Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven,* a grittily realistic movie about an Old West assassin, and the big winner at the Academy Awards in 1993.

The effect on Hollywood was as sudden and startling as the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Immediately, every major studio gave the green light to western productions that had been languishing in its story department for years. By the middle of the 1990s, more westerns were opening in the nation's theaters than at any time since the 1950s.

The pundits who had smugly announced the permanent closing of the frontier were stumped for an explanation. Writers of westerns were not.

What *Lonesome Dove, Dances with Wolves,* and *Unforgiven* have in common that set them apart from the long stream of *High Noon* imita-tions of decades past was a regard for authentic history. The flawed, emotionally repressed cattlemen of *Lonesome Dove* had as little in common with the heroic cowboys of 1946's *Red River* as Kevin Cost-ner's flesh-and-blood Sioux had with the cardboard savages of the old B western; and there was certainly little of John Wayne's swagger or Gary Cooper's stoic self-sacrifice in Clint Eastwood's gunfighter, a drunken, whoring killer. They presented raw, unflinching portraits of imperfect humanity that audiences the world over recognized as genuine.

Not every entry in this spate of big-screen westerns was successful. Those that failed were dismal attempts to revive the old mythology of fast-draw contests and heroic loners with no visible means of support, dedicating their lives to the eradication of evil. Time was when these stereotypes were fresh and popular. But an increasingly sophisticated public, made cynical by real-life assassinations and corruption in high places, demands realistic characters in plausible situations.

TV documentaries such as Ken Burns's *The West,* and exhaustive revisionist histories such as Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,* Paula Mitchell Marks's *And Die in the West,* and Evan S. Connell's *Son of the Morning Star,* have all reached wide audiences who can no longer be expected to embrace tall tales directed at readers who never ventured west of Chicago. Responding to a growing appetite for historical accuracy, a new breed of western writer is mining primary resources for people and facts that require no dramatization to attract reader interest.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of such raw material. The historical James Butler Hickok and Martha Jane Cannary were far more complex and interesting than the Wild Bill and Calamity Jane of fiction, and the thousands of less noted participants in the Westward Expansion all loom larger than life in our pampered time. Consider the haunted, burned-out expressions on the faces of those long-dead prairie wives photographed in front of their mean soddies. Yes, there were women out West; and theirs is but one of the many hundreds of tales that have yet to be told.

The traditional western is dying out, along with the readership that made it popular. Today's publishers have jettisoned the very word "western," substituting the labels "frontier fiction" and "American historical." Books herded into these categories are immediately distinguishable from their predecessors, first, by their length—100,000 words plus, as opposed to the 60,000-word horse operas of old—second, by their covers, which feature great sweeps of land and ethnically diverse casts instead of WASPish gunslingers facing off on a dusty street— third, by their reviews. *Publishers Weekly, The New York Times,* and the *Bloomsbury Review* take serious notice of these books as often now as they ignored the work of Luke Short and Ernest Haycox in the past. Today's western writers demonstrate a deeper understanding of the role of the American West in the shaping of a nation, and consequently of that nation's place in the history of the world.

As a writer, I welcome the larger canvas. In the past, I often felt constrained by the need to tell a grand story in a narrow space, and once ran afoul of an editor at Doubleday when an early entry in my Page Murdock series ran more

than 300 pages in manuscript. Compare that with the freedom I felt to include this passage in Murdock's adventure, *City of Widows* (Forge, 1994):

> Desert heat doesn't follow any of the standard rules. You'd expect it to be worst when the sun is straight up, but a hat will protect you from it then. When the only shade for miles is on the wrong side of the shrubbery you're using for cover, there is no hiding from that afternoon slant. I turned up my collar and unfastened my cuffs and pulled them down over the backs of my hands, but I could feel my skin turning red and shrinking under the fabric. Pinheads of sweat marched along the edge of my leather hatband and tracked down into my eyes, stinging like fire ants. The water in the canteen tasted like hot metal. I wanted the Montana snow, blue as the veins in Colleen Bower's throat with the mountain runoff coursing through it carrying shards of white ice . . .

That editor would probably have insisted I make do with the bare statement "It was hot," and get to the shooting. The end of space restrictions allows me to enlist the climate and topography of the West as characters in the plot.

One of the most significant—and progressive—developments of the new western has been the increase in women writers. Their ability to empathize with the courageous women who left behind the security of civilization to build a new life in the wilderness is largely responsible for the western's acceptance in the literary mainstream. In the past, the few women who ventured into the genre, including Dorothy M. Johnson ("The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," "A Man Called Horse") and Willa Cathcr *(My Antonio, Death Comes for the Arch-bishop)* were obliged to write from the male point of view. Successors such as Lucia St. Clair Robson, author of *Ride the Wind,* told from the perspective of Comanche captive Cynthia Ann Parker, have changed all that—to everyone's benefit.

Consider this frontier fiction staple—the showing of a notorious outlaw's corpse for profit—as transformed by Deborah Morgan in her short story "Mrs. Crawford's Odyssey" (*How the West* Was *Read,* Durkin Hayes, 1996), simply by adopting the point of view of the dead man's mother:

> This could not be her twenty-two-year-old son. Matthew had golden features, sunlit hair, a strong, square-set jaw. Laid out before her was an old man, bald, with flesh of a blue-white translucency, like watered-down milk. The heavily rouged cheekbones emphasized vast, dark hollows that should have been a jawline.
>
> Someone had made a terrible mistake, she was sure of it. She grabbed at that thread of hope, caught it, held it taut. This eased her, and she approached the deceased like any slight acquaintance might—respectfully, but thankful it's not one of your own. Only when she was leaning over the body did she discover death's ruse and see, unmistakably, her child.
>
> She clasped her hand over her mouth, a futile attempt to contain her emotions. Tears flowed until she believed that she would never be able to cry again.
>
> "My dear, precious boy," she said at last, "what have they done to you?"

Few male writers could write so poignantly and convincingly about a woman regarding the lifeless body of the boy to whom she gave birth.

Publishers are actively seeking women interested in tapping the rich vein of material concerning women out West. The market has rarely been so open to newcomers.

The West was settled by many different kinds of people: whites, blacks, Indians, immigrants, consumptives, heroes, and scoundrels. Bill Hotchkiss's *The Medicine Calf* and *Ammahabas* absorbingly follow the life of Jim Beckwourth, the black trapper and fur trader who became a Crow chief, and Cherokee writer Robert J. Conley *(The Dark Island, Crazy Snake)* stands at the summit of an impressive career built upon the Native American experience. In the heyday of the traditional western, such characters were regulated to secondary roles, either as villains or as comic foils.

When in my *Writer* article I first echoed Horace Greeley's advice "Go West," the necessary reference material resided only in libraries, bookstores, and county courthouses. Today, the writer with access to a computer can tap into a wealth of information on the geography, living conditions, and history of the West through the Internet. Rounding up the facts has never been so easy, but be warned: There is no longer an excuse for getting them wrong. Today's readers have the same access, and if you err, you will hear from them.

The timespan embraced by the new western is limitless. Once restricted to the bare quarter-century between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the closing of the frontier in 1890, it now encompasses prehistoric Indian life as exemplified by the "People" series written by anthropologists W. Michael and Kathleen O'Neal Gear *(People of the Fire, People of the Silence,* and many more), and the struggles of modern westerners to come to terms with their heritage, as recounted by John L. Moore in *The Breaking of Ezra Riley.*

Freed from the tyranny of "acceptable" timeframes, I took advantage of all I had learned about the West in twenty years of researching and writing westerns to tell a fictional story based on the mysterious life of the musician who wrote the famous ballad "Jesse James." History knows nothing of this individual beyond the name he signed to his composition, so I co-opted him as representative of the itinerant modern minstrels whose music brought romance to the frontier and preserved its legend. My novel *Billy Gashade* (Forge, 1997) follows its narrator from his fateful role in the New York draft riots of 1863 to his final stint as a ghostwriter of songs for Gene Autry musicals in 1935 Hollywood:

> ... I don't regret much. I've known some of the best and worst men of my time, survived events that sent better men than I to their graves more than half a century ago and as I was told by one of the strong, intelligent women who have charted the course of my life, I have my gift. Unlike its composer,

the song I wrote fifty-three years ago grows stronger each year. A month hardly passes that I don't hear it on the radio or in a supper place with a live performer, usually at the request of one of the patrons, even if whoever sings it usually leaves out the last verse:

> This song was made by Billy Gashade
>
> Just as soon as the news did arrive.
>
> He said there was no man with the law in his hand
>
> That could take Jesse James alive.

The "best and worst men"—and women—of Billy's time include Jesse James, Boss Tweed, Edith Wharton, Allan Pinkerton, Oscar Wilde, George Armstrong Custer, and Greta Garbo. The liberty offered by the new western permitted me to include people and places not commonly associated with the "western," and thus to help stretch the limits; for the history of what was once dismissed as the Great American Desert is the history of America.

The mystique of the frontier has always been freedom: from restrictions, from convention, from one's past. Today, at long last, the western itself offers that same freedom, as well as the opportunity for the writer—any writer—to slap his or her brand on an exciting, expanding market. So saddle up.

45
DETECTIVE NOVELS: THE PACT BETWEEN AUTHORS AND READERS

By Ian Rankin

I had little interest in detective stories until I found that I'd accidentally written one.

My first Inspector John Rebus novel was not meant to be a whodunit. It was not meant to be the first book in a series that has now reached double figures. At the time I wrote it, I was a postgraduate student in Edinburgh, studying literary theory and the Scottish novel. I thought I was updating *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* delivering a "Scots Gothic" for the 1980s, while also perhaps telling readers something about hidden aspects of the city of Edinburgh, aspects the tourists and day-trippers would never see.

That was my intention. The fact that I made my central character a policeman was (to me at the time) of little or no importance. I knew almost nothing about policing or the mechanics of the law; in retrospect, probably no bad thing: It's easy for the would-be author to be put off by procedure and detail, easy to be sidetracked into esoteric research. Maybe that's why so many fictional detectives have been amateurs (in the UK) or private eyes (in the US): These are people who either ignore or wilfully sidestep the proper procedures for investigating a murder. By using them, their authors can proceed in blissful ignorance of the mechanics of a criminal investigation.

In the early days, my writing really did seem to descend from a Muse, in that I depended upon a fertile imagination—and how fertile it was! With no family life, wife or mortgage worries to get in the way, I wrote *Knots <& Crosses* in about five weeks. Because I'd already had one novel published *(The Flood),* an agent had approached me to ask if further novels were forthcoming. I handed her *Knots & Crosses,* and she offered valuable suggestions for changes I should make (such as pruning an overtangled flashback from fifty pages to a neater fifteen, or so). She then found me a London publisher, and the book crept into the world without making too much fuss. (I was on book five or six before I was earning enough to even contemplate becoming a full-time writer.)

So it was back to the day job and dreams of new stories. I'd gone on to publish two spy novels before someone asked the innocent question: "Whatever happened to that Edinburgh cop of yours?" By this time, I'd discovered that *Knots & Crosses* had been classified a crime novel, and that the *genre* had not ended (as I'd assumed) with Christie and Chandler. I was now reading and enjoying crime novels, and catching up on the history of the detective story. I discovered its long and noble tradition, and that while noted for rattling good yarns, it was also capable of dealing with serious questions and the moral and psychological depth usually associated with the "literary" or "serious" novel.

I also discovered that a pact exists between mystery authors and their readers, forcing certain constraints on the author. For example, there should be no *deus ex machina,* no sudden appearance of a new character at the end of a book who would turn out to be the miscreant, no twist which the reader couldn't have been expected to be able to work out. I found that because the whodunit constantly poses questions, there have to be ways of expressing them and answering them. Thus the usefulness of the sidekick ("But gracious me, Holmes, how did you come to that astonishing conclusion?!"), or the penultimate chapter's gathering of suspects ("So you see, Madame Bouvier, you could not possibly have been in the archdeacon's antechamber at ten minutes to midnight"). In the Holmes example, the sidekick (Watson) stands for the reader and allows the detective to answer the very questions readers have been asking themselves. In the second example, the book's plot is about to be summarized and explained, and the real villain unmasked, all for the readers' edification.

The problem with such tricks, even when the reader is a willing enough accomplice, is that, to my mind, they *are* tricky, and reduce the seriousness of the crime novel, and turn it into a game, a puzzle. This is fine if the author's intention is to provide fun, entertainment, some little mental challenge to while away the hours.

But my own intentions extended further, and in my Rebus books, the detective is a loner along the lines of the American private eye. He works on the margins of the police force, eschewing sidekicks and back-up, and though written in the third person, the style of the narrative has evolved so that readers are inside the detective's head most of the time, allowing them insights into his thinking. Further, the detective is never physically described, his face and physique a blank, allowing readers to impose their own interpretation on him. In effect, he becomes *their* character.

Some critics have shrewdly commented that Rebus is not the main character in the series, that my main character is Edinburgh itself, and the country of which it is capital. But Edinburgh can "boast" only six murders a year, while Glasgow, only forty miles to the west, notches up between sixty and seventy. I've been asked why I don't write about Glasgow; wouldn't it be a more fruitful setting for a crime novel? Perhaps, but I don't *know* Glasgow. I choose to live and work in Edinburgh. It's a city that fascinates me and puzzles me, and these feelings become part of the fabric of my

stories. Because / am fascinated by my chosen city, perhaps part of that fascination will extend to the reader which was the whole point of the series all along, even before it *became* a series. It is a cliché perhaps, but in a very real sense we are all detectives, trying to make sense of the world around us. I set up problems for Rebus, and the pleasure for the reader is in joining him on an expedition toward the various solutions. This requires a measure of holding back. *I* may know whodunit, but readers will probably be disappointed if they work it out too quickly. Premature revelation is a constant worry. One way to solve it is to be unsure yourself who your villain is. Sometimes I'm on the third or fourth draft of a book before I decide which of my cast is to be the "baddie." The first draft for me is in itself an investigation: it's only when I start to write about my characters that I begin to sense what they are capable of, and what motives they might have for committing a crime.

Just as we are all detectives, so *all* fiction is mystery fiction, setting up questions that will be answered only if we read on. Ask yourself: What makes you turn the next page? Answer: the need to find out what happens next. A story must generate tension and leave things unsaid or unexplained (until near its climax), otherwise the reader will lose interest. If there are only so many plots in fiction, there are even fewer in the detective novel, and the problems with keeping a series going are many and varied. I doubt I'd have had the guts to begin a series using the alphabet, as Sue Grafton did, in the knowledge that twenty-five books on I'd still have to be writing about the same protagonist. How do you keep your character and your plots fresh? I've found that it pays to have a hero with a past—and not to unlock the door to this secret past too quickly. In *Knots & Crosses,* the plot is all down to events that happened to Rebus during his time in the British Army's crack SAS batallion. In future novels in the series, we learn a little more about his army service in Northern Ireland, about his early police cases, and about past family secrets and even boyhood mysteries.

These help add layer upon layer to the psychological make-up of the detective, as well as providing new material for plots. But in fact plots have never been that hard for me to find; most of them actually throw themselves at me: Some newspaper story or overheard anecdote in a bar will have me asking questions or railing at a miscarriage of justice. The crime novel is the perfect vehicle for dissecting society, since in fiction you can get away with saying things (between the lines) which, as newspaper reporting, could get you sued. And the detective is the perfect tool for the job, having, as he does, access to both the Establishment and society's dispossessed. In moving easily between these two worlds (and all stops in between), the detective can uncover all sorts of skeletons, from the personal (a character's hidden past, for example) to the public (conspiracies in high office).

In this sense, there are no limitations to where the crime novel can go. It may also explain why serious novels such as Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (and note that title) contain their fair share of mysteries, subterfuges, hidden identities, and murderers.

Here, then, are a few rules about the detective story, with the caveat that rules are there to be broken by writers with a strong enough disposition:

1) No cheating. Your murderer can't turn out to be a character you've suddenly introduced five pages from the end of the story. The reader must be given a fair chance of solving any puzzle in your book.

2) Having said this, I must admit that some sorts of cheating are actually expected, in that you're going to provide red herrings and false trails galore. These can be as outlandish as you like, as long as the reader is convinced they work within the context of the story. Note James Ellroy's tactic of peppering his novels with real historical characters. In this way. he dupes the reader into suspending disbelief, thinking: "That really did happen, and those people really did exist . . . so how much of the rest of this story is true?" Once you've got readers reacting that way, you've got them hooked.

3) You can keep research as minimal as you like, but your book must read as *authentic.* In other words, the reader must be hoodwinked into thinking you know what you're talking about, which isn't the same as your actually knowing what you're talking about. A little knowledge will go a long way. Conversely, writers who know too much about a subject can end up putting too much of it into their novels, slowing the story and confusing the reader. The task for the author is to know how much to put in and how much to leave out. I believe in the "less is more" principle. *Showing* is always better than *telling.* Give an example rather than a long explanation. If you have 200 pages of notes on autopsy procedure, fine, but use all of it in a novel and you'll bore the pants off everyone. An autopsy scene of a couple of paragraphs can be every bit as convicing as one of twenty pages, and you stand less risk of descending into tedium or jargon.

4) Don't strain for novelty in your central character. We all know this problem: Since all detectives are much of a muchness, how can I get mine to stand out from the herd? Well, in fact the very familiarity of a typical detective can be satisfying to readers. They're happy to work with a hero who is little more than a cipher, as long as the plot is blistering. To put meat on your hero's bones, introduce flaws and foibles, and an interesting home life. You don't need to strain after this. Don't feel the need to make your protagonist a six-foot-five Icelandic woman with poor eyesight and a box-file of homemade recipe-cards to be dispensed one per chapter. Characterization can be more subtle, and every bit as effective at delineating your detective.

5) Go read Raymond Chandler's rules. Better still, make up your own.

46
DISCOVERING A STORY IN HISTORY

By Sonia Levitin

"I'm writing a historical novel about the reconstruction period," a student told me. "I'm using my great-grandmother's Civil War diaries."

"Wonderful," I said. "Now, what's your story?"

The student was baffled and a little insulted. Story? Hadn't she just told me?

What she had told me was simply that she was delving into a certain period in American history—a time filled with drama and conflict, and she had resources at her command. What I needed to know is exactly what any editor and every reader wants to know: What happens in this story to make readers identify with the characters? What dangers do they face? How do they apply courage, ingenuity, and risk to their personal challenges? What are the stakes?

I have written various historical novels set in different periods. My most recent, *Escape from Egypt*, is set in Biblical times and deals with the Israelites' enslavement, exodus, and the wilderness sojourn. Dramatic events all, but the story had to come from specific characters, all drawn boldly and vividly, to convince the reader that these long-ago events happened to real people. Only in that way do we involve readers, make them care.

Some say that history is dry, while the novel is juicy. There is the difference. Most writers of pure history remember the facts and forget the people. For the novelist, the facts are the foundation, the people are everything else.

To breathe life into history, writers must ask two questions: First, what aspects of human endeavor never change? Second, how have things changed since the distant past in the story?

What doesn't change is the need for people to survive, to be loved,

to win the approbation of their peers, and to reach some personal/ spiritual conclusion. What do change are manners, customs, ways of thinking about the world and one's place in it. Some things go in cycles. Society moves from repression to permissiveness, back to strict control. Individuals continually battle the restrictions, which becomes the basis for many a story.

The historical novel, like any other, needs a protagonist who must battle the status quo. In my novel, *Roanoke*, protagonist William Wythers is a pauper wrongly accused of a crime. He sails for the New World to clear his name and to win fame and fortune, thus battling the status quo that relegated paupers to prison. William does not meet his goal in the ordinary sense; instead, he discovers a terrifying and captivating land. When war breaks out with the local Native Americans and most of the colonists are murdered, William survives. Why? Because he has been able to adapt to the new land, to accept change, and also (not incidentally) because he has fallen in love with a Native American girl. In a historical novel, or any novel, love can be the element that keeps the hero on course; it is the one ingredient that remains constant in a world of turmoil and change. We know the hero by what or by whom he loves, and often it is this very love (commitment) that saves him.

The hero in a historical novel must often leave his old world of conflict and conformity. Every patriot, pilgrim, and adventurer begins by stepping out of the old world and finding not only new worlds "out there" but new attitudes within. This is the universal lesson of history. Without change there is no growth.

Against this universal background, the novelist must prepare something unique and challenging, new characters with fresh faces, characters who behave boldly but in conformity with all that we know of psychology. Motivation must be clear.

In planning the plot for *Escape from Egypt*, I realized that the two primary characters, Jesse, the Israelite slave, and Jennat, the young Kgyptian-Syrian concubine, must be given different lives and different motives for needing to escape from Egypt. For Jesse, it was enough that he was an Israelite whose people were ultimately released through Moses' leadership. For Jennat, however, an entirely different scenario had to be created, and it was this that became part of the plot.

Jennat and Jesse have shared a mutual attraction—forbidden love, of course. The Bible gave me the bare bones of the action: Ten plagues are unleashed upon stubborn Pharaoh. His innocent subjects suffer, too. Jennat is one of them. The final plague, the death of all the firstborn of Pharaoh's subjects, gave me the perfect plot point I needed. Instead of seeing it only as part of the retribution against Pharaoh, I made this plague very personal. It provides the impetus for Jennat to

leave Egypt and join the Israelites in their exodus. What happens is that Jennat's mistress loses her beloved son to the plague. Because of Jennat's association with Jesse, an Israelite, Jennat's mistress blames *her* for the death of the child and, insane with grief, tries to kill her. Jennat flees and joins the Israelites in their exodus and the wilderness adventures. Similarly, other historical events are brought into the lives of the various characters, influencing their actions, propelling the story.

Momentous events—a migration, invasion, invention, or a major catastrophe—can be the foundation for your novel. But the nuts and bolts, the action that keeps the reader turning the page, has to come from within the characters themselves, their personal struggles as they are swept away by major forces that seem to be controlling their lives.

For characters to be real, they must be in conflict. That is where the action comes in. The novelist creates conflict from every premise. The Israelites are slaves and want to escape. Or do they? In my novel, Jesse's father, a renegade and an opportunist, doesn't want to leave Egypt at all! Jesse's mother, on the other hand, is passionate about wanting to flee. Thus, Jesse is immediately plunged into conflict between the two.

Remember, the unfolding of historical events is never smooth, never easy. Among this country's westward migrants there were those who came unwillingly, resentfully. There was conflict with natives, with recalcitrant beasts, with fellow travelers, and most of all, there was conflict within.

In *The No-Return Trail,* my heroine, Nancy Kelsey, is faced with numerous conflicts, some recorded, some invented. It is the novelist's privilege to invent, as long as the facts are not overlooked. For Nancy, I invented a bossy sister-in-law and a blunt, stubborn husband, as well as a mother who grieved over her departure. None of these seems too farfetched, considering the situation. Even a few known facts can provide the seeds of conflict. For example, Nancy was the youngest in her family. As such, she would very likely be intimidated by an older in-law. Her husband was an uneducated woodsman and in later years an itinerant preacher. Certainly, he would have had a fiercely independent nature, and like other men of his day, probably spent little time romancing or sweet-talking a young wife. Thus, we can assume that Nancy longed for talk and tenderness and the companionship of other women. It is these personal reflections that make Nancy real and empathic. This personal background provides the necessary drama for the story, as Nancy sets out to be with other women but ends up the only female among thirty men who made it to California. History provides the facts; the novelist seeks out the dramatic irony that brings a story to an emotional high. For everything gained there is something lost: This is the premise of the historical novel, which, even more than the "regular" novel, imitates life.

How do we create new characters in a historical setting? My own method is, first, to immerse myself completely in the period, until I know almost instinctively what my protagonist eats for breakfast, what he hears outside the window, what smells greet him upon arising, what kind of song springs to his lips, what curses, what endearments. Because everything we say and do and think is anchored in the time and place we find ourselves.

For my *Journey to America* trilogy, I researched what was playing at the movies in the late forties, what songs were popular, the actual names of the restaurants we frequented, and even the price of an egg sandwich. On my extended calendar, I always look up the date and the day of the week, and I consult almanacs to check the weather. Why go to all that trouble? Because I know that the background I provide is as accurate as it can be, and lends veracity to the whole.

I particularly enjoy researching and using medical information in my historical novels. Everyone is interested in health and remedies. I find it amusing to note some of the outrageous "cures" that were perpetrated upon innocent patients, and also to note their abiding faith in their physicians. Probably every writer favors certain details; my personal favorites are the domestic details of housekeeping, clothing, and personal care.

In *Escape from Egypt,* the opening scene between Jennat and her mistress takes place while the latter is having her hair done. Her wash-stand, mirror, tiny cosmetic cups, and trays are straight out of a museum, prototypes of the things we still use today. The hairdresser inserts several hair pieces, as much tricks of the trade then as now!

Why does it matter what powders, scents, and colors women used back then? Because it makes people seem more real, more like us, engrossed in minutiae of living even while major historical events are exploding all around them. This is what makes the historical novel exciting, for while empires rise and fall, epochs emerge or end, everyday life goes on *just as if nothing were changing.*

Actual historical events are the "wall" or the structural foundation of the historical novel. Between these "walls" the characters come and go, live out the desires, compulsions, or regrets that you, the novelist, create. One character hates his father. Another is haunted by an evil memory or a damaging secret. If a character is hell-bent on proving his courage, it's a sure bet that he was once a coward, and that secret becomes a compelling part of the plot.

Of course, the outcome of actual historical events is already known. The cataclysm inevitably must occur. This creates a sense of tension in the historical novel, the inevitability of crisis known to the reader, pitted against the ignorance, complacency or apparent helplessness of the characters. Eventually the characters are forced to see and to act.

If the characters are provocative, complex, and *real*, the outcome doesn't matter as much as the journey to that outcome, because the novelist is more concerned with "how" than with "what." How do people survive tough challenges? How do they find the courage to make the right decisions? How can they go against the current of overpowering events and still come out victorious?

This is the task and the pleasure of writing the historical novel, to ponder the past, to find its truths, and then to invent new lives that will speak these truths to the reader.

47
SELLING SPECULATIVE FICTION

By Leslie What

The genre known as science fiction and fantasy is much more than rocket ships, dystopias, and elves. This might explain why some critics and writers prefer to call it "the literature of the fantastic" or "speculative fiction"—SF for short. SF magazines and anthologies publish a mix of unclassifiable fiction, magical realism, urban fantasy, alternative history, high fantasy, and hard science fiction. No matter what you call it, speculative fiction is a great field for the new writer.

Editors actively seek out talent: They attend conventions; make virtual appearances on-line; teach at workshops or conferences; and read unsolicited submissions from unknowns—unceremoniously known as "slush." Leading SF magazines publish only ten to twelve of every thousand manuscripts submitted; fortunately for new writers, every editor is a reader hoping to find precious words in that mountain of paper. And there are ways to make your work stand out, at least long enough for the editor to notice your name.

My first professionally published story, "King for a Day" (*Asimov's Science Fiction)*, postulated that there were so many Elvis impersonators in Hell, the *real* Elvis had a hard time finding work. In my satiric vision of the afterlife, John Lennon waited in line to see himself. The acceptance was a bit of a surprise, because I hadn't been sure if "King for a Day" was *really* science fiction. But I was sure about the important things: The story was fast-paced, original, and lively; the manuscript proofread to the best of my ability. The rest was up to the editor.

Though the creative side may be in the writing, selling fiction is business, and in business, deals can be broken by a clumsy introduction. Take time to come up with a title that creates interest and excitement in the story. A knockout line from the text might do, or a portion of a quote that has always intrigued you. Titles can mirror the concept of the story. "Designated Hater" *(Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction)* took its cue from the American League, but twisted the rules for the sake of the plot. "The Goddess is Alive, and Well, Living in New York City" *(Asimov's Science Fiction)* reworked a bumper sticker I saw on pre-1980 VW vans. Titles work best when they reflect both the tone and language of the story. "A Dark Fire, Burning from Within" *(Realms of Fantasy)* tells the reader not to expect one of my light-hearted pieces, while "How to Feed Your Inner Troll" *(Asimov's Science Fiction)* suggests not only an encounter with a magical being, but a satire of pop psychology.

Think of the opening paragraphs of your story as an introduction to a prospective employer. Picture yourself standing face to face with the employer while you mumble on for pages before getting down to what you both mean and want to say. Not the most effective use of time. Rambling openings can keep an editor from reading to the end and giving your work the attention it deserves.

Analyze your beginning carefully. It should:

1) Evoke a sense of time and place. A reader expects a story to take place in the here and now, unless you say otherwise. If your story is set in the Italy of 2507, mention this at the start, or offer enough clues to prevent the revelation from coming as a surprise on page six. Clues can take the form of metaphor, dialogue, or straight narrative description.

2) Establish tone and authority through voice, word choice, theme, imagery, and detail. Prove that you are in control of your story by a correct use of grammar and a healthy respect for the conventions of language.

3) Introduce major character(s), hint at ages, gender, socioeconomic background. This can be the barest introduction, to be elaborated upon throughout the story.

4) Foreshadow major story problems and introduce minor ones.

A beginning that accomplishes as much of the above as possible will increase its chances for publication. Here's an example from "Smelling of Earth, Dreaming of Sky" *(Asimov's Science Fiction):*

> Sunday at church:
>
> In his sermon, the minister preaches that the first man was made from earth.
>
> *"Adamah,"* he begins, "common clay begat Adam, common man." Adam of earth, who thought he knew better than God and was forced to leave Paradise.
>
> "We all—every one of us—came from that very clay," says the minister. "With this humble beginning, the Bible teaches that not one of us is better than the rest."
>
> I groan, disagreeing. The minister must be referring to the commoners.

This opening makes clear who the story is about, and also hints at possible conflicts. Each new piece of information

builds on what has previously been established. The next few paragraphs reveal that the narrator is an angel, sent back to perform one good deed. The somber tone of the writing, the deliberate use of present tense to magnify the feelings of a character who is trapped, the angry voice coupled with the spare choice of details, suggest that she will be unlikely to fulfill her mission. (Note: The title came from an earlier work that another editor had rejected with a note, "Title great, story stinks." The truth hurt, but he was right. I kept the title, tossed the story, then wrote a better one in its place.)

Selling wonders

Gardner Dozois, the editor of *Asimov's Science Fiction,* compares himself to P. T. Barnum, who sold wonders and marvels for money. "If there's no wonder or marvel in the content of your story," says Dozois, "then it's going to be a hard sell."

Editors want stories that are interesting and entertaining, unique, and logically consistent in their own way. Read what is being published now for clues of where to send your work. Magazines like *Analog* and *Science Fiction Age* are unlikely to publish a "Gnomes on Vacation" story, while *Realms of Fantasy* might not be the first place to send a story featuring "Physicists Who Save Themselves Before the Sun Goes Nova." Of course, there are always exceptions.

Instead of trying to clone what you read, view ideas through a prism to see them in a different light. For "Mothers' Day," (*Realms of Fantasy),* I took the legend of the Pied Piper one step further. What would it *really* be like, I wondered, for a man stuck inside a cave with all those children? The resulting story was a sympathetic yet satiric look at a man living with what he *never* bargained for.

It's fine to reuse a premise if you do something different. You must take the premise where no writer has gone before. A story cannot have time travel or virtual reality as the only focus; it must use the idea as background setting, what editor Dozois calls "The furniture of plot." In "Compatibility Clause" (*Fantasy and Science Fiction),* I borrowed heavily from William Gibson, my experiences and observations at video arcades, and themes of married life. The story is about a wife (Mrs. Claus on the night before Christmas), desperate to communicate with her husband, a busy man with an addictive personality. I combined real-life tensions with a fantasy world and a science fiction gimmick to create a story.

Hard sells

You might have trouble selling what is known as a *Translation Story:* the Western set on Alpha IV, with blasters instead of shotguns, and spaceships instead of horses. As a general rule, the fantastic or scientific idea must be an integral part of the story and not put there just to set up your theme or add interest to the plot.

Other hard sells include the surprise ending: the *deus ex machina,* where the resolution occurs as if by the hand of God; the story set in virtual reality (unbeknownst to the characters, who are revealed as imaginary only at story's end); stories that take place in dreams; Adam and Eve at the end of the world; stories with joke endings. If you've written one of the above, send it out anyway, but if you get back form letter rejections, you might try changing tactics. You will not be able to sell stories based on Star Trek or any licensed characters, or stories that are spin-offs from trademarked games.

Stories about ghosts are said to be a hard sell, though I've sold several. The key to selling a ghost story might be figuring out what the ghost represents on a symbolic level, as well as knowing why the ghost is needed in the story. Little-known legends reinterpreted through your unique vision can be a source of ideas for new and inventive ghost stories. "Beside the Well" *(Bending the Landscape: Fantasy,* White Wolf Publishing 1997) was based on a Korean folk tale, but with a few unexpected twists that fit the theme of the anthology. "Clinging to a Thread" *(Fantasy and Science Fiction)* presented ghosts through their physical connection to the objects they once touched. Vampires have been done to death (sorry), but an inventive writer might come up with a way to make them fresh.

Your story must be about the day, the person, and the event—not just any day or any person who happens to be trapped in some fascinating scenario. If another person could just as easily replace the cen-tral character, if the angel is merely symbolic and could be replaced by a Western Union man, if the effect of time travel is the same as if your character just got out of jail, you'd better rethink what you've written.

Why this person? Why today? Why is THIS fantastic element necessary? In general, these questions must be answered for the story to sell. Otherwise, let yourself go wild. In the field of speculative fiction, stories are limited only by imagination.

Definitions

Cyberpunk: Combines street-smart punks with the hi-tech world of computers and neural networks.

Hard Science Fiction: SF where the scientific idea is central to the plot, conflict, and resolution in the story.

Urban Fantasy/Contemporary Fantasy: Magic in modern-day settings, also called "North American magical realism."

High Fantasy: Often set in feudal or medieval societies where magical beings reside.

Alternative History: Looking at how an alternative past would change the present.

Web Sites of Interest

1) <http://critique.org/users/critters> On-line workshop, support, critiques, advice.

2) <http://www.sff.net> Author newsgroups, marketing information, and a private on-line critique group.

3) <http://www.speculations.com> News of open anthologies, magazine guidelines.

4) <http://users.aol.com/marketlist> Marketing information.

48
PLOTTING A MYSTERY NOVEL

By Carolyn Hart

How do you plot your novels? this may be the question writers hear most often.

It's as if, after enjoying a particularly succulent dish, I ask a cook, "May I have that recipe?" The cook smiles, nods, offers a list of ingredients. But if I try that recipe in my own kitchen, somehow the finished dish won't be the same.

The cook's answer is quite similar to those of authors when asked how to plot. We launch into quick answers that make plotting sound, if not easy, at least quite reasonable and straightforward.

We lie. Oh, not intentionally, of course. But our answers simply don't capture the reality of plotting a novel. Plotting is never easy, rarely straightforward, and cannot be reduced to a formula.

I'm especially attuned to the deficiency of our rote answer—outline, outline, outline—because I'm presently engaged in plotting a new mystery. It should be easy, right? No. No. No!

It is terribly difficult, as all novelists know. And every novelist has an individual way of responding to the challenge. Some novelists pose that wonderful, familiar question, "What if?" Some do detailed character sketches and carefully outline every chapter. Others write a one-or two-page synopsis. We all struggle, but I truly believe there is no easy route to writing a novel. But perhaps the imperfect, tantalizing suggestions of how I forge a story will help you discover your own process.

These are the facts I must know in order to start a mystery novel:

1. The protagonist

2. The victim

3. The murderer

4. The title

The most important decision to make is who will be the main protagonist. In my Death on Demand series, it is Annie Laurance Darling, who is aided and abetted by her husband, Max. In my Henrie O series, the protagonist is retired newswoman Henrietta O'Dwyer (Henrie O) Collins. There is a world of difference between the two series, and all the differences can be traced to the personalities of the protagonists.

Annie and Max are young and enthusiastic. Annie is quite serious and intense, but she loves to laugh. She owns a mystery bookstore, and her vocation and avocation are mysteries. Max is sexy, fun and handsome, rich, easy-going and loving. He is, in fact, the kind of man women adore.

So, what do we have in the Death on Demand series? A young, eager bookstore owner who in various novels in the series falls in love, plans a murder mystery weekend, participates in a community play, gets married, teaches a class on the three great ladies of the mystery, learns about the many faces of love, celebrates the brilliance of Agatha Christie, and serves as the author liaison at a book fair. These novels also have sub-plots featuring subsidiary characters, avid reader Henny Brawley, curmudgeonly Miss Dora Brevard, and Annie's mother-in-law, unflappable, ethereal, unpredictable Laurel Darling Roethke.

In sharp contrast, Henrie O is a sixty-something, savvy, sardonic woman who has seen good and bad in a long life, has few illusions, a passion for truth, and a determination to do what she feels she must. In the first book in the series, Henri O refuses to be vanquished by either an old lover or a hurricane, and in the process of solving a murder decides that silence best serves those she loves. In the second, Henrie O saves a man unjustly accused despite the power and money arrayed against her. In my newest novel. *Death in Lovers' Lane*, Henrie O faces a hard personal decision. In discovering the murderer of a student reporter, she brings a resolution to three old unsolved crimes.

Who these people are and what they do determine the structure, tone, and objective of the books.

The Death on Demand novels are written in the third person, which makes it easy to switch viewpoints and offer the reader insights. Each book opens with a series of vignettes that give the reader an instant slice of the life of a character who will be important to the book. The recurring minor characters offer another way to entertain the reader, and that is the objective of the Death on Demand books—to entertain. Everything about their creation—the mystery bookstore, the young lovers, the subsidiary characters—is calculated to result in a good-humored novel that provides mystery lore,

entertaining characters, and, hopefully, an intricate mystery.

The Henrie O mysteries are another pot of soup entirely. They are written in the first person to engage the reader totally in Henrie O's life, thoughts, and actions. I chose for her to be an older woman because I want to celebrate age and experience. In *Dead Man's Island,* Henrie O waits for an elevator....

> I saw my own reflection: dark hair silvered at the temples, dark eyes that have seen much and remembered much, a Roman-coin profile, a lean and angular body with an appearance of forward motion even when at rest—and the angry light in my eyes. I can't abide meanness.

The Henrie O novels are sparsely written, with quick, short, vivid sentences of a newspaper article. Henrie O wryly comments on life as she has lived and observed it, but these are not light, entertaining novels.

The differences between the two series clearly illustrate the importance of the protagonist. A book mirrors its protagonist. The choice of protagonist provides the tone, background, pace, taste, and scope of your novel.

Who will your protagonist be? A cop, a midwife, a divorcee, a lawyer? Each would make a different story out of the same facts. Is the story set in San Diego, Des Moines, Chicago, Paris, Birmingham? That depends upon the protagonist, too.

Everything else in the novel flows from the choice of the protagonist. Choose a cop, and you can have a serial killer, domestic violence, a drive-by shooting. But if you decide to create an amateur sleuth, that sleuth's vocation or avocation will determine who might be a likely murder victim.

Annie, a bookstore owner who lives on a resort island off the coast of South Carolina, is most unlikely to have contact with a murdered drug dealer. In *Death on Demand,* the victim was a mean-spirited mystery author murdered at a gathering of mystery writers in Annie's store. Victims in my other novels range from a well-to-do club woman to a love-hungry wife, to a cold, hard judge, to a crabby voyeur who snooped on the wrong night. But all of my victims grew out of Annie's world. Their existence was dictated by Annie's milieu.

Henrie O plays on a much larger stage. In *Dead Man's Island,* the story grows out of her background as a reporter, but that background can have inhabitants from diverse places. *Death in Lovers' Lane* revolves around personal responsibility and how much information is owed to society. Henrie O makes some difficult judgments, but, as she emphasizes in that book, judgments never come easy.

So, you begin to see how stories flow. The choice of a protagonist determines the background. The choice of the background determines the victim. The choice of the victim determines the murderer, because the persons involved in the victim's life make up the circle of suspects. One of the suspects will be the villain.

Villains can be flawed, likable people, or they can be horribly selfish and mean. Your choice, but this choice is once again the result of earlier choices.

In *Design for Murder,* Corinne, the victim, is the wealthy, selfish, egocentric society matron who tries to control the lives of those around her. Her circle included:

- Leighton, the charming, handsome, not-so-grieved widower
- Gail, the emotional, love-struck, frightened niece
- Bobby, the abrasive, tough, self-serving reporter
- Roscoe, the self-contained but passionate lawyer
- John, the ambitious, determined, aloof doctor
- Sybil, the lusty, willful, spoiled sybarite
- Tim, the gifted, immature, self-centered artist
- Edith, the nervous, sensitive, hardworking club woman
- Miss Dora, the eccentric, unpredictable, waspish old woman
- Lucy, Corinne's childhood friend who once loved Corinne's brother Each person in Corinne's life—and death—evolved from Corinne's personality.

In *Death in Lovers' Lane,* the victim is a bright, beautiful student reporter, and Henrie O is her journalism professor, who insists the student find fresh facts if she intends to write about three unsolved crimes in the university town. When I was plotting the book, I knew the milieu—a university town, a campus. What kind of unsolved crimes might there be? I came up with three: the double murder of a student couple in Lovers' Lane; the shooting of a respected businessman; and the disappearance some years earlier of the dean of students.

I then had four victims: the student reporter, the lovers, the businessman, and the dean. Whom did they know? Who loved them—or hated them?

Now that you've seen how to create the characters in your novel, you may reasonably complain that this isn't a plot. No, it isn't, but you are on your way. The plot does not arrive full blown, at least, not for most writers. Some writers

outline an entire novel. I am in awe of them, but most of us do not have that kind of linear skill. We begin with people. We decide the general theme. In the novel I'm plotting now, Henny Brawley is putting on a Fourth of July celebration in honor of South Carolina history, from a woman's perspective. Lt. Gen. (ret.) Charlton (Bud) Hatch insists on changing the focus to men, which puts him at cross purposes with a good portion of island society.

I know who the protagonist is: Annie.

I know who the victim is: Bud Hatch.

I know who the murderer is: (Of course, I won't tell you!)

I know who the suspects are: Henny Brawley, Bud's mistress, his next-door neighbor, an alienated stepdaughter, the director of the library, the director's lover, a librarian, a handyman.

I know the title: *Yankee Doodle Dead.* I have to have a working title when I begin a novel. It gives me a sense of reality, and it also defines the ultimate story. In *Yankee Doodle Dead,* a Yankee (Bud Hatch) comes to town and ends up dead.

So, I have a great deal, but where is the plot?

Darned if I know, and I'm not being flippant or dismissive or coy. This truthful admission is perhaps the best help I can ever offer to a new or struggling writer: All the planning in the world won't create a novel. That takes magic, and the magic happens when you write. If you figure out all the elements I've listed, you won't know how the story ends, or what's going to happen in Chapter 9, but you have enough to begin.

That's how I do it: I begin writing, and the people come to life—or death—and events occur, and I will have the great adventure of finding out who these characters are, what they are going to do, and ultimately, with them, I will—haphazardly, surprisingly, unexpectedly—reach the final chapter.

Yes, I get stuck. Sometimes everything I've written seems dull and boring, and I can't figure out how to move ahead. But if I keep on thinking about those characters, and if I sit at my computer and write, things will begin to happen. And finally I'll know that the novel exists, that it's out there, all I have to do is find it.

It isn't a straightforward process. I can't diagram it, but this is how I plot—and write—a novel. It's scary, but it's a great adventure.

49
WRITING THE SUPERNATURAL NOVEL

By Elizabeth Hand

I've always thought that the oldest profession was that of storyteller—in particular, the teller of supernatural tales. A look at the cave paintings in France or Spain will show you how far back our hunger for the fantastic goes: men with the heads of beasts, figures crouching in the darkness, skulls and shadows and unblinking eyes. Take a glance at the current bestseller list, and you'll see that we haven't moved that far in the last twenty thousand years. Books by Anne Rice, Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, and Clive Barker, among many others, continue to feed our taste for dark wine and the perils of walking after midnight. But how to join the ranks of those whose novels explore the sinister side of town?

First, let me distinguish between supernatural fiction and its tough (and very successful) younger cousin, the horror novel. Horror novels depend heavily upon the mechanics of plot, less-than-subtle characterizations, and shock value—what Stephen King calls "going for the gross-out." In spirit and execution, they aren't that different from the "penny dreadfuls" of a century ago, crude but effective entertainments that tend to have a short shelf life. Unlike more stylized works such as *Dracula, The Turn of the Screw* or *The Shining,* most horror novels lose their ability to chill the second time around—they just don't stand up to rereading. As Edmund Wilson put it, "The only horror in these fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art."

In the wake of Stephen King's success, the 1980's was a boom decade for horror fiction. But the market was flooded with so many books—and so many second-rate Stephen King imitators—that publishers and readers alike grew wary. With the dwindling reading public, it's far more difficult today to get a supernatural novel into print.

But the readers *are* there. And they're quite a sophisticated audi-ence, which makes it both more challenging, and more fun, to write the sort of novel that will appeal to someone who prefers *The Vampire Lestat* to the *The Creeping Bore.*

More than other genres, supernatural fiction is defined by *atmosphere* and *characterization.* By atmosphere, I mean the author's ability to evoke a mood or place viscerally by the use of original and elegant, almost *seductive* language. Science fiction and fantasy also rely heavily upon unusual settings and wordplay, often against a backdrop of other, imagined, worlds. But the most successful supernatural novels are set in *our* world. Their narrative tension, their very ability to frighten and transport us, derives from a conflict between the macabre and the mundane, between everyday reality and the threatening *other*— whether revenant, werewolf, or demonic godling—that seeks to destroy it.

The roots of supernatural fiction lie in the gothic romances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with their gloomy settings, imperiled narrators and ghostly visitations. Even today these remain potent elements. Witness Anne Rice's vampire Lestat during a perambulation about prerevolutionary Paris:

> The cold seemed worse in Paris. It wasn't as clean as it had been in the mountains. The poor hovered in doorways, shivering and hungry, the crooked unpaved streets were thick with filthy slush. I saw barefoot children suffering before my very eyes, and more neglected corpses lying about than ever before. I was never so glad of the fur-lined cape as I was then. . . .

Much of the pleasure in Rice's work comes from her detailed evocations of real, yet highly romanticized, places: New Orleans, Paris, San Francisco. It pays to have firsthand knowledge of some desirable piece of occult real estate: Readers love the thrill of an offbeat setting, but they also like recognizing familiar landmarks. So, Stephen King has staked out rural Maine as his fictional backyard. The incomparable Shirley Jackson (whose classic "The Lottery" has chilled generations of readers) also turns to New England for the horrific doings in *The Haunting of Hill House, The Bird's Nest* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle.* Daphne du Maurier's novella "Don't Look Now" gives us a tourist couple lost amidst the winding alleys of Venice, a notion creepy enough to have inspired Ian McEwan's nightmarish *The Comfort of Strangers.* Just about any selling will do, if you can imbue it with an aura of beauty and menace. My neo-gothic novel *Waking the Moon* takes place in that most pedestrian and bureaucratic of cities, Washington, D.C. But by counterpointing the city's workaday drabness with exotic descriptions of its lesser-known corners, I was able to suggest that an ancient evil might lurk near Capitol Hill:

> From the Shrine's bell tower came the first deep tones of the carillon calling the hour. I turned, and saw in the distance the domes and columns of the Capitol glimmering in the twilight, bone-colored, ghostly; and behind it still more ghostly buildings, their columned porticoes and marble arches all seeming to melt into the haze of green and violet darkness that descended upon them like sleep.

Style, of course, is a matter of taste and technique, and as with all writing, your most important tools should be a good thesaurus and dictionary. (Good taste in reading helps, but is probably not necessary.) A thesaurus can transform even the oldest and most unpalatable of chestnuts. "It was a dark and stormy night" becomes "Somber and tenebrous, the

vespertine hour approached."

The danger, of course, is that such elevated diction easily falls into self-parody. But when well-done, it can quickly seduce the reader into believing in—well, in any number of marvelous things:

> Last night I dreamt that I woke to hear some strange, barely audible sound from downstairs—a kind of thin tintinnabulation, like those coloured-glass bird scarers which in my childhood were still sold for hanging up to glitter and tinkle in the garden breeze. I thought I went downstairs to the drawing room. The doors of the china cabinets were standing open, but all the figures were in their places—the Bow Liberty and Matrimony, the Four Seasons of Neale earthenware, the Reinecke girl on her cow; yes, and she herself—the Girl in a Swing. It was from these that the sound came, for they were weeping.

This is from Richard Adams's superb *The Girl in a Swing,* to my mind the best supernatural novel I've ever read. One of the problems in writing supernatural fiction stems from the fact that "ghost stories" are nearly always better when they are really *stories,* rather than full-length novels. Indeed, many of the classic works of dark fantasy—*The Turn of the Screw,* Charlotte Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Oliver Onions's "The Beckoning Fair One"—are novellas, a form that particularly suits the supernatural, but which is a hard sell: too short for publishers looking for meaty bestsellers, too long for a magazine market that thrives on the 5,000- to 7,000-word story. It is very difficult to sustain a high level of suspense for several hundred pages. Chapter after chapter of awful doings too often just become awful, with the "cliffhanger" effect ultimately boring the reader.

Characterization is one way of avoiding this pitfall. If your central characters are intriguing, you don't need a constant stream of ghoulish doings to hold a reader's attention. Think of Anne Rice's Lestat, whose melancholy persona has seen him through several sequels. Or the callow student narrator of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History,* a novel which has only a hint of the supernatural about it, but which is more terrifying than any number of haunted houses:

> Does such a thing as "the fatal flaw," that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs.

The Secret History is told in the first person, as are *The Girl in a Swing,* Rice's *Vampire Chronicles,* and *Waking the Moon.* In supernatural fiction, it is not enough that the protagonist compel our interest. Readers must also be able to truly *identify* with him, to experience his growing sense of unease as his familiar world gradually crumbles in the face of some dark intruder, be it spirit or succubus. That is why the first-person narrator is so prevalent in supernatural tales. It is also why most uncanny novels feature individuals whose very *normalcy* is what sets them apart from others. Like us, they do not believe in ghosts, which makes it all the worse when a ghost actually does appear.

But "normal" does not necessarily mean "dull." Richard Papen, the narrator of *The Secret History,* is drawn into a murderous conspiracy when his college friends seek to evoke Dionysos one drunken winter night. In *The Girl in a Swing,* Alan Desland is a middle-aged bachelor whose most distinguishing characteristic is his extraordinary *niceness*—until he becomes obsessed with the beautiful Rathe, who may be the incarnation of a goddess—or of a woman who murdered her own children. And in C. S. Lewis's classic *That Hideous Strength,* an entire peaceful English village is besieged by the forces of darkness.

As with all good fiction, it is important that the central characters are *changed* by their experiences, whether for good or ill. Lazy writers often use mere physical transformations to effect this change: The heroine becomes a vampire. Or the heroine is prevented from becoming a vampire. Or the heroine is killed, far more eerie is the plight of the eponymous hero of Peter Ackroyd's terrifying *Hawksmoor,* a police detective who finds himself drawn into a series of cult murders that took place in London churches two hundred years before:

> Hawksmoor looked for relief from the darkness of wood, stone and metal but he could find none; and the silence of the church had once again descended as he sat down upon a small chair and covered his face. And he allowed it to grow dark.

While he is very much a twentieth-century man, Nicholas Hawksmoor's unwanted clairvoyance gives him a glimpse of horrors he is unable to forget, and forever alters his perception of the power of good and evil in the world and in his work.

In many ways, the intricacies of *plot* are less central to supernatural fiction than is *pacing* (another reason why short stories usually work better than novels). A careful balance must be achieved between scenes of the ordinary and the otherworldly. Usually, a writer alternates the two, with the balance gradually tipping in favor of the unreal: Think of Dracula moving from Transylvania to London, and bringing with him a miasma of palpable evil that slowly infects all around him. In *Waking the Moon,* my heroine's involvement with the supernatural parallels her love affair in the real world. However you choose to do it, don't let the magical elements overwhelm your story completely.

Especially, don't let the Big Supernatural Payoff come too *soon.* (The only thing worse that killing off all your werewolves fifty pages before the end is penning these dreadful words: it was all a dream.) Think of your novel in musical terms: You wouldn't really want to listen to one Wagnerian aria after another, would you? Well, neither would you want to read page after page of mysterious knockings, stakes through the heart, and screams at midnight.

Finally, dare to be different. Does the world really need another vampire novel? How about a lamia instead? Or an evil

tree? As always, it's a good idea to be well-read in your chosen genre, so that you don't waste time and ink reinventing Frankenstein's monster. In addition to the works mentioned above, there is a wealth of terrific short supernatural fiction that can teach as well as chill you. *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* (edited by Herbert A. Wise and Phyllis Fraser) is perhaps the indispensable anthology. There are also collections by great writers such as Poe, Robert Aickman, John Collier, Edith Wharton, Isak Dinesen, Sheridan Le Fanu, M. R. James, and many, many others. Jack Sullivan has written two books that I refer to constantly:

Elegant Nightmares and *Lost Souls*, classic studies of English ghost stories that can serve as a crash course on how to write elegant horror. These, along with Stephen King's nonfiction *Danse Macabre*, should put you well on your way to creating your own eldritch novel. Happy haunting!

50
WHY HORROR?

By Graham Masterton

Few people understand that writers are writing all the time.

To think that a writer is writing only when he or she is actually hammering a keyboard is like believing that a police officer's job is "arresting people."

Even while they're not sitting down at the word processor, writers are writing in their heads. Inventing stories. Playing with words. Thinking up jokes and riddles and metaphors and similes. These days, I write both historical sagas and horror novels. Most people relish historical sagas, but I'm often asked, "Why do people like horror?"

I think they like horror novels because they depict ordinary people dealing with extraordinary threats. They like to imagine, what would / do if a dark shadow with glowing red eyes appeared in my bedroom at night? What would / do if I heard a sinister scratching inside the walls of my house? What would I do if my husband's head turned around 360 degrees?

I've found my inspiration for horror stories in legends from ancient cultures, and my research into how these demons came to be created by ordinary men and women is fascinating. Each of them represents a very real fear that people once felt, and often still do.

There are beguiling men who turn into evil demons. There are monsters that suck your breath when you're asleep. There are gremlins that steal children. There are horrible gorgons that make you go blind just to look at them, and vampires that drain all of the energy out of you. There are zombies who come back from the dead and torment you.

My favorite Scottish demons were the glaistigs, hideous hags who were supposed to be the ghosts of women haunting their former homes. They were frequently accompanied by a child who was called "the little plug" or "the whimperer." If you didn't leave out a bowl of milk for the glaistigs, they would suck your cows dry or drain their blood. Sometimes a glaistig would carry her little whimperer into the house, and bathe it in the blood of the youngest infant in the house, and the victim would be found dead and white in the morning.

Now, this is a legend, but you can understand what genuine fears it expresses. A woman's fear of other women intruding into her home, as in the film, *Fatal Attraction*; a man's fear of losing his livelihood; parents' fear of losing their children to malevolent and inexplicable illnesses, such as crib death. What I do is take these ancient demons, which are vivid and expressive manifestations of basic and genuine fears, and write about them in an up-to-date setting, with modern characters.

The very first horror novel I wrote was called *The Manitou.* A man-itou is a Native American demon, and in this novel a 300-year-old medicine man was reborn in the present day to take his revenge on the white man. I was inspired to write that by *The Buffalo Bill Annual, 1956.*

Since then I have written books based on Mexican demons, Balinese demons, French demons and Biblical demons, two dozen in all, and I'm working on another one about the Glasgow woman who makes a pact with Satan so that her house disappears every time the rent collector calls.

I started writing horror novels at school, when I was 11. I used to read them to my friends during recess. Reading your work out loud is always invaluable training. When I met one of my old school friends only recently, he said, "I'll never forget the story you wrote about the woman with no head who kept singing 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips.' It gave me nine years of sleepless nights, and I still can't have tulips in the house."

Horror books seem to sell well all over the world, with some notable exceptions, like Germany. The French love horror, and the Poles adore it. In France, *Le Figaro* called me "Le Roi du Mai," the King of Evil. I was the first Western horror novelist to be published in Romania, home of Dracula. I received a letter from a reader this week saying, "I have to write to congratulate you on a wonderful book, rich with ideas and shining with great metaphors. Also very good printing, and excellent paper, which is appreciated here because of bathroom tissue shortage."

How extreme can you be when you write horror? As extreme, I think, as your talent and your taste permit, although gruesomeness is no substitute for skillful writing. I had several complaints about a scene in my book *Picture of Evil,* in which the hero kills two young girls with a poker. People protested my graphic description of blood spattering everywhere. In fact, I never once mentioned blood. All I said was, "He clubbed them to death like two baby seals." The

reader's imagination was left to do the rest.

It is catching the mood and feel of a moment that makes your writing come to life. Most of the time you can dispense with whole realms of description if you catch one vivid image; catching those images requires thought and research. When I write historical novels, I frequently rent period costumes which my wife and I try on so I can better understand how my characters would have moved and behaved when wearing them. How do you rush to meet your lover when wearing a hobble skirt? How do you sit down with a bustle?

We also prepare food and drink from old recipes, using cookbooks by Fannie Farmer, Mrs. Beeton, and Escoffier. One of the least successful period drinks we prepared was the King's Death, drunk by King Alfonso of Spain in the Men's Bar of the Paris Ritz. The King's Death is made with wild strawberries marinated in Napoleon brandy, then topped up with half a bottle of champagne—each! We served it to some dinner party guests, and they became incoherent and had to go home.

Whether you're writing history or horror, thrillers or love stories, the most important technique is to live inside the book instead of viewing it from the outside. Your word processor or typewriter is nothing more than a key that opens the door to another world. When I'm writing, I step into that world, so that it surrounds me. So many writers as they write look only forward at the page, or screen, forgetting what's all around them.

Think of the rain on the side of your face and the wind against your back. Think of what you can hear in the distance. Think of the fragrances you can smell. Most of all, *be* all your characters: Act out their lives, act out their movements and their facial expressions, and speak their dialogue out loud. Get up from your keyboard sometimes, and do what you've imagined; then sit down and write it. The Disney artist Ward Kimball used to draw Donald Duck by making faces in the mirror. You can do the same when you're writing about the way your characters act and react.

Your best research is watching real live people living out their real lives. Watch every gesture, every nuance, listen to people's conversations and accents. Try to propel your story along at the pace that *you* would like to read it. Avoid showing off in your writing; all that does is slow down your story and break the spell you have been working so hard to conjure up. How many times has your suspension of disbelief been broken by ridiculous similes, like "her bosoms swelled like two panfuls of overboiling milk."

Two similes that really caught my attention and which I later used in novels were an old Afrikaner's description of lions roaring "like coal being delivered," and the hideous description by an Australian prisoner of war of two of his fellow prisoners being beheaded: "the blood spurted out of their necks like red walking-sticks."

To my mind, the greatest achievement in writing is to create a vivid, spectacular novel without readers being aware that they are reading at all. My ideal novel would be one that readers put down, and discover that they're still in it, that it's actually come to life.

The other day I was reading *Secrets of the Great Chefs of China*, and apart from the eel recipe, where you throw live eels into boiling water and have to clamp the lid down quickly to stop them from jumping out of the pot, the most memorable advice the book gave was, "A great chef prepares his food so that it is ready for the mouths of his guests; it is both a courtesy and a measure of his professionalism." That goes for writing, too.

51
GLUES TO WRITING A MYSTERY NOVEL

By T. Jefferson Parker

Before starting a new book, I make a deal with myself. It doesn't involve character, atmosphere, structure, or setting. Rather, it's an agreement I make with my reader, something to keep me honest over the long haul of writing a novel.

Here are my rules when I begin.

One: Write as well as you can, never down, always up to your readers; do not pander; do not cheat; do not be dishonest. If something rings false to me, it will surely ring false to my reader, too. Treat that reader with the same respect with which you treat yourself.

Two: Make sure that what you're offering your readers is worth the several hours of reading it will take. You can make a thousand promises to your readers in the opening pages of a book, and you will have to make good on every one in a surprising, satisfying, and believable way. Deliver. After all, your pact implies that your readers will leave the novel somehow richer. Give your readers the bargain of a lifetime.

Three: Don't be afraid to entertain: You are writing popular fiction, not an instruction manual, a position paper, or an essay.

Four: Leave your readers with a feeling of something experienced, not just something read. Give them an emotional reality. Make it impossible for them simply to chuck your book into the wastebasket when they've finished reading it and grab the next one. Make your novel linger, haunt, last.

These are the self-imposed commandments I try to follow when I work. I forget them sometimes, ignore them others, amend them often. I never achieve them all perfectly.

Before I come to the point of writing, though, there is the odd fallow period during which I'm sniffing for the trail of the new book. At those times—and they may be as brief as days or as long as months—none of the above rules is relevant yet. I'm a bloodhound then, or a detective, maybe, trying to pick up the scene or the clues that will lead me to the new book. This gestation period can be brief or long, but it is generally an anxious and troubling time. When I was young and frenzied with ambition, I finished up the final draft of *Laguna Heat* on a Friday, ending roughly five years' work. The following Monday I began writing my next novel. (It was never published and probably should not have been.) Conversely, after *Summer of Fear* was finished, I took off almost half a year before finding it again.

And what is "it"? A certain scent, a smell, an emotional aroma is what you're searching for. Like many good things in life, you don't really know what it is until you find it. When you do find it—or more accurately, when it finds you—it is immediately recognizable. It's something outside you that sparks something inside you. The spark starts a fire. The fire burns for two or three years, during which time you write the book. The novel is an attempt to see what the fire leaves. It is an attempt to find something new, something born of the union between what you believed you might find, and what was actually there. If all that sounds vague, maybe I can explain.

Here's an example: After I'd finished writing *Laguna Heat,* I was sniffing around for something new. The scent hit me loud and clear one day when I was in a liquor store off Harbor Boulevard in Costa Mesa. I stood in the checkout line and there was something about the man in front of me that made me think he must be an American Vietnam War veteran. I also noticed that the clerk was a young Vietnamese woman. I stood waiting, wondering what might be going through their respective minds. What did she think of him? He of her? Could their paths possibly have crossed many years ago, in her war-torn country? Could he have fought alongside her father or brother? Against them? Could these two have actually met?

Eavesdropping shamelessly, I moved to the side just a little to watch their transaction. He stepped up to the counter, and before he could say one word, the young woman reached up to the cigarette rack above her and took out a pack of Pall Malls—soft-pack, regulars. She set them on the counter in front of him. He looked at them, then at her, then said his first words to her: "How did you know that's what I wanted?"

She smiled shyly. "Some things," she said. "I just know."

He paid and left.

Well, that's the kind of moment a novelist lives for, a moment loaded with intrigue, expectation, surprise. It connected directly with some of the things I'd been thinking about for most of my adult life—the war, what it meant to us and to

them, how it changed the psyche of the republic and the face of the globe. I did not serve in Vietnam, so such questions were large, complex abstractions to me. Suddenly, they were made real, the "something" outside directly colliding with the "something" inside. I had just gotten my first whiff of the new book.

What did this tiny moment in the history of the Vietnam War have to connect with inside me? Well, all that I was. All the hours of news-reel footage of dead soldiers and body counts I had watched. All the newsprint I'd read. All the stories from friends and acquaintances who'd gone to 'Nam. All the hours of reports, synopses, analyses. All the feature films, from *Coming Home* to *Apocalypse Now* and beyond. All of the 20 years I'd been wondering about this pivotal thing in my own history. All of this fuel rushed out to meet that moment of spark— the American vet having his mind read by a young Vietnamese refugee.

Leaving that liquor store on Harbor, I knew certainly that my next book would be an attempt to deal with those things and that I would set that book in Orange County, California. Why? Because there we have a place called Little Saigon that was and is the largest enclave of Vietnamese on earth, outside of Vietnam itself. I can remember my first forays into the clubs and bars of Little Saigon, notepad in pocket, mind literally reeling at all the "material" I was discovering. It was the discovery of a large part of myself that I had known was there but had no access to before. The mystery of that encounter, the tonnage of things left unsaid in that brief moment, stayed with me for the three years of writing *Little Saigon,* and beyond.

I had another similar moment, though it was less dramatic, as I was preparing to write my fourth novel. I was sitting on a patio chair on my deck, which overlooks Laguna Canyon. It was late afternoon, then it was evening, then it was night. My wife, suffering a brain tumor, was beside me. Our dogs were sprawled around us. We had watched the light fade into sunset, experiencing each increment of the growing night. We said hardly a word. Watching anything fade was a painful correlative to what we both knew was happening to her.

As we sat there and looked out to the hillsides, Catherine noted the odd way the hills formed what looked like a supine female (torso and legs) at night, and the way the distant lights of Laguna illuminated up from her middle. Cat named her "Lady of the Canyon." For a brief moment, I was filled with a new love for this suffering young woman, and for the house in which we lived, and for the hillsides that cradled us. It was an overwhelmingly powerful love, and almost unbearably sad. And I knew that my next book would be an attempt to celebrate that love somehow. The book became *Summer of Fear,* in which crime writer Russell Monroe tries to help heal his ill wife while a murderer stalks the city around him. It is a gut-wrenching, chaotic book—confessional, tortured, and dark. But it ends in hope and redemption. In some ways, that book is a fictionalized accounting of things that we wanted to come true. Cat never got to read the ending. But the Lady of the Canyon that she had noticed is in that novel, in fact, she plays an important part.

I offer these moments to demonstrate how strangely a book can begin. The emotions that draw one to the blank page are often vague, poorly understood, ephemeral. The writing then becomes a journey of discovery rather than a mission of execution. The fire burns and what it leaves behind is the book.

52
TRICKS OF THE WIZARD'S TRADE

By Susan Dexter

Fantasy is the oldest form of literature—the great umbrella that arches over *all* fiction. Fantasy is also a marketing category, shelved and intermingled with science fiction, wearing scaly dragons on its covers in place of shiny spaceships. Fantasy's themes spring from the collective unconscious. Fantasy is populated by archetypes and demons common to us all. Our dreams and our nightmares. Fairy tales.

It's *hard* to be original in this genre. But limits are illusions. Consider: We have but 26 letters in our alphabet. And they'd best be used in combinations readers will recognize as *words.* Now, *there's* a limit. Music? Even worse, but composers don't seem to mind that there are only so many notes to go around.

"Never been done before" may truly be impossible. But "Never been done like *that* before"? That sounds like a goal to me. *Star Wars* didn't wow the world because it was a *new* idea; it resonates with audiences because it's a very *old* story: a fairy tale, right down to the princess. Retell an old tale—do it in a fresh way, and your readers will gasp in wonder. Do it well, and you'll have editors drooling.

The first trick in a wizard's bag is this: Look at your sources of inspiration. Be a *reader,* before you begin to write. Read new fantasies. Keep up with the field. Read the classics. Comic books aren't forbidden fruit—just don't make them an exclusive diet. Read fairy tales. Read folklore. Study the magic and mythologies of many cultures. If you feed your subconscious properly, it will supply your storytelling needs.

Go to your public library. Breathe in the fresh air and book dust. Surf the Net later. No need to memorize the Dewey System to graze the shelves productively. The 200's are philosophy and religion—*all* religions. Folklore lives in the 398.2's—right next to the prettified fairy tales "retold for children." You'll find original folk tales that will make your hair stand on end and get your juices flowing. Arrowsmith's *Field Guide to the Little People* will convince you that elves are neither Disney critters nor the fantasy analogue of Vulcans, but beings far more ancient and interesting. *The Golden Bough,* Frazer's study of myth and religion, supplied the magical system my wizard Tristan used in *The Ring of Allaire* and its two sequels. I doubt that a thousand authors mining day and night could exhaust that book's possibilities.

Remember the hero has a *thousand* faces. If you confine your reading to role-playing manuals, the stirring high fantasy you hope to craft will be a pale, weak thing, a fifth-generation videotape. Recycled characters stuck in a plot that's a copy of an imitation of Tolkien won't excite an editor these days. Read to understand what the classic themes are. Tolkien based *The Lord of the Rings* solidly on the northern European mythic tradition. It's not a copy of anything, but we respond to it as something familiar.

Fantastic elements work only if you make *reality* real. If I carelessly give my horses "paws," will you believe what I tell you about dragons? So think about the nuts and bolts, and don't trust Hollywood to do it for you. Castles—where did people *live* in them? Surely everyone wasn't born a princess. Who grows the food, does the laundry, cleans up after the knights' horses? When you research actual medieval cultures, you'll turn up truths far stranger than anything you could *invent.* Your characters should have real lives, with routines, habits, responsibilities. Most of us have to work for a living, and while being a princess may be a full-time job, being an elf is not. My title character in *The Wind-Witch* stands out from the pack of fantasy heroines: Not only is she *not* a princess, but she has a job—two jobs: She's a farmer and a weaver. Getting her sheep through lambing season matters just as much to Druyan as warding off a barbarian invasion or discovering her magical talents. That makes her *real,* for all that she can literally whistle up a storm. Readers can identify with her.

Magic was the science of its day. Science is of fairly recent origin. Both science and magic seek to explain and control the natural world, usually for a man's benefit. Study belief systems. Decide what suits your story, and stick to that. Don't throw in random demons just because they sound cool. Plan your world, if you want it to work for you.

Maps are more than endpaper decorations, and you should start drawing one before you ever start writing your fantasy. Never mind your quest-bound characters: A map will keep *you,* the author, from getting lost. If the desperate ride from Castle A to Castle B takes three days, then the trip back from B to A can take *longer* once the pressure's off; but if the journey takes *less* time, you have major explaining to do. Maps can spare you such *faux pas.*

Maps can suggest plot solutions. In the real world, things are where they are for good reasons. Castles protect and are not built where there's nothing worth contesting. Towns are tied to trade; they grow where roads cross, beside safe harbors. As I began to write *The Wind-Witch,* I had established in an earlier book that my Esdragon had a cliffy coast and

treacherous seas. Now I needed it to suffer an invasion—by sea. Where could the invaders strike? Well, the Eral are after plunder, so they want towns. And Esdragon's towns—as in the real-world town of Cornwall, on which I based my fictional duchy—are mostly at the mouths of the rivers that drain the upland moors and reach the sea as broad estuaries. I put rivers on my map, decided which were navigable for any distance—and *presto!* I had many places for my raiders to plunder, distant from one another, spots for Druyan to try to protect from the back of her magic-bred horse.

A primitive map has charm—perhaps one of your characters drew it—but there are tricks to convincing cartography. You can't draw a straight line without a ruler? Relax! Nobody can, and there are rather few straight lines in nature anyway. Now get yourself a real map. Any continent or bit of one will do. Put tracing paper over your selection. Pencil some outlines, imagining how the coast changes as the sea level rises—or falls. Hills become islands, islands change into peninsulas. Valleys become arms of the sea. The combination of wind and wave nibbles cliffs, isolating outcrops. It's your pick.

Change the scale. Use an island to make a continent, or vice versa. Turn your map upside down. When I designed Esdragon and Calandra, I basically used Europe—but I stood it on end, balanced on the tip of Portugal. Copy the shape of the water spot on your ceiling or the last patch of snow lingering on your sidewalk.

Study actual maps. Where do rivers flow? How do they look? Mountain ranges trap rain and alter climate. So where will your forest be? Your dry grasslands? Your band of unicorn hunters needs to cross the Dragonspikc Mountains. Where are the passes? Are they open year-round or only seasonally? The threat of being trapped by an early winter can add drama. A map will remind you of that.

God, as Mies van der Rohe said, is in the details. As the creator of your paper world, you have responsibilities. *You* must concern yourself with the details, for there is no *Fodor's Guide to Middle Earth,* or Esdragon, or your elfin kingdom. Which brings us to the Rule of Names.

Basic rules for name use apply to all fiction. Just as you vary your sentence lengths, so you should choose names with differing lengths and sounds. Your names must not all begin with the same letter of the alphabet. Characters and countries must not be easily confused with one another. A name that brings to mind an over-the-counter remedy will not work for your hero.

World-makers need to name *everything.* Adam got off easy doing just the animals! I need to name kingdoms, heroes, continents, castles, islands, mountains, rivers, lakes, gods, horses, magic swords and cats. Unlike the author of the police procedural, I can't get my names by stabbing a random finger into the phone book.

Names in fantasy present special pleasures and certain problems. Names must always be apt, but you can toss off grand heroic names without the twinge of conscience you'd feel about giving such names to real children who'd be attending real-world schools. Remember, though, that names are tools. They make your invented world convincing and solid, but they must evoke the feel of *your* world. You can't just put the *Encyclopedia of Mythology* into a blender. In folkloric tradition, names have serious power: To know a creature's true name is to control it. That power carries over into fiction. Poorly chosen names can strain your reader's willing suspension of disbelief until it snaps. And then where are you?

You will be wise not to leave your naming to chance, or to the last minute. Under the pressure of mid-paragraph, you will either heave up a melange of x's, q's, and z's, or you'll clutch and settle for names as bland as tapioca. Planning ahead avoids both extremes. Compile a list of useful names.

You can keep that list in your PC or on the backs of old envelopes, but a small notebook is the handiest. I use an address book—durably hardbound, alphabetized pages, large enough not to be easily mislaid. I list names down the left margins, circling those I use and noting where. I may reuse a name from time to time, certain names being as common in Esdragon as John is in this world.

I glean and gather from sources readily available to all. Start with baby-name books. The older the better; you aren't after the trendy and popular. Copy whatever catches your eye. Histories of popular names offer archaic forms and less common variants. Rhisiart, in *The Wizard's Shadow,* is a name that is simply a Welsh version of Richard. The Welsh struggle to represent with their alphabet the sounds of a name they got from Norman French gives the name an exotic look.

Invent your own names. Dickens did it. Lord Dunsany was a master at it. Tolkien invented whole *languages* and took his names from them. You may enjoy playing with sounds. When I wrote *The Ring of Allaire,* I struggled for a week for a proper name for Valadan, my immortal warhorse. Wanting a proud, noble, brave name, I began with *val,* from valiant, and went on from there. Whereas Kessallia in *The Prince of III Luck* just popped out of my subconscious one day. Learn to spot a "keeper" like that.

Use the phone book. Use the newspaper—all those lists of engagements, weddings, obituaries. Chop off the front half

of a name, or use just the ending. Stick a syllable of one name onto part of another. Minor changes yield fresh names. Switching just one letter made Robert into *Rohart,* and gave Druyan's brother a familiar yet not ordinary name.

Watch movie credits. Watch the Olympics—you'll hear scads of less usual names, like Oksana, and they're *spelled* for you, right on the screen. What could be easier?

Once you have your names, use them wisely. Pick those that fit your story and its cultures. Save the rest for your next project.

The true test of imagination may be to name a cat, as Samuel Butler said. I doubt that correctly naming a dragon is far down the difficulty scale, though. World-making and myth-making are not for the fainthearted, nor the short attention span. The good news: No license is required! Only the will to do the job right—which is the *real* power behind *any* wizard's spell.

NONFICTION: ARTICLES AND BOOKS

53
SLEUTH, HUNTER, BIOGRAPHER

By Linda Simon

One of my favorite biographies is Richard Holmes's *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*. In it, Holmes does not give us what we might expect—a chronological study of one subject—but instead, he records his own travels in search of some great British Romantic writers, including Robert Louis Stevenson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, and Mary Wollstonecraft. One admiring critic summed up the book's merits: "This exhilarating book, part biography, part autobiography, shows the biographer as sleuth and huntsman, tracking his subjects through space and time."

Not all biographies are quite as exhilarating, but the critic's words could be applied to any biographer's task: We are all part sleuth, part hunter as we travel into the past and through unfamiliar landscapes in search of our subject. For writers with boundless curiosity and a genuine respect for other people's lives, writing biography is a satisfying and illuminating project.

Your subject

Biographical subjects may be found anywhere. Your mother's uncle, the one who emigrated from Norway at the turn of the century, may be as interesting a subject as a renowned artist or statesman. A biographical subject need not be famous to the world; it is up to you, as biographer, to make that subject interesting to others. If your subject is a family member or friend, he or she may have lived a private, unheralded life—but a life no less worthy of a biography. Other subjects may have touched fame, but never achieved it for themselves. Jean Strouse, the biographer of Alice James, sister of the novelist Henry and philosopher William, coined the term "semi-private lives" to describe men and women who lived in the shadows of more famous people, but whose own lives were fairly ordinary. One of my own subjects, Alice B. Toklas, lived a "semi-private" life in comparison with her more famous companion, Gertrude Stein. And another of my subjects, Margaret Beaufort, also lived a "semi-private" life, in comparison with her more famous son, King Henry VII, and her notorious grandson, Henry VIII.

Writing about Margaret Beaufort gave me a chance to explore the lives of women in fifteenth-century England. Although Beaufort surely was a member of the aristocracy, still she shared some experiences— childbirth, for example, and widowhood—with other women of the time. Initially, I decided to write about her because she was the matriarch of the House of Tudor; but as I explored various sources, I became increasingly interested in the ways that she helped me understand the daily life of medieval women.

Margaret Beaufort, not yet sixteen, was living in Wales at the end of her first pregnancy. Her husband was in England at the time, and when labor began, she was alone, without family, in a cold, stone castle, unable to speak the language of her servants. I found a fifteenth-century gynecological manual to help me understand how young Margaret would have been cared for during childbirth. She delivered her son in a bare room, with walls a foot thick, tended by midwives who brought her strange oils and potions and who sat beside her on an oddly shaped birthing stool. Surely Margaret knew that her life—like that of all women at the time—was at risk from childbirth; and just as surely she knew that infant mortality was frighteningly high. But the birth went well: She lived and so did her son. And the thin, frail young woman quickly rallied to a newly-discovered strength when it came time to name the boy: She refused to name him after his Welsh father or grandfather, but instead insisted on a regal English name. He would be Henry, and he would be king.

Even though Margaret Beaufort was a noble woman, there were few sources available to me that gave evidence of her life and experiences, especially as a child and young wife and mother. But there were enough sources, scarce as they were, to enable me to feel confident that I could reveal the significant events and context for her life.

Make sure there are sources

As much as you may care about your subject, you cannot write a biography without sufficient historical and biographical sources. Those sources include letters, diaries, journals, interviews, memoirs, creative writing, and works of art such as paintings or films. Such sources are available in many collections—some private (in your parents' attic), some public (in libraries or museums).

The reference room of a good local or college library has many reference sources that may help you find out what material, published and unpublished, is available about your subject. Among these is the *Biography Index*, which lists references to books and more than two thousand periodicals for a wide range of subjects, including major figures in the arts, sports, science, and politics. You may also want to consult one of the many standard biographical dictionaries, such

as *Dictionary of National Biography* (for British figures) or the *Dictionary of American Biography*. The *Biographical Dictionaries Master Index* can direct you to an entry about your subject in one hundred biographical dictionaries. For contemporary subjects, you may want to consult *Current Biography*, a monthly journal that began publication in 1940, offering biographical information on men and women in the news. Many public libraries subscribe to this journal and keep bound issues on their reference shelves. In addition to these general dictionaries, there are many specialized biographical dictionaries focused on gender, race, profession, or time period.

To find unpublished material about your subject (manuscripts or letters your subject may have written), you may consult directories of libraries that contain archives or manuscript collections. These directories include *American Literary Manuscripts*, the *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States, and The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.* Tracking down your subject in these reference books is often slow and tedious work, but it is a necessary first step in the research process.

Once you locate sources for your subject, you may be able to order photocopies of the material you need. Sometimes, however, you may need to travel to collections to do research. Before you leave on a research trip, however, it is helpful to know as precisely as possible what the library holds, what you are looking for, and how much material is available. If you plan a two-day trip and discover two weeks of reading, you will leave the library frustrated.

If your subject has been written about before, a previous biography can be invaluable in giving you a start for research. Consult the book's bibliography and notes for references to library archives. But don't stop there. Libraries are always in the process of adding to their collections. New material about your subject may have become available since the publication of books or articles. It's your job to find that new material.

Stay organized

Any researcher needs to be well-organized. For my own work, I keep notes in three places: file folders, which contain photocopies of sources; 5"x7" index cards, on which I write notes taken from books or articles; and computer files, where I also keep notes from readings, interviews, and other sources. At the end of a project, I may have several drawers of file folders, hundreds and hundreds of index cards, and many computer files—far more material than will ever make its way into the finished book. But this excess is necessary so I can select what I need for a coherent and energetic narrative.

Biographers find their own way of organizing notes: Mine is to keep index cards devoted to the names of people that figure in my subject's life. Whenever someone is mentioned in a letter or book, I make an index card. When I see a reference to that person in another source, I pull out the card and take notes. In that way, I find it easy to compose small biographical sketches of the person when he or she first appears in the biography.

Other biographers may organize material chronologically or they may organize notes related to events in their subject's life. There is no right way to organize, but you need to be consistent and meticulous in both note-taking and documentation. Write down the author, title, and publication information for every published book that you use, and make sure you note the name of the library for every unpublished letter or manuscript you use. Your readers will expect careful documentation in whatever you publish. For writers who need to brush up on documentation, such reference sources as the *MLA Handbook* or the *Chicago Manual of Style* are helpful.

Keep asking questions

As a biographer, you do not serve as a conduit through which your subject tells his or her own life. Instead, you are an active questioner about that life. You are always in search of understanding why and how your subject acted, rather than merely chronicling those actions.

You are interested in relationships, in motivation, in the dimensions of your subject's personality that may have been hidden from public view.

The questions that you ask about a subject's life reflect ways of understanding human behavior that come largely from your own experiences. If, for example, you discover that your subject was a person who tried to control or manipulate the behavior of others, your own experiences with such a person will color the way you portray and understand such behavior. Some biographers also rely on psychological theory to explain behavior, bringing to their sources ideas from such famous thinkers as Freud, Jung, Karen Horney, or a host of other theorists. If you decide to take such an approach, you need to remember that your sources, however rich they are, do not provide as complete a "case history" as a psychoanalyst might glean from years of therapy sessions. Usually, it is safer to *suggest* a theorist's explanation for your subject's behavior, rather than to claim that the explanation is airtight.

Similarly, some biographers bring to their work assumptions about gender or class that reflect the work of feminist or cultural critics. You need to be careful, though, about ascribing your subject's dreams and desires to social forces or personal expectations that may or may not have been applicable at the time in which your subject lived.

Create contexts

Biographers are interested in more than the events of one person's life. They must look at the contexts—historical, cultural, and physical—in which that person lived. Every public event, of course, does not affect each person in the same way; still, the biographer needs to be aware of the history swirling around his or her subject: How did a war, an economic depression, or attitudes of racism or sexism affect the subject's life? How was the subject shaped by growing up on a farm in central Kansas, in a castle in Wales, on the city streets of nineteenth-century Manhattan? "You pick up things spending time on the native ground, taking your time, listening, poking through the old local papers," said David McCullough, biographer of Harry Truman and Theodore Roosevelt. Sometimes, though, it is not possible for a biographer to travel to that "native ground." Richard Holmes came to France in 1964 hoping to discover the landscape that Robert Louis Stevenson had traversed in 1878. In some places, the hills, the woods, and the villages seemed unchanged from the late nineteenth century; in other places. Holmes wandered "dazed and disappointed" because sites had so greatly altered. In the end, however, armed with Stevenson's travel diary and letters, Holmes used his talents as "Baskerville Hound," as he put it, to reinvent the reality of Stevenson's life. *Footsteps* testifies to the achievement of his —and of any biographer's— goal: to enter the inner landscape of another human being's mind and feelings, and to share the adventure of that discovery with readers.

54
WRITE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

By Donald M. Murray

I don't know what to write. I sit down and nothing happens. My mind is blank.

Good. That's where the best writing begins.

"But I don't have anything worth writing. No one would be interested in what I would write."

Wrong. We all have important stories to tell, but we have to begin in ignorance so that we pass through what we have said before to what we can say anew. To write well, to write what earns us readers, we need to have the courage to write what we don't yet know.

Many who want to write wait—and wait and wait—until they know all about their topic before they begin to write. Writers know—but have to keep learning—that ignorance is the beginning, not the end. Writing instructs. We write what we don't know to discover what we know that we didn't know we knew.

Here are some techniques of a writer who has taught himself to harvest ignorance, writing from not knowing to knowing:

Celebrate ignorance

I've been writing for publication for almost 60 years, and yet there are mornings when the screen is blank and the mind is blank. What I have written, thought, felt before is stripped away. I start to panic, and then I will say something that is new to me and may be new to readers, if I have the courage to confront my ignorance.

The other morning I faced the familiar but still terrifying emptiness; I started, as I usually do, with description, recording the details in the decor of the new restaurant where we ate last night. The walls and phony rafters were hung with newly manufactured antique tools. I started describing the mill in which some of those tools would have been used a hundred years or more ago.

This draft accelerates and takes me through the page to the looms that clattered in New England textile mills when I was a child and earlier. The words reveal a grandfather I never knew, fixing a loom, and my grandmother at the loom, carrying her firstborn, my father. I have a column about the fashionably restored mills, filled with shops, eateries, and ghosts.

Respect your difference

I was a skinny kid who was embarrassingly strange to my parents, weird to my classmates. I asked the questions no one else asked: If I could not drink milk with lobster because it was poisonous, why was my mother trying to poison me at the church picnic by demanding I eat the minister's wife's lobster bisque? What I said in class, on the playground, at dances and in the football locker room brought strange looks and set me apart.

But when I wrote, my eccentric vision of the world brought me publication. During the Korean War I kept writing editorials that were strange in form—some were very short stories, others were a former infantryman's view of military strategy—and I was awarded, to my and my family's astonishment, a Pulitzer Prize. I began to accept my difference.

Find your obsessions

School and society try to make us well rounded, equally interested in many things, but writers are obsessed with a few concerns. They have small acreage but work it over and over again for a lifetime.

We lived in my grandmother's house, and after she had her stroke I started each day of my childhood getting up first and seeing if Grandma was still alive; I did badly in school, dropping out twice before flunking out of high school; I saw infantry combat in the paratroops in World War II; I have had a lifetime fascination with the twin crafts of writing and drawing; we lost a daughter when she was 20; I am concerned with my wife's and my own aging.

There you have it. In trying to deal with these few obsessions I have published more than two dozen books, written hundreds of poems, and thousands of newspaper and magazine articles. Pay attention to what you need to understand and write your way to understanding.

Make the familiar unfamiliar

When I am bored, I stop, look, and listen to the specific, revealing details of the life swirling around me. I celebrate

the life I am living with awareness—what is being done and *not* being done, what is being said and *not* being said, what has changed and what *should* be changed, what answers need questions, what solutions need problems, how people are reacting and *not* reacting to each other. The familiar world becomes unfamiliar, the ordinary extraordinary, the commonplace uncommon.

Trust accident

In writing about the eating habits in our Yankee-Scot-dull home, I was trying to list the conventional hamburger and boiled potatoes and found myself writing about my father's love for calves liver, and that led me, by accident, to his sharing more than his only child wanted to know about the women he did *not* marry, and that led me to a new understanding of his longings.

In trying to describe my mother I write a tangled sentence: "A friend is nursing his dying mother, and that brings back discomforting memories of my own mother with whom I still have strained relations, years after her death, but I have to remember she did care for my invalid grandmother—up at night, bedsores and bed pans—but it wasn't so much about love. That old woman in the bed terrified her, and, of course, I can't forget the bills her brothers folded into her hands during their weekly visits."

Two instructive accidents: The tangled sentence, which I can untangle—"Mother didn't only care for her bedridden mother out of love and Baptist duty, but for the cash pressed into her hands when her brothers visited."

Out of a bad sentence a good one. And more important, a hint of my mother's motivations that may illuminate a character in a story.

And when I typed "strained relations," it came out "stained relations." My subconscious goes to work on the "stained relations" I've had with family, friends, at work, in the neighborhood. Another fortunate accident.

Collect and connect

It is the job of the writer to collect specific information and connect it, to create patterns of meaning, to place information in a context. My most meaningful connections come when I write what I don't yet understand.

In writing about my infantry war and wondering what officers saw in me that caused them to give me so many lonely missions—delivering messages through German territory, for example—I realized I was more comfortable in the surrealistic confusion of combat war than most of my fellow soldiers. In a draft I asked myself why, and connected my childhood, where I learned to survive chaos and contradiction, with my experiences in war. That became another column.

Line—an image, a word, or fragment of language—caught out of the corner of the eye or ear, often precipitates my writing what I do not yet know. Talking to myself I hear myself say, "I was most alive among the dying and the dead," and I start to set down the contradictory feelings during combat that have grown into a poetry manuscript.

The precipitating line contains a tension that demands to be released, a contradiction, an interesting distortion, an unexpected connection, an answer without a question, an end to a story that I must begin. The line itches, and I must scratch.

Play with leads

Writing the lead—the first paragraphs of the news story that give the heart of the story first and then expand on it—was the trick that made it possible for me when I worked on rewrite, to take notes over the phone and turn out 30 or 40 stories a shift on subjects I did not understand until I wrote the stories.

Each lead is a compressed draft. It reveals the subject, the writer's attitude toward the subject, the voice, the direction, the form and order of a piece of writing. As an apprentice magazine writer I would write as many as 150 first lines, first paragraphs, first pages to discover the focus and direction, the voice and melody of what I finally learned. Now I write as many leads in my head as on paper, trying to say what I do not yet know needs to be said in ways I do not yet know it can be said. Eventually one lead points me toward where I may find the right focus and direction.

Join me tomorrow morning. Write what you don't know you know.

55
CREATIVE NONFICTION WRITING

By Rita Berman

What is creative nonfiction? is it a new genre of writing? An oxymoron? Fictionalized facts? While it sounds like a contradiction in terms, creative nonfiction is a new description for an old skill: that of writing well-crafted salable articles. For today's market, however, nonfiction writers are allowed, even encouraged, to incorporate certain fiction techniques and to use the first-person "I."

Formerly, the formal style, using a neutral voice, is now recognized as distancing the writer from the reader, whereas writing from the first-person viewpoint can help with reader identification that is further magnified if the writer's experiences or comments resonate or connect with the reader's life. That is why seemingly ordinary concerns of everyday life, such as health, diet, sex, money, and travel can provide good potential topics for creative nonfiction. The range of creative nonfiction includes feature articles, memoirs, essays, personality profiles, travel pieces, how-to's and even contemporary, political, or other social issues pieces.

Because editors have switched from asking "just give me the facts," to "tell me a story," *how* you tell the story is where creative nonfiction comes in. In other words, the article remains nonfiction because the content is based on fact and is not created or made up, but you have more freedom in the actual writing of it. That calls for embellishing and enhancing, narrating instead of reporting, dressing up the bare facts by using fiction techniques such as setting of mood, providing description of place, expressing emotion, and often incorporating dialogue or flashbacks.

Before describing some of the fiction elements you could use, it might be helpful to review the basic structure of an article. You must catch the reader's interest in the introduction; in the next section identify your topic; in the body of the piece present your material; and close by drawing a conclusion or repeating a key point.

Your task is to write your article like a storyteller, not as a gatherer of facts. Take those facts and filter them through your eyes. Provide details so that you add to, but don't change the information you have gathered. And as you write, keep your potential readers in mind, so that you angle the story to their needs.

My article on graphology, "Unlocking Secrets in Handwriting Can Help Hiring" (*Triangle Business*), began with an opening quote from my source, Mary Gallagher, a handwriting expert:

> "Looking at how applicants cross their t's or dot their i's is one way to decide whether to hire an individual." So said Mary Gallagher, a certified graphoanalyst. More than 5.000 companies use handwriting analysis as a hiring aid. . . . Employers need the edge to know not only what the applicant projects but also what he or she is capable of doing.

Having aroused the readers' interest, a brief summary about the history of graphology came next, and then I continued with examples of what handwriting might reveal. Quotes from other people who had used Gallagher's services, including a manager who had ignored her findings, gave balance to the piece.

Framing the story

For this particular piece, I used the technique of framing the story to make a satisfactory ending: I circled around to the beginning by referring to the opening paragraph. For creative nonfiction, this is an excellent way of tying the article together, satisfying the curiosity you have aroused and leaving the reader with a resonant image of all that has gone before. You might draw a conclusion, make an evaluation, or point out a question that still needs an answer.

In this instance I ended by informing readers of how companies obtain a sample of handwriting from applicants in order to study it; they have prospective employees state in their own handwriting why they believe they are qualified for the job.

Atmosphere and mood

Specific details are highly significant in nonfiction to help the reader visualize the place or the event you are describing. They add interest and color and convey atmosphere and mood to the setting, locale, time of year, and even the weather in your article. General statements, such as, "We went to a museum, which we found interesting," fall flat without supporting detail. Use fiction techniques to describe what you saw in the museum.

Make note of your impressions and reactions as you conduct your research. Whether you are taking a tour, arriving at a new destination, or interviewing someone for a personal profile, these impressions and observations may turn out to be the lead or heart of your piece when you come to write it.

Example: In a piece about redevelopment and housing in Jamaica for *Town and Country Planning Journal,* I opened with a description of what I had seen in the drive from the airport:

> The coast road from the airport is a narrow lane overlooked by small and large estates. Plantations, old great houses, and tiny country towns dot the hillside. Snaking by resort hotels and sugar-cane fields, some of which are now being developed into housing estates, the life of the country appeared before us as we turned each bend on the main north-coast road.

Writing in first person

Your nonfiction pieces will come alive creatively when you incorporate your personal observations. Use all of your senses. Tell your readers what you tasted, saw, touched, heard. ... By personalizing the piece, it becomes your own. No other article will have that voice— your voice.

Instead of saying that there were vendors at the site and leaving it at that, I described my encounter with them in "Spain, New and Old Faces," published in *Leader Magazine:*

> ... As we stepped down from the bus, we were accosted by a group of women darting in front of us, each waving a lace tablecloth. Having caught our attention, they shouted prices at us in Spanish, jabbing their fingers in the air to indicate how many thousands of pesetas they wanted.
>
> To indicate that I wanted a smaller cloth, and round, I made a circle with my hands. They understood. An older woman held up a tablecloth while a young girl held up five fingers, 50,000 pesetas. I countered with two fingers. She shook her head and held up four fingers. I then showed cash—25,000 pesetas (approximately $25). She took two bills, but wanted "another finger," total of $30. No deal. I pointed to an embroidered rectangular cloth and the finger shaking started all over again. ... I got both tablecloths for $53.

By revealing the interaction that took place, I enhanced the story and by adding color and humor, made the piece more interesting than if I had baldly stated that I spoke no Spanish, but we came to a deal.

Reveal your characters

Creative nonfiction is frequently about people. We're all curious about how other people live, what they do, and how they think. For personality profiles, draw on the external cues that you observed while doing the interview. Describe the subject's quirks, mannerisms, or appearance, what he wore, how he moved his body as he spoke. Movement can reveal and imply at the same time. "Shifting in his chair" conveys an image quite different from "settling in his chair."

Dialogue

The fiction writer makes up dialogue, but in creative nonfiction you take the dialogue from your interview notes or tapes, using direct quotes from your sources, instead of paraphrasing. This adds verbal color to your piece and encourages your readers to draw their own conclusions—an excellent way to present a controversial topic or viewpoint.

I used provocative statements about women and their reactions to conflict as my lead for a piece for *Women Executive's Bulletin:*

> Most women fear conflict—perhaps more than men fear it. . . . Many women give contradictory signals. For example, when they are under stress and trying to communicate, they often smile, unconsciously suggesting to the other person that this isn't such a serious situation, according to Dr. Ruth D. Anderson, Associate Professor of Speech Communication.

Next, I offered some significant details on how we learn to communicate:

> The communication skills we learn early in life are those that we use when we reach managerial and executive positions: to accept conflict as a normal, everyday occurrence, then to understand how to handle conflict. Think back to how your mother, or any other female authority figure in the household you grew up in, dealt with conflict. If she screamed, do you scream?

Here's another "tell me more" quote that I used for a general-interest article on buying or selling a house, a concern of many Americans:

> "The consumer has the right to bargain," said Andrew M. Barr, a real estate broker. "It isn't a rigid situation. Some houses are easier to sell than others. Why charge 6% when you can do it for 3% and sell it in a week? That's fair to the consumer and fair to us."

Published in the *Virginia Cardinal,* my article explored the sensitive topic of brokers' commission and informed the reader about available alternatives in the Washington D.C. area, the flexible fee system, or using a consumer-oriented advisory service.

Flashbacks

Flashbacks are another fiction device you might consider using to provide a change of pace. By means of the flashback you can expand your story and take the reader in a direction different from where you began. Example: "As the train drew into the station, I remembered the last time I visited London. . . ." Or, "As he spoke of his father I was remembering our first meeting, more than 20 years ago. . . ."

With this technique, you can introduce something significant from the past that has bearing on the present. To help the reader make the transition back to the present, insert a transitional phrase or word, such as "now" or "today," and continue with the present-day account.

Writing about my own experience as a temporary worker some years ago, I used a flashback to go back to when the

Kelly Girl organization began in 1946, transitioning to a change of name of Kelly Temporary Services in the 1980's, then continued with more of my work experiences and ended with a forecast about the future direction of temporary work.

Know your readership

As you write, keep in mind the readers you want to reach; you need to know for whom you are writing. This calls for studying your possible markets before you commence writing, research that will be helpful when you shape the story. For example, some magazines publish only descriptive essays, while others prefer nuts-and-bolts information. After you have studied the market listings as well as writers' guidelines and read several issues of the magazine, you will know what the readers like and how to aim your articles to their preferred style.

Knowing my readership helped me slant my piece, "Pick up on the Shell Game," for *The Army, Navy, Air Force Times Magazine.* I opened with:

> When Navy man Jim Wadsworth was stationed in New Guinea 30 years ago, he stooped over and picked up a shell on the beach. By that simple act, he found himself hooked on a hobby—shell collecting.
>
> Shelling has given many military families special pleasures. Any number can play; there are no sex or age barriers. You don't have to be an expert or spend a cent, unless you want to become a professional shell collector. Shells can be traded with other collectors or bought like stamps from a dealer.

That paragraph linked the hobby of shell collecting to military families, who were the readers of this particular magazine. By focusing the angle of the story to those readers, I achieved publication.

Creative nonfiction is not a new genre, but a new description for articles based on fact but written in fictional form. Creative nonfiction uses mood, setting, descriptions of place, action, people, senses, thoughts, and feelings. It may use dialogue and flashbacks. The first-person viewpoint adds to reader identification, catches their attention. Your personal impressions and comments can help make your nonfiction unique.

56
WRITING AND SELLING YOUR TRAVEL ARTICLES

By Janet Steinberg

Dear me, the sky is falling. Or so it may seem to the many hopeful writers trying to break into that grossly misunderstood profession known as "Travel Writing."

To those on the outside, travel writing heretofore appeared to be an illusive magic carpet, floating you off on exciting journeys to seven continents. Sunrise in Bali . . . icebergs in Antarctica . . . pyramids along the Nile. "And," those travel-writer wannabes think, "all of this will be free, and mine for the asking, if only I write an article about it."

Those of us on the inside know better. With editors insisting that their travel writers not accept freebies, and those same editors refusing to pay the writer's expenses, we fear that the professional travel writer may well be on the way to extinction. However, until that happens, there will always be those of us dedicated to the profession who will continue to travel, continue to write about our journeys, and continue to find a way to get published.

Struggling neophytes determined to make a living in this limited field may find themselves facing instant frustration and starvation. But if you are endowed with endless stamina, insatiable curiosity, high energy, unfaltering determination, and the financial means to get you through those first lean years, you will find it a most rewarding profession.

The following tips on writing and marketing travel articles have been garnered from my two decades of travel writing experience. With allowances for individual personality, interests, and style, they should also work for the aspiring travel writer.

Open with a powerful lead: Begin your article with such a strong or catchy lead that readers can't put the article down until they've read

everything you wanted to tell them. Let it paint a picture . . . arouse curiosity ... or even anger. And don't let go until your very last paragraph takes them back to that engaging lead.

For example, one of my successful travel articles began: "I'm just wild about Harry." Playing upon the old song title, it compels readers to learn just who Harry is and what he is doing in the travel section. "I love calories! I love cholesterol! I love Fauchon!" Who or what is Fauchon? Curious readers have to read beyond this award-winning opening. "Auschwitz is the flip side of Disneyworld." This first sentence of another travel article instilled anger in some readers until they continued to read on for the explanation. But they did read on!

Anecdotes make good openers: Quote the joke that the cab driver told you, or begin with the tour guide's remark that put the entire busload of tourists into stitches.

Write as if you are talking to your best friend: Pretend you've phoned to tell your friend about the wonderful place you've just visited. Describe which sights are not to be missed and which are a waste of time and money. Tell her where to eat—in a variety of price ranges—and what dish must absolutely be tried. Go beyond the over-hyped shopping malls to the unusual boutiques that specialize in goods unique to that area. Recount with enthusiasm and delight the joys you experienced; weep for the sadness you saw. Communicate with your readers. Don't try to impress them.

Engage your readers senses: Immerse your readers in the destination and make them eager to go there. Through your words, they should be able to *see* the Great Wall of China . . . *hear* the cacophony of sounds in the Casbah . . . *smell* the spice-laden, cow-dunged streets of India.

Write to entertain: Travelers, both real and armchair, need to be entertained as well as informed, otherwise you will lose them after the first few paragraphs. Your facts must be current and informative but not boring. If it's in-depth research your readers want, they will turn to an encyclopedia or comprehensive guidebook. Your job is that of the surrogate. Sort through the books and visit the attractions. Then write the article in a natural, readable style.

Breathe new life into the old: Make antiquity come alive as you uncover the past. Your readers might have difficulty picturing Mark Antony and Cleopatra walking along the Arcadian Way in Ephesus, Turkey. But, a mention of Charlton Heston riding down those ancient marble streets in his chariot will conjure up a myriad of images in the minds of millions of movie buffs.

Find unexplored subjects and unique angles: For the most part, travel editors are not interested in general destination pieces. When you visit a place, think of all the subjects connected to that place. Then go one step further, and look for the oft-neglected hidden treasure. Skip the overdone St. Mark's Square in Venice, Italy; instead, write about Venice's little-

known ghetto. Forget the tourist-trap restaurants in the old walled city of Dubrovnik; instead, write about that secluded seafood spot a half-hour down the road. A day in Rio may be overdone for most publications, but a day on nearby Paqueta Island is new and refreshing.

Focus on the "must do's": Evaluate each destination from the viewpoint of someone who was never there. Focus on places and things your readers *must* see or do. Make them realize they may never come this way again. And, if you haven't experienced something important yourself, give them a quote from someone who has.

Be sure your articles are timely: Unless you have a regular market for your travel piece and are assured of publication, don't write about events taking place currently or in the near future. By the time an editor gets around to reading—and publishing—your story, it may be dated.

Don't write about an area that has been receiving negative publicity. A Mediterranean cruise story won't sell right after an outbreak of violence in the Gulf, nor will an Eastern European story immediately following a disaster such as the Chernobyl explosion. If Hurricane Gilbert has just devastated the Caribbean, this is not the time to submit articles about the island you visited last Christmas.

Think ahead: Jump the gun on the laggards. If a city is planning a bicentennial in two years, now is the time to query a magazine. If the local senior citizens club sponsors an annual motor coach tour for fall leafing, query seniors' magazines a year ahead to see if they'd like an on-the-coach report.

Rely on roundups: Grouping information about a subject into one article is a favorite of editors. The world's best—golf courses, tennis camps, adventure travel, honeymoon havens; the world's worst or best—restaurants, cruises, shopping, etc.

Share your travel tips: Readers want you to tell them how to travel lightly, what type of luggage you recommend, how to deal with jet lag, and what to do about nasty customs officials.

Be your own photographer: Even though you may not know a shutter from a lens, learn to take your own photos, and never travel without a camera. Presenting a complete package to an editor gives you a leading edge. Smart cameras make it easy for dumb photographers. Today's fully automatic equipment gives even amateur photographers a chance to illustrate stories with one-of-a kind shots not available from stock files. Sophisticated photographic skills, though desirable, are no longer essential. Take it from one who doesn't know a Nikon aperture from a Beethoven overture! All you need is a good eye and a smart camera.

Don't pretend to be what you're not: Sophisticated readers want travel articles by sophisticated writers. Adventurers want to read articles about trekking the Himalayas by someone who has trekked them. Leave the golf vacations to the golfers, the shopping sprees to the shoppers. Don't try to write for a publication that features a lifestyle that is totally foreign to you.

Go behind the scenes: For example, the kitchen at Air France; the flight attendants' training center at Singapore Airlines; the semi-annual sale at Harrods; the cockpit of the *Concorde;* the kennel of the *QE2;* the shop on the *Orient Express.* These are topics not likely to be overdone.

Be what you really are: Let your readers know that even travel writers have fears and emotions. "Sure," I write, "I'm afraid of skyjackers and terrorists. Of course, I prayed when our Nepalese plane engine failed, and we turned back to Kathmandu. Certainly an outbreak of meningococcal meningitis in Delhi just prior to my trip there made me nervous. Undoubtedly, I panicked when the Chinese navy encircled our cruise ship, which had unknowingly sailed into the midst of their maneuvers. A cannon at one's porthole is most unsettling!"

Once you've assured readers that it's normal to have fears, tell them what precautions to take to alleviate those fears. Call the State Department in Washington, D.C., for security alerts; the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, for medical advice.

Be humble: It's hard to be humble when you're having a grand time, but above all, don't become jaded or patronizing to your readers. Write *to* them, not *above* them. Don't try to appear as the *boti vivant* by flaunting how much you know or showing off how many places you've been. A tongue-in-cheek "snob" piece can be fun, as long as your readers are in on the joke. If you want to use foreign words, local jargon, or complicated dialects for local color or to set the mood, be sure to provide a simple translation or explanation.

Be human: Keep the human element in your writing. When you write about facilities for people with disabilities, you must include all the physical details, but don't neglect the emotional aspects—the feelings of a disabled person who has been on a cruise ship or climbed the Great Wall of China. Let your readers know how other travelers feel and have managed in spite of their disabilities.

Be fair: Advise your readers honestly of any problems or shortcomings, but don't try to build your ego by wiping the

destination off the map. When I found a particular Jamaican hotel to be dirty, I wrote that "roaches romped in dresser drawers." When writing about an obviously overpriced Florida attraction, I advised "Save your money, unless a smile on your grandchild's face is worth $30." When describing the social structure of the QE2, it was difficult to state tactfully the difference between First Class and Transatlantic Class. I simply said, "leisure suits in lieu of tuxedos." Everyone understood.

Be professional: If you're going to be a travel writer, you must travel, travel, travel. And all along the way, you must pry, you must probe, and you must ask questions—and you must not give up until you get answers. Library research is fine as a *supplement* to travel, not as a *replacement.* For authenticity and credibility, let your readers know you've been to the spot about which you are writing. Describe something you ate or something you bought. Quote a local resident. Verify facts and figures that are often mixed up by local guides. Don't write from a travel brochure; readers can peruse those without your help.

Include consumer information: Your article should give a sense of place. Limit the number of dates, figures, etc., in the body of the article. Costs, documentation requirements, weather, local currency, and other service details should be relegated to an informative sidebar.

Give editors what they want: A long-term relationship with an editor is directly dependent upon the reliability of your work. Many travel writers offer readability, but fewer offer credibility. Be accurate, and always submit clean copy. No matter how enjoyable and informative your article may be, an editor will reject a messy manuscript rather than suffer eye strain trying to decipher it. And above all, spell the editor's name correctly! Whether you think it's right or not, send a query and SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope) when editors request it. Familiarize yourself with the writing style of the publication you're aiming for, and with the number of words in an average article. Editors like writers who make their jobs easier.

Think beyond the travel section: The travel sections of newspapers now rely mostly on staff writers, but you can pitch your work to other sections of the paper. Send that French restaurant piece to the food section, the Italian shopping piece to the fashion section, the Poconos piece to the weddings section, and the Smoky Mountain fish tale to the sports page. If that doesn't work, forget the traditional newspaper markets and concentrate on secondary markets, such as sports, business and trade, art, and seniors' magazines.

Work with a local travel agency: Try to convince a travel agency of the importance of a monthly newsletter or insert to go with their regular mailings. The pay for such items can be much better than that for a newspaper article—and much steadier.

Work with a local public relations firm: Though your byline might never see the light of day, the pay for travel-related press releases is much better than for newspaper articles. The same holds true for writing for the tourist offices of various cities or countries.

57
THE BUSINESS OF GRAFT WRITING

By Kathleen Peelen Krebs

In the past three decades, the handcraft movement has spawned an interest in and appreciation of fine crafts for the consumer, and big business for the artist. The proliferation of art and craft fairs in almost every town, city, state, and province across the United States and Canada is a testament to the ever-growing demand for original, handmade merchandise. The publishing world is racing to keep pace with this market, and a wide variety of books, magazines, and periodicals carry articles pertaining to craft.

As a fiber artist and basket maker for over ten years, I have contributed numerous "how-to" articles on various aspects of my craft: from locating, gathering, and preparing natural materials, to step-by-step instructions in basketry techniques, such as coiling, twining, and weaving. And selling my art through museum stores, art galleries, and fine craft fairs has inspired me to write articles on the business of craft.

Based on my experience as an artist and writer, I offer the following seven steps for entering the craft writing market:

1) Write what you know.

If you have ever turned a bowl, knit a sweater, crafted a candle, woven a basket, built a birdhouse, or braided a rug, you may have the how-to basics of writing about your craft. The market for craft how-to's is broad. A multitude of specialized craft publications offer techniques on quilting, knitting, woodworking and carving, embroidery, metal-smithing, ceramics, and weaving. A number of general craft magazines feature instructions on how to make anything from stained-glass lampshades to mosaic flowerpots. Home and garden magazines offer well-written articles on subjects ranging from herbal wreaths from your backyard, to building your own bent-willow garden furniture.

1 have written instructions for making hats from lily leaves and mats from scented herbs. My article on drying pine needles to coil a natural green basket was featured as a cover story for a national craft magazine, and brought me $300.

2) *Tap the children's market.*

Do you remember those beanbag squares, potato prints, and paper-bag masks you made in second grade? Most children's magazines have a "crafts corner" and welcome new ideas (or variations upon old ones). This is an easy way for even crafting amateurs to enter the craft writing market. If you have ever helped a child make a tissue-paper kite, a newspaper mâché animal, an egg-carton caterpillar, or a felt finger puppet, you can write an article with an original twist on your project. An article I wrote on Southwest-style, woven newspaper baskets earned me $250 from a national family craft magazine.

3) *Record your research.*

You have spent hours in art museums admiring antique Chinese porcelain or seventeenth-century Japanese kimonos. You seek out contemporary expressions in wood in countless art galleries. Many fine art and craft publications accept well-researched articles on a particular area of interest. *Fiherarts Magazine* published an article on the sari collection of one of the last Ottoman princesses, as well as a feature on collecting early "aloha shirts" from Hawaii. For an article on Huichol Indian bead and yarn art published as a colorful cover story for *Bead* t& *Button Magazine,* I earned $375.

Read extensively in your field of interst and focus your article for a particular publication. You may wish to call experts or collectors in the field to add details and depth.

4) *Profile an artist.*

You are captivated by the one-of-a-kind brass door-knockers of a local metalsmith and linger longingly over the tilework of a well-known ceramist. Call or write the artist to request an interview, and then query one of the art and craft publications that frequently feature artist profiles. Ask about photo requirements.

5) *Review a crafts show.*

If you are well-informed about a particular area of craft, reviewing an art gallery or museum show that exhibits work in your field may prove profitable. (Shows and openings are often listed in local newspapers.) Target your market. Several craft and art publications, as well as newspapers, accept free-lance reviews. Well-crafted impressions backed by knowledge are always acceptable.

6) *Evaluate a craft fair.*

Craft is big business, and the major venues for a majority of craft artists are the juried craft shows held throughout the United States and Canada. Professional artists and all of those concerned with the business of craft, as well as consumers of handcrafts, welcome articles evaluating and appraising these shows. There is an ever-increasing free-lance market in craft publications for such evaluations.

Visit your favorite show, noting attendance, overall quality of the artists' work, the originality and appeal of booth display. Jot down a few brief questions to ask artists or request a card and an O.K. to contact the artists after the show. Always ask permission to use an artist's name, and offer to send a copy of the article, if published. Ask how long the artist has exhibited at the show; try to find out if the show was profitable; did the artist have better wholesale or retail sales; what were the show's costs vs. profits, etc. You might also quickly interview customers, as well as show staff and promoters, asking their impressions.

7) *Offer craft business advice.*

Whether you sell your craft in galleries, gift shops, at professional craft shows, or simply through your local church or school bazaar, you know something about the business of craft. Tips on pricing, booth set-up and design, photography for jurying, advertising, bookkeeping for tax purposes, travel expenses, and sales strategies are well-received by many craft trade magazines.

Writing for the crafts market is an enjoyable way to share your professional know-how, your part-time hobby, or your special field of interest with others. The demand for well-written, informed articles has never been higher.

58
WRITING HUMAN INTEREST ARTICLES

By Janet Fabyankovic And Catherine Pigora

Writing human interest articles requires having a passion for people and their unique stories. You are not only giving readers factual information, such as a person's lifestyle, tragedies, or secrets, but allowing them to see what goes on through the eyes of others. Numerous women's and religious magazines are excellent publications to target with queries of real life dramas or people narratives.

Media professionals often look to other communication sources for ideas, or draw on personal human interest stories in local or national newspapers or magazines. Recently, both print and visual media have been saturated with true-life dramas in which women or children are abused, kidnapped, acquire rare diseases or are betrayed by society, the legal system, or by men.

Many first-time writers became published when they presented accounts of how they faced and overcame adversity in columns such as "Drama in Real Life," featured in *Reader's Digest.* Mothers often become published authors when they write about their personal experiences raising a physically challenged child, surviving a marital storm, or coping with a cancer diagnosis.

It's important to find and write a chronicle that most readers can relate to, even if they haven't encountered the same situation. Although a reader may not be a grandmother who lost a grandchild when her son was divorced, she can relate to the loneliness, despair, and other similar emotions a person deals with during separation or loss.

Disaster stories provide another outlet for tales of ordinary people who become empowered with strength and courage by an extraordinary experience. If you write about a father who saved a child in an airplane crash, or a dog who rescued a baby during a lire, try to find a slant that is unique, especially if the story was covered numerous times in print and on television.

Because of their busy schedules, reporters often don't do a follow-up on original stories. Many times, incidents that occur after a heroic event have as much impact as the original piece. Or the subject may present a new perspective on the event after having time to digest it.

One teenager who risked his life saving a friend from gang violence later becomes a police dispatcher to assist with crime cases; a couple adopted a five-year-old girl whom they saved from a fire after discovering that her whole family was killed in the tragedy.

Many article writers study national trends and issues, then find a local angle that has universal appeal. With child abuse a current topic, well-written pieces that focus on a nearby shelter for battered children or a profile of an outstanding counselor may appeal to editors.

A writer may decide to collaborate with another writer, especially if both authors have a different specialty or flair that enhances an otherwise ordinary manuscript. When you face writer's block, enlisting another writer may be a good solution and add a new point of view to your piece. At an interview, two writers may have different observations or one writer may ask questions that the other might have missed or not thought of at the time.

Make sure to have a few questions jotted down for reference, but once the interview begins, don't be afraid to be spontaneous and ask spin-off questions from comments that surface in discussions. No one knows exactly what will take place during the interview. Being flexible yet professional will put the interviewee at ease. Always be considerate if a person responds with tears, anger, or a request for privacy on certain issues.

Where do you find ideas for a human interest story? Fortunately, they are easy to spot, since most people have a personal story to tell. Scan newspapers, television segments, journals, magazines, videos, or computer systems for a start. Or contact local schools, government stations, organizations, and other institutions and ask to be placed on their mailing list for releases, newsletters, and bulletins.

By perusing such publications, you may come across a story idea that could be pitched to a national magazine or journal using a different slant. For example, a feature from a hospital newsletter about a blind lady who saved a suicide victim's life on the internet was reworked and submitted to a national journal seeking accounts of emergency rescues. Written from a crisis perspective, it was immediately accepted and published.

Many writers get story ideas at bus stops, from visits to social agencies, and chats with friends or relatives. If your

specialty is medical or social issues, it's imperative to develop a link with a physician or attorney. Specialized writers, such as entertainment critics, often use human interest stories as sidebars to a related article, especially when local children or adults have been involved.

After coming up with an idea, appropriate research is imperative for background, proper spellings of names and places, and additional information that will enhance your article. If your topic (such as a rare disease) is unusual and many readers may be unfamiliar with it, you should include a description of symptoms and diagnosis for its characteristics to allow medical perspective.

Once you select your subject, write an article lead that will attract the reader's attention. For example, if the story is based on an abused woman, try to create an intense, active scene as your beginning. ("As she came out of unconsciousness with blood dripping down her face, Jessica couldn't believe that the man she married only two months ago did this to her.")

Let the story unfold naturally. Remember to be patient and sensitive to the people you interview, allowing them to reveal what happened in their own way and time. Try to imagine yourself in the subject's place, and don't ask any questions that might be too upsetting, unless the person being interviewed brings up the delicate topic (or welcomes any questions.) Several writers give their interviewees the option of answering only the questions that they may feel comfortable with. Although these journalists are respected, occasionally their articles are rejected by publications that prefer a more probing approach for greater emotional impact. Obtain publication guidelines before submitting queries or articles, to determine exact editorial focus.

Capturing the mood of the story can make your article more compelling. As you describe an athlete who wins a tournament while battling the effects of leukemia, make the words active to set the pace of the event. However, if you're describing a daughter's last goodbye to her mother in a hospice, sensitivity is a must.

By spending a little extra time with the person after the interview.

a writer can obtain quotes and facts that will add the extra human touch to the article. The main character must be someone whom the readers will care about and can identify with. It isn't a fast-paced, "just the facts, ma'am" piece.

Treat your subject with respect so that in revealing the story you don't offend the person who trusted you with his or her personal life. An article on suicide can be serious and poignant without being depressing. Often people grant interviews in hope of helping others prevent or cope with a similar situation. Celebrities and officials sometimes risk revealing their own or their family's weaknesses as a stepping stone to their own recovery, as in the case of Betty Ford, who helped thousands recover from addictions. Assure those you interview that you will write an inspirational, informative piece, not an exposé.

Writers who are determined to make a literary mark or spotlight a social issue may disguise themselves as a homeless lady, elderly person, or prisoner to illustrate what it's really like to "walk in their shoes." They're able to add suggestions and present possible solutions to problems that their subjects face.

Not all human interest stories are traumatic. In fact, some writers recognize that tragic stories are often too complicated or emotional for their tastes, so they concentrate on writing upbeat narratives and profiles. Their writing repertoire might include a four-year-old child who charms the audience with her singing and dancing, a farmer who makes friends with a wild pheasant, or the story behind a circus, regatta, or concert. Occasionally they may tour with symphonies, bands, police, or paramedics so they can include first-hand accounts and relevant quotes.

When you write a human interest story, a sincere concern for people combined with curiosity, good writing skills, effective research, and editing are essential to bring your views to life and intrigue an editor.

59
THE KEY TO INTERVIEWING SUCCESS

By Joy Parise

If you want to advance in your article writing, incorporate the opinions of outside professionals to enliven and enrich your work. If done properly, a good interview provides not only plenty of material that will add depth to an article, but also valuable ideas and sources for future projects.

The actual interview is no place for on-site training. Much of the success of an interview will depend on your behind-the-scenes preparation to make sure that your subject is enough at ease to talk freely and openly to you. With experience, you'll learn techniques that work best for you. The following are some methods that can help you on your way to interviewing success.

1. If at all possible, arrange for a face-to-face interview. While a telephone call can give you the information you need, an in-person interview will more than pay off. Eye contact with your subject will help relax him or her, and being able to describe his or her gestures, appearance, and surroundings can make your writing come alive.

Once you have phoned and arranged the interview, follow up with a note thanking the person and confirming the time and place, and enclose a simple business card, if you have one. If you'll need any specific information, photos, statistics, or phone numbers, alert your subject in your note so that he or she can have them handy. Don't send specific questions that you'll be asking. Nothing is worse than sitting down in front of the subject who reads stilted and scripted answers to you.

2. Make the most of your interviewing time, and give your subject the maximum amount of time to talk. Prepare your questions in advance so that you don't flounder. To create an atmosphere of easy conversation, don't keep the list of questions in front of you. Tuck them inside the cover of your notepad or place them discreetly to the side to peek at now and then. Be familiar enough with your questions in advance to be flexible if new material from your subject's comments and responses pops up, if your interview takes an interesting new slant, or if your prepared order doesn't work. Although your prepared questions will help keep you on course, don't be close-minded. Keep alert. You may find a whole line of discussion to pursue spontaneously.

3. Structure your questions around a preliminary outline. Try to keep the outline of your article in your mind before you go into the interview so that you ask your questions in sequence. This will make it easier later to work from your notes rather than facing a hodgepodge of information you have to organize.

When I interview someone for a feature, I structure my articles in a specific way. Drawing a picture in words of the gestures, appearance, or surroundings tells why this person is interesting enough to be written about. That's how I try to capture the readers' attention so that they will become interested enough to want to know more about this person—and keep reading.

I then go into the subject's area of expertise and give enough objective and colorful information so that readers say, "I didn't know that." (Editors often tell me that they found my articles very informative; they learned a lot.) Then I swing back to the person I'm interviewing and ask about his or her goals for the future.

Whatever your style, make a plan in advance so that you have a good idea where you want to steer your interview.

4. Dress for success. Making a good appearance begins with being on time. If you're interviewing someone important enough to be interviewed, then his or her time is important, too. Respect it.

Dress in a way to put your subject at ease. Don't underestimate this step. If you're going to a corporation, wear a suit. If you're going to a small business, try a sports jacket. If you're going to a cowboy barn, try jeans. For a sports club, neat slacks. The idea is to make your subject comfortable enough to relate to you and want to help you write a good article.

5. Let your instincts take over. If for some reason you're having a really hard time with the interview, let your subject know it. Some years ago, I was sent to cover a riding clinic at an out-of-state stable. The owner was very rude and cold. After trying to get quotes from him—to make him look good—and getting nowhere, I looked at him and lightly said, "Come on, give me a break. Help me out here." Since he knew he was being obnoxious (but was probably never called on it), he immediately tuned in and started talking.

Another time, I was asked to do an article on a whole family. The editor had tried to write a piece about them but had found them almost impossible to interview. Though they were willing to sit down with me, they found it hard to make

anything other than the "name, rank, and serial number" types of comments.

When I walked into their house, to my horror I found the whole family sitting around the table. Self-conscious in front of each other, no one spoke. From the corner of the table, one person would meekly add a bit of information. I went home and waited for a few days, then phoned that person. I told him that he sounded as if he had so much background to tell me about (which he did), and I asked if I could meet with him alone so that I could write a "good" article. We met again at his house, sat under a lovely tree, and talked for an hour about the family history and their achievements in the horse world. The tree became the central symbol for the stability of the family, and the article turned out much better than I'd ever imagined it would.

Don't be afraid to ask for more if you are not getting what you need, but do so tactfully and honestly.

6. Bring a tape recorder. Be prepared to take notes to back up what's on the tape. The recorder is good for capturing the exact ways that people speak, as well as names and figures and other information that takes too much time to write. This is important in drawing a picture of your subject. Furthermore, the flow of your subject's speech as opposed to yours in your writing will help keep the rhythm of your article interesting.

A third and more subtle use of the tape recorder comes in when it is shut off. I've gotten some of my best quotes when the interview appears to be formally over and the people you're interviewing tend to relax and open up.

Once, when I was interviewing a successful professional horseman, he walked me to the door of his stable, and looking out over his forty-acre farm, he waved his arm and said, "I'm so lucky. I'm so lucky. I'm forty years old and doing what I love!"

I began the article with that gesture and those words. Since the article showed that he had attained what he had through hard work and dedication, not luck, his humility endeared him to the readers. In fact, he said he never got so much positive feedback from any other article written about him. The fact was that he was a nice guy, and it showed—particularly when the interview was "officially" over.

7. Let your subject really talk. Ask your subject what he or she thinks is important, and what he or she would like you to write. You'll be amazed!

Once when I was interviewing a man who had won at a horse show, I asked him what he would like me to say. He talked about his stable's successful breeding program—something few people knew about, although it was highly successful.

Not only did it add more information to the article, but it provided me with material for a second article on that stable—an eight-page piece I wrote the next year for a national magazine.

8. Show your appreciation. Get to your interview on time, leave on time, and be polite. Remember, you're not the important person here; the person you're interviewing is. Send a copy of your published article with a thank-you note.

9. Look inside yourself. If you're not getting a successful interview after careful preparation, then look inside. Were you sincerely interested in the person you interviewed? Dogs, horses, and kids know when someone dislikes them, but they warm up with people they know they can trust. People being interviewed do, too. Put your best foot forward, and you can't fail.

60
CREATING GREETING CARDS

By Wendy Dager

Have you ever received a greeting card that was so "you," it could have been written by you? Have you ever had a brief, funny thought that would make a great T-shirt slogan, or perhaps composed a poem that brought tears to the eyes of a reader?

Using one or all of these criteria can help you break into greeting card writing, an industry that boasted $6.3 *billion* in sales last year, representing 7.4 billion greeting cards sold.

There are now approximately 1,500 greeting card companies. Although the majority of them do not accept submissions from free lancers, many are eager for writers who can provide them with fresh ideas. Just follow these simple rules, and you'll find yourself hooked on creating one-liners, poems, and words of wisdom specifically for the greeting card market.

1. Always send for guidelines. Get addresses of greeting card companies, either from *The Writer* Magazine or from the *Greeting Card Industry Directory.* (The directory is expensive, and I wouldn't advise your buying it unless you have made a few sales first.) The Greeting Card Association (1200 G Street N.W., Suite 760, Washington, D.C. 20005), which publishes the directory, is very receptive to inquiries and will send a price list of all the books, tapes, and related industry information they publish. In addition, some greeting card companies have their addresses on the backs of their cards, or the name of their city and state (so a writer can call information and get a phone number, then call the company and see if they will provide an address for freelance submissions).

If a company does accept work from free lancers, the guidelines will tell you the required format for submissions, the style they are looking for (some even give examples of published cards), and the occasions and holidays for which they need ideas, for example, some companies may produce cards for Christmas, but not Chanukah.

2. Brainstorm! Keep pads of paper around the house so you can scribble down thoughts while you are doing chores, or invest in a voice-activated tape recorder (about $35 at discount stores) to record ideas. Make up your own worksheets. For example, for Christmas ideas (usually, a company accepts seasonal ideas for the following year right *after* the holiday), write down the many things associated with it—Santa, tree, tinsel, presents, reindeer, etc.—then try to think of them in a funny or sentimental scenario. This method can be applied to any holiday or occasion. Recall situations you've been in or things your friends or relatives have said. Are they quirky, funny, silly, romantic? Can you tighten them to create a greeting card?

3. Most companies prefer submissions on 3"x5" cards, using the following format: O indicates what's to appear on the *outside* of the card; I is for the *inside.* You can put the holiday or occasion on the topmost line of the card, as follows:

Christmas

O: What has a red suit, white beard and flies?

I: A Santa who never bathes! Merry Christmas!

Girlfriends

O: He got me an iron for my birthday, which I used right away . . .

I: He should be coming out of the coma soon.

You can also put a description of the artwork you visualize on the top line, or in parentheses after O:

Birthday

O: (photo or picture of a gorilla)

I: Happy Birthday! You're in the primate of your life!

There is no need to send a mock-up of the card, unless it is a puzzle, maze, or game. Check greeting card counters in stores for examples; these types of cards are usually directed at children.

Other greeting card companies accept submissions on 8 l/2"x11" sheets of paper (indicated in their guidelines). They might also be willing to consider faxed or E-mailed submissions, but you must first clear this with the editor. On the back of each card, put your name, address, and phone number. I recommend purchasing a self-inking stamp with this information (about $15 or less), to save time. Do *not* send simultaneous submissions. If a company rejects your ideas, then you can feel free to send them somewhere else. As a rule, do not send fewer than six or more than twenty ideas.

Some companies will specify in their guidelines how many ideas (called a "batch") they will consider at one time.

Put a code number on the lower right hand corner of each submission (Birthday ideas can be Bl, B2, B3, etc.; Christmas can be CI, C2, etc.), and keep track of what ideas correspond to which code numbers. Keep copies of all your submissions and the names of the companies to which you send them. A company may decide to purchase your idea C2, but, if you don't know which one they're buying, you're in trouble!

4. Expect to wait at least one month for a response, sometimes longer. After two months, send a polite follow-up letter inquiring about your submission. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope for their reply.

5. Greeting card companies receive hundreds of ideas a year and buy only a select few, so if you submit twenty ideas and sell one, you have beaten the odds. The company will send you a contract, indicating that they would like to purchase your idea and are buying all rights to it, which of course, means that it becomes their property. You must also attest to the fact that it is, indeed, *your* idea to sell. Read the contract carefully before signing it, then return it. Don't forget to make a copy for yourself. Generally, payment arrives thirty days or so after publication of the card, along with several samples of the finished card. It is rare, though not unheard of, for a writer to receive writing credit on the back of the card.

6. How much can you expect to be paid? Anywhere from $25 to $150 for each idea purchased, with $100 the average for a one- or two-line gag. Although not the norm, royalties are sometimes negotiable (a company's guidelines will indicate if they pay royalties). Payment for a poem is more, about $200 on the average, for all rights.

Because greeting card companies are as individual as the people who run them, payment varies. The companies that give royalties are indeed a minority, and flat-fee is the norm, on acceptance or on publication, for all rights. While most companies do not allow the writer to retain rights to his work, there are a few that do. Your contract will tell you if you are selling all rights to an idea.

7. Some companies will indicate that they wish to hold an idea for further consideration. This generally means it must pass a review board before they decide to accept or reject it. In this case, do not submit the idea elsewhere until the company has made its final decision. Sometimes they will hold an idea up to six months; after sixty days, however, you may send a polite letter with SASE, inquiring about its status. If they decide not to purchase your idea, you are then free to submit it to another company.

8. I'm often asked, "How can I keep a company from stealing' my ideas?" You must keep in mind the old saying, "There is nothing new under the sun." Maybe someone, somewhere, has already come up with your idea and has beaten you to the punch. Editors have reputations to maintain, and it is highly unlikely that they will steal your idea. You may submit your idea anywhere you choose (following guidelines, of course). If your work is rejected, it is because an editor simply cannot use it or may already have something similar; if it is rejected a number of times, consider discarding or reworking it. Editors want to accept new ideas; that's their job. Some other tips:

• Always enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope with the proper postage with any correspondence to a greeting card company.

• Always be polite when you write to an editor. I once sent a thank-you note to an editor for purchasing an idea, and she remembered me the next time she needed a one-liner for a card. Now she regularly faxes me cartoon cards that need inside gags.

• Diversify. Some companies may want punchy one-liners or thoughtful poetry for plaques, magnets, buttons, mugs, key chains, and "soft-line" items like T-shirts and aprons. Keep in mind that "brevity is the soul of wit." It's a tiny space you're trying to fill, so conserve your words, but pack them with wit.

• There's always a market for humor of various types: risqué, studio, juvenile, cute, silly, contemporary, or laugh-out-loud.

• Keep in mind that women purchase 85% to 90% of all greeting cards.

• Do not telephone an editor. Mail or fax is preferable.

• Don't take rejections personally. Relax, have fun, and fine-tune your rejected work, especially if editors offer encouragement and tell you to keep at it.

Some of the larger greeting card companies, like Hallmark (and some of the small ones just starting out), do not accept work from free lancers and use only staff writers. Do not let this deter you. Keep sending to other companies for guidelines and you may find one that likes your writing style.

61
PROFILES TAKE COURAGE

By Bob Schultz

The nervous man in the rumpled sports coat picked up the handgun from its place near the microphone, lifted one slat of the mini-blind, and watched as the slow-moving car disappeared around the corner. "Can't be too careful after all those death threats," he said. "Now, what else does your magazine want to know about me?"

All articles on interviewing stress how to put the person you're interviewing at ease, but none of them told me how to put myself at ease as I jumped every time I heard the slightest noise outside for the rest of that interview. Some profiles take courage.

Interviewing locally famous, or notorious, characters like this conservative talk-show host has been one of my more regular sources of bylines and income. The skills I have acquired interviewing a smalltown mayor or the local handwriting analyst are the same skills I've used to interview celebrities. What skills do you need to start seeing your byline on profiles? Here are the steps I follow:

Find an interesting subject. Where can you find people interesting enough to profile in local newspapers and regional magazines? Everywhere! Look in the phone book for unusual businesses, and you may find people like the owner of the Used Car Factory, who turns out "new" roadsters or brings that old Chevy back to life so it looks as good, or better, than it did when it rolled off the assembly line. If Halloween or New Year's is coming up, that store with all the old costumes might make an interesting story, with some great photo possibilities.

Follow local news articles and watch for those little human interest pieces. A handwriting analyst in a local fraud trial turned out to be an expert on Elvis Presley's handwriting. An arresting officer in another case turned out to be a singer in a rock and roll band comprised of uniformed officers.

Do your research. Before you ask your first question, you need to know something about the person you're interviewing, or about the career or activity that makes the person noteworthy. If he's a radio talk show host, tape a few shows and listen to them to become familiar with his favorite themes and strongest opinions. If she's a handwriting expert, pick up a book on handwriting analysis or on crime investigation to get enough background to ask relevant questions. If he's a famous author, read a book or two along with book reviews of his work to see what the critics think of his work.

Respect your subject. You don't have to fall in love with or agree with everything the person you're profiling says, but you do have to respect him or her enough to write an article that is accurate and fair. If you look down on your subject, your arrogance will show through, diminishing the reader's respect and interest in the person.

You don't have to believe in psychics to write good articles on a local psychic. Your job is to get to know the person well enough to illuminate the qualities that will make this person interesting to readers.

Hook your reader. Once you have the background you need, start writing. You need a lead paragraph that will hook readers and keep them reading till the end. They may never have heard of the person you're profiling and never thought about doing whatever it is that the person does, so you have to work to draw them into the article. Here is an opening paragraph to an article I wrote on a local boudoir photographer:

> Considering what she isn't wearing, perhaps she just stepped out of a shower. Reclining in peace and apparent solitude, she takes a bite from a juicy red apple. Slowly, a huge serpent slithers up from behind her.

Wonder what happens next? I hope so. If you don't entice readers with your opening paragraph, they're probably already skipping on to the next article, so the hook is critical.

Use anecdotes and interesting quotes. If you think the person you're interviewing should be in the hall of fame, just telling readers your opinion probably won't carry much weight. You are much more likely to be convincing by describing an activity or a comment that illustrates your opinion.

As I interviewed a woman with multiple sclerosis confined to a wheelchair, I noticed that she didn't have any "handicap" plates on her van. "Oh, I don't ever use those parking places," she said. "Those are for people who'd have breathing trouble or other problems if they couldn't park close. Remember, I'm not disabled." And, of course, she isn't disabled, because she refuses to see herself that way. But, she said it better than I could.

Letting a person you disagree with speak his or her mind will give readers information that will help them form their own opinions. In an article about a basketball coach, I acknowledged that the coach felt that his being labeled a blatant

sexist was due to some out-of-context quotes. I found his original statement and quoted it in its entirety. When readers had a chance to read his complete statement, the coach came across as "blatantly sexist," but he did it in his own words!

Surprise the reader. Anecdotes and quotes that surprise readers usually keep them reading for more, as do anecdotes that reveal the humanity in larger-than-life people.

During an interview with Ray Bradbury, he showed me the autographs of people like Jean Harlow and W.C. Fields that he collected when he was a youngster in Los Angeles. But the note he seemed to treasure most was from someone much less famous—his daughter: "Mom, I don't know what time I'll be home, but I will be safe. PS. One of the cats threw up on the stairs." That simple quote brought home the fact that my profile was about Ray Bradbury, father and husband, not just Ray Bradbury, author.

Be positive, but don't "puff." Those too-good-to-be-true articles about celebrities are often called "puff" pieces. The magazine or newspaper generally looks for a positive article about someone from an industry that advertises in the publication, or a famous person. The trick is to show the person's good qualities without making your profile sound like a nomination for sainthood.

To make it clear that a local TV news anchorman had not let his fame go to his head, he closed his interview with these words: "Don't tell my mother I'm a newsman. She thinks I'm a piano player in a whorehouse." I used that quote as the ending of my profile.

Wrap it up. Second in importance only to the hook that draws readers in, is an ending that will keep them thinking about your article after they finish it. An illustration of giving your profile a big finish comes from an article I wrote on Robin Cook. I had ended a review of one of Mr. Cook's medical thrillers by mentioning that I was going in to have two wisdom teeth taken out the next day and I was grateful that Cook hadn't written any books to scare me out of that surgery. After reading my review, Mr. Cook wrote to me, saying, "I wanted you to know that my next book will be called *Tooth* ... a thriller about wisdom teeth!"

Fictionalize it. Take the real-life characters you've interviewed and profiled and mix and match them to create characters for your fiction. Change that conservative talk show host into a liberal talk show hostess. Create a series sleuth out of that handwriting analyst. Keep track of the comments, the habits, the eccentricities of the fascinating people you profile, and then recycle revised versions of those people into your short stories and novels.

There are many good reasons to write profiles. They get you away from your solitary word processor and out interacting with interesting people; they give you experience conducting interviews, connect you with local experts you can call on later, and provide you with bits and pieces for creating memorable fictional characters that are deeply rooted in reality.

There are plenty of interesting people out there just waiting to tell their stories. They might as well tell them to you. Just ask them to check their guns at the door.

62
WRITING MEDICAL ARTICLES

By Jan Roadarmel Ledford

Good news, writers! There's a topic that's always hot. Everyone wants to read about it. It's time-honored, yet on the leading edge of technology. It's medicine!

The surprising news is that you don't need a medical degree to write many types of medical articles. Naturally, it helps to be working in the medical field in some capacity. But any writer who is interested enough to do careful research can turn out good, solid articles on medical topics. Your best investments are a medical terminology class at your local vocational-technical school, an illustrated medical dictionary, a drug reference book, and a basic text on medicine, such as *The Merck Manual.*

The two cardinal rules for writing medical articles are the same for any type of writing: Know your audience and know your target publication. There are basically two types of audiences: the lay and the professional. The markets, however, are vast.

Writing for the lay audience

The usual purpose of lay-oriented medical writing is to inform. Answering questions is what this type of material is all about. To organize your thinking, ask yourself: What does the patient (reader) need/want to know? What do care-givers want the patient to know? What action do we want the reader to take?

With answers in hand, you can formulate an outline that includes an introduction (scenarios and statistics work very well here), a definition of the problem, cause(s) of the problem, treatment options, and the expected outcome. This outline will fit almost any medical condition that you care to write about. Depending on your slant, you may want to concentrate more on one area than another. For example, an exposé on the side effects of a specific treatment would dwell more heavily on the "expected outcome."

As always, you must write on a level appropriate for your audience. If you are approaching a newspaper, you will use a simpler vocabulary and shorter sentences than when writing for a trade journal. In any case, be sure to define medical terms or replace them with common lay terms. (For example, say "gum" instead of "gingiva.") An anatomical drawing is often helpful in introducing terms and in orienting your readers.

While you do not need medical credentials to write for the average reader, you may need someone with medical credentials to add credibility to your article. This might be accomplished by interviewing, then quoting, a person in the field. Or, you might consider writing as a coauthor or ghost author for a medical professional. You know the writer's admonition to "write what you know." Your reader (and editor) is going to ask, *"How* do you know?" Associating your work with someone who has medical credentials will answer that question.

If you understand medical terms and statistics, you can search through medical journals and "translate" technical research into lay-oriented articles. Find someone (well-known, if possible) who has a stake in the research to add human drama and interest to your story. Be sure to get your numbers right. Case studies in such journals make for interesting reading as well. (Wouldn't your readers be fascinated to learn about a procedure in which a surgeon used a piece of donor sclera [white of the eye] as a framework on which to rebuild someone's external *ear?)*

Your local newspaper and health magazines are not the only markets for your lay-oriented medical articles. Many general-interest magazines have a health-related column or use medical information. Parenting magazines are a good market because parents are extremely concerned about their children's health. Scientific magazines are interested in new technology. There are support groups or foundations for many diseases, widening your market to newsletters. Or, you could turn your article into a brochure and offer the copy to physicians or interested organizations. The American Academy of Ophthalmology, for example, has patient education brochures on all types of eye disorders. (Note: this might be a one-time sale or a work-for-hire situation.)

Depending on your topic, you may want to market the piece to appropriate non-medical trade journals. Suppose you've written a great article on carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS). Who would be interested? Any professional whose work involves the wrist motion that aggravates the problem: athletes, mechanics, typists. The same goes for any other type of medical condition. Ask yourself: Who is affected by this condition? Every answer identifies a potential market.

Writing for medical professionals

The same approach can be used to write for professional medical trade journals. Before you start, consider the education level of your audience, and adjust your language and terminology appropriately. For example, a medical assistant may be trained at a vocational school or on the job. A physician's assistant has at least a four-year college degree. You must do meticulous research when writing for medical professionals, regardless of their education level. If you say something wrong, they'll know it!

Suggesting that you start out by writing for medical professionals with "lower" levels of credentials is like suggesting that a fiction writer start out by writing for children. Writing for children is *not* easier: It's different. But it *is* true that the higher the level of medical professional that you're writing for, the greater your need for medical credentials personally, or for an association with someone who has the credentials. This "associate" may agree to pay you for your work if his or her name is given as the primary or sole author. However, your payment will probably come in the form of copies. It is considered an obligation and a privilege to share medical knowledge with your colleagues; hence, monetary reimbursements are not usually offered.

The trades, however, may offer regular pay or an honorarium. And don't limit your market or your slant. You might sell your article on carpal tunnel syndrome to *RDH* (a trade journal for dental hygienists), but by changing your slant a little, you might place the piece in the *Professional Medical Assistant* (a journal of the American Association of Medical Assistants). *PMA* has a feature called "The Two-Minute Clinic" and might be interested in an informational article that would help readers learn more about CTS.

If you move into writing for regular medical journals, you'll receive one of a writer's greatest rewards: editorial feedback. In journals that select articles by peer review, the reviewer is required to give the reason(s) that an article is rejected. What a wonderful way to learn the craft! A physician-client hired me to write an article on a unique surgical procedure he'd used. I told him from the outset that because the technique was controversial, we might have trouble placing it. He wanted me to go ahead, so I wrote the piece and then made a list of medical journals that published related surgical cases. I sent the article to the first (and most prestigious) journal on the list. As I feared, the article came back. But with it came the reviewer's comments and suggestions I used to make the article stronger and sent it to journal Number Two. This journal also rejected it. . . but also sent comments, which I again utilized. Journal Number Three published the twice-improved piece. Not only was the physician happy, but I had learned and grown as a writer. This type of feedback doesn't often come in fiction writing. Or in most types of nonfiction writing, for that matter.

Additional research sources

Besides using a good medical dictionary and general medical text as part of your research, don't overlook your local physicians and other health care workers as references. Not only can you interview them, but you also may be able to use their extensive personal libraries. In addition, you can ask them for patient education brochures. Virtually every practice in all branches of medicine uses handouts to inform their patients.

Earlier I mentioned organizations that deal exclusively with certain diseases and conditions. Check your local library's reference shelf for the *Encyclopedia of Organizations* published by Gale Research, Inc. Not only are these organizations good potential markets, but they can also supply a wealth of information. Some of these organizations run local support groups. These, in turn, may be able to put you in touch with individuals who are experts on the condition or who actually have the disorder themselves.

The National Library of Medicine offers on-line information via MedLine. Using appropriate key words, you can search the NLM computer banks for journal articles related to your topic. You must specify if you want to search back prior to the last several years. But in medical writing, you usually won't want to use a reference over five years old, anyway, unless you are doing a historical piece. The program can retrieve the abstracts for you. Often the abstract alone gives enough information for a lay-oriented article. Or, you can order the full article on-line or through your library. The reference list at the end of any medical article may supply further resources to check into.

Medical writing is challenging and extremely rewarding. You have the potential to reassure, to encourage, and to offer hope through your words. For more information about this branch of writing, contact the American Medical Writers Association, 9650 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20814-3998.

63
BECOMING A BIOGRAPHER

By William Schoell

To become a biographer, you must first be intrigued by other people's lives. You must have a good understanding of human nature and a willingness to ask the tough questions, both of yourself, your subject, and the people who knew him or her. You must understand the difference between biography and memoir, and know the right approach to take to your biography depending on the subject and related factors.

Of course, first, you must choose your subject. An important basic factor is your enthusiasm level; there's nothing worse than spending months or years writing about somebody you have no deep interest in. Is there a particular historical figure or a contemporary celebrity whose life or work you admire, whose background you'd like to explore? If you find yourself wondering what kind of childhood this person had, what kind of relationship he or she had with his spouses and children and coworkers, what went on behind the scenes, then it's a good bet other people have the same curiosity. Then finding the answers to your questions will not be a chore to you, but rather a welcome revelation.

Next, you must decide if you are truly the right person to write this biography. A genuine interest in the subject and writing talent are, of course, prerequisites and the ones that matter the most. But today's publishers also like their authors to have some background related to the subject's, or even a vague connection. (Keep in mind that if by any chance you knew your subject personally or had some kind of relationship with him or her, you'll be writing what might more appropriately be called a *memoir,* that is, your personal recollections of the subject. This is the difference between a straight biography, of, say, Tennessee Williams by an author who may or may not ever have met him, and a book on the playwright written by his brother or a close friend who knew him well.)

You do not need to know or have known your subject personally to write a good biography about him. However, if you want to write about a filmmaker, an actor, or a director, it would be helpful to have written a few film reviews or filmmaker profiles, even if only for a local paper. If your subject is a composer, singer, or conductor, then some background in music will indicate you will have a better understanding than the rest of us as to what drives this person. If you've written an interview or an article about one of today's celebrities, it will certainly help sell a biography of him.

When you've decided on your subject, the next step is to think seriously about the subject's marketability. If the person is very obscure, it might be better to try first to sell a magazine article rather than a book. Then again, perhaps this person's obscurity is entirely undeserved. Perhaps there is something "special" about this person that gives him or her historical validity and therefore contemporary interest. For instance, the bestseller lists in recent years have featured biographies of women who were feminists long before the word was in fashion, and African-Americans whose contribution to society had never before been fully explored. There have also been successful biographies published about people whose sole claim to fame is the people they knew and worked with.

If you're uncertain how publishers might react to your subject, test the waters by querying a magazine or two. A published piece enclosed with your book proposal will show the editor that others thought your subject would be interesting to a mass audience. Your proposal should make clear that there's much more to say about the person, that there's plenty of room to develop things you only mentioned in the article.

Suppose you have a strong interest in chronicling someone's life, but there really is no special "hook" on which to hang your proposal. The person was not ahead of his time in any particular way; she does not fit neatly into any modern trends. Query a smaller firm or publisher, one less concerned with the bottom line. Trade publishers—that is, publishers whose books are sold in bookstores—are understandably concerned with sales potential, and frankly, a biography of an obscure person who did not do anything *very* significant, will not get past the sales representative who sits in at all editorial board meetings.

Even a small press, however, will want subjects who have done *something* significant: Your Uncle Joe may have been a marvelous character, but if he's never painted, written, composed, made a film, or left some kind of unique achievement behind, there probably isn't a book in him.

Also remember that most small firms pay tiny advances if they pay any at all, so if you need to take a leave of absence from your job to do research for your biography, you might, regrettably, have to move on to a more commercial subject.

As for historical subjects, publishers want a fresh approach to major figures, books that reveal, rather than rehash. If your subject is not internationally famous, you must explain why he is important and what his contribution was, and especially, *why* people might be interested in reading about him. When it comes to modern-day celebrities, there is one

basic rule of thumb. Are people talking about him or her? There's little point in trying to market to a major trade publisher a biography of a film or rock star who hasn't worked or been in the public eye (or gossip columns) in years—unless he or she has reached cult status like Elvis or Marilyn.

After choosing your subject, you have to decide on the tone and style of your book. Largely, these will be set by the subject's achievement: A book on major figures like Beethoven, or Winston Churchill, whose life played out across an international arena in a fascinating, frenetic time period, will require a very serious, profound approach. On the other hand, books on Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio, or the Spice Girls, whose accomplishments and fame are recent and don't have a large body of work, and whose fans are primarily teenagers, should be comparatively light and breezy. An artist like Laurence Olivier would require an in-depth approach; a movie star like Marilyn Monroe with her much narrower range should get a much lighter treatment. However, because Monroe was involved with world-famous men (and because recent biographers have created such a "mystery" about her death), some biographers feel an intense approach to her life is the only way to go. Look at your subject with an objective eye and then decide on the appropriate tone and style. Sometimes it's not the subject but the events she was embroiled in and the people she knew that determine what kind of book you should write.

Your proposal should consist of an introduction mentioning the highlights of your subject's life, the things that make him memorable, and any fresh theories you have regarding his life and work. The rest should be a chapter-by-chapter outline showing that you have knowledge of his life and times and can effectively organize the material. If you've never published a book before, the publisher or agent will probably want to see a sample chapter or two. These do not necessarily have to be the first two chapters but could be a part of your subject's life or career that particularly intrigues you and information that you have special access to and develop in later chapters.

By this time, you should have read everything you could find on your subject. As you read, make a note of published "facts" that bother you or seem inconsistent. Biographers often make conjectures about their subjects that may or may not be supported by facts. Make a list of questions about your subject that you'll want to answer in your book. Is this person's public reputation (good or bad) deserved? What areas of her life and work have never been adequately explored? In addition to books and magazines available in the public library, remember that there may be collections in special libraries or museums— personal letters, private papers, notes and diaries—that relate to your subject.

When you've exhausted the books and files in the library, make a list of every living person (or their offspring) who might have known or worked with your subject. Famous people can often be contacted through professional organizations like Actors Equity, the Screen Actors Guild, the Authors Guild, and Mystery Writers of America; others may be in the phone book or can be reached via their employers or universities. Sometimes the best anecdotes and information come not from other big names, who may have reasons for putting a "spin" on their memories, but from ordinary people who have crossed paths with your subject in interesting ways. Each person you speak to may be able to provide the names and phone numbers of others who knew or have some information about your subject.

If the person you're writing about has already been the subject of several biographies, or one good recent one, you might want to consider a different, non-chronological approach. When I did my book on A1 Pacino, I found that a pretty comprehensive biography about him had already been published. I decided to have a biographical section up front in my book and then to concentrate on the actor's career— one chapter for each film—with a final section on his stage work. In this way, I was able to analyze his films and acting style more intensely than would have been possible in a regular biography. When several Steven Spielberg adult biographies were published just as I was putting together a proposal for one, I decided to target mine for the young adult market. Sometimes it's a good idea to expand upon or refocus your original plan, as my coauthor and I did when we found that several Frank Sinatra books were coming out at once. We decided, therefore, to do a book on the entire Rat Pack—Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop—instead.

To organize your material better, use file folders, one for each chapter, that will include, photocopies, tear sheets, phone numbers, transcripts, and a list of other material too large to fit in the folder—books, videos, audio cassettes—that you will need to refer to when you do the writing. Give yourself at least several months to complete your research (although you can work on certain chapters as you gather the material). Keep in mind that busy people—whether it's the director of a Rat Pack movie or a college professor who wrote a thesis on a classical composer—can take months to answer your letters or return your phone calls.

Whether your book winds up in the bookstore or on the library shelf, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that as a biographer you've helped illuminate the lives and careers of people that the world should know more about.

64
FROM FOOD PROCESSOR TO WORD PROCESSOR

By Susan Kelly

I began writing about food for two reasons: first, I like to cook as much as I like to eat; second, I wanted a break from what I usually write about, which is crime. (Let me note here that many mystery authors manage to combine corpses and cuisine, a la Katherine Hall Page and Robert B. Parker. For myself, I'd just as soon keep the two separate.)

The first thing I noticed when I began researching the field is the enormous editorial appetite (first awful but irresistible pun) for articles about food and cooking. I was staggered by the number of journals devoted to the culinary arts. On my local grocery store's magazine rack, which is by no means either huge or comprehensive, I counted three publications devoted just to Italian cuisine. I couldn't begin to count the other special interest journals: vegetarian, light, country, ethnic, heart-safe, etc., or the large number of general magazines that publish articles on food.

Newspapers, daily or weekly, big city or small town, print vast numbers of articles on food and cooking. (The larger papers devote whole sections to the subject.) Most newspapers will consider free-lance work. Rates vary widely. You may not get paid much—or indeed anything by a very small publication—but you will have garnered a byline and a clip to add to your store of credentials.

The market for articles on food is a thriving one. And why not? Aside from sex and death, I can't think of a greater human interest subject than food.

Here is my own personal recipe for writing about food and cooking, one that I have checked in my test kitchen. The ingredients are given in order of assembly, but feel free to rearrange them or make substitutions—as any innovative cook would do.

1. Go with your particular interest and expertise. This is especially important for the beginner. After you've established yourself, you can branch out into other areas. But for the time being, if you have the world's best recipe for gefilte fish, or *caldo verde,* or cassoulet, or pot roast, or linguine with clam sauce, or if your grandmother was the best German cook in recent history, the world wants to hear about it.

2. **Decide the focus of your piece and then pare (second awful but irresistible pun) that down as much as possible.** It's no good trying to dash off a 2,000-word piece on "Italian Food." There are thousands of *books* on this subject already, and many others to come. Editors need articles with narrowly focused topics and with fresh slants.

To provide focus as well as originality, it helps to think in terms of categories. The following lists are by no means all-inclusive, but may be extensive enough to inspire you to create your own:

Ethnic: Thai, French, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Irish, Creole, African, Portuguese, Caribbean, Mexican, Swedish, Chinese

Provincial/Regional: Southern, New England, Southwestern, Pacific Rim, Tuscan, Provençal, Mediterranean, Iberian, Cantonese

Holiday: Thanksgiving, Passover, Easter, Christmas, Asian New Year, Chanukah, Kwanzaa

Seasonal: spring, summer, fall, winter (or by month)

Occasional: wedding, birthday, anniversary, graduation, bar mitzvah/ bas mitzvah, christening, bridal or baby shower, cocktail party

Meal Type: breakfast, brunch, lunch, tea, dinner, late supper

Health/Vegetarian: Low fat/low cholesterol, low salt, low sugar or sugar-free, meatless, non-dairy

Food Types: appetizers, soups, main courses, salads, desserts

Clearly, you don't have to consider all those categories. A choice of three is a good start. To illustrate my point: If you want to write about Italian cooking, why not do a piece on an Italian Christmas Eve dinner? Or, since the traditional Italian Christmas Eve dinner involves twelve fish dishes, refine the topic further by considering a fourth category, that of the food group. If your interest—or expertise—is Jewish cooking, think of writing an article about a seder dinner. There you have ethnicity, holiday, and meal type established for you. Once your imagination starts rolling, the possibilities are endless. A vegetarian Thai summer luncheon; a Scottish brunch for New Year's Day; a Provençal birthday picnic for two; a low-fat Mexican dinner.

3. Write *articles* about food and cooking, not recipe files. Your articles should offer helpful practical information beyond lists of ingredients and cooking times. Editors and their readers want serving suggestions, menu plans, and whatever other instruction and guidance you can offer. Tips about table decoration are always welcome, as are suggestions about wine appropriate to the food.

4. Articles about food and cooking benefit from background. In addition to giving instructions, include anecdotes. These can be personal— how *you* became interested in cooking such and such; first time you cooked it; your guests' reactions to it.

If you have no personal anecdotes, historical and cultural ones will do fine. If you are writing about veal Marengo, for instance, you might want to mention that the dish was invented to celebrate Napoleon's victory over Austria in the Italian town of Marengo. If you are writing about champagne, you might recount the legend that the bowl-shaped champagne glass (from which, incidentally, one should never drink) was formed from the mold of the breast of the mistress of the French king. Or that *puttanesca* sauce is alleged to have been the invention of Italian prostitutes seeking to whip up a quick snack for their clients. Such stories add real spice (third awful but irresistible pun) to a piece.

5. Bear in mind that food and travel overlap. Think of the Korean produce markets of New York. And the Polish sausage-makers of the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts. Or the chowder specialists of coastal Maine. Or the Italian immigrant fishermen of San Francisco, who invented *cioppino.* Readers enjoy local color along with a recipe.

6. Always get exact quantities of ingredients tor recipes—and then test them yourself. Make sure the instructions you give your readers are as clear and exact as possible. Be precise even though anyone who cooks knows that exact times and measurements are absolutely essential only in certain kinds of baking. I suppose everyone's heard the story about the published recipe that called for a can of condensed milk to be placed in a crockpot along with the rest of the ingredients. Now, common sense would dictate that one would *pour* the condensed milk from the can *into* the crockpot. Unfortunately, some readers, not explicitly *told* to do so, *didn't.* The results of that omission were . . . explosive!

If you offer recipes with variations or substitutions for ingredients, be sure to check out all those as well. Fat-free unflavored yogurt seems like a perfectly acceptable replacement for sour cream, and many times it is. In other cases—ugh. You can't predict with assurance. Don't take someone else's word. Perform your own taste-test.

7. If you are writing about a professional chef, be sure to interview him or her. This means going beyond accumulating the basic biographical and career data. Get permission to watch the chef in action. Request (no, insist on) written copies of any recipes the chef is willing to share. Ask for the chef's own personal serving and wine suggestions. Get the menu, whether the chef is an independent caterer or the employee/owner of a restaurant, so you can refer to it while you write. Talk to the chef's colleagues and competitors.

A real bonus of a thorough interview is that you will probably be invited to sample the chef's art.

8. **Time your article appropriately.** This is of special importance to a free lancer. Allow a lead time of a month for a small newspaper, two months for bigger ones, and up to a year for magazines. Publishers plan each issue well in advance for a number of reasons—the tightness of printing schedules is the foremost. No publisher is willing to incur the expense involved to disrupt the deadlines except for a drastic reason. Don't submit an article on fourteenth-century English Valentine's Day treats to a magazine in December and expect to see it in print in February. A year from that February is more like it.

9. Finally, read at least a year's back issues of the magazine you're interested in querying about an article idea. This will give you a clear sense of what particular publications seek and the tone and style in which your article should be written.

Some magazines look for pieces with a light or humorous touch. Others demand a more serious, almost scientific, approach. Still others want a definite historical, cultural, regional, or social orientation. Also, bear in mind a magazine's audience. A journal whose typical reader is a college graduate, a resident of an upscale city neighborhood or affluent suburb, and a professional earning in excess of $150,000 a year will not be interested in an article on the manifold culinary uses of Fritos.

Do not worry if the publication you've targeted for your article on "low-fat pasta salads for an informal June wedding" published a similar-sounding piece five years ago. Yours, because it's yours, will be different. And in any case, such ideas are always recycled.

65
MILITARY MONEY: GASHING IN ON OLD WAR STORIES

By Lance Q. Zedric

If you've always wanted to write for military magazines, but never considered yourself an expert, relax—you don't have to be an expert or even a veteran to break into this well-paying free-lance market. It's easier than you think, and often the best material can be found in an old history book or even right next door.

There are plenty of topics bivouacked out there. All you have to do is ask. Everyone knows a family member, friend or neighbor who served in the military. And they all have an old war story to tell. The kind old man next door might have been a celebrated war hero or a Medal of Honor winner! Your grandfather, father, aunt or uncle might have served aboard a ship with Admiral Nimitz, eaten Christmas dinner with General Patton, or participated in a historic event. Millions of stories are waiting to be told.

After you've blown the dust off *U.S. History 101,* turn to the sections on World War I, World War II, Korea, the Vietnam War, and even the more recent military ventures, and you will find accounts of important battles, commanders, or military events that, with a little research and a fresh angle, will provide ideal material for an interesting article.

Recon the market. Research military publications, and become familiar with their readership. A sound battle plan will prevent having your article become a rejection slip casualty.

The military market ranges from general to specific. For example, *VFW Magazine* (Veterans of Foreign Wars) and *American Legion Magazine* have readerships of more than two million veterans from every branch of the military. They publish various articles on training, weaponry, tactics, veterans legislation, active and former units, military personalities and nostalgia. Publications with such large readerships prefer articles that appeal to as many of their readers as possible.

They focus on events involving large military units, such as Army and Marine divisions, Navy fleets, and Air Force Squadrons. Smaller publications, on the other hand, cater to more defined audiences. *Behind The Lines: The Journal of U.S. Special Operations,* specializes in articles on elite U.S. units, such as the Green Berets and Navy SEALs; others focus on respective branches of the military. *Army Magazine* appeals to Army veterans; *All Hands* and *Navy Times* to the Navy; and *Air Force Times* to the Air Force. Magazines like *Civil War Illustrated, World War II* and *Vietnam,* among others, appeal to enthusiasts of a particular war.

Editors are always on the lookout for articles offering new insights on prominent military leaders and for anniversary articles commemorating notable battles and events. But most publications prefer articles on major anniversaries, such as the fifth, tenth, twenty-fifth, fiftieth, and one-hundredth.

But military publications aren't limited to anniversary themes. Anything to do with the home front is also desirable. Whether it's an article on industrial war production, sending care packages to a family member overseas, or collecting "sweetheart pins," the possibilities are endless. Read past issues and look for a theme.

It will save time and effort to consult a calendar. Since most magazines require at least four months' lead time, allow ample time to query, research, and write an article. If you're writing a 50th-anniversary article on the armistice during the Korean War, which occurred in June 1953, send your query or article to the editor by February 2003.

But be careful. War recollections can be a professional minefield. Here are a couple of tips to remember when interviewing a war veteran for an article:

Never write a military article based solely on a personal recollection. As years pass, war stories tend to be exaggerated and important details omitted. Whether intentional or not, veterans often "embellish" their experiences and recollections. What might have been a five-minute skirmish with a squad of enemy troops armed with pistols in 1944, may, more than fifty years later, become a bloody, year-long siege against two divisions of crack troops armed with automatic rifles! So, beware. Ask the veteran you're interviewing for specific times, dates, locations, books, articles, documents, and for the name of anyone who could "help verify" the account.

Use tact when interviewing a veteran. War is often the most traumatic event in a person's life, and it can be an ongoing source of great pain. Don't begin an interview with "how many people did you kill?" or "tell me what it's like to kill somebody." Insensitivity will guarantee failure. Ease into the interview, and allow the person time to relax and learn more about you. For example, ask an open question, such as "tell me what you were doing before you left for military service." As your subjects relax, ask specific questions. But steer clear of potentially sensitive questions until a solid rapport is established. Always put the veteran's feelings first.

If you want to research a specific military unit, but can't find anyone who served in it, don't give up. Most units have a veterans' association and are listed with the Office of the Chief of Military History in Washington, D.C. Another approach is to consult reunion announcements listed in military magazines; these usually provide a phone number to call for information. Explain that you are researching an article on their unit, and chances are a membership roster will be in the mail.

When you need detailed accounts of a particular unit, government institutions are the best source. The National Archives at Suitland, Maryland, contains enough information for the most ambitious military article. The United States Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, is an outstanding repository for unit histories and contains the personal papers of some of the country's most outstanding military figures. Service academy libraries at West Point, Annapolis, and Colorado Springs, along with military post libraries across the nation, also have extensive unit histories and rare documents. But call first and obtain clearance. Admittance is not guaranteed.

Good photographs can sell an article. In many cases, military photographs are easy to obtain. Most veterans have a few snapshots and will eagerly show them or lend them to you to be copied. With luck, a rare one-of-a-kind photo might turn a reluctant would-be editor into an eager, all-too-happy-to-write-you-a-check editor!

Photographs can also be purchased from several government sources. The Still Photo Branch of the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, is one. It will research its photo files and provide a partial listing on three topics. You then select a commercial contractor from a list to produce the photographs.

Other government sources in the Washington, D.C., area maintain extensive photo files and offer similar services. The Department of Defense Still Media Records Center provides Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps photographs from 1954 to the present. The Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum has Air Force photographs prior to 1954. Coast Guard photographs are available through the Commandant at Coast Guard Headquarters.

If time is short, consult the ad sections of military magazines. Military photo catalogues are available from a number of private suppliers. The photos might cost more, but they will arrive much faster than if they were ordered from Uncle Sam. And an 8 x 10 B&W photo may sell a $500 article.

After concluding your research and obtaining photographs, it's time to write. Here are a few more helpful tips:

1. Write tight and factually. The military audience is knowledgeable and will not be won over with flowery prose or fluffy writing. They appreciate facts and hate filler. Most readers are veterans and know how to cut through fat to get to the point.

2. Use quotes from participants when possible. Put the reader in a muddy foxhole alongside a bedraggled infantryman. Put him or her in the cockpit of a bullet-ridden F-14 screaming toward a Soviet MIG at mach 1 with guns blazing! Let the reader take part in the action.

3. Extol duty, honor and country. Patriotism sells, especially with readers of military magazines. Don't be afraid to wave the flag responsibly.

Whether you write about an elite unit fighting its way out from behind enemy lines against insurmountable odds, recount the monumental invasion of Normandy, or retell the sad story of a soldier's loneliness far from home, if you do your homework and follow a few simple rules, you should be well on your way to breaking into this lucrative market. Salute!

66
WHEN YOU WRITE A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE ARTICLE

By Judy Bodmer

Something has happened to you and you want to write about it. Does that mean it's marketable? Not necessarily. Many people who take my creative writing class do so because they've been through a divorce, had a child die, experienced a life-threatening illness, or have come to a place in their lives at which they want to pass on what they've learned to another generation and would like to write about their experiences.

Some of them get published. Others don't. Those who do have learned the basic principles of writing a marketable personal experience article: They slant their idea to a specific audience, choose one of the three types of articles that will tell their story best, use all four of the basic elements of a personal experience article, and target the right market. The secret to getting a personal experience article published is to use your experience as a stepping-stone to help others who have faced similar situations. Writing about a tragic event, such as the death of a child, probably won't sell until the writer understands what he or she learned while going through the experience. A couple of angles one could use are: 1) how to cope with the death of a child or 2) how to help a friend grieve.

The experience you write about doesn't have to be tragic. It can be as simple as baking cookies with your grandchildren, watching your son play baseball, or writing thank-you notes. It may take you quite a while to process and find the right slant. Keep asking yourself, what did I learn that will help someone else? When you've finally found the message in your experience, describe it in one sentence or phrase; it will keep your article on track. You won't be tempted to go off on interesting but irrelevant sidetracks that may have really happened but have nothing to do with the theme. Your phrase should read something like this:

• Six steps that helped me forgive.

• Ways to cope with an empty nest.

• How to handle stress.

Don't skimp on taking this step. One of the main reasons articles are rejected is that they aren't focused.

Three Kinds of Personal Experience Articles

Once you know the theme, you are ready to choose the type of article you want to write. Basically there are three: *straight narration, partial frame,* and *full frame.*

Straight narration

This type of article reads like a short story: It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You set scenes, use dialogue, and action. As in a good short story, the tension should mount until it is resolved. The message woven throughout the piece is driven home with a powerful ending. The straight narration approach is best used to describe a dramatic event: a daring rescue off a mountaintop; surviving an airplane crash; or having a baby in the middle of a snowstorm. This is where you should let your personality and the personality of the people involved shine through. Use strong nouns and active verbs. Show the action. Don't just say you and your husband had a fight, show it.

Partial frame

This type of article is used most frequently. It usually opens with an anecdote and then makes a transition into the body of the article. For example, a taxi driver picks up a fare in New York City. In the body of the article you show how that fateful day changed the taxi driver's life forever. Or you open with a description of taking your three young children grocery shopping. The body of the article then discusses the simple trick you learned that helped turn a sometimes frustrating chore into a game your children all love.

Full frame

Here you first set a scene of your article using description, dialogue, and action. You then move into the body and list the points you plan

to cover; for instance, the five things your mother never told you about sex. Each point is then expanded, sometimes quoting experts, statistics, or anecdotes. In the end, you shift back to the opening scene to wrap up your discussion.

An article I wrote for a parenting magazine on why I watch my son play baseball opens as I sit in the stands. I describe being cold, burning my mouth on hot coffee, and seeing my son strike out. In the body of the article I discuss the reasons

parents put themselves through this often painful experience. For the ending, I returned to my opening scene describing my son asking for money to buy a hamburger and the coach coming up and talking to me. Through action and dialogue I answer the question that I presented in my opening.

The Four Elements of a Personal Experience Article

Before you begin to write, make a rough outline using the following four elements of a personal experience article.

1. *The opening.* Choose an aspect of your story that will catch the reader's attention. It can be an anecdote, a quotation, an intriguing situation or a question that must be answered. One of my articles opened with an anecdote about a minister who counseled a couple. The wife wanted to leave her husband because she couldn't take the black book any more. The black book turned out to be a list that the husband was keeping of everything she'd done wrong since the day they married.

2. *The transition.* Transition statements that are pretty straightforward and sound almost trite tell the reader where you are going.

In "Helping Friends Who Grieve," which appeared in *Reader's Digest*, Lois Duncan describes the fatal shooting of her daughter. After opening with the tragic event, she uses the following transition statement: "Here is some advice I wish I'd been given when heartbreak was a stranger." The transition for my black book article was, "If you are keeping a similar list, what I learned may help you."

Writing a good transition statement is probably the most important step in writing personal experience articles. If you've processed your theme, it should be easy to write. It will also help you focus your article to a specific audience.

3. *The body.* In the body, you discuss what you learned from your experience. You can use bullets, numbers, headings (remember readers and editors love white space), or just develop the idea in narrative form. Each point can be enhanced with more details, examples from other people, quotes from experts, statistics, or another example from your life. In my black book article, I talked about the steps needed to achieve forgiveness.

4. *The ending.* In the end, drive home your message. Here you can summarize the points you've made, quote an expert or someone famous, challenge your reader, or project the future. Whenever I'm stuck, I look back at my opening. Is there some element there that you can draw on to help you wrap up your article? In the transition statement of my baseball article, I asked, "Why do I do this?" For the ending I answer with the question, "Where else can I watch my son grow into a man?"

The Market

Many magazines are looking for personal experience pieces; the trick is to match your theme with the right magazine. Once you've found a promising market, study a couple of issues. (The library is a good source for periodicals, or write for a sample copy.) Look at the cover, the table of contents, and the ads. Read the articles. Try to get a feel for the reader.

An author I know sold an article on her Hawaiian camping trip to the *Seattle Times* and then rewrote her camping experience from a different angle and sold it to *Seattle's Child.* One of my students wrote a piece about the ways she has made her long commute fun. She sold it to a newspaper in Seattle, which has a terrible traffic problem. Another young author sold a piece to *Seventeen* about how to make the most of being grounded—something she had experienced a lot of growing up.

Timeliness is also a factor. Seasonal material should be submitted six to twelve months ahead of the holiday or special celebration. (Check your market list for individual magazine requirements.) During the Christmas season, collect ideas and write about them while you're still under the influence of the season. Then starting in January send them out. If the idea hasn't sold by June, put it away, rework it if necessary, and try again the following year.

Magazines receive lots of submissions for the major holidays, but they are constantly looking for articles about some of the lesser known ones such as Arbor Day, St. Patrick's Day, or Martin Luther King's Birthday. They want stories about swimming for summer, skiing in winter. My baseball article was set in May and was just right for the next Mother's Day.

After choosing a market, you will save time by querying magazines to see if they'd be interested in your idea. Most magazines reply to queries within two weeks to a month. (Again, check your market lists. Some magazines want to see only the completed article.)

Once you receive a positive response to your query, try to picture a typical reader sitting across from you at lunch and write to him or her. This will help give your reader a truly personal experience.

With planning and persistence, personal experience articles can be a good way to break into publishing. They take little research, are in great demand, and pay anywhere from $15 to $2,000. Another benefit of these articles: There's nothing more rewarding than touching someone's heart.

67
SNOOPING IN THE PAST: WRITING HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHIES

By Laurie Winn Carlson

The past few years have seen biographies of people from the past propelled onto bestseller lists across the country: *Undaunted Courage,* Stephen Ambrose's biography of Meriwether Lewis; *Unredeemed Captive,* by John Demos, the story of Eunice Williams and the French and Indian War; *No Ordinary Time,* the story of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt by Doris Kearns Goodwin, and several biographies of Jane Austen, to name only a few.

The spectacular sales of historical biographies prove that the public wants stories about heroes and heroines, whether their lives involved statesmanship, exploration, or writing literature. People read biographies for many of the same reasons they read novels: to be entertained, to be informed, to be comforted or inspired, to identify with successful people, to live somebody else's life for a while. There's every reason to write historical biographies if you like historical research, enjoy learning about people, and can master the elements of good storytelling.

How does a writer go about retelling the life of a historical person in a way that grabs first an editor, then the reader? Even the most intriguing person's life can be incredibly boring unless presented with creativity and skill. Writing historical biographies requires a combination of techniques from nonfiction and fiction writing, and like the novelist, the first decision the biographer makes is, "Whose story can I tell?" Just like creating a main character in a novel, choosing the subjects for biographies is all-important. Who they are, the times they lived in, and the choices they made are what keeps the narrative going.

The main character

The person you choose to write about must be someone with whom readers will want to identify. That doesn't mean they have to be

saints—readers like to read about "bad guys," too, and biographies of history's villains can make compelling reading. Just be careful to select someone whose life and character pique your interest. I decided to write about women missionaries in the West because they were different from our commonly held perceptions—they were feminists rather than conventional nineteenth-century wives and mothers—and that makes their story intriguing and interesting to today's readers.

Avoid stereotypes: They are too boring. Challenge your preconceptions, search for people who tried to break the mold society had created for them, who strived to do something different and worthwhile, even if they made poor decisions or met with failure. Similar to a protagonist in a novel, good biographies follow the "hero's journey." Writers need to examine a person's life, the hurdles and obstructions he or she met, and how that person overcame them. If he or she failed miserably, perhaps that failure can be understood better or differently from today's perspective.

Like the novelist, as a biographer you want to reveal a person's character bit by bit, showing rather than telling. Using the subject's own writings (diaries, letters) as well as what others wrote or said about the person can be very revealing, but, of course, other people's opinions can be biased, based on personal resentments or jealousies. How you interpret the facts determines whether or not your biography will have true depth and dimension. You'll want to reveal details about your subject's life throughout your book, looking for ways to stir readers' emotions by creating drama and tension, even some suspense, to propel them forward.

Setting

For historical biographies, time and place are extremely important to the picture of the subject's life. What best-selling biographies have in common is that they examine lives of people who lived in periods of turmoil and action, and are carefully researched and scrupulously accurate. In addition, they are written in a lively narrative style that engages and holds readers' interest.

As you choose the person to write about, look at the geographic setting and the time period and social class in which they lived. Time and place achieve a symbolic importance in a biography, as they do in a novel. In biographies, the setting is another character of sorts; it provides hurdles the protagonist must overcome. An impoverished childhood, geographic isolation, ramifications of social class—these all become part of the setting in a biography. When writing about a woman of the early nineteenth century, it makes a great deal of difference whether she lived in a settled New England village or on the Ohio frontier. Where and when she lived is part of her life's story.

When you're casting about for a particular subject for your biography, look for people who lived in exciting times.

That will make the entire story much more interesting and provide conflicts outside the person's inner character.

Other characters

Biographies, like novels, have antagonists or villains. Your subject may be young, idealistic, duty-bound; the "bad guys" can be treacherous weather, distance, rugged terrain, armed and dangerous dissidents, time running out, lack of funds, or simply the dark side of human nature. You will also need to identify and include people who helped the protagonist: lovers, mentors, siblings, rescuers, friends, or confidants. Adding these elements will enrich the biography—you will not simply be retelling chronological events in a dead person's life—and will eventually give the biography a sort of climactic resolution.

When you choose a suitable subject to write about, be careful not to choose someone you're in love with—and be sure not to fall in love with the subject as you write. Be alert for evidence of character failings in even the most righteous subject's life: Those natural flaws, mistakes, and weaknesses make the character more well-rounded and real.

Theme

Once you've selected the subject for your biography, ask yourself: Why do I want to write about this person? It's an important question because it gives you the theme for the book. What topics, besides the facts of the person's life, will you include? What broader issues will you address as you tell about this particular person and the times he or she lived in? The theme is really the story you are telling, whether it's about an ordinary person trying to save the farm, a business, society, or whether the theme is one of family devotion, escape from intolerable conditions, or how to overcome adversity and become a leader. These are the overall themes you should really be exploring when you write a person's life from the past.

Study psychological motivation, and place the person's life within the times in which he or she lived. Don't judge his or her efforts (or lack of them) by today's social standards, but determine the expectations of the period in which your subject lived and how he or she did or did not live up to them.

Structure

Most biographies are pretty much chronological, because that's how lives are lived. But you can jump around or diverge somewhat to keep the narrative dramatic as well as realistic. What you're trying to do is to write in scenes, like a playwright. Plan your story around the incidents or events with the most dramatic potential. Select scenes that are visual, full of conflict, danger, failure, suffering, turning points, beginnings, discoveries, and successes. You can't recount all the events in the person's life, but only the most important, dramatic ones; perhaps limit the scope of the book to a span of only a few years or a decade, rather than an entire lifetime. Omit details of childhood, education, old age, or other times when your subject's life held little conflict or excitement. Focus your narrative on the times and events that shaped the subject's life.

Research

Research strongly affects your selection of a subject. You certainly can't select someone about whom there's practically nothing known, because then you have to invent the facts, in which case you should switch from writing a biography to writing a historical novel.

If you want to write about someone with an extensive written record—diaries, court records, letters, and military records—you'll have no problem with research. If, however, you choose a female subject who wasn't famous enough to have left behind lots of written records (and most women in history would fall into this category), you'll need to search harder for information, and can perhaps write a group biography, as I did. This will enable you to use what several women wrote about each other, and by comparing and contrasting their lives, you'll be able to produce a strong narrative.

Researching the biography is all-important in giving your writing authenticity; the use of specialized jargon of the day, and specific details gleaned from your research will help make your book credible. The foods people ate, the fabric used in the clothing they wore, the specific illnesses and medicines they were subject to—these all help the reader become more involved in the story you are telling and make your words ring true. This research takes time, but these tiny details makes the subject's life become more real to you, too. The words I found in missionary hymns of the 1830s made me see how women connected becoming a missionary with going to far-off lands for adventure. I would have never discovered that fact if I'd simply accepted that they sang "generic" church hymns. The exact words in the hymns provided a rich resource for understanding the people who sang them. As you do your research, you should at times be surprised, or else you simply aren't digging enough.

A last question to ask as you set about writing a biography: Why would anyone else want to read about this person? Your answer will help you identify your theme and focus, and maintain the energy and effort it takes to complete a project as time-consuming and difficult as writing a historical biography. A satisfying mix of personality, historical setting, and human nature, moving along a chronological continuum, gives you (and your readers) a story to enjoy and

remember.

If there's one other thing a historical biographer needs, it's a passion for digging into the lives of people, finding out all you can about them and the times in which they lived—along with the drive to tell others about it. An unquenchable desire for gossip (backed up by research, mind you) goes a long way, too!

68
THE BUSINESS OF WRITING ABOUT BUSINESS

By Christine M. Goldbeck

Wall Street reporters aren't the only writers making money from the business community. Most business journals and regional weekly or monthly publications dealing with issues and information important to business people depend on free-lance writers, and pay well for the articles they receive or assign.

Step one to breaking into this market is to tell yourself that business is not intimidating or boring. That you aren't an M. B. A., that you flunked high school economics, that you don't know the difference between a mutual fund and a certificate of deposit—none of this really matters. The business community is not an ogre, and all business people are not stuffed shirts who are too busy with the bottom line to talk about their industry or their enterprise. Nor is business writing non-creative and rigidly routine.

In fact, many business owners and operators like to share their expertise and experiences. So, not only will you get bylines and make money writing about business, you will learn a lot.

Call the local Chamber of Commerce or any other business support agency to inquire whether there is a business journal published in your area, and check your newspaper to see whether it has a business page. Bigger daily papers usually run such a page in each issue. Smaller dailies often publish a business page on a weekly basis.

Business story subjects run the gamut: new businesses, profiles of business people, the grand opening of a business, a store reopening a year after it was destroyed by fire, trends in an industry, affirmative action contracts, a bankrupt bagel shop, a new product sold in the area, college bookstores selling quarts of milk for continuing education students ... as long as it relates to doing business and you can write it for business people, you're in.

A newspaper editor will want samples of your published works in order to assess your ability to write interesting business copy. Business journals usually have writer's guidelines and on request, will mail them to you, along with a sample issue. Therefore, that byline might be but a telephone call to an editor away.

Let's say you've received a go-ahead from a business editor on an article about a business in your community. Now what?

You will of course want to set up an appointment to interview the owner, and to be prepared for that interview by learning something about him or her, the company, and the industry. Your local community library, as well as area university libraries, are great places to obtain information on the businesses and types of industries in the area. Take time to familiarize yourself with all the information that is available.

These are some of the references you should consult for background information on a company or a business executive:

• **Annual reports.** A public company's annual report contains helpful information (in addition to the stuff they write for stockholders). Look for statistics that reveal financial information about the company.

• **Trade journals** (magazines and newspapers devoted to a specific industry).

• **Local chambers of commerce and business associations.** Staffs at such agencies are usually good about giving you some information about their member companies, many of which are small- to medium-size private enterprises. So, if you need to know the identity of the president of Aunt Mabel's Meatballs, call the Chamber of Commerce nearest to the location of the business.

• **Commercial on-line services, the Internet, and the World Wide Web.**

Here you'll find a wealth of information about industry trends and specific companies and business leaders. (For a recent piece on how high paper prices are affecting profit in a number of industries, I went to an on-line newsstand, searched under the key words "paper," "costs," and "paper prices," and got more information than I was able to use. But, it certainly gave me a lot of background, which I used to formulate questions for my interviews.) Dun & Bradstreet and other business references can also be contacted via the Internet.

Like a typical newspaper or magazine article, a business feature is built on the five Ws *(who, what, where, when,* and *why*—and don't forget *how),* answering such questions as:

What is the business: What does it make or what services does it provide for sale? Where is it located? How long has

the company been in business? How does it market its product or service?

Once you have that vital information, you will need to focus on the people who run the business, asking every interviewee from whom you need information the following kinds of questions:

• What is your business strategy?

• How are you marketing your product?

• How much did you invest to start the business? Did you get loans, and if so, what kind?

• Who is your competition and how do you try to stay ahead of them?

• How much do you charge for your product?

• Is this a sole proprietorship, a privately held company, or a public operation?

• What are your annual sales?

• How many employees do you have?

Let's say you're going to write about your neighbor who makes meatballs and sells them to local supermarkets. If your piece is for a mainstream newspaper, the editor will probably instruct you to take what is called a "general assignment approach," which simply means you will have to use a style the average newspaper reader will understand and find satisfying. You won't use business lingo, and you will find something interesting, even homey, about your subject or topic and center your story on that specific point.

You will ask your subject how, when, and where she got started, why she wanted to sell her meatballs, and what made her think this business could be profitable. What did she do before making meatballs? Your lead might read:

> Up to her elbows in ground beef, Susan Tucker fondly recalls the times she and her Aunt Mabel made meatballs for the Saint Mary's Church socials. A year ago, Tucker gave up her 7-to-3 job sewing collars on coats to sell "Aunt Mabel's Meatballs." "Too bad Mabel isn't here to see how good business has been," she says.

This type of human interest piece, extolling personal success, the local church, and good old Aunt Mabel, sells mainstream newspapers.

If your piece is for a business journal, you'll need to handle it a little differently, since you are writing for a different audience—business people.

Something like this might work:

> An Olive County businesswoman last year used a recipe for homemade meatballs to launch a business that currently employs ten people. Susan Tucker, the owner of Aunt Mabel's Meatballs, started the business in the kitchen of her Brownsville home. Within six months, she had made enough money to purchase and renovate an old restaurant located in Brownsville's commercial district, where she and her employees now make meatballs for wholesale and retail sales. They package and ship their product to a number of supermarkets and restaurants in the region and sell hot meatball hoagies to downtown shoppers, as well.
>
> "I started out making and selling meatballs wholesale to places like Acme Market and Joe's Spaghetti House," Tucker says. "After we moved into this building, I thought it would be a good idea to sell the product retail, so I started selling sandwiches and fresh meatballs from here. That proved to be a good decision, too."
>
> Tucker invested no capital when she launched the business. She says there was little overhead cost, and she quickly recouped what she paid for beef, eggs, and the other ingredients by selling the meatballs for $2.99 per pound.

See the difference? It's the same story, but tailored for a different readership.

This method of getting the information and writing a business journal piece can be used for any type of business or industry. Here's another example, using a service industry executive as the source:

> The president of Bridgetown Health Services Inc. says his company now sells medical insurance to small businesses that have fewer than five employees. Owen Johnson says that the small business health plan was created in order to stay competitive in the ever-evolving health industry. The new policy was put on the market October 1, and within two months, the company had signed up 500 small businesses.
>
> "There are major competitors trying to break into this marketplace. We wanted to get a jump on them. By selling our 'Small Business Health Plan,' we believe we have entrenched ourselves in the Northeast Pennsylvania medical insurance field," Johnson said. "It proved to be a good business decision."

Reporting on business is not difficult when you know your subject, get the vital information, then ask those extra questions specific to doing business in a particular field. If you were writing a piece about a fire, a murder, a local church yard sale, a visit from the Pope, you would ask questions specific to that event or person. This is really all you will do in business writing: You will write the story so that your readers—business people—will be informed and entertained. Also, you'll build up your publication credits, make new contacts, and learn interesting things about the people in your area.

Reference materials I recommend and which you may want to have on hand include *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*, which contains a section on business writing, and *BusinessSpeak*, compiled by Dick Schaaf and Margaret Kaeter (Warner Books). Both should be available through a local bookstore or in a good public or business

library.

Trade groups with information about business journals include the Association of Area Business Publications, 5820 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 500, Los Angeles, CA 90036, (213) 937-5514, and The Network of City Business Journals, 128 S. Tryon St., Suite 2350, Charlotte, NC 28202, (800) 433-4565.

There are also professional societies for business writers. Write the Society of American Business Editors and Writers, University of Missouri, 76 Gannett Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, or the American Business Press, 675 Third Ave., Suite 415, New York, NY 10017.

69
TRUE GRIME WRITING: A DYNAMIC FIELD

By Peter A. DePree

Few genres in journalism today are as exciting and profitable as true crime, whether article or book. Although this piece focuses on the true crime article, many of the techniques and methods discussed in the following six steps are readily applicable to the true crime book.

Step One: *Researching the field.* Buy several true crime magazines and spend a rainy afternoon getting a feel for the slant and depth of the articles. Jot down what you liked and didn't like about them. Then, dash off a request to the editorial office of one or two of the magazines for the writers guidelines (include the requisite SASE).

Step Two: *Finding a crime.* Visit your local library and look in the index of the biggest newspaper in your area under the heading Murder/ Manslaughter, going back about four years, and photocopy those index pages. (Most crimes more than four or five years old are too stale to fit the slant of true detective magazines.) Highlight the crimes that seem most likely to make interesting true crime pieces. The few sentences describing each article will give you a good feel for the highlights of the case. Select about half a dozen cases that look promising. As you peruse them, you will whittle down the group for one reason or another until you're left with one or two that have all the elements you need for an effective true crime piece. Most detective magazine guidelines will help you narrow them down: The crime is always murder; the "perp" (police parlance for perpetrator) has been convicted; there was a substantial investigation leading to the arrest; the crime took place reasonably near your area (important, since you'll have to go to the court to gather research); and photos are available for illustration.

Step Three: *Doing the research.* First, with the index as a guide, collect all available newspaper articles on the crime you've selected so you can make an outline before reading the trial transcript. Your library should have either back issues or microfilm (provided you followed Step One and picked a case no more than four years old). If there are two or more newspapers in your area that covered the crime, get copies of all of them. Often, pertinent details were printed by one paper but not the other.

Step Four: *Reading the trial transcript.* Call the clerk's office of the court where the trial took place and ask for the case number on the crime and whether the transcript is available to the public (it usually is). By now you should have a three- or four-page outline based on all the articles you've read. Take your outline and a lot of paper and pens to the courthouse, and be prepared to spend a whole day reading the trial record; even a trial that lasted only three or four days can fill several bound volumes. (When I was doing research for a book on the Nightstalker serial killer case in Los Angeles, the court record was 100,000 pages long and filled three shopping carts!) Skim and make notes of the quotes and material you'll need; this will be a lot easier if you've prepared your outline carefully, since you'll already know the key names to watch for—the lead detective, prosecutor, defense attorney, victim, witnesses, responding officer, and so forth. You'll need to look for material on several different levels simultaneously: details for accuracy, dramatic quotes, colorful background, etc. There will usually be far more of these elements than you could possibly pack into an article, so you have the luxury of choosing only the very best. You may discover a brand-new form of writing frustration when you have to slash all those dramatic prosecutorial summations and subplots down to the required word count.

Use whatever form of research you're comfortable with. I find a combination of scribbling notes in my own pseudo-shorthand and dictating into a hand-held recorder suits me. (Pack enough spare batteries and tapes!) I can mumble into my recorder faster than I can write. Having photocopies made at the court is usually prohibitively expensive, so copy very selectively. As a rule of thumb, the parts of a transcript that yield the most important factual information are the opening remarks of both attorneys; the questioning of the lead detective; the testimony of expert witnesses such as forensic technicians; and the summing up of both attorneys. A couple of tips: Dates are especially important, and so are names.

Almost as important as the transcript is the court file. Specify to the court clerk that you would like that as well as the transcript.

Step Five: *Writing the article.* Reread the writers guidelines for the magazine to which you're submitting your piece, then write the kind of article *you* would find exciting and surprising (or shocking) to read. Chances are that if a particular detail, scene, or quote piques your interest, it belongs in your piece. Don't get lost in boring minutiae, but do remember that sprinkling in telling details seasons the piece and sharpens the focus.

If your detective used a K9 dog to search for evidence, you might mention that it was a Rottweiler named Butch, with

a mangled ear. If the ballistics expert test-fired the gun, you could throw in that detail, noting that he fired it into a slab of gel, then retrieved the bullet and viewed it under a comparison microscope for tell-tale striations, and so on. The trial transcript is packed with details like these that make your article stand out from a "made-up" detective story.

As you're writing, watch your length. Editors are not impressed with articles that run a few thousand words over their suggested length.

Step Six: *Secondary wrap-up research.* True crime editors are picky about certain details, especially names (check those writers guidelines again!). If you mention "Mr. Gordon," you should specify that he is Commissioner John Gordon of the Gotham City Police Department. Change the names of witnesses or family members, for obvious reasons. Go back to the library to check the details that will give your writing authority. For instance, if the crime was committed with a shotgun and you don't know a pump-action from an over-&-under, you need to do some minor research to find out. If your crime involves DNA fingerprinting, you'll need to spend no more than an hour in the library to find enough useful facts to give your article a little snap. I recently wrote an article on a killer who was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. In just four pages in two college psych textbooks— twenty minutes' investment of my time—I came up with more than enough facts for my piece.

What to watch out for

There are at least four articles in my computer that are almost completely written, but went nowhere. Why? Because I made stupid, un-necessary mistakes—mistakes that *you* would never make if you follow a few simple rules. The following three are non-negotiable:

1) Never start on an article without querying the magazine first. Nothing is quite as frustrating as writing twenty detailed pages on the Longbow rapist, only to discover that Joe Bland already sold that piece to your target magazine a year ago. You now have a pile of perfectly good kindling.

2) *Always make doubly sure the trial transcript is available.* You should never have to invest more than one or two full days in researching the transcript and court file, but that doesn't help when on the day you need it you learn that the whole file was shipped five hundred miles away so the appeals judges could study it at their leisure. (We're talking *months* here.)

3) *Never start an article without making sure photos are available.* Etch this in stone. No true crime magazine will run an article without *at least* three photos. The minimum basics are a photo of the perp; one of the victim; one of the crime scene. These can be what I call "documentary-grade"; sometimes, even a particularly sharp photo clipped from a newspaper will suffice. But query your target magazine first, and always make sure the picture is in the public domain (i.e., a high school yearbook photo of the killer, a photo of the victim distributed to all the papers, a snapshot of the bank building where an armed robbery took place).

True crime writing might be called entry-level journalism. If you can write a tightly researched and entertaining piece following these suggestions, you'll have a better chance of success.

70
FREE-LANCING FOR YOUR LOCAL NEWSPAPER

By Dan Rafter

Ever dream of writing for *The New York Times* or *The Washinton post,* or reviewing movies for *Entertainment Weekly?* The writers whose names are atop the biggest stories and features didn't just show up one day and start typing. Most of them worked their way up from small beginnings.

One way to get started in the world of nonfiction writing is to freelance for a local community newspaper. Most towns, even most big cities, have at least one. You might find in their pages a story about winners of the high school's science fair, or the results of the Little League baseball playoffs.

Free-lancing for these papers may not be glamorous, but it's an excellent way for beginning writers to learn the basics of nonfiction writing. You'll also learn a lot, even when writing for the smallest local papers. You'll experience the thrill of having your name in print. And if you prove to be a reliable reporter, you'll get to write something every week. If you want to move up in the world of nonfiction writing, free-lance reporting gives you the most important tool of all: a portfolio of published stories. You won't get paid much, generally about $20 to $30 an assignment. But writing for the local paper can give a young writing career a big boost. Here's how to get started.

Making contact

First, buy a copy of your local paper and study it carefully, noting the various bylines on the stories. The paper probably uses a number of free-lance writers. If the same writer's name keeps popping up, it means the paper relies on a staff writer for most of the material.

Learn the types of stories the paper features, and figure out what is missing. Maybe, for instance, the stall reporters aren't covering the

high school's track team. That might be something you can do. If you've had experience working with the chamber of commerce, who better to write about the local business climate?

Once you've studied the paper, call the editor. You can find his or her name on the masthead located near the front of the paper, usually on the editorial page. At small papers, the editor assigns stories to free-lancers, so don't waste your time talking to anyone else. Keep in mind that editors at small newspapers don't have a lot of time. Before you call them, make sure you know exactly what you want to say. If you're nervous, write a script for yourself. Tell the editors you're familiar with the paper and would like to report for it on a free-lance basis. If you have writing experience, mention it. If there are any areas you'd most like to cover, such as sports or feature writing, mention this, too.

Most editors will ask for a cover letter, resume, and writing samples. Send exactly what the editor requests. If you don't hear anything within two to three weeks, don't take it personally: give the editor another call. Editors are notorious for not following up on letters or phone calls. If you send a professionally written cover letter with strong writing samples, you're more than likely on your way to your first assignment.

Standing out from the crowd

A lot of writers want free-lance reporting jobs, even at the weeklies. That means editors sift through a stream of cover letters and resumes each week. They look first for strong clips, published samples of your writing. They'll spare little more than a glance at your resume if you don't send some writing samples with it.

If you've never been published, don't panic. There are several ways to get into print.

Do you belong to an association, church or club that has a newsletter? Write some stories for them. Your chamber of commerce may publish a community newspaper of its own. Volunteer to write for it. If you're a college student, or even if you're just taking classes part-time, write for your school newspaper. You probably won't get paid for any of this when you're just getting started, but getting published is more important at this stage than making money.

You can also write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. While not a true example of reporting, a well-crafted letter speaks volumes about your writing skills.

If you're really ambitious, attend the next meeting of your local city council, park or school board. Interview the important people after the meeting, and write a piece on it and send it to your local paper. Your style may appeal to the editor, and your story could show up in the news section.

Drafting the irresistible cover letter

Samples aren't the only thing editors look at. Your resume is important, and should list your special skills. But the cover letter is even more important. Here's your chance to show some clean and efficient prose, the traits of good newspaper writing. An effective cover letter details your background, explains why you want the job, and lists your qualifications, all on one sheet of paper. A good cover letter can make up for other flaws, such as a limited number of writing samples.

Rich Parmeter, editor of the *Regional News*, a weekly based in the southwest suburbs of Chicago, is no pushover. His paper has won more than 200 writing awards. His standards are high. One free-lancer Parmeter hired didn't send him a single writing sample. What made the difference?

A great cover letter, that's what.

"She wrote a wonderful letter," Parmeter says. "It was direct and to the point. It showed no bad habits. She said she never thought about writing for a newspaper, but was fascinated by the chance to do some reporting in her own community. I appreciated that enthusiasm."

What sets one cover letter apart from the next? The ability to tell editors exactly what you can do for them.

Have you lived in your community for decades? This gives you a special insight into the way your town works. Mention this in your cover letter. Did you play high school basketball? That makes you a perfect candidate to cover local sports. If you have a financial background you'll do a great job writing about the city council's budget planning.

The cover letter is your chance to show editors everything you can do. It's no time to be modest.

The more you can do . . .

Newspaper budgets leave little room for new hires these days, especially. at weeklies. The cost of newsprint continues to rise, and the growing field of electronic publishing lures scores of advertisers from newspapers. At many community papers, editors have fewer dollars than ever to spend on free-lancers. That's the case at the *Harbor County News*, based in southwest Michigan. The paper employs just three steady free-lancers. Editor Phyllis Kelly keeps an eye out for one thing when she's hiring new free-lancers: diversity. In these penny-pinching days, the ability to do several things well has become more important than ever.

"It's always better if you can do double duty," Kelly says. "We don't have any staff photographers, for instance, so we prefer writers who can also take photos."

If you have a skill besides writing, let editors know it. If you've done proofreading, mention it in your cover letter. If you've worked in sales, put that in there, too; you may get a side job selling ads for the paper. And, by all means, let the editor know if you can take photos.

The world of free-lancing is a tough one. A National Writers Union study a few years ago found that only 16 percent of free-lance writers earned more than $30,000 a year. But the study didn't show how much fun you can have free-lancing . . . and it didn't measure the satisfaction you get from seeing your name in print.

So give it a shot. After all, writing for a community paper might be the first step toward that 16 percent club.

POETRY

71
BECOMING A POET

By Diana O'Hehir

Talking becomes poetry as walking becomes dancing," wrote poet Josephine Miles in her introduction to *The Poem, A Critical Anthology* (Prentice-Hall). "It takes on form to give shape to a mood or an idea."

Yes. We've all felt that. During those moments of pure felicity when poetry welled up and became our natural medium, when writing seemed loving and straightforward, a natural activity. But what about those other times when writing was difficult? How do you not only become a poet, but how do you keep on being one?

It's the first day of a fall course I'm teaching called "Creative Writing. Poetry." "How many of you," I ask, "are poets?"

My naive question produces only three raised hands. I don't ask how many of the others here would *like* to be poets; instead, I start inquiring about what difficulties are imagined. And in no time I have a long list, most of its items familiar:

"How do I get started?"

"I used to write. Now I can't."

"How do I know I'm any good?"

Yes, almost everyone in this varied group (the ages range from seventeen to fifty-five) would like to be a poet. But fear of poetry—"because it's so difficult ... so important ... so different . . ." is a major complaint of this class.

"I don't have any ideas. When my life's not dramatic, I don't know what to write about."

"Somebody said, write your dreams. But I don't remember my dreams." At this point I ask everyone to grab a sheet of paper and list seven objects she really hates. "Objects, artifacts from ordinary life that irritate you, gizmos that won't do their job or get in your way. Things you really feel strongly about. Stuff that springs to mind when

I say *hate.* You can see them clearly. Remember, you're listing objects, not human beings, not events. Things you can touch and see—clock-radio, television set, purple scarf, leaky ballpoint pen."

The class settles in with enthusiasm to list stuff they hate. "No," I answer a question, "your list isn't a poem, though it looks something like it on the page. But if you choose one of those hated items—the one you see most vividly, whose physical details you know best—you'll probably be able to write about it. And maybe that's the beginning of a poem."

A hand goes up. "Somebody said that if I wrote a poem that rhymed you wouldn't let me stay in the class."

This question produces such enormous issues of craft, discipline, originality, and control, calls for such a long lecture on form, its use and abuse, that I move on completely. "Now," I announce enthusiastically, "we're going to look at some poems by professional poets, poems that will give you a lift; you'll notice that one of the most beautiful and moving of these is rhymed throughout."

I've been writing poetry all my life and some of the students are just about to begin, but our problems are much the same. We face issues of self-worth and of dogged application, questions of how to keep going. (Remember that Emily Dickinson had only five poems published in her lifetime; William Blake printed his own poems by hand and died a pauper.) At home now, after my class, I'm drawing up a mental list, a list for myself. It's short and stupid and obvious; it includes a series of instructions to myself and a list of recipes to overcome block.

The recipes at least are specific and direct. They sound simple-minded; they don't always work, but they're a place to begin.

First, here's an anti-block measure that we all know: Find a friend, at least one friend to whom you can show your work. This person should ideally be another writer with whom you trade reactions. And it helps if the friend (a) likes your work; (b) is not too competitive; and (c) writes a lot, so that he or she is eager for you to show up with your poems.

And second (related and also simple-minded), get yourself into a group of writers. Choose this group with enormous care. Not too large a group, one with some people your own age, people whose work you respect, and at least one of whom is a better poet than you. Writers who offer genuine criticism but aren't destructive. Not at all. Not the least little bit!

There are lots of small anti-block devices. Sometimes these work; often they don't.

Vary your routine. If you use a computer, try a yellow pad. Pen instead of pencil. Different chair, different table, back to light instead of facing the view, etc.

Vary your routine *dramatically.* Leave home, go to San Francisco or Hoboken and sit in a park. Claim a table in a coffeehouse. Public libraries are great for composition; if you're like me, you feel enclosed and comforted by public libraries.

Imitate. Read voraciously and then shamelessly imitate a poet whom you really respect. After a while, you may get the surprise of finding you sound like that poet, but different, good in your own way.

Imitate other art (not writing). Music, painting, sculpture, architecture? I don't mean to write *about* these arts, but to try to reinterpret them. What would a poetic version of the *Nabucco* Hebrew Chorus be like? Of the Vietnam Memorial?

Use a newspaper headline as a first line of a poem. (Or a quote. Or someone else's first line. Or a line of instruction for your computer/ shampoo/pancake mix.)

And so on, and on. Look out your window and react, in poetry, to the first thing you see. Write about your dreams. If you don't remember dreams, get a reproduction of a surrealist painting—Dali, di Chirico, Chagall, or whoever—and try to describe it. Write a letter in poetry to someone you hate, to somebody you used to love, or to someone you loved too late. *From* someone you've wronged. Obviously, all these devices are tricks to get you started. Maybe some of them will produce meaningful work, maybe none will, but you *will* be writing, if only briefly.

So, what good are tricks? Well, anything that works, works. But beyond such questions as "How do I get some words on the page *today?"* are fundamental issues of commitment and address: Why are we doing this? How do I make myself feel like a poet?

Back home in my room, I translate my class's questions into a more simple catch-all question for myself: How do I keep going?

Read, I tell myself. Read poetry, lots of it, poems that are strange and thorny, that make my scalp prickle. (That's how Alice B. Toklas knew she was in the presence of genius.) Read many other works, too, the more difficult and challenging, the better. I'm lazy; I like to ignore this straightforward instruction. But on the few occasions when I follow it I'm really happiest, glowing with a sense of Calvinist Tightness, fighting with ideas that stretch my mind. Not knowledge I can copy or imitate, but astronomy, geology, physics (I don't understand that one at all), philosophy. Beside me is a stack of books that I need to review each time I pick them up.

Difficult reading can lead to poetry; exotic flotsam can surface unexpectedly. "Almost always my poems begin with a small scrap of language," William Matthews says, "—a few words or an image."[3] And he goes on to make a comparison between deep-sea diving and poetic process.

A second instruction to myself involves honesty. It sounds feebleminded to say *try to be completely honest with yourself; don't tell lies to yourself.* Of course we're honest; who fakes inside the safe haven of her own writing? Well, I do. I'm not talking about creative invention and imagination, which are absolutely necessary. I'm talking about dishonesty in recognizing my own true attitudes. I pretend I can write in a fashionable style that's not mine. Or I pretend to a point a view, not mine, which might get me published. Oddly enough, these efforts never work; poems written that way are bad and weak, imitations of imitations; I know this and so does the editor of the magazine I'm hoping to fool.

Editors of magazines? Publication? How do you get published? There are, of course, simple rules about the way a manuscript should look, about knowing the magazine you're submitting your poems to. But, if you want to keep going, to think of yourself as a poet, do that sending out automatically and then forget it. Ridiculous? Impossible? Yes, almost. But watching the mailbox is highly destructive. Maybe you can trade duties with a friend: "I'll send yours, you send mine." This friend who reads your work *is* publication; remind yourself of that. And that thrill from getting published lasts only about ten minutes.

My final instruction to myself is one some poets don't agree with.

but I find it essential. Edit. Everyone has an editorial personality as well as a creative, intuitive one. Don't let that editorial personality interfere with your original creative process. At the time of inspiration, the editorial self can be an anti-muse that stops you before you start. But go back later, after a month, a year, and review rigorously, with all the honesty and judgment you have. Be thorough and incisive. Forgive nothing. There's a liberating sense of Tightness that comes when a poem finally meets your own exact standards. Marvin Bell says, "I remember carrying a draft of the poem, at first on yellow sheets, later, ironically, a Xerox of a draft—on trips, finally, all the way to Europe. I let it lie, awaiting a clear perspective. ... I wanted the poem to speak as the objects and occasions had spoken to me: haltingly, correctingly, without a posed moment to make famous."

We're back to Josephine Miles's statement about poetry, that it gives shape or mood to an idea. What a simple,

unassuming concept, and what a fantastically ambitious and disturbing one. No wonder we poets are excited and disturbed by our job.

72
THE POET'S CHOICE: LYRIC OR NARRATIVE

By Gregory Orr

Poets are haunted by the dream of perfection in a way that writers in no other literary art form are. And unity is one of those mysterious elements interwoven with poetry's fatal dream of its own perfection.

Unity is something almost all poets and those writing about poetry have insisted upon as an essential element. But things become complicated when we decide to define unity, because there are many definitions leading to many different kinds of poems.

Suppose we begin with two kinds of poems and the distinct kind of unity each might aspire to: *lyric poems* and *narrative poems.* They aren't different kinds of poems; they actually exist on a spectrum with (pure) lyric on one end and (pure) narrative on the other. I've put the adjective "pure" in parentheses because there is no such beast; every lyric has some element of narrative in it, even if it is only an implied dramatic context for its words. Similarly, every narrative has some lyric element, if only a metaphor placed at a crucial point or the heightening of its rhythmic texture, as it approaches its narrative climax. Lyric and narrative are part of a continuum, and it is extremely interesting to take a number of your poems and try to locate them along this spectrum. Ask yourself: Is this sonnet more lyric than narrative? And how does it compare with any of my other poems in terms of lyric and narrative elements? Which is dominant?

Lyrics and narratives are the products of different sensibilities or of the same sensibility operating in two distinct ways. These differences can be understood by comparing them with the making of a sculpture. There are two basic ways of making a piece of sculpture: carving and modeling.

The carving method involves taking a piece of stone or wood and cutting away toward some desired or intuited shape *within* the original block. The finished piece emerges as the extra material is stripped away.

The modeling method requires the sculptor to construct a skeletal structure out of wood or metal that essentially defines the shape of the piece, much as our skeleton defines the shape of our bodies. This structure is called an armature. Once the armature is constructed, the sculptor proceeds by slapping lumps of clay or plaster on it to flesh out the shape. This modeling technique is one of accretion: The sculptor has added material to make his piece, and the finished piece is larger than what he or she began with. Also, the carving technique results in a piece that is smaller than the original stone the sculptor began with.

What do these two techniques have to do with poetry? They correspond to the lyric and narrative modes. The lyric poem is created like the carved sculpture—the poet intuits a hidden, compelling shape within the language of the first draft. The secret is to carve away, to eliminate the excess as you work your way toward the lyric's secret center. The motto of the lyric is somewhat mystical: "Less is more."

The author of narrative, on the other hand, has a different purpose: If the lyric poet seeks a hidden center, then the narrative poet wants to tell a story—this happened, and then that happened. He or she wants to add material, to keep moving, to find out what is over the next hill. The narrative poem is a kind of journey, and it needs to add action to action, event to event, line to line. Narrative poems get longer as they are rewritten, because the narrative poet discovers his or her meanings by asking, "What next?" and pushing a poem's protagonist further by adding one line to the next. One of the cleverest definitions of narrative thinking comes from contemporary poet Frank O'Hara, who spoke of his work as his "I-did-this-and-then-l-did-that" poems. O'Hara's remark sounds almost glib, but he's articulating the secret of how a narrative gets made. The narrative poet's motto is the sensible: "More is more."

The narrative poem wanders across a landscape, propelled by verbs and unified by the need to have a beginning, middle, and end that relate to each other. The narrative poem is searching for something and won't be happy (complete, unified) until it has found it. The lyric poem has a different shape—it *constellates* around a single center, usually an emotional center: a dominant feeling. If the shape of a narrative is a line meandering down the page, then the shape of a lyric is that of a snowflake or crystal. The lyric is not searching, because it already knows what it knows, what it feels. Browning caught this already-knowing when he said "the lyric poet digs where he stands." The lyric poet digs into his or her emotion, a single, centered thing.

Needless to say, neither the narrative nor the lyric is "right"; each can be merely a direction a poet might take a poem. But they also reflect inclinations a poet has, and as such, they can be more deeply rooted in the dominant psychology of a poet.

Robert Frost is a prime modern example of a narrative temperament—not that his poems contain no lyric moments, but that the lyric was seldom his aim, and lyric unity was not what he usually sought. William Carlos Williams would be my candidate for a poet whose primary temperament is lyric.

What do I mean by lyric and narrative unity? Aristotle, who in the fifth century B.C. became the first poet-friendly critic with his *Poetics,* knew that unity was essential to the dramatic effectiveness of poetry. His idea of poetry was essentially narrative, and he proposed that what could unify narrative poetry was this: that it describe a single action. He further insisted that there had to be a beginning, a middle, and an end to this action, and that these three parts should be in a harmonious relationship.

When Robert Frost writes his poem "Directive," he is giving us a quintessential narrative poem, which will take the form of a journey, the poet-speaker offering himself to us as a guide. We travel over a landscape toward the ruins of a vanished village (we are also, in a sense, traveling backward in time). It is the narrative as journey, the narrative as a series of actions where *verbs,* those action words, move us forward from one sentence to the next. How will Frost's "Directive" achieve narrative unity? By arriving at a significant location (the village, the spring behind the deserted house) and making a significant discovery (the cup hidden in the hollow tree). We have journeyed a long way, we have journeyed from being "lost" and disoriented to being "found" and located.

Here is Edmund Waller's 17th-century lyric "On a Girdle." The gir-die he celebrates is an embroidered sash or belt women then wore around their waists, not the "foundation garment" in modern use:

On a Girdle

That which her slender waist confined
Shall now my joyful temples bind;
No monarch but would give his crown
His arms might do what this had done.
It was my heaven's extremest sphere,
The pale which held that lovely deer;
My joy, my grief, my hope, my love
Did all within this circle move.
A narrow compass! and yet there
Dwelt all that's good, and all that's fair.
Give me but what this ribband bound.
Take all the rest the sun goes round.

(1664)

Waller's poem achieves lyric unity through two methods. One is through the single emotion that motivates and animates the poem: praise of the beloved. The poet is at pains to tell us how enraptured he is at the thought of his beloved: He'd rather have her in his arms than the whole world in his possession. Notice that Waller sticks with the single emotion and takes it all the way through the poem. Lyrics tend to do that—locate their single, central emotion and take it to the limit.

The second unifying element in Waller's poem is "technical," i.e., the recurring use of circle images and metaphors. Almost everything is a circle starting (and ending) with the sash that encircles his beloved's waist. He puts the sash around his head, and that reminds him of the circle of a king's crown and arms around a woman's waist. In stanza two he thinks of heavenly spheres and the circle of fence (pale) that might confine a deer; in stanza three, he thinks of her waist again, and (the final line) the giant orbit of the sun around the earth (here he's using the old earth-centered cosmic scheme).

The reason I chose Waller's poem rather than, say, a William Carlos William lyric is this: The very technique that unifies Waller's lyric—a series of metaphors—would work *against* narrative unity.

Why? How? Simply this: Metaphors slow a poem down. The more metaphors, the slower the going. The reader has to stop and think about (and savor) the comparisons. But narrative poems thrive on momentum; they need to keep moving. A good narrative poet knows to beware of metaphors and use them sparingly. Metaphors are a lyric poet's friend, but they can disrupt narrative unity, which is based on unfolding action.

A lyric poem can go wrong in many ways: Most commonly, the first draft has not sufficiently surrounded its emotional or imagistic character. (In this situation, when the sculptor revises by carving the block of wood, he ends up with no more than a toothpick, or even less.)

Similarly, when a narrative poem goes wrong, it can get completely lost and wander aimlessly. Remember that in Frost's poem, the speaker/poet/guide knows exactly where his poem is taking readers, even if they don't.

If a poem you're working on is giving you trouble, try to locate it on the spectrum that goes from lyric to narrative. If your poem aspires to narrative, then keep it moving with verbs and action, and ask yourself where this story best begins, how it develops, how it is resolved. If your poem aspires to lyric, ask where its emotional or imagistic center is, and see if

you can strengthen it by stripping away extra material.

73
WHAT IS A POEM?

By Diana Der-Hovanessian

What is a poem exactly? How can you tell a piece of writing is a poem? Should it rhyme? Those are the questions most often asked to me as a poetry workshop leader.

There could be flip answers: You know the writing is a poem if it bites. Or, poetry is that stuff printed with wide margins. My favorite definition is simply: *Poetry is made of words and magic.* And I like how W. H. Auden described the presence of magic. He said he would never shave while reading a real poem because he'd cut himself. Poetry is writing that gives the reader goose bumps.

Of course, some prose has that magic, too. During the 15 years that I was a visiting poet in the Massachusetts schools, the first thing that children wanted to know was, "What's the difference between poetry and prose? Poetry and verse? "

A poem has the magic to zing into your heart or the pit of your stomach or wherever goose bumps begin. Verse, on the other hand, can be defined more specifically. The word comes from the French *vers*, meaning to turn. Verse refers to measured lines that end, or turn, on the rhyme. Poetry can be in verse, but all verse is not poetry. If we say, "Mary owned a small pet lamb with snow white wool," that would be prose, of course, the ordinary way of talking. But if we say "Mary had a little lamb / Its fleece was white as snow. / And everywhere that Mary went / the lamb was sure to go," we have measured lines and rhymes, verse, but no goose bumps.

I like to compare prose to walking and verse to dancing, because dance is measured. "If you were going from one end of this room to the other with an ordinary stride," I say to my students, "we could compare that to prose. But if you danced, turning and turning, say in waltz time, we could compare that to verse. *However,* if you could *fly* from here to there, then we would have poetry." Poetry is magic.

Then I give specific examples of each. For instance, here are three little pieces about an onion. The dictionary definition is in prose, of course: "The onion is a pungent vegetable of the allium sepia family which can be eaten raw or cooked." In verse we could say:

The dictionary does not describe
your translucent clothes
nor does it tell the way
you tickle eyes and nose...

Or in a poem:

I peel off
layers and layers
of meaning
all of them
add up to tears.

Verse always rhymes, poetry can be rhymed or free. And a poem, as in the last example, is a way of saying two things at once. Two or more. That's why poetry that is dense with meaning can be read and reread many times, offering up new interpretations each time. But too much density, too much opaqueness, hinders communication. And the first aim of any kind of writing is communication.

Can poetry be taught?

Technique can be taught. Poets in the schools transfer enthusiasm for poetry, and that in itself is a big thing. They also show that the fun of playing with words should not be confined to experts. Anyone can enjoy the process: writing out pain, telling a story, your story, giving your take on the world. But to make the poem into art is another matter. Art takes skill. A facility with words might be a gift, or the result of practice, skillful rewriting, or both.

I'm a great believer in revision. Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite is my credo.

How can you tell when a poem is finished?

Robert Frost said poems are never finished, they are abandoned. He would change poems even after publication. You will find different versions of his poems in different editions.

I have my advanced students put their poems into forms . . . making a villanelle (19 lines in six stanzas), using two

repeating lines from a poem they have already written. But for beginners I don't stress forms. I tell them to use the length of the line as punctuation. I tell them to have a line stop when they want to take a breath. When rhymes and meter are used, the lines, of course, end with the rhyme.

It is good exercise for more advanced students to use rhyme patterns in sonnets, etc. Forms are fun. It's sometimes helpful to put a poem into form, then take it out, to make sure it has the right shape. Rarely does a poem arrive full blown on the page, a gift from your word processor.

In my own family, poetry was a way of life. Both my parents recited poems all the time in several languages, my mother in English, my father in Armenian, French, Russian. And it was natural for us children to learn poems by heart and recite them.

I recommend constant reading. And beginning poets should memorize great poems. A good exercise for them is to write poems using work they admire as models. Poets more advanced in their craft should try to find a workshop group. Sometimes just hearing yourself read your poem to others will give you ideas on how to improve it. And getting a poem ready to take to a workshop will help finish it as much as the feedback you'll get. If you do not have a group, it is helpful to read your work aloud to yourself.

When it's time to send it off for publication, when you think the poem is polished enough, when you have a batch of four or five good ones, enclose a short note to the editor. List some places you've published or the name of the poet with whom you've studied. A short note. Keep a log or card index of what poem is where so that you will not submit a poem to the same magazine twice.

When I started publishing my poetry, I did not know one was expected to submit cover letters. I thought that was apple-polishing. I thought each poem stood on its own merit—as it does, but a note will sometimes get a good poem past the first reader.

I had been writing since I was twelve, and started publishing very young. I had not taken poetry workshops as an undergraduate; I just learned the protocol of submission, the layout of a poem on a page, the obligatory SASE, from a magazine—most likely *The Writer*—I saw in a library.

Nowadays there is a growing outlet for the spoken poem, at poetry cafés in most large cities. There are also open readings at schools and poetry societies and centers. The so-called slam poets are part of a popular movement of poetry performers who memorize their work, as did troubadours of old, to recite them as dramatically as possible, sometimes for prizes. Some of these poems hold up on the page, some do not. But the movement has brought new audiences to "the word." The most rewarding experience remains seeing your poem in a publication you can hold in your hand. A poem, after all, is an object you've made, and you should be able to see it, touch it. Here are some of my exercises to help you get started:

1. Since poetry is a way of holding onto the past and making time palpable, write down your very first memory. Were you in a crib? Was it a bath, a train ride? Do you remember who was with you? Write a short paragraph about it. If you are blocking out the past, just make up something. You might find it's a true memory *after* you get it on the page. Rewrite it with shorter lines, cutting any extraneous words until it feels like a poem or a real evocation of the past.

2. Write a riddle describing a vegetable or fruit or something you might find in the refrigerator: clam, potato, cauliflower, pepper, watermelon, for instance. Read poems that are riddles, such as "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," by Emily Dickinson.

3. Write a poem about yourself, listing what you like and dislike. Lists and chants are among the oldest poetry forms in the world. Read the "Song of Solomon," then do a chant poem.

4. Write a poem describing yourself from the point of view of your mother or a sibling.

5. Read "The Ball Turret Gunner," by Randall Jarrell, which is a "mask poem," the putting on of another persona. Write a poem from the point of view of a homeless woman, a first-grader who doesn't know English, a cash register clerk.

6. Look in the mirror and imagine yourself at age 85 looking back on your life.

7. Write a couplet—two lines that rhyme—about the biggest surprise at a school reunion.

8. Now take those two lines and use them as the repeating lines in a villanelle.

9. Write a paragraph about what you would do if you had only six months to live. Now change it into a poem, taking out the excess words. Don't use rhymes this time.

10. Write a poem using colors, various shades of gray, for instance, to describe a street.

11. Write a short poem comparing the blindness of lovers to various blind objects.

12. Use a lot of fragrances or smells in a poem about a place, such as Tagliabue's poem about the man carrying a fish on the subway.

13. Write an angry poem about dieting and the use of skinny models in fashion magazines.

74
FINDING THE RIGHT FORM FOR YOUR POEM

By N. I. Clausson

As a poet and teacher, what I notice most about the poems of beginning poets (in addition to the lack of concreteness and specificity) is that their form seems arbitrary, that there is no reason for a poem to have the number of lines it does, for the line breaks to come where they do, or for the poem to be long and narrow, short and wide, or divided into four-line stanzas (quatrains) with one extra line at the end. I often get the impression that I could rearrange the lines and stanzas without affecting the poem's meaning. In short, the poet has not mastered form.

Form is not a convenient container into which you can pour your meaning. Trying to define form so it is instantly intelligible to beginning poets (or even to experienced ones) is very difficult. It is much easier to say what form is *not*.

When you jot down a note to a friend asking her to take out the garbage and phone Mary to invite her to the barbecue, it really doesn't matter how many sentences you use or where you end one line and start another. But poems are not notes (as anyone who has read William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just to Say" will know). Poetry is a field of writing in which how you say it is just as important as what you say. But even that definition doesn't nail down what I'm trying to get across. Poetry is an area of writing in which meaning is determined by form. In the successful poem, form creates meaning.

The best way to explain this concept is with an example. I've chosen Linda Pastan's "love poem." (If you haven't read any of Pastan's poetry, you have a real treat in store for you.) Here's the poem:

love poem[5]

I want to write you
a love poem as headlong
as our creek
after thaw
when we stand
on its dangerous
banks and watch it carry
with it every twig
every dry leaf and branch
in its path
every scruple
when we see it
so swollen
with runoff
that even as we watch
we must grab each
other or
get our shoes
soaked we must
grab each other

If the meaning of this poem were simply *in the words* Pastan has brilliantly chosen, then we could rearrange them into a different configuration and the meaning should not change, or change so little as to be insignificant. Let's do that. Here is my "rearrangement" (of course, it is one of many possible versions):

I want to write you a love poem
as headlong as our creek after thaw

when we stand on its dangerous banks
and watch it carry with it every twig,
every dry leaf and branch in its path,
every scruple;

when we see it so swollen with runoff
that even as we watch
we must grab each other and step back.

We must grab each other,
or get our shoes soaked.
We must grab each other.

In one sense, the two versions say the same thing. I have not added or deleted a single word, or changed the order of

any words, although

I have added punctuation. But the difference between the two poems is enormous. It is the difference between a successful poem and a stillborn one. And that difference is a difference of form.

What is most noticeable about the form of Pastan's poem is that it enacts or duplicates in language both the movement of the creek during spring thaw and the emotional release of the speaker. Like many love poems, this one is organized around a controlling metaphor, which here compares being in love to being swept down a creek during spring thaw; being in love is like being in the power of an uncontrollable natural force. The lover can no more control her or his feelings than the objects in the stream (twig, leaf, and branch) can control their movement. That feeling of being in the power of an uncontrollable force somehow has to get into the poem; and the only way for this to happen in poetry is for the form of the poem in some way to embody that feeling. The meaning of the words alone cannot convey that experience; it's the form the words take on the page that convey the speaker's state of mind.

But the poem is not just saying that love is like a powerful force of nature. It is also saying that *the poem itself* is "as headlong / as our creek / after thaw." The poem has to be like the creek. The problem is how, in language, to create the experience of being carried headlong along a creek like a branch or a leaf. The only way to do this is through the movement of the words on the page—that is, through *form.* In reading Pastan's poem, the reader experiences—through the form of the poem—the headlong feeling of the speaker. The reader moves headlong through the poem, unable to pause at any point to catch his or her breath. The reason for this is that there are no periods or capital letters separating the three sentences of the poem; there are no pauses at the end of any of the lines (they are all enjambed); and the poem is printed on the page as one long, narrow stanza without breaks or subdivisions. The words rush past the reader just as the turbulent creek rushes past the speaker.

But what about my version? What's wrong with it? There is a contradiction at the heart of the poem: The words are saying one thing (that love is an irresistible natural force and that a love poem must carry the reader along like the victim of this force), but the form of the poem is saying just the opposite: that one can talk about the headlong, uncontrolled force of love in language as controlled and logical as the language of a chemistry textbook. Notice how my line and stanza breaks neatly coincide with grammatical and syntactic units. It isn't that my poem lacks form; it's that the form is inappropriate for *this* poem. In short, I have not solved the problem of how to make the form of the poem consistent with the propositions that the words are making about love and about love poems. My poem is stillborn.

Is there any other form that Pastan could have chosen to gain the effect she wants? Perhaps, but I doubt it. True, she could have written the poem in long lines that go almost from margin to margin. The first line of such a version might be: "I want to write you a love poem as headlong as our creek after thaw . . ." Such a poem would of course create a strong sense of irresistible forward movement, but something would be missing. In Pastan's poem the short enjambed lines create a sense of jerky disorientation that is perfect to covey the sense of the jerky, unpredictable movements of the objects in the stream. Long lines would create a sense of steady, predictable forward movement. But that is not the feeling Pastan wants to create. It still would not have been the best form for her poem.

To a large extent the problem of writing poetry is the problem of how to solve similar problems of form. Once you realize this fact, you will find that you are writing much better poems because what you say and how you say it will be inseparable. The proof will be in the noticeable decline in rejection letters in your mailbox.

Of course, writing a good poem is much more than a matter of form. For a poem to be good, the poet has to have something worthwhile to say: If you find the perfect form in which to say something that should have been left unsaid, you will not have written a successful poem. Nor will having something worthwhile to say in itself make you a poet. Only saying something significant in the most significant form will make you a significant poet.

75
POETS SPEAK IN MANY VOICES

By George Keithley

Writers of the persona poem—a dramatic monologue spoken in the voice of a character created by its author—often find it one of the most rewarding of poetic forms. And often for the same reasons that delight readers: At its best, the poem may be surprising, insightful, and dramatic, all at the same time.

While *persona* may refer to the speaker of any poem, the term *persona poem*, in current usage, refers to a poem spoken by a central character other than the author. Immediately you see one of its attractions: It invites us to enter the consciousness of a creature other than oneself. Who hasn't, at some time, wondered what it would be like to be someone else? Or tried to understand how the world might look when viewed from a perspective other than our own? Well, for the duration of each persona poem, the poet thinks and feels and speaks as someone else; perhaps a person of a different sex, age, nationality, or culture.

Because of this different perspective, in which the poet assumes the role of someone else, the persona poem differs essentially from a lyric poem (in which the speaker is the author) or a narrative poem (written in the third person about other people and their experiences).

Among the best-known examples of the persona poem are some of the most admired poems in the English language: Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," W.B. Yeats's "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," and Hart Crane's "Repose of Rivers" (a monologue in the mind of the Mississippi River).

As that last example suggests, the *persona*, or speaking-consciousness of the poem, needn't be a person. Poems in this form have also been written from the imagined intelligence of rain, snow, fog, fire, sheep, frogs, bears, horses, whales, characters from fairy tales, and the constellations in the night sky.

Whether they are historical figures or fictional ones, human or non-human, the speakers of these poems bring to both the poet and the reader many voices that might otherwise have remained silent, not only in the world around us, but also within ourselves.

A few of the many successful persona poems written by modern poets are Linda Pastan's "Old Woman," Galway Kinnell's "The Bear," Louise Bogan's "Cassandra," James Wright's "Saint Judas," and Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" and "Big Bessie Throws her Son into the Street." The telling nature of these titles is no accident. The reader of a persona poem should learn from the title or the first lines of the poem exactly who is speaking, and perhaps—something of the situation that has moved the speaker to address us.

Keep the identity of the speaker clear and direct. Since you're asking the reader to embark on a journey into the consciousness of another being, often one in inner turmoil, let the identity of that figure be clear from the start. The poem's essential mystery lies in what the speaker reveals to readers, and in the language in which the revelation is expressed. In one of the most famous persona poems, Browning offers the title "My Last Duchess," and the speaker, the Duke, begins:

> That's my last Duchess painted on the wall.
> Looking as if she were alive. I call
> That piece a wonder now...

Immediately the reader knows that the Duchess has died, and her widowed husband cares more about her portrait than he cared for her.

In my book, *Earth's Eye*, I included a poem, "Waiting for Winter," which begins:

> I think of my name, Julia Grahm,
> and hold my hands so in a circle,
> making my mind obey my mind.

In the first line the speaker gives readers her name and invites them to see that introspection and self-restraint are her significant features. (She'll go on to reveal that, in her forties, living alone, she's keenly attuned to the promptings of her body and soul.)

Similarly, in the same book, my poem, "In Early Spring," begins with a young woman saying:

In early spring I felt the weight
of his legs
upon my own. I undid my dress,
we watched the wind row
across the water . . .

At this point, I hope the poem has established the voice of its central character and has suggested her situation.

About the speaker's situation—remember that the persona poem is a *dramatic* monologue. Ask yourself: What is it about this situation that causes my character to experience an intensity of insight and emotion? What is the urgency that compels this person to speak? What makes us eager to reveal ourselves to others? When you can answer these questions, you're ready to write the poem and hope to see it published.

Once the nature of your central character is apparent to you, and the figure has begun to reveal itself, you then have the speaking-consciousness that is vital to the persona poem, and you're ready to move on, within the life of that character. I often visit a diner where a waitress, as she places food before her customers, smiles, and says: "There you go!" As if she's recognizing our hunger, our anticipation, and our readiness to begin. That feeling of release, of freedom to explore, is typical of the poet and the reader, meeting each other in the persona poem. For the poem offers a wide range of physical and psychological experience not often accessible to us. Writing it, or reading it, we inhabit another life —or perhaps a part of our own consciousness of which we're usually unaware.

I tend to write the persona poem for two different purposes. One is to allow myself to enter a state of feeling, a state of being, and to speak from within that context, which previously had been unknown to me. It might mean empathizing with a character of a far different nature, but by assuming the thoughts and feelings of that speaker, to the extent that I give voice to them, I might come to a better understanding of the "character" of that figure. On the other hand, the persona might be very compatible, but I find it difficult to write about myself in the first person, so the dramatic figure, the persona, is a mask that allows me to speak, free of an otherwise stifling inhibition.

A word of caution. Much has been said about the ethics of appropriating someone else's culture or history: a poet pretending to be someone he or she is not, in order to capitalize on a history of suffering that the writer hasn't endured. The rule is simple: Don't do it. You write with your head and your heart. Your conscience will tell you if your empathy is authentic. Or not. A virtue of the persona poem is that it affords both poet and reader an opportunity for understanding and compassion.

A second reason for writing the persona poem is that often the central figure is involved in a dramatic situation or story. Taking on the character of the figure is a way of entering the story. The speaking figure is itself our invitation to enter the poem.

So the persona poem will be most compelling if the main figure, the speaking-consciousness, is at the center of a dramatic situation, for the moral and psychological pressures of a conflict will bring thought and feeling into focus. Why is that persona compelling to us? Why at this particular moment? If the poem's central character, its speaking voice, is encountered at a moment of dramatic tension, or moral consequence, or significant insight, the answer will be evident to the poet and the reader alike.

The drama that compels our interest may or may not be apparent from the character's actions. What's vitally important is the poet's understanding of the character's inner nature at the moment when it's revealed to the reader. In "The Pleading Child," another poem in *Earth's Eye*, I tried to evoke the troubled joy a young boy experiences one winter night with his parents and his sister, in what might otherwise seem a very peaceful environment:

After Christmas Mass the strains
of carols call us to the flesh
and blood figures in the stable crèche:
"Joy to the world! the Savior reigns..."

Joseph, Mary, and the Child in white.
Kneeling, the Kings set down their pomp
and gifts. We troop into the night—
Moon, lift up your little lamp.

The stone bridge straddles the stiff creek.
Skate blades slung back, two sharp boys slip
off the ice. Beyond the bridge we grip
each other's hands to climb the bleak
hill. My sister whispers, "Look!"
Fresh tracks pock the snow, dogs romp
down the road in a ragged pack—
Moon, lift up your little lamp.

Something more than the snow or chill

makes my mother stop and weep.
Something her heart had hidden deep
within the winter pulses still:
Silent in the sparkling dark,
lovers bundle past the pump
house and pause. Only their eyes speak—
Moon, lift up your little lamp.

Father shoulders Julia over
a steep drift. Why do I cry?
Mother's singing, ". . . the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy." I shiver
in my short coat and she stoops to fold
her arms around me. Gladly we tramp
home across the glittering cold—
Moon, hold up your happy lamp!

Whether the resulting persona poem is a character study or the evolving of a story, there is, at the heart of the poem, a figure who compels our attention. The writer's interest in this figure might be an impulse toward compassion, or humor, or the desire to come to understand different aspects of human nature or the natural world. Or it might be a desire to explore the drama of the character's situation.

Each of these is a fundamental motive for writing, and the persona poem results from the combination of introspection, examination, and drama. It is a dramatic form, and a poetic medium, but it is also, and essentially, a poem. So it must live and prosper according to those qualities of language, rhythm, tension, and imagery that we give it.

The possibilities for subjects in the persona poem are limited only by our imagination and our willingness to take risks —which is another way of saying that it's time to get to work. Now, for however long it takes to write the poem, you find yourself becoming (and giving voice to):

• A teacher facing her third-grade class on the first morning of the school year.

• A man watching a baseball game with his father who is recovering from a stroke.

• The almost silent snowfall that settles upon a pine forest.

• A parent attending the military funeral of an only son, killed in combat.

• A woman riding the subway home to her apartment while she considers a recent marriage proposal that she's not quite willing to accept. Or reject.

• A river flowing swiftly under a fine spring rain.

• A child walking thoughtfully through the dappled shade of a fruit orchard on a summer morning.

• A man who stands in a public parking lot looking at his red pickup truck, while two police officers pull his arms behind his back and handcuff his wrists.

• An owl gliding over a frozen field at twilight.

• A stand-up comic waiting to go on stage in a small theater.

• An elderly woman picking her way through a city park, a bag of groceries in her arms, while her granddaughter skips ahead of her into the deepening dusk.

• A colt running through a field of grass glossy with sunlight. "There you go!"

76
WHAT MAKES GOOD POETRY?

By Peter Meinke

What makes good poetry? is one of those subjects that makes me (and most poets) groan: It's amorphous, subjective, and potentially endless. But like many vague questions, it *does* force you to think and take a stand; in fact several stands, as the ankle bone's connected to the foot bone. In a recent discussion, here's the stand I wound up on, for you to look at and consider from wherever *you're* standing. It's an important question, after all, one that we're constantly deciding as we pick up and put down poems, choose which books to buy out of the unlimited choices, and tell our friends, "You have to read *this!"*

A serious and talented young writer asked, "How can you tell when a poem is *really* good?," the unspoken corollary question being, "How can we make our own poems better?"

Although everyone has thought about this, many people tend to answer along the lines of "I know it when I see it." This is unhelpful because intelligent and sophisticated people like different poems and different poets: Many readers admire John Ashbery, Howard Nemerov, Gwendolyn Brooks, Charles Simic, language poets, new formalists (make any random list)—but these are seldom the same people. So, unless we simply believe that good poetry is the kind we write ourselves, it could be helpful for us to use whatever definition we come up with as a way to measure the poems we're working on.

Our tastes are probably "set" when we're very young, by the first poems that moved us, by our first real teachers (academic or not). Nevertheless, it seems to me that there are some useful things to say on this subject, even though there's no agreement on how to apply them; so I've broken my definition into six intertwining parts, as follows.

We've all had the experience of being bowled over (goosebumps, tears, laughter, gasps) from reading or hearing a poem. But a truly good poem is as good or better upon rereading. Unlike novels or even short stories, our favorite poems tend to be those we read over and over again. "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety." This suggests something about the nature of poetry: 1) *It withholds something from us at first,* yielding its secrets slowly, like a lover. In our poems, it's almost always a mistake to tell too much, to supply "answers." A poem isn't a sermon or a lecture. "Let us go then, you and I," is the (English) beginning of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Who is "you"? Who is "I"? After all this time, scholars still disagree.

I think a good poem performs two opposite functions at once: 2) *It surprises and satisfies.* Without both of these qualities, a poem either doesn't work, or doesn't work *for long.* (I take for granted that one aspect of good poems is that they *repay* this rereading.)

A poem can surprise in lots of different ways. It can surprise by vocabulary: "Buffalo Bill's / defunct / who used to / ride a watersmooth-silver / stallion" (E. E. Cummings). Or by image: "Dumb / As old medallions to the thumb" (Archibald MacLeish). Or by idea: "My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near / Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year" (Robert Frost).

But after the surprise, a good poem also seems *inevitable.* A typical reaction to a good poem, expressed in various ways, is, "I knew that, but didn't know I knew it." You don't learn things from poetry the way you do from geography (the capital of Costa Rica is San José) or history (the battle of Blenheim was in 1704). Rather, poetry satisfies an inner sensibility (linked to that early-formed "taste") which, though varying from reader to reader, is real and particular.

This feeling of inevitability is connected to the poem's music, its interesting sounds. 3) *A good poem sounds special,* either melodious like T. S. Eliot, homespun like Robert Frost, jumpy like William Carlos Williams, etc. A poem sets up a rhythm: the insouciant in-your-face tone of "Buffalo Bill's / defunct" is matched perfectly by its ending: "how do you like your blueeyed boy / Mister Death." The hint of formal rhythms in the beginning of "Prufrock" culminates in the iambic pentameter of its last lines:

> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

And the problem of how to end his stanzas of triple rhymes, with one unrhymed line, in Frost's "Stopping by Woods" is solved by his repeating his last line: "And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep," making a quadruple rhyme and a perfect stop.

As writers, we have to learn to follow the poem's music, and hope that the sense follows along. When Wallace Stevens begins, "Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan / of tan with henna hackles, halt!" we know he's drunk on the delights of sound, not sense (though it *does* make sense, sort of). "Follow the music and not the meaning" is generally good advice when you're rewriting your poems. It will hardly ever be your idea that's original: If anything, it will be your voice. Sonnets by Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth. Frost, Millay, Wilbur, Dove don't sound at all alike, even though they might have the exact same rhyme schemes and number of syllables.

4) *A good poem is memorable.* It becomes part of our mental/emotional landscape: Every line we remember changes us as every leaf changes the skyline. The key word here is *line:* Looking through our own poems, we should try to make each line memorable. Why should anyone read this? Why should anyone read this *twice?* I remember that John Donne was the first one to affect me that way: "Come live with me, and be my love," "She, she is dead; she's dead," "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love." I wanted to memorize (and did) line after line. This, by the way, is one advantage of formal poetry—it's easier to memorize—but that's another topic!

5) *Poems speak to the unanswerable questions.* By moving primarily through images rather than logical constructions, poems address the essentially mysterious aspects of life: Why are we here, who am I, what's true or false, what is the good life? These are the important questions, and the very act of asking them is as close to a definitive answer as we're likely to get. This is why even people who dislike poetry embrace it at the major turnings of their lives: birth, death, love, celebration and mourning.

This doesn't mean a poem has to be murky or unfathomable. Rather it means, like that rare thing, a clear and pure lake, a good poem has depth. The strange thing about "clear" poems like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" or "A Red Wheelbarrow" is that they are less clear on rereading, i.e., they can go in many directions, all kinds of "meanings" are suggested. (To say a poem has many meanings is far from saying that it's meaningless.) Even a simple love poem means something different to a high school girl, a farm boy, a widow, a grandfather. Your idea of what dire event Yeats is predicting in "The Second Coming" will depend on your religion, personality, and life experience. But that poem is plenty clear enough!

My last definition is this: 6) *A good poem fulfills its promises.* What it sets out to do—musically, visually, emotionally—it accomplishes. At the end of a poem, we feel we have arrived. "A poem should not mean / but be," "And Richard Cory, one calm summer night, / Went home and put a bullet through his head," "Without a tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone—," "And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating / Of dark habits, / keeping their difficult balance." These last lines, whether formal or free, are set up by what has gone before, and click into place like the last piece of a puzzle. They seem in retrospect, as I said before, inevitable.

In some ways, these are vague descriptions—but if you apply these to your own poems, they can become quite specific. I hope they help. In the end, of course, good poems resist definition and explication: Like the natural things of this world, they are what they are.

I'll conclude here with a short poem of my own. Normally I'd just read or print this poem without elaborating on it—but this is a poem in which I've tried to capture what it feels like to want and/or need to write poetry, and what elements are necessary for its creation. I think, with careful and friendly rereadings, these elements will make themselves clear. But it's also a love poem. It is the nature of poetry, and of the world, to be more than one thing at once.

The Shells of Bermuda

First the wind through the window lifting
this room with breath tugging the curtains waking
the flowers turning one by one slowly
the pages of old books Then the sun
through the windows glinting in corners
warming the tops of tables The cicadas'
shrill vibrations the woodpecker's percussion
even the high whine of Mrs. Rheinhold
as she scolds her children *Pamela! Paul!*
All necessary: but the window most of all
There are moments in every day when a hunger seizes and the hands
tremble and a wall turns transparent
or a cup speaks Suddenly
bright as the shells of Bermuda
the combs for your long hair blaze on the desk

(from *Night Watch on the Chesapeake* by Peter Meinke, U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1987)

77
A SERIOUS LOOK AT LIGHT VERSE

By Rosemarie Williamson

i have been writing and selling light verse for nearly thirty years. As an art school graduate (who had always enjoyed humorous writing), I had been undecided about my career choice until I enrolled in a creative writing course at a then-nearby New Jersey university. When my professor, who was both knowledgeable and enthusiastic, happened to spot a few of my verses lying around on the table beside my assignment pad, she got very excited. "These are great," she said. "Send them out—flood the market!"

I will never forget her words. I did indeed send my light verse out, to two of the markets she had suggested. To my utter amazement, within a week I received an acceptance from both *Good Housekeeping* magazine and *The Saturday Evening Post.* Hallelujah—I was hooked! An early acceptance by *The Saturday Evening Post* was "Cost Plus":

She sells
Sea shells
By the sea shore.
Sam sells
Clam shells
For a bit more.

A sale to *Good Housekeeping* from the same period was "Mob Psychology":

You join the bargain-hunting group,
Grabbing and unfolding—
Then find the only thing you want
Is what some stranger's holding.

This is all well and good, you may be thinking, but how does the verse itself come about? Surely it doesn't evolve full-blown? Not at all. There are a few simple rules to remember, and within these con-fines, your creativity can run wild. First, you must have a funny idea. (If you find something amusing, chances are others will, too.) Everyday events provide one of the richest sources for humor; the office, supermarket, church, sporting events, shopping mall—all can produce laughable situations.

Possibly the easiest and most common poetic form for humor is the four-line verse, called the quatrain. The quatrain is a neat little package whose length makes it ideal for use as a magazine filler, or for other spots where space is limited. Its brevity is particularly suited to telling a "joke in rhyme," which essentially defines light verse. Making each word count, the first three lines build up to the fourth line, the all-important punch line.

Second in importance is the title, which can serve one or more functions. Titles can provide background material, act as lead-ins, or simply be relevant wordplay. Remember that a clever title is your first chance to catch an editor's eye.

Following are two favorite titles of mine—which may have been instrumental in selling the verses:

Of All the Gauls!

Caesar's legions, so we're told.
Were famous for their marches.
Which may account for Rome today
Being full of fallen arches.

(The Wall Street Journal)

Handwriting on the Cave

A caveman's life was fraught with fear,
His world was full of predators,
And it's much the same for modern man,
Except we call them creditors.

(The American Legion Magazine)

A word about meter

In a humorous poem the meter (or rhythm or beat) should be regular and simple, to make sure that readers' (or listeners') attention will focus on the words and not be distracted by unexpected changes in rhythm. Otherwise, double entendres and other forms of wordplay could easily be missed. Irregular and even innovative meter certainly has a place in the poetic scheme of things. Long, rambling epics, elegiac stanzas, and free verse are all perfectly acceptable forms,

but they're *not* light verse—whose format is quite different.

Two examples of uncomplicated metric lines come to mind. Familiar to most of us, the first line is from a nursery rhyme, and the second from a Christmas carol:

MAry, MAry, QUITE conTRAry

and its inverse

it CAME upON a MIDnight CLEAR

You will notice that I have capitalized the accented or "stressed" syllables; the unaccented or "unstressed" syllables are in lower case. The first line starts with a stressed syllable, the second with an unstressed one. Either would be a splendid vehicle for light verse. (No need, here, to go into the intricacies of "iambic tetrameter," etc. Life is complicated enough! I just remembered that years ago I wrote a short verse called "They Trod on My Trochee"—which remains unsold!)

So far we have a boffo title and a knee-slapping punch line, but what about the other lines? Not to mention the rhyme scheme—what is appropriate for light verse? The first three lines of a humorous quatrain should provide fodder for the grand finale in the fourth line. If the last line concerns a dog, the build-up lines could be full of canine humor— "Dry Bones," old sayings, puppy puns, etc. When my children were growing up, we had a family dog. Kids-plus-dog inspired the following poem, which ran in *The Saturday Evening Post:*

Dog Days

School is out, the weather's nippy—
They forecast snow; the kids yell "Yippee!"
And greet the flakes with eager glance.
But Fido views the scene askance—
"Although for kids it has its assets,
It's enough to BURY us poor bassets!"

I had more to say about the subject than usual, so I extended it into a set of three couplets.

The most common rhyme scheme for a quatrain is to have the second and fourth lines rhyme. Frequently, the first and third lines also rhyme (but with a different end-rhyme sound from lines #2 and #4). The following verse (which I sold to *The Wall Street Journal)* demonstrates the most common rhyme scheme:

Gag Rule

While dental work for some is painful.
And frequently induces squawking,
My complaint is somewhat different—
It means I have to give up talking!

While you'll be aware of the second/fourth line rhyme in this poem (a copy of which hangs in my dentist's office!), there are other things going on as well. You'll note the dentist-related wordplay of the title. The word "squawking" is funny-sounding—even more so when associated with supposedly mature adults. The last line, however, is the real clincher, with its surprise ending.

Endowed with a good sense of humor, you're already halfway there, and the rest of the trip is fun.

Markets

An investment that's sure to pay long-term dividends is the purchase of a few books: an introduction to poetry that explains basic terms and concepts, as well as that perennial poet's pal, a rhyming dictionary. Public libraries are virtual wellsprings of information about and examples of light verse by well-known humor writers—from the amiable Robert Benchley to the tart-tongued Dorothy Parker.

Several of the so-called slick magazines are good markets for light verse. This can be an off again-on again situation, however, so it's best to check recent issues to determine their current editorial policy.

Literary and college magazines can be good markets for beginning as well as established verse writers. *Cimarron Review*, a publication of Oklahoma State University, bought two of my verses, one of which follows:

From "A" to Zebra

Our kids described their zoo trip to us.
Excitedly, at home that night:
"We saw most animals in color—
But the striped one was in black and white."

A real plus in writing light verse is the fact that the entire process can be just plain FUN! Not many professions can

offer such an enticing "perk." With practice, you can learn to view life's little annoyances as raw material for humor—it becomes positively addictive. After writing—and selling—light verse for nearly thirty years, I find the challenge just as exciting today as when I started out, and that's saying quite a bit.

78
IN PRAISE OF RHYME

By Jennifer Shepherd

After my lack of success in receiving publication for rhymed poetry, I decided to test the "audience" of real people out in the world, not just higher-ups in the literary community. Where I live, we have a lot of coffeehouses where there are regular poetry readings.

I read some of my work for an audience of about 100 people, and I found their response to be very warm. They didn't treat my poems as if they were less important or more superficial because they were in rhyme form. In fact, listeners that evening said that the rhyme actually helped them focus on the various pieces they heard, allowing them to analyze and retain the poems better.

This got me thinking about the exclusionary nature of many poetry editors, how rhyming is just not considered "cool" these days. I can't help wondering if, in the universal rebellion against rhyme, the literary community has been missing out on a heck of a lot of fun.

Ideas that pour forth naturally from a poet's brain in rhyme form do so for reasons of their own. Should rhyming poetry automatically be categorized as less profound, less worthy of consideration, than the non-rhyming kind? To do so excludes a large number of thoughtful rhymers from even receiving attention from both audience and peers.

Poetry used to be romantic and playful entertainment, conveyed primarily via storytellers' presentations. Anecdotes, songs, and tall tales anchored themselves more easily in the listener's mind when they were expressed through rhyme. Rhyme allowed people to carry the poet's sentiments home with them, because the words became fixed in their brains.

We now live in a much more literate age, and almost anyone can pick up a volume of poetry and begin to read. But we also live in an era of information and entertainment overload. Commercial jingles, news report sound bites, and the latest overplayed hit song on the radio flood us with far too much stimuli. Time seems to be speeding up, while our memories and attention spans get shorter. Most people remember very little of what they hear or see these days. And poetry, foremost among all artistic forms, is getting lost in the shuffle.

Meanwhile, poets from all over the world do their best to raise their voices above this cacophony. They continue to express ideas that they feel have value to an audience consisting of 1) themselves; 2) a hand-picked "worthy" few; or 3) as many people of the general public as possible.

All of them want essentially the same thing. The greatest poets of both past and present have sought to create doorways through which others can enter into a thought-provoking, reality-shifting experience.

Rhyme need not detract from creating this experience. Quite often, rhyme can actually enhance the balance and impact of a poem. Rhyme serves as a framing device for the poet's thoughts—the wooden beams, if you will, of a writer's doorway to reality. If the linguistic carpenter is at all skilled, rhyme can perform its task well.

Shakespeare's most affecting work still stimulates and captivates us, "in spite of" its iambic pentameter. And his work remains portable, readily available to the average memory, not just because of its age, but because it is structured in rhyme.

Yes, it's true—clumsy young poets sometimes fasten upon rhyme with a death grip, refusing to let go until they have created poetry destined to make readers (and listeners) scream with terror. But just because the occasional poem has imprinted itself indelibly upon your memory doesn't mean that you should greet each new rhymed poem with a visceral gasp, its very appearance causing you distress.

Don't berate rhyme. It has no power to harm you, in spite of the rumors circulating among many contemporary poets. Content that is vague or vacuous deserves blame; the rhyme form in itself does not.

So try stepping beyond the current literary norms. Be open to creating and enjoying poetry of all kinds. And the next time you encounter a rhyme, let it linger and possibly carve out a few neural pathways. That way, the piece might remain locked in your memory box and filed under "fun."

And who among us couldn't use a bit more fun?

79
THE WISDOM OF A WISHY-WASHY POET

By Rachel Hadas

In thinking about what I would write that would be helpful to aspiring authors, I thought I'd steer a middle course between the Scylla and Charybdis of too grand and too pedestrian. I will, therefore, not attempt to inspire the reader with transcendent words of wisdom about the beauty of poetry (I'm principally a poet and have more confidence in my wisdom regarding poetry than, say, fiction); neither will I remind readers to keep copies of all their work, be sure to have their name on every page, and enclose self-addressed envelopes with their submissions, sound as such reminders would be.

Instead, I'm offering a list. Not do's and don'ts, but rather, something closer to the way my own zig-zaggy mind and wishy-washy temperament seem to operate. People often find themselves teetering dizzily between opposing instincts and options; certainly, writers, and perhaps especially beginning writers, do. Very often there is something to be said for both sides, even if the two seem in blatant contradiction. Finally you have to decide; but for the dedicated writer, there's always another chance, another way to tackle the problem, another way to go about getting this particular poem or manuscript done.

I am not guaranteeing success or even enlightenment, but I hope to provide some food for thought and perhaps spark some recognition along the way. Writers need to remember that they are not alone. And finally, I append to my list of on the one hand/on the other hand a small dessert tray of quotes I've come across recently, from writers I admire, which are (I hope) both entertaining and enlightening.

• Autonomy

On the one hand—You can't help learning from the work of other writers, and you should do just that. Read all you can; you can't be a good

writer unless you are familiar with literature. Furthermore, ask the advice of other writers/readers regarding your own work. **On the other hand**—You need to make sure that what you are writing comes from you and is not just an imitation of or a homage to some other writer. Reading too much may even interfere with the development of your own voice. You are alone in this business and need to make your own decisions; don't depend on the advice of others, which is fallible anyway.

• Consistency

On the one hand—Develop your own individual style, tone, or voice and stick to it! Your work will be more distinctive and recognizable that way.

On the other hand—Don't lock yourself into a single mode because it has worked for you once or because you're afraid to stray from one style. Be wily, restless, experimental, dialogic. Have the courage of your own wishy-washiness.

• Scale: universality

On the one hand—Don't be afraid to tackle immense topics: love, death, the meaning of life, what's wrong with the world today. **On the other hand**—Don't be afraid of what may seem very limited, even miniature topics.

• Obscurity

On the one hand—Avoid pretension and obscurity. If you don't know what you're saying, how can anyone else be expected to? And even if you do know, since people can't read your mind, they may well be puzzled by sudden allusions, leaps, or discontinuities. **On the other hand**—Poetry is better at flying than any other literary form, so don't be afraid to leap, glide, and skip steps. Also, it's all right not to understand everything one writes or reads; like dreams, poems can be both enigmas and solutions.

• Poetry

On the one hand—Poetry can do anything from exhort, pray, sing, lament, insult, or narrate to telling a joke, cursing an enemy, or depicting a scene. What you attempt to do in poetry shouldn't be limited by a narrow sense of the limits of genre.

On the other hand—Poetry is better at some things than others. Are you sure that what you're writing isn't really a story or article, a cartoon or editorial, a personal letter, photo, or painting? There's also the historical aspect to be aware

of; at certain times in the past, treatises on farming or astronomy or philosophy were often in verse. Nowadays, they rarely are. Do you want to buck this trend? Can or should you? Maybe. . . .

• Your audience

On the one hand—Be aware of your audience. Who are you writing for? Who are they likely to be? Who do you want them to be? **On the other hand**—All you can do is write as well as you can, be persistent, be adaptable within your aesthetic limits, and get published; the audience will take care of itself. Furthermore, certain poets we now think of as great—Emily Dickinson and Cavafy are two who come to mind—published little or no work during their lifetimes.

• Writer

On the one hand—Remember to ask yourself such questions as what gives you the right to be called an author? Why do you want to be an author in the first place? Why do you want to publish? **On the other hand**—If you are writing, then you're a writer, and naturally you want to publish.

• Perfectionism

On the one hand—Poems (this is true for all writing, of course, but even more so of poetry) are made of words, and every word counts. Revise, revise, cut, polish, expand, move things around, until the poem is as good as you can possibly make it. One good poem is worth a thousand sloppy ones.

On the other hand—Endless fussing over details can undermine your confidence in your own work and leave you unable to finish anything, whether it's a poem or a manuscript, so you can move on to the next thing.

• Inspiration

On the one hand—Try to have a regular schedule for writing, at the same time every day if possible, whether or not you feel inspired on a given day. Waiting for the Muse to descend is a romantic holdover, childish and self-defeating more often than not. **On the other hand**—Grinding away at your writing whether you feel like it or not is a recipe for boredom—the reader's as well as yours. Writing on a regular schedule is, at least for poets, obsessive and unnecessary. Be free, spontaneous, untrammeled.

• Teaching

On the one hand—You can learn to be a better poet in all sorts of ways: courses, workshops, conferences, writing groups, and, of course, reading.

On the other hand—Writing cannot be taught.

* * *

To anchor you after that dose of dialectics, here are a few wise words **I**'ve turned up in my magpie-like pokings:

"All objects await human sympathy. It is only the human that can humanize." (Louise Bogan)

"The subconscious, when dredged up without skill or imagination, can be every bit as tiresome as the conscious." (Louise Bogan) "How can a person not personify?" (James Merrill) "There is nothing in the human predicament that is truly sectarian, parochial, narrow, foreign, of 'special' or 'limited' or 'minority' interest; all subjects are universal." (Cynthia Ozick)

"Precocious adolescents make do with whatever odd conglomerate of wave-worn diction the world washes up at their feet. Language at this stage uses them; years must pass before the tables turn, if they ever do." (James Merrill)

"Last year's writers are routinely replaced by this year's; the baby carriages are brimming over with poets and novelists." (Cynthia Ozick)

80
CREATE YOUR OWN POET'S LIBRARY

By David Kirby

Most writers I know have a collection of totems on or near their desks: a photo of Whitman, a strand of heather from the Brontés' parsonage, a fortune-cookie slip promising great success. These are our power objects, the ritual devices we gaze at, touch, even talk to as we prepare to shoulder the mantle of authorship. Where would we be without them?

Well, we'd probably be right there at our desks anyway, doing the best we can. But good writing comes more easily when it takes place within a rich, familiar environment that not only locates us in a sympathetic time and space but also reminds us of a larger context, that realm where the immortals dwell. A friendly physical setting is a point of departure for a writer as well as a source of continuous encouragement during that long journey we make every day through an often-strange landscape of fresh feelings and new ideas.

I've got my gadgets and gizmos—postcards, mementoes, strange things I've put on my desk unthinkingly but for some reason never removed—yet books are the things that help me the most with my own writing. I always use the same coffee cup, a chipped, badly stained object that my sons gave me years ago, though in a pinch I suppose I could drink my morning jolt of "rocket fuel" from some other vessel. But there are certain books I find indispensable. One person's lifesaver is another's dust trap, of course, so I trust you'll edit this list to meet your own requirements as you compile or revise your poet's bookshelf. Some of these items are available on CD-ROM or come already included in a computer's hard drive. However, even the most computer-centric writers I know still surround themselves with their favorite books.

Personally, I couldn't get along without:

(1) A dictionary, probably two. Almost any dictionary will do for daily use as long as it is comprehensive enough to be useful and small enough so that you can handle it comfortably. After that, it's nice to have *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster), or, even better, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), which comes in a compact (i.e., small-print version). Mark Twain said that the difference between the right word and the one that is almost right is the difference between "lightning" and "lightning bug," and certainly the dictionary's principal purpose is to steer the writer toward the most precise expression. But it can also be used as a aid to inspiration. The poet Carolyn Knox writes a poetry that is so lush and word-drunk that I once asked her, "Do you just look through the dictionary sometimes for interesting words?" Her answer was, "Of course. Don't you?" I didn't then, but I do now.

(2) The Bible. The Judeo-Christian tradition permeates the whole of Western culture. But our ordinary lives are shaped by religious language as well; just listen to what a self-described atheist says when he pounds his thumb with a hammer and you'll see what I mean. The Garden of Eden, the Flood, the Marriage of Cana: these are timeless stories of innocence, righteousness, and love, chapters in a rich anthology that addresses our deepest sorrows and our highest hopes. From Dante to Dickinson, writers have always borrowed from the Bible and always will.

As with the dictionary, any standard version will do, though an index is essential. The Bible is a big book in more ways than one, and if you're looking for the story of Abraham and Isaac, you won't want to spend hours wandering in the desert with Moses and the Chosen People.

(3) A real thesaurus. I say "real" because these days, every computer comes equipped with a thesaurus of sorts, but to date there is no substitute for *Roget's International Thesaurus* (HarperCollins). For instance, if I want to consider synonyms for "totem," which occurs in the first sentence of this article, I can hit the Alt-Fl keys on my keyboard, but then the screen tells me "Word Not Found" in my computer thesaurus. On the other hand, if I look up "totem" in *Roget's,* I can choose from "earmark," "emblem," "token," and "badge" as well as "genius," "demon," "good angel," and a dozen other choices. This is one more case of the computer being faster but not better than the book.

Besides, computer tools don't really encourage serendipity. Again, imagine you're looking up "totem." Your computer may tell you there's no such word, but on the way to looking it up in *Roget's,* you may (as I just did) stumble across "stiacciato," which can be used in place of "mask," "plague," "medallion," "cameo," etc. A real thesaurus reminds us of the richness of our language in a way that the more efficient if single-minded computer cannot.

(4) A one-volume encyclopedia. Of course a multi-volume set would be ideal, but something along the lines of *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (Columbia University Press) is ideal for most purposes, especially when you take shelf space into account as well as cost.

(5) *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Little, Brown). Did Samuel Johnson say "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing"

or "A little learning is a dangerous thing"? You often hear the former, but the latter is correct. And by the way, Alexander Pope said it, not Johnson.

(6) A current edition of an almanac, such as the *World Almanac* (World Almanac). Recently I was writing a poem about rhythm and blues and I needed to find out when Fats Domino was born, and that's not the kind of thing you're going to find in the encyclopedia. (Answer: February 26, 1928.)

(7) Langford Reed's *The Writer's Rhyming Dictionary*, with an introduction by John Holmes (The Writer, Inc.). Even a free-verse poet will from time to time want to find a word with a very particular sound, and this or a similar book will lead you to the right one. It will also surprise you: how else would you learn that the rhymes for "Christmas" include "anabasse," "contrabass," "octobass," "Boreas," "isinglass," and "galloglass," as well as a bunch of words you already know?

Yes, the version of Windows on my computer has a rhymer, but I value it more for its speed than for its usefulness. For as with the dictionary and the thesaurus, the rhyming dictionary permits the kind of happy accident of which wonderful poems are made. Speaking of which . . .

(8) Jack Elster's *There's a Word for It!* (Pocket Books) is an engrossing guide to all those words you know exist even if you don't know what they are. Thanks to Lister, I found out that I am a "cruciver-balist." No, not someone who nails grammar books to boards—a cruci-verbalist is a devotee of crossword puzzles.

More seriously, suppose you want to describe someone who hates men. Everyone knows that a woman hater is a "misogynist." "Misanthrope" isn't the word you want, because a misanthrope hates everyone. But a "misandrist" is someone who hates men only.

(9) *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* and *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford University Press). These two books, like the next item on this list, keep me out of trouble because through them I stay connected with the great tradition out of which all writing flows. After all, you can't do something new unless you have an idea of what has already been done.

Right now I'm working on a poem about my recent trip to Venice, so before I began to write I reminded myself of what Shakespeare said about that city in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello.* I don't plan to outdo Shakespeare, of course, but I do want to say something different from what he said.

(10) At least one anthology of classic poetry. This can range from such manageable volumes as Oscar Williams' *Immortal Poems* (Pocket Books) or William Harmon's *The Concise Columbia Book of Poetry* (Columbia University Press), which contains the 100 poems included most often in more than 400 anthologies, to the thousand-plus-page textbook you kept from your college days. Again, the point is to be able to connect with the best of the past and use it in the best way.

(11) Half a dozen current poetry collections. Obviously a poet's connection with the past is essential, but it is equally clear that poets need to learn from their contemporaries. Right now I'm looking at the spines of recent books by Primo Levi, Marilyn Hacker, Reginald Shepherd, and Dorothy Barresi; I also see two anthologies, the *Coffeehouse Poetry Anthology* edited by June King and Larry Smith (Bottom Dog Press), which emphasizes the oral tradition, and *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry*, edited by Robert Alexander, Mark Vinz, and C. W. Truesdale (New Rivers Press). A sumptuous feast is served 24 hours a day within the modest space these books occupy, and whenever I pick up one of these collections, I am certain of getting my Recommended Daily Allowance of Vitamin P.

As with the older poetry, this new writing is not something I want either to duplicate or deny. What I seek in these pages is inspiration, an inkling of what has been done and what remains for me to do. This is the part of my poet's bookshelf that changes most frequently, and it is the part least likely to be cloned by any other poet. Vitamin P takes many different forms, and you know which poets are best for you.

(12) A book from The Wild Card Category. You have a further chance to personalize your poet's bookshelf by including something so outlandish that only you would find it useful. One of my favorite books in this category is *The Romance Writers' Phrase Book* by Jean Kent and Candace Shelton (Berkley Publishing Group). This is a book of over 3,000 "tags" or one-line descriptions used to convey emotion— or passion, actually, since romance heroes and heroines seem never to do anything halfway.

In the "Eyes" chapter, for example, you will find such headings as "Expression," "Color," "Movement," and so on, with dozens of tags under each, such as (from "Expression") "her wide-eyed innocence was merely a smoke screen," "his eyes were cold and proud," and "his eyes glowed with a savage inner fire." I love to dip into this book whenever I think I'm being too stiff or pedantic. Then my own eyes begin to glow with a savage inner fire as I return—no, swagger—to my task.

Are these the books you need to make your own poetry the best it can be? Many of them are, no doubt, whereas others

may strike you as unimportant. The idea is to create your own poet's bookshelf and stock it with works that will, like old friends, gaze down upon you and murmur silent encouragement as you pursue your craft.

81
WRITING POETRY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

By Pat Lowery Collins

For young children, a poem is a deeply satisfying way of look-ing at the world. Fascinated at first by rhyme for its own sake, they soon begin to appreciate poetry that deals with simple concepts. They love slapstick, the wildly impossible, the ridiculous, word play, fanciful questions, clever and unexpected conclusions, twists and turns. They dote on repetition, used to great effect in *A Fine Fat Pig,* by Mary Anne Hoberman, in which the word abracadabra, used as an exclamation, precedes each line describing a zebra.

They revel in the action rhymes, finger play, and later, jump rope games, that depend on onomatopoeia, hyperbole and alliteration, as well as in such farcical verse as *Merry Merry FIBruary,* by Doris Orgel. Using these last two devices and the fun of a deliberate fib, the claim is made that "On the first of FIBruary/Setting out from Hacken-sack/ My Aunt Selma, in a seashell/ Sailed to Samarkand and back."

Poetry books for this age group are heavily illustrated, not only to complement the words, but also sometimes to explain them. And since poets are usually very visual writers, they will often provide the artist with exciting possibilities for illustrations without really trying.

The combined *Hector Protector* and As *I Went Over the Water* by Maurice Sendak is an unusual case in which poems and illustrations are all of one piece. Words emphasizing the text pepper the illustrations, and much of the action is in the pictures instead of the words. But in most cases, poems, even for the very young, rhymed or un-rhymed, should be able to stand on their own.

Sometimes a single poem is used as the entire text for a picture book, illustrated so as to enhance or help to develop a concept or story. The text of my nonfiction book, / *Am an Artist,* is actually one long poem conveying the concept, through the finely detailed paintings of Robin Brickman, that art is a process which begins with our experiences in the natural world.

It's been my observation that children in the middle grades (ages 9-12) are no longer as fascinated by rhyme. To some degree they want a poem to be as profound as what they are experiencing in life, something that takes them seriously. Yet, they still look for poetry that is simple and unlabored. *Haiku,* three unrhymed lines (in Japanese they must consist of 17 syllables) offering an unusual perspective on a spark of reality, is a perfect vehicle. Writing in this form is not as easy as it sounds. To provide an example, I struggled to produce: "Evening/is quietly stitching/the seam of night."

Children of this age are intrigued by the subtlety of haiku, and its shortness is irresistible to those just learning to put their own thoughts on paper.

But humorous, silly verse, either in such traditional forms as the limerick or in new and inventive ways, still holds great appeal. Thus the information that "Oysters/are creatures/without/any features," provided by John Ciardi in *Zoo Doings,* may be better remembered than the multiplication tables.

It is also a good time for books such as *Alice Yazzie's Year,* by Ramona Maher, in which unrhymed poems, each one complete in itself, taken together tell a story of a year in the life of a Navajo girl, a year that holds such mysteries as the birth of a lamb. We are told that "The new lamb sucks/The pinyon burns low/The lamb goes to sleep/ His nose is a black star."

Poems about parents quarrelling or grandparents dying are often interspersed with poetry in a lighter vein in collections for this age group. One that does this effectively is *Knock at A Star,* collected by X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy.

Language for its own sake becomes the focus again for readers about eleven to twelve, when communication with peers, intrigue, and secrets are important. Poetry is then a vehicle to express feelings without exposing them. Tools for this are found in nonsense sounds, obscure meanings, double meanings, rhyme, and, of course, humor. The mystery of nonsense—even an entire made-up language—seems to hold the same allure as it had for the four-year-old. Young readers are all too willing to accept the special logic of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and will have no trouble figuring out that when the Jabberwock "came whiffling through the tulgey wood/And burbled as it came," the "beamish boy" slays him as his "vorpal blade went snicker-snack!"

But these same children are also looking for poets able to look at life in the ways that they do. The poetry of Walter de la Mare has a timeless appeal because he affirms feelings that are universal. His book *Peacock Pie* was first published in

1913 and has been in print ever since. I'm currently illustrating a collection for Atheneum called *Sports, Power and Dreams of Glory, Poems Starring Girls*, edited by Isabel Joshlin Glaser, that affirms the dreams and aspirations of young women in such poems as "Abigail," by Kaye Starbird[4], which ends by saying, "And while her mother said, 'Fix your looks,'/ Her father added, 'Or else write books.'/ And Abigail asked, 'Is that a dare?' And wrote a book that would curl your hair."

Teenagers may establish a passionate identification with one particular poet as they look for role models, a sense of history, a way to understand the world as it changes in and around them. By this time, they have probably been made aware of the mechanics and craft of poetry and are intrigued by experimentation. They can appreciate any poet whose vision is not too obscure. Because of the need of adolescents to deal with strong feelings and disturbing issues such as death and suicide, they are often attracted to poets with dysfunctional lives, for example, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

Most poetry for this age group appears in anthologies related to a single theme, to a city or to some historical period.

My own feeling is that even though the poetry you are compelled to write may turn out to have a special appeal for this age group, you will be competing with Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and a cast of thousands. Of course, there is a lot of wonderful poetry out there for young children too, but not enough of it. And here I think the masters of today are a good match for those of yesterday and have an edge because they speak to the familiar.

But knowing your audience is only a beginning. There are a number of other things you should bear in mind in writing poetry for young people.

Don't fall victim to the mistaken notion that writing poetry for children of any age is easier than writing for adults. Your perspectives and topics may be different, but the skills you must bring to task are the same, skills honed through years of reading good poetry and working to develop your craft. Your most important assets will be a good memory and a strong awareness of the child within you.

It is a common misconception that almost anyone can write poetry for children. It's true we can get away with serving them peanut butter sandwiches for dinner, but it better be creamy peanut butter or the kind with just the right amount of nuts. Just so, the quality of poetry we give our children should be the best available, from the very beginning of their awareness of language.

Another misconception is that almost any idea for a children's book should be written in rhymed verse. Quite the opposite is true. Although there are exceptions, even reasonably good verse will not necessarily make for a more compelling text, and bad verse can, in fact, be deadly. So many "first" manuscripts in verse are submitted to editors that there is almost a universal resistance to them. Here I must admit to being an offender myself with my first book for children. *My Friend Andrew.* Looking back, I realize that any advantage I may have had was somehow knowing enough to keep it simple.

Things I personally object to, not under the control of the poet, are anthologies that include bad poems simply because they're by "good" poets, and minor poems by major poets because they're short; uneven collections by one poet or many; and anthologists who completely overlook contemporary poems and poets. The inability of some editors to recognize good poetry or to appreciate a child's ability to understand abstract concepts is a real problem.

Besides being as meticulous when writing poetry for children as you would be in writing for adults, you should, under penalty of a one-way trip down the rabbit hole, avoid all of the following:

• Poetry that talks down to the reader or is used as a vehicle to deliver a moral or message, unless it is written with good humor, as when Shel Silverstein, in his *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, admonishes readers to "Listen to the Mustn'ts."

• Near rhymes. They stop children in their tracks and detract from the flow of the poem. An example would be "lion's" rhymed with "defiance" and "cat" with "hate" in the poem "My Old Cat," by Hal Summers. *(Knock at A Star)*

• Rhymes that are too cute, convenient, or overused. "Rain" rhymed with "Spain" comes to mind.

• Lazy images. Even well-known poets sometimes do this, settling for the most obvious image, metaphor, or simile as in "wide as the sky."

• Rhyme for rhyme's sake, not because it will assist in saying what you want to say in the most interesting way. If, as with the book, *Madeline*, by Ludwig Bemelmans, it would be hard to imagine your own story being told in any other way, then, by all means, go for it. (I felt this way about *Andrew.)*

• Subject matter inappropriate for the intended age group, sometimes directed more to the parent than the child, or dealing with subjects outside the child's experience.

• Distorted rhyme that's hard to read aloud. Always read your own work aloud to avoid this.

• Poetry that is florid and old-fashioned, written in the accepted style of an earlier period.

• Poetry that is too complex or obscure. Young readers won't want to struggle to understand what may be very personal imagery.

• Writing presented in the form of a poem that isn't poetry by any stretch of the imagination and isn't even good prose.

• Writers who believe they must write like another poet in order to be published.

There was only one Dr. Seuss. If he had insisted on being another Edward Lear, we would have missed his unique vision and voice. If you aren't sure enough of your own voice, keep studying the work of poets you admire—their pace, rhyme schemes and structure—and keep writing until you find how to say what you want to in ways uniquely yours.

Like Valerie Worth, in her *All the Small Poems,* you may have wonderful, quiet perceptions to express about everyday objects and happenings. Borrow her microscope if you must, but wear your prescription lenses and present the world through your observations and special talents, having in mind that building a poem is much like building a block tower: You will be balancing one word or line against another; arranging and rearranging; dropping one word, adding another, until the poem begins to say what you had in mind all along or what may never before have occurred to you. When a poem really comes together, really "happens," it is a moment like no other. You will feel like the child whose tower at long last has reached the sky.

Today, the market for children's poetry is quite different from what it was in the inhospitable 1980s. Then, there were a few poets who had cracked the barrier somewhat earlier and continued to be published, but a limited number of new names came on the scene. Thanks to the firmer financial footing of most book departments for young readers, to some editors who realize that poetry rounds out a list, and to the demand by teachers and librarians, there is currently greater opportunity for new poets. A number of publishing houses are actively seeking poetry for children, but they are highly selective and still apt to overlook a talented newcomer in favor of a poet more likely to turn a profit.

But the field of poetry has never been considered a lucrative one. There are exceptions, as with any art form, and for some poets, who continue to put their words down on paper napkins and laundry lists, there is really no escape.

PLAYWRITING

82
THE DEVIL'S IN THE REWRITE

By Julie Jensen

Rewriting is like milk or exercise—either you like it or you don't. Also like milk and exercise, it's necessary. So it's best if we all learn to like it. Better yet, if we all learn to love it.

Because theater is a collaborative art form, writing for the stage is full of rewriting: Directors, actors, designers all play a part. They all have opinions, and they all affect the play, either overtly or covertly. Some of them will actually tell you how to rewrite; others will just make choices that make the text changes necessary.

It's wise to be open-minded about rewrites. The best playwrights listen, cull the suggestions, and make the changes they find genuinely helpful. Unwise playwrights take all suggestions and try to incorporate them. Foolish playwrights listen to no one and make no changes at all.

Here are a few suggestions, things to keep in mind during the rewriting process.

The first concerns **plot.** Ask yourself this question: What's the difference between the character at the beginning of the play and at the end? In other words, did something happen? Think back on your favorite plays. Compare the leading character at the beginning with the one at the end. Look at Romeo and Juliet when we first meet them. By the end, of course, they are dead. But they have done more than just die. They've been through a lot. And that's good. One sign of a good plot.

The second test concerns **structure.** Are the events in an arc? Arc implies an arch. But arc is also more elastic than that. Arc is a bubble in the wind, stretching. It's a good shape for a play.

Next, make sure you've written **beats.** Beats are the small units of a play. Beats in a play correspond to paragraphs in prose. They should have beginnings, middles, and ends. It's easiest to define a beat as the time between a character's starting to pursue a goal and the point at which he achieves it, changes it, or stops. That section or segment is a beat.

Can a beat be short? Of course. Sometimes a piece of stage business is a whole beat. The character reads the note, thinks a second, wads it up, and tosses it into the fire. That's a beat. A beat might also be a page or two long. A woman wants her husband to wrap a present for their child. Her pursuit of that goal is a beat. Her reasons compose the element of the beat. She's running late, she's got to change her clothes, and the child will be home at any moment. When she grabs the box, tosses it on the couch, and decides to wrap it herself, that's the end of the beat.

The reason you write in beats is simple: You want your play to be made up of sections rather than isolated lines. It's also easy for actors to play beats. They understand them instinctively and will endeavor to supply them if you don't. The structure of the action is also easier to apprehend if it's divided into beats. Could you have a good piece of prose in which there were no paragraphs? Well, perhaps, but I doubt it. We think in sections. We feel in sections. Sections help us divide up an experience.

Now then, a radical suggestion: Don't think about *expanding* your play. Think about *cutting* it. If expansion is really a goal, think about adding events, not expanding dialogue. In general, playwrights worry entirely too much about their work being too short. Most people in the audience worry about a play being too long. Try packing a lot of events into a small section of time rather than scattering a few events over a long period of time.

Recently, I was standing in a theater lobby, waiting to see a new play. Someone came out with news that the play was only 95 minutes long, with one intermission. We were buoyant. And yet, I'll bet anything that the playwright had tormented herself about whether the play was long enough.

I had a similar experience at the opening of a college production of a musical. "It's three hours and twenty minutes long," someone said. We were all disappointed. I myself was inconsolable. One couple frowned and left.

Theater experiences need to be intense and, in general, shorter than they were in the past. Audiences just won't put up with a lot of talk. They certainly can't put up with the boredom. And overlong plays threaten both.

My best advice is to rewrite the play to please the audience and yourself. Examine your own responses to experiences in the theater. Then go ahead and be ruthless. Cut any scene not necessary to the story, even if it contains some of your favorite bits, lines, or ideas. *Especially* if it contains your favorite bits, lines, or ideas, cut it. If it doesn't further the story, it sticks out as "writerly," calls attention to itself, to the writing. And that is a no-no, the writer equivalent to a show-off child. Embarrassing rather than impressive.

Cut also any repeated beats. That means any beats in which the character repeats the same tactics in pursuit of a goal. Say, for example, that a character wants his sister to leave the room. His first tactic is to lure her out, his second is to threaten her, his third is to insult her. If he threatens her twice, it is less effective than if he threatens her only once.

Now we are at the micro-editing stage. Pare down the individual lines. Make sure they're economical. What if a character says something like, "Oh, hell, Bill, how many times do I have to tell you? You just don't understand anything." All right. But check to see if the line would be better if it read, "Hell, Bill, you just don't understand anything." Then take a look at that version. Maybe it would be better yet if it read, "You understand nothing." Make sure you've tested every line every possible way. Almost always, the most economical version is the best.

A writer with a particularly good ear will often imitate speech, and that can be wonderful. But it can also lead to extra beats in a line, especially at the beginning. For example, a character will say something like, "Well, yes, I know, but I also like horses." Far better if the character says, "I also like horses." It's cleaner, sharper, in some way more surprising. But most of all, it moves the scene along. It steps forward rather than marching in place, and then stepping forward.

You can also sharpen the individual lines by letting a character go on the offensive. What if the line reads, "I don't know. I don't think you understand." We know already that the lead-in sentence is unnecessary. But the second sentence is inert. What if, instead, it reads, "You. What do you understand?" You've said the same thing, you've shortened the speech, and you've also issued a challenge. The line is sharper, cleaner, better. And probably the scene is, too.

On the other hand, the character might surprise you, and say, "It smells like Campbell's Vegetable Soup in here." Good for him. Surprises are wonderful. Most plays have too few of them.

That leads me to another suggestion. Note the images you're using. (Images are figures of speech that appeal to one of the five senses.) Quite consciously, make sure that your images are interesting, subtle, fun. And while you're at it, check to see if they appeal to at least four of the five senses. Of the senses—sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing—we tend to overdo images of sight and neglect all the others.

This next suggestion is quite radical: If you're having trouble with a section you've rewritten several times, try using iambics (a two-syllable foot, the first unaccented, the second accented). They are very easy rhythm structures, quite natural to English. They make the language rock, give it a sense of momentum. (By the way, you need not worry about the pentameter part or any other number of feet to the line. The important thing is the iambic.)

Practice some lines. Don't worry about meaning. Pay attention only to the rhythm: Ta-DUM, ta-DUM, ta-DUM. Here's an example: "In fact, the words are in my mind. But God himself could hardly give them voice." Good old iambic. Write more lines, just for practice. "You can't believe I'm dead tonight. I've gone and said too much." Language is pure sound and rhythm. Just practice the rocking motion.

Now take a look at some of your awkward lines. See if letting them rock back and forth will help you move the scene along.

One final suggestion (I like to apply this one after I've been playing with the details, the mechanics, because it is a marked contrast): Test your play for truth. Is what you're saying true? Is what this character says and does true? You can learn to finesse anything, but make sure you don't lose your soul in the process. All the technical expertise in the world can't compensate for a play that lies.

83
WHEN THE WELL RUNS DRY

By Kent R. Brown

You've finished that scathing diatribe against something or other, and that hysterical comedy about the time you and three longtime women friends from Cape May, New Jersey, were stranded in a country 'n western bar in Amarillo, Texas. Now what? Your audience is hungry for something new, original, daring, funny but not silly, silly but not stupid, serious but not a complete downer, and your blank computer screen is daring you to knock its socks off. And nothing's coming. You've run dry!

It's a fact. As storytellers, you sometimes get stuck, run out of steam. Or perhaps you find yourself writing the same play over and over again, using similar themes, situations, and characters. You need to expand your skills by varying your plots and characterizations. Where then do you go for artistic stimulation? The answer? Everywhere. History, myth, biographies, diaries, letters, newspapers, obituaries, and the yellow pages—all are possible sources of inspiration.

Reading history, whether ancient or current, places us at the center of the social, political, scientific, and military revolutions that left their mark on human development. We can explore the public and private lives of Jefferson, Lincoln, Madame Curie, or Louis XIV. We can research the Ming Dynasty, Alexander's conquest of the western world, the Great Depression, the role of women in science or the influence of immigration on the social fabric of America. The possibilities are endless. We can continue our fascination with whatever our favorite themes might be, but we must draw our characters, accurately or with artistic embellishments, from the fabric of history.

History is full of fascinating people, but perhaps you don't have the time or, truthfully, the interest to wade through scholarly analyses. You're willing to be enriched and all that, but you really want to write the five- to six-character play with no more than one or two settings.

If so, start reading the newspaper. You do read the newspaper, you say, but nothing leaps out at you. Why would it? *You* have to improvise, speculate.

Over several mornings, with *The New York Times* and two local newspapers before me, I decided to see what plots and characters might be hiding within the articles I read. I tried to keep an eye out for conflict, that situation in which two energies go up against one another. Without conflict, without making choices, there is little drama. Here goes.

• **Article:** The opening of a new art gallery. The drama: A photographer/artist who "sees" life as a set of flat planes and surfaces has difficulty communicating his/her own heart. Maybe a parent is dying and the artist tries to convey emotion through drawings or photographs. But the parent is blind. The play takes place in the gallery, perhaps, or in the summer cottage where the artist, estranged over the years, has come to say goodbye. What might happen? The possibilities are endless.

• **Article:** A biographer has elected to focus on embarrassing/sexual behavior engaged in by the subject of the biography. The drama: The biographer is approached by the subject's last surviving family member and is asked to expunge this unflattering period/episode/event in the subject's background. But the biographer needs the publication to break into an august circle of celebrity biographers. The issues are fascinating. Does any singular action actually reflect the essence of an individual? Are reputations built upon truths or fiction? Is honesty really the best policy?

• **Article:** The need to establish an investment strategy at an early age to insure that a child's college tuition will be fully funded. The drama: A single father/mother, having made disastrous financial decisions, resolves to take money from a teen-age child's education fund to cover loans or bad debts. Where is the play set? In the living room, fine, but how about a playground? On a teeter-totter? It might be dynamic to see an adult and fully-grown child coming to terms with the parent's flaws, surrounded by toys of symbolic innocence and hope. Maybe this is really a play for young people focusing on two children who set out to help their father/mother who is ill at home and has lost his/her job. How might they help out? What difficulties might they encounter?

• **Article:** Legal vs. emotional claim to items in an estate. The drama: A niece or long-distant relative appears after a funeral claiming title to an object that has been willed to her sister with whom she has had a stormy relationship. What rights do the sisters really have? What evidence will they each produce? What do they know about the family, the deceased, each other? What are the *real* stakes here?

• **Article: A** longtime social club has been meeting in an old house that is up for sale. The members face displacement. The drama: One of the club members is the buyer but does not want the others to continue meeting there. Why? I don't

know yet, but if I started to explore the energy inherent in the situation, something would emerge.

• **Article:** A mother and two sick children are stranded by the side of the road in bad weather. The drama: A grown daughter, her ailing mother, and her two teen-age children are stranded at a roadside picnic rest stop. Two men approach and offer their assistance, which requires one of the stranded family members to go with one of the men while the second man stays with the family. I'm intrigued.

• **Article:** A retrospective piece looking at the Mars Rover and efforts of the engineers and scientists. The drama: What must it be like to devote one's life effort to a machine? Is it to benefit the human race, or is it motivated by a desire for celebrity? What about the scientists' families and the time the scientists spent away from loved ones? Perhaps a scientist tries to excite his children to share his enthusiasm for the work, but the children rebel because of his absence. Maybe this play is set in the backyard in a tent or a lean-to the father helped build. And the children refuse to come inside the house.

For a little comedy, try the absurd:

• **Article:** Older children in greater numbers seek money and financial assistance from their parents. The comedy: A scruffy, slightly degenerate father seeks financial aid from his grown child. But the grown child is such a poor manager of money that the father moves in with him or her and tries to manage not only the child's financial life but the child's love life as well.

• **Article:** A feature on an unfamous writer of famous jingles. The comedy: A quiet, unassuming writer of greeting cards and jingles is approached by a mobster/unsavory character to write a tribute for the mob/gang's boss on the eve of. . . something or other. I haven't figured it out quite yet, but maybe the writer falls in love with the gangster's daughter or wife or mistress!

At the core of these speculations must always be the search for an energy opposite to that generated by the protagonist. And don't require all the questions you may have about the material to be fully known before you begin to write. Many writers launch into their work letting the impulse and energy guide their inquiry. Often, too, the ending is not what they originally thought it was going to be. That's not necessarily bad. The exploration most likely will unearth future plot or character possibilities.

I used several issues of *USA Today* in writing my play. *The Phoenix Dimension.* The inciting event was actually supplied by a friend who answered his phone one morning and heard a woman's voice plead, "Help me." My friend didn't recognize the voice, thought it was a prank, and hung up. But he couldn't get back to sleep. What if the plea was genuine, what if he had stayed on the phone longer? Concurrently, I had become increasingly fed up with America's obsession with violence. Indulgent and confessional talk shows, depressing nightly news, and hundreds of articles about how we damage ourselves in so many ways in this country—all this had been fueling my frustration. *The Phoenix Dimension* fused together these two separate but thematically related states.

A ringing telephone is heard in the dark. A man in his 50s answers it. A woman's voice is heard. He hangs up. She calls back. He is hooked. She has a seductive voice and seems to know a great deal about his life, even warning him that his job is in jeopardy. A man of simple means, his full identity has been invested in his work. He becomes wary. She calls him at his office, but he never gave out his work number. His world begins to come apart. Younger employees want his job, and the boss seems eager to see the man leave the company. By the end of the play, and without ever having met her directly, the woman has persuaded him to kill his boss, who happens to be the woman's husband.

To create the impression of being off-center and no longer in control of a stable environment, I wrote a series of sound bites influenced by jingles, discount and grocery store announcements, radio and television talk shows, and predominantly, from those thumbnail news items *USA Today* lists under the heading of each state. These were interspersed throughout the play, between scenes, as my central character dressed, went to work, stared out the window, sat in a bar, and so on. Also, I never allowed him to leave the stage, thus intensifying his sense of being assaulted by the frantic and often absurd dimensions of life. For several months, I read these news snippets to learn about murders, bizarre marital difficulties, gang killings, killer bee attacks, and a host of other actual events. Each was tailored to underscore specific moments in the play, or to serve as ironic counterpoints to the action. I don't believe I could have made up all the items I used. In this instance, truth was stranger than fiction but served my fictional needs perfectly.

Besides history, biography, personal observations, and journalism, what's left? Obituaries. Here's what you'll find:

• A rural farmer who fought in W.W. II, fathered seven children, lost his farm in a major Midwest flood, played Santa Claus at annual Rotary Christmas festivities, sang with a barbershop quartet, survived three wives, and lived to be ninety-seven years of age. And that's just what was printed in the obituary! What influence might his W.W. II experiences have had on his attitude toward life? What made him want to play Santa Claus?

• A single mother in the south, with three adopted children of mixed heritage, who earned her living as a professional

mourner, a tutor in Italian, a nurse, and a choir singer who often sang at ten church services per week. She served on the state's Welfare Commission and generated funding initiatives for the Special Olympics. What conflicts did she have with her children, her employers? How did she spend whatever quiet time came her way, or was she driven to prove something to herself or to someone else?

• A Ph.D. university scholar of hard sciences who was a sports photographer and National Science Foundation Fellowship recipient, a Formula 1 race car driver, and loved ballet and classical music. Was this a man who valued control and precision but enjoyed dealing with risky variables as he raced around the track?

Finally, if you are really pressed for time, and are fed up with the alcoholic fathers, insensitive psychiatrists, and arrogant teachers that always seem to turn up in your cast lists, try this: Open a telephone book and turn to the yellow pages. You'll be amazed at the countless occupations, associations, and businesses that keep this country moving but seldom walk the stage: air conditioning contractors, termite controllers, animal welfare directors, antique dealers, architects, auto supply owners/workers/secretaries, bank examiners, birth center directors, private bodyguards, billiard parlor owners, bookbinders, burial vault salespersons, caterers, chiropractors, ministers, crane operators, kitchen designers, elevator inspectors—I'll stop here.

Imagine the options! You can mix and match your characters as you do your wardrobe. How about a crane operator father who is an opera buff? Why not? Or a chiropractor who studied film in college and knows the dialogue to all the films by John Ford and plays out a different scene each time he's working on a client. Or maybe there's a play about a burial vault salesperson who meets an antique dealer/ mortician/bookbinder who wants to be buried in a specially designed vault that plays Dixie whenever the doors are opened. Well, this last idea may or may not fly, but give it a try. The point here is that what we do and how we elect to spend our time and our energy tells volumes about our values—and our characters' values, as well.

To develop a rich appreciation for how fascinating people's lives can be, read the oral histories compiled by Studs Terkel: *The Good War, Hard Times, Working,* and *American Dreams.* The personal tales of fear, joy, aspiration, and regret are riveting, superior tributes to human tenacity. Also, for a personal perspective on history, take a look at *Eyewitness to History,* edited by John Carey, for examples of life as it was lived from the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. to the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

To see how history and nonfiction can inform the theatrical imagination, take a good look at Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons;* Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle;* James Goldman's *The Lion in Winter; Clarence Darrow,* by David Rintels; *Becket,* by Jean Anouilh; the musical *Quitters,* by Molly Newman (book) and Barbara Damashek (book, music and lyrics); and *Across the Plains,* by Sandra Fenichel Asher.

Root your work in reality, but remember, fact alone is not drama. You have to push it, shape it, tease it into a dramatic work that can be more truthful to the spirit of human condition than the facts that created it.

84
CREATING EFFECTIVE STAGE CHARACTERS

By David Copelin

One of the greatest rewards of writing plays lies in crafting memorable characters. I love those wonderful moments in the process when characters you've invented start developing traits you never imagined for them, changing in ways that make them seem almost autonomous, creating *themselves.*

Although such moments can't be guaranteed, you can prepare for them by choosing those techniques of characterization that will help you jump-start the souls of the diverse citizens of your imagination.

How do you do this? Let's look at three areas of character creation: the *verbal,* the *non-verbal,* and the *relational.*

To dramatize the world is to unmask it. A novelist can describe characters at length, telling us who they are, what they look like, what they think and feel, and even how we should react to them. But a playwright's characters must unmask *themselves*—and quickly. Characters reveal who they are through their stage behavior: their words, their interaction with other characters, their strategic silences, their presence or absence in a particular scene. Stage characters also comment on each other. Some of that commentary is credible, some is not. Part of the role of the audience, part of their pleasure, is to figure out which part is which.

Since plays are so compressed in time and space, a little has to stand for a lot. So, to the extent that you can sketch a character's "character" with a few lines of dialogue, or through a minimal number of gestures, you will be a master of dramatic economy. In the most successful plays, such economy exposes both character and the world that surrounds that character in a theatrically involving way.

Dialogue is a primary means of communication in the theater. The first thing to remember about dialogue is that you can do quite a lot with very little. For example, take Tom Stoppard's provocative comedy *Travesties.* At one point in the play, mention is made of an imminent world-wide social revolution. A British Embassy bureaucrat inquires, "A *social* revolution? Unaccompanied women smoking at the opera, that sort of thing?"

We laugh, and we instantly understand who the character is, the nature of the society he's used to, and his utter incomprehension of a radically changing world. Stoppard tells us everything we need to know *in one line.*

Depending on who they are and what they want, characters will have different strategies of communication. In David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago,* a young woman has just begun a love affair and has been with her new boyfriend for several days. When she returns to the apartment she shares with a woman friend, her roommate greets her laconically: "Your plants died."

In that brief moment, we learn a good deal about the roommate's personality, the women's relationship, the passage of time, domestic responsibility, jealousy, and cynicism. In performance, this moment is both funny and poignant.

Some characters don't talk much, but are devastatingly powerful. (Check out Ruth in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming.)* Some characters chatter on and on, but are of little consequence in a play's power scheme. Such chatter can be quite useful as a source of comic relief, or it can be a convincing mannerism of disguise for a character who needs to conceal something from other characters and from the audience.

Audiences tend to believe whatever stage characters say. You can use this credulity in many ways. One of your most interesting options is to have characters *lie*—to themselves, to other characters, and to the audience. Moreover, characters who sometimes lie may also sometimes tell the truth! This is a situation ripe for dramatic exploitation.

Characters who reveal small truths win an audience's confidence; they can then conceal the larger truths you're *really* writing about until late in the play, and the audience will forgive you—and the characters—the deception.

Have you noticed that direct audience address has become quite commonplace in contemporary plays? Have you noticed how mixed the results are? If you have one of your characters confide in the audience, make sure that the character *has* to do so. Don't use this technique simply because it appears to be easier than juxtaposing characters with different agendas. Such appearances deceive the audience.

It's usually unwise to have a character state the theme of your play. Focus instead on what the characters *want* and on what actions they take to get it. The audience will then have all the information they need to perceive the theme on their own.

Try not to have your characters explain their own or each other's motivations. Plays in which every character speaks as

though she or he has had years of psychotherapy tend to be dramatically inert, because they do too much of the audience's work, too little of their own.

How do you choose one mode of verbal communication over another? Think of your cast of characters as an orchestra —whether chamber, full, or jug band doesn't matter. Much of your play's "music" comes from the permutations and combinations of characters as they speak and interact, so mixing speakers with different voices and rhythms automatically creates a theatrical "score." Of course, you may be writing a play in which all the characters *need* to sound alike. If so, go ahead. But this is not a choice to be made *unconsciously.* Your choice must reveal the *interplay* between plot and character, the *tension* between individual personalities and the situations they find themselves in. That's what's important dramatically.

As a play evolves, any kind of change in a character is permissible, as long as he or she behaves consistently within the parameters that you set. Altering a character's age, class or gender can have a positive impact on both the story and the other characters in the play, especially if the change makes your character less stereotypical, more idiosyncratic—and *raises the stakes.* This criterion also applies to adding, deleting and combining characters. Each such change will force you to review your dialogue, and probably to revise and tighten it.

Once your characters are established verbally, with their conflicting personalities revealed by their particular and unique ways of speaking, remember that, on stage, they also exist visually. That raises a whole different set of challenges —the *non-verbal.* Since you're writing for performance, you need to think about *people,* not just about words on a page; about non-verbal communication; and about communication in three dimensions.

Be aware that while words are important, visual elements, silence and non-verbal sound all must be part of your playwriting strategy. Words express only what characters need to *say.* A character's tone of voice, body language, and the like express the emotions that underlie those words more complexly. This is what actors call "subtext." What's *between* the lines may reinforce what's being said out loud, or contradict it. In either case, what isn't spoken may well be more important to the persuasiveness of your play than what *is.*

The 18th-century diarist Samuel Pepys often wrote of going to the theater "to hear a play." We don't do that anymore; nowadays, we go to *see* a play. The difference is crucial. For modern people, seeing is believing. Therefore, in the theater, where the entire visual and aural context can be manipulated for effect, lighting and non-verbal sound can contribute to an audience's understanding of character as strongly as do your words. You need to appreciate what non-verbal communication can and cannot do to help you define your characters. How do they walk? What radio station do they listen to? Should the lighting make them look innocuous or sinister? Do they belch? And so on.

You can combine verbal and non-verbal means to present character far more effectively than you can express it with either mode alone. In Marie Irene Fornes's play, *The Conduct of Life,* an overworked, exploited domestic servant in the household of a Latin American fascist talks to us as she goes about her chores. She lists a number of things she does as soon as she wakes up, adding, "Then I start the day." After another list of chores, she repeats, "Then I start the day." After a third list, she says it again. And we're exhausted!

We understand, we *feel,* the dreariness of the character's life, and the oppression of her situation, even as we see her do her chores quickly and efficiently. The playwright's words and the actress's physicality combine to create an unforgettable character and theater with a powerful political sensibility.

You must also consider the *relational* aspects of character.

What do I mean by that?

I've been talking about character as if each personality in a play were an individual, distinct from other characters and more or less independent of them. But characters in plays are even less autonomous than human beings are in the "real" world. Whatever may be the rules of the dramatic universe you've created, chances are that *relationships* between characters are more important to the play's energy and for-ward motion than the individual characters you create one by one can ever be.

Try thinking about your characters in pairs, in triangles, in the context of their society, as well as individually. You can create character groupings that illustrate the workings of social forces without being too obvious about it, without losing the charm of the immediate and personal. If you need to, you can alter audience expectations of time, space, blood ties, cause and effect, or anything else that they usually take for granted. It's fun, and it stops conventional thinking in its tracks—one of the reasons we have theater in the first place.

For example, look at Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9.* This justly celebrated play subverts commonplace notions of what character is in the theater and in the world. Churchill's highly economical method, which only a truly imaginative playwright could use so effectively, explodes received ideas about gender and its immutability. By having men play female characters and women play male characters, by having them interact in highly provocative ways, Churchill

dramatizes complex issues that range from patriarchy and imperialism, to domestic violence and sexual pleasure. The play is exhilarating, because Caryl Churchill has the wit and the craft to turn our expectations of character upside down—and make us like it.

You will probably not want or be able to use every technique for presenting character that you run across, but your own arsenal of ways to make the people "work" is bound to grow, whether you write kitchen-sink realism, post-neo-futurist cabaret sketches, playlets for children, or any other dramatic form that puts human beings on a stage.

Remember, the wide variety of character-revealing techniques is there to serve your purposes. If you can't find contemporary techniques that fulfill your needs, feel free to invent (or revive!) those that do. Whatever makes your characters memorable makes *you* a better playwright.

85
FINDING A THEME FOR YOUR PLAY

By Peter Sagal

Usually when people ask me what my plays are about, them and haw and squint off into the sky and then come up with something like, "Well, there's this guy, and he has this dog .... and then this army invades. . . . well, it's really kind of a love story, in the end." I feel silly, and my questioner hasn't learned anything, which may be right, because if he wants to know what the play is about, he should see the thing. I mean, we write immortal works of dramatic literature, not slogans.

But I recently wrote a play that could be summarized in a single sentence.[6] This was a first for me, and because of this, and because the sentence in question invoked some political and moral questions, I became instantly known as a Dramatist of Serious Theme. This makes me bristle, because like every other normal writer, I resent any praise that is not universal. What are my comedies, chopped liver?

Nonetheless, I'm now known as a guy with something to say, and I've been asked here to give some tips on how to say it, that is, how to approach the problem of Theme in playwriting. (That raises the ancillary question of how you write a play when you have *nothing* to say, which is a problem I face daily.) Somebody—I think it was Woody Allen quoting Samuel Goldwyn—said that people go to the theater for entertainment; if you want to send a message, call Western Union. But the theater has changed a lot and seems to be surviving only because of its toehold in Meaning; i.e., movies and TV may give you cleavage and explosions, etc., but if you want to learn something, come to the theater. Somebody else said—and this time I know, it was the actor

Simon Callow—that in this day and age, going to the theater for "entertainment" is like going to a restaurant for indigestion.

So how to approach the theme play, the political or "problem" play? First of all, it seems to me that the playwright should always begin not from a statement, but a question. It is boring to be told an opinion, but it is interesting to be asked for your own. Thus, a writer who sets off to tell us, "Racism is bad!," for example, will probably ultimately irritate the audience, because they know that racism is bad and they're sorry, but frankly they don't feel that they had to pay $20 or whatever to be told again. But a writer who asks the audience, "Why is racism bad?" or even "Is racism ever justified?" will hold the playgoers' attention, because they may never have thought about it before, and their answers may surprise or please or horrify the playwright.

Once you have framed your question in an interesting and provocative way, how do you dramatize it? Here we fall into the great Unknown, because the answer depends on your particular vision of drama and the theater, and my answer may not suit you and your purposes. For example, if you're Brecht, you'll pose your question by writing it on a banner and hanging it upstage center. What I do is try to make the Thematic Problem into a personal one.

Sometimes it's obvious how to do this, sometimes it's not. If you're writing about True Love, then clearly your play will need some lovers. If it's about racism, then a racist or two will be in order. More complicated questions require more complicated solutions, but part of your job as a dramatist (some would say your *whole* job) is to find that telling situation, that moment of crisis and decision plucked from the entire span of an infinite number of imaginary lifetimes, that perfectly distills the essence of the question you're addressing. For example, let's say you want to write about the tension between duty to self and duty to country. You want to write about a solider. But which solider, in which war? An Englishman fighting in World War I? A Jew fighting in World War II? An Asian American fighting in Vietnam? Any situation will give different emphases to different sides of your question. How do you choose?

In considering this choice, remember that the worst sin the dramatist can commit is to lie to an audience. In this context, it means putting a question out there and then making the answer easy or simple when it's not. There's a great temptation when asking an important question—"Will True Love Always Triumph?"—to go immediately for the best and most comforting answer—"Yes!"—and ignore all the evidence to the contrary that's in the world, in your heart, in your own play. Consider *King Lear.* Its answer to that particular question would be a resounding *No,* so during the 17th century, the play was rewritten by Nahum Tate to answer *Yes:* Cordelia, quite alive at the end, united with Edmund and her loving father. That rewritten version was rejected by history for, among other things, being a lie.

So if you are going to ask a tough question, and you should, you must be merciless in your search for the answer. Let the situation of the play be rife with ambiguity and doubt. Let your characters be contradictory, holding both bad and good within them. Let the most horrible opinions be held by the most pleasant and attractive people. Let good people do

terrible things to one another; let them react to kindness with anger and to attacks with fear. Because that's what happens in the real world, and if by chance you do want to say, ultimately, something good—that Love will triumph, that freedom is precious and worth fighting for—it won't help your case to set your play in a fantasy world where these things come easier than they actually are.

What I've often done is to take a character I admire and like, and then either put that character in a very difficult position, or cause him or her to do something rather unpleasant and then have to deal with the results. In my play *Denial* I took a character who was very confident in her support of free speech and confronted her with another character—very charming, by the way—who made her want to scream and strike out every time he opened his mouth. In *Angels in America,* by Tony Kushner, a lead character, who is charming and sympathetic and funny, abandons his lover in time of crisis, so we are left to ask ourselves—we, who think of ourselves as charming and sympathetic and funny—if when the time came, we might do the same thing.

The second worst sin in the theater, after lying, is to be boring. In fact, it's often in the pursuit of not being boring that we end up telling our worst lies. There's a strong temptation—driven by the market and our own inclination to be cheerful—to preach to the choir. The theater of today desperately wants to say something Useful and Good about the world; it wants to condemn what needs condemning and praise what needs praising, according to the mores of the day. But the problem is that unless you do that from a deeply informed, dramatically charged, almost universally comprehending place, you're going to bore the heck out of your audience.

How do you achieve that kind of aesthetic Buddha-nature, where you comprehend everything, where all forces balance, where the true strengths and faultlines of the universe reveal themselves?

Work hard, write every day, and tell the truth. It may not work, but nothing else will.

JUVENILE AND YOUNG ADULT

86
HANDS-ON RESEARCH: FINDING A BAGPIPER

By Eloise McGraw

I enjoy research. I love finding out all about a place and time and the people who lived then and how they dressed and what they believed, and then recreating it all in fiction. The search for accuracy has led me into some long and arduous paper chases through interlibrary loan, but I've never minded. Sound book research can not only expand your education in all directions; it can keep you from making a fool of yourself. The local library can be a writer's best friend.

But how can you find out things no book ever tells you?

Imagine yourself standing on the roof of Notre Dame Cathedral. How much—if any—could you see of a house across the street? Now transfer yourself down to the street in front of such a house. How well—if at all—could you see a person standing on the cathedral roof? Imagination isn't going to give you those answers; there's too much you don't know. Guess at matters of hard fact, and you're sure to expose your ignorance. But how to find out more about that cathedral roof? Not one solitary guidebook provides a clue.

To many writers, the element of *place*—the setting—is not as important as other elements of the story. To some of us it is fundamental. When I write, the inner process is like watching a movie—in living color—with sound. If I have no clear mental picture of where and when everything is happening, and a reliable inner map of the landscape, I'm stymied. My characters are, too. They either stumble around in a sort of fog or just sit there, mum.

There are a number of ways to find out what you're writing about. You can go to Paris—or wherever—yourself. Frequently, this is not possible. I hadn't the leisure or the money to travel to the Nile Valley during the years I was writing three novels about Egypt. In any case, my setting was *ancient* Egypt, and no traveler can go there except via the library shelves, the museum collections, and his own powers of visualization. Years later, when I finally did go to Egypt, I found that these three approaches had not let me down; in fact, the research I had done enabled me to see ancient Egypt right through the modern overlay.

Historical novels aren't the only books that require research. Twelve of my nineteen novels have contemporary settings, but there wasn't one that didn't require a little research into *something*. I've had to find out about knots, codes, World War II fighter planes, sleight-of-hand tricks, parrots, logging, old stagecoach schedules, company mergers, fox-hunting lingo, pioneer gravestones, and so-called antique stores that sell toys and ice-picks and buttonhooks just like the ones I grew up with. But first—most memorably—circuses.

I took my initial plunge into real research only because my editor gave me a shove. It was my very first book—already written, already accepted and awaiting (though I was unaware of it) the back-and-forthing between editor and author that grooms a manuscript for publication. I knew nothing about this process. I knew almost nothing about circuses or bareback riders, either—though that's what my book was about. It must have read convincingly, because when my editor inquired if I had, myself, worked in a circus, she seemed taken aback when I said no. "I've read three books about them, though," I assured her. Whereupon my education, in circuses *and* research, began, and has continued to this day.

There are times when nobody can answer your question. Faced with a well-documented historical fact—a baffling suicide, an inexplicable disappearance or usurping, a war that led nowhere—how do you discover the cause behind the effect, the powerful human motivations, that nobody has documented at all? And here's a more prosaic sort of poser: How many days would it take, by what route, to travel from Egypt to Babylon in 1500 B.C.? How many miles to walk from Hastings to Canterbury in 1067, through what sort of countryside?

To answer such questions you must use plain ingenuity, a kind of labor-intensive jigsaw puzzle technique (to gather and fit together various unrelated scraps of information), and some leaps of imagination (to fill in the picture they suggest).

I managed to solve the Hastings-to-C'anterbury puzzle by such means. Other questions immediately arose, all having to do with the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry, on which my main character was going to work. How long would it take her to embroider one figure, one sail? Would the work hurt her fingers or tire her back? I wasted time asking people who didn't know. The hands-on method was the only one left.

I had to learn from a book how to do the three stitches used on the Tapestry. That done, I selected one scene and drew it on linen (using the old art school squaring-off method) to exact size, 40 by 20 inches. Using my drawing table—minus its board—as a stretcher I settled down to embroider the scene in a wool thread similar to the handspun original, keeping

track of the hours and my sensations. It took me 200 hours, working two to three hours a day during one spring—writing the book in the mornings and embroidering in the afternoons. It's not your back that gets sore; it's your fingertips—but only on the outline stitch.

Now, as research this was going overboard. I know that, but I enjoyed every minute—and learned to embroider, besides.

The historical past—even the dimmest, most distant past—at least concerns the real world. What about the worlds you invent yourself?

Fantasy—dreaming them up or writing them down—seems easy and is anything but. It is a brave (or naive) beginner who tackles it. Consider Flannery O'Connor's comment: ". . . when one writes a fantasy, reality is the proper basis of it. ... I would even go so far as to say that the person writing the fantasy has to be even more strictly attentive to the concrete detail than someone writing in a naturalistic vein—because the more convincing the properties in it have to be."

In short, fantasy must seem even more real than real. The strange landscapes, the smell and color of the dragons, the squeaky voice of the talking mouse, the details of every chair and mantle ornament in the old rabbit's living room, must be clearly visualized and sharply described.

Visualizing—that's the hard part. When I was planning *The Moor-child*—a fantasy—my first worst hurdle was getting the visual landscape in my mind. This is not a problem with a historical novel, because you've read up on your chosen place and period until you feel more solidly oriented in, say, 17th-century London than you do in your own neighborhood. Obviously, it is not a problem with a modern-day setting. But with a fantasy, where are you?

The Moorchild was based on elements of British and European folklore—that is, on a well-established body of *traditional* fantasy. Because of this matrix, I did not feel wholly free. I had two places to invent— one an isolated human village at the edge of a non-specific moor in a non-real time similar to the early Middle Ages. The other place, hidden under the nearby moor, would be the Mound, the parallel world of my (also invented) non-human creatures, the Moorfolk.

The landscape inside the Mound gave me very little trouble. Lodged in a far corner of my mind, just waiting, was the memory of a salt mine I visited as a child—a vast, glittering cavern where sound drifted eerily without echo, where on a slope I'd judged only a short walk away a donkey and cart looked the size of toys, where an hour flew by like an instant and yet stood still, all these years later, in vivid recollection. Once I'd thought of that salt mine my imagination took off, and I had my Mound. But a wholly fanciful setting for my human characters seemed wrong for a story based on elements of real folklore. I wanted to give my village solid, pseudo-historical reality based on the real world. Yet I didn't want to use an identifiable country because I wanted to keep this a fantasy. Deadlock.

I had to work my way out of it, using trial and error with no idea what would work. From the beginning, I had thought of a countryside and climate reminiscent of (perhaps) northwest England or the Scottish Highlands—so I started with that, and read up on the medieval use of such lands, the woods, the common fields, the "waste land," the shared plows and animals, what kind of houses, which crops. Then I mentally situated my village in such surroundings—feeling as though I were constructing a cardboard stage with a painted backdrop—and gave it the few craftsmen such a village would need: a miller, a blacksmith, a potter.

With nearly total lack of confidence, I started my characters moving through this jerry-built environment. And astonishingly—as if each character carried a magic wand—the details came alive; the place became real and substantial to me, feature by feature, as the villagers moved through it. The vaguely mentioned hillside apple orchard a child climbed past took solid root and was there for good. Once a woman hurried up the village street I could sec (he street—grassy and crooked, with the well halfway along, and old Finch with his dog sitting in the sun. Soon I knew where everybody lived, and the ways to the fields and the moor and the woods, and the whole place was mine. I can't guarantee that this method will work for you, but unpromising as it feels while you're doing it, it's worth a try.

I went through a similar process to invent my Moorfolk—who are *not* elves, nor fairies, nor brownies, nor any other of those remarkably well-documented traditional beings. I drew some qualities and habits from such creatures, especially their non-human emotions and attitudes, but my Moorfolk are themselves. And this painted me into another corner; for unlike the sprites of folklore, who all play fiddles, Moorfolk play bagpipes.

So I suddenly needed to know what bagpipes look like up close, how all those tubes and tassels and straps are hung together, how you hold bagpipes when you play, which bit you blow into. Is the conglomeration heavy to carry, where do you feel the pressure, how do you work that bag when both hands are busy fingering stops, what's the hardest trick in playing it, could an undersized child of nine or ten ever manage it at all ... ? My questions, like my ignorance, were endless, and called for some hands-on answers. But how to find a bagpiper, just like that? The nearest I'd ever come to one was in northern Scotland.

I was dwelling hopelessly on the air fare to the Highlands or even to Indianapolis, home of an old friend's ex-son-in-law, who, I thought, used to play the pipes. My daughter then reminded me of the Highland Games held annually on a nearby college campus—always accompanied by an entire—and undoubtedly local—bagpipe band. I phoned my suburban chamber of commerce and learned the name of an expert high-school-age piper who lived just a few blocks away. I got enthusiastic cooperation, all my answers, and a hands-on, ear-splitting hour I'll never forget.

In that instance, the hopeless turned out to be easy. But that doesn't always happen. You have to be prepared to go the extra mile. No matter; it's that mile that's often the most rewarding.

87
FORGET THE ALAMO: WRITING HISTORY FOR CHILDREN

By Sylvia Whitman

Growing up, I felt the same way about history as I did about spinach: Everybody said it was good for me, and I detested it. Elections, treaties, dates, and more dates—what a bore! Luckily, I loved to read. Just as I managed to meet my minimum RDA of vitamins with frozen peas and grape juice, I got a rough sense of the past through biographies and novels like *Johnny Tremaine* (1943), Esther Forbes's award-winning story of an apprentice silversmith on the eve of the American Revolution. The last thing I ever expected, though, was that I would end up writing history books that teachers could inflict upon kids.

I first started to enjoy history in college in the early 1980s. By then "social history" had moved into the academic mainstream. Although it would seem that social historians should be poring over the guest list of the Boston Tea Party, they are more likely to be studying the propaganda of rebellion or 18th-century perceptions of Native Americans. Social historians are the "big picture" people: They tend to highlight change instead of chronology; to focus on processes rather than events; to think in terms of decades instead of weeks or months; to follow the transmutations of ideas as they trickle down from the intelligentsia and trickle up from popular culture. Also, in the 1980s, stirrings of multiculturalism were beginning to influence scholarship, and women's studies was gaining respectability. I had long taken an interest in the activities of my mother and grandmothers, my personal links to the past. At last, academia was encouraging me to place family history in a broader context.

Developments at the university level have influenced elementary and secondary school curricula. Time lines are now merely a springboard in many history classes. Teachers searching for books and periodicals to enrich textbook fare and stimulate research projects have helped feed a boom in nonfiction of all kinds for children. If you're interested in writing about the past you have a captive audience.

Fact vs. fiction

Most of the biographies I devoured as a child read like novels. I remember in particular one about Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross. In the opening chapter, Clara is celebrating her sixth birthday. As she divides up her cake, she forgets to leave herself a piece. Although the scene skillfully makes a point about Clara's selflessness, the author would never get away with all that embellishment today. It's historical fiction, not history.

Teachers and publishers expect authors to adhere to certain scholarly conventions. You can conjecture from the evidence; you can contrast opposing viewpoints; you can report conversations documented in journals or letters or tape recordings. But you can never invent characters or recreate dialogue. Writing "pure" history requires a sort of collage mentality. You have to search out the juiciest facts, then juxtapose them to support your points.

Going to the sources

Some authors avoid putting any of their own words into the collage by compiling anthologies of first-person quotes. This cut-and-paste approach asks young readers to extrapolate a lot. I prefer to blend primary and secondary sources—combining accounts by people who lived through or witnessed events with analysis and reports by academics or journalists. By paraphrasing, quoting, and interpreting, you can give more structure to the collage. You can also scale history down to an elementary reading level.

Before I begin a first draft, I survey the topic in the library to find out what's on the shelf, what's in print, and what might be available through interlibrary loan. My proposals always include an outline and a bibliography. Neither is considered binding, but they force me to think early about structure, about themes, and especially about the variety of my sources.

Cast your net widely. Researching *Hernando de Soto and the Explorers of the American South*, I relied on four published accounts. Luis Hernandez de Biedma described the group's wanderings. Although both de Soto's secretary and a Portuguese nobleman documented the ruthlessness of the Spaniards, the latter also admired his leader's panache. Garcilaso de la Vega, a 16th-century mestizo historian who nicknamed himself "the Inca," didn't travel with the expedition, but his romantic version based on interviews with survivors stands out for its sympathetic portrayal of Native Americans. Instead of designating one chronicle as the "true" version, I juggled all four. I let my readers see the seams of history—the biases of the winesses, and the "facts" on which they disagreed.

With secondary sources, try to draw on recent work by young historians as well as classics by old masters. Essential to

my book *This Land Is Your Land: The American Conservation Movement* was William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (1983). Each generation rewrites history. It's not coincidence that Cronon published his groundbreaking study about the colonial deforestation and economic exploitation of the Atlantic coast after Earth Day 1970. Even if you're writing about Pilgrims, make sure you've skimmed titles from the past three decades.

And don't overlook related works in other disciplines—art history, literature, anthropology, sociology, even science. To find out about Native American trail building for *Get Up and Go! The History of American Road Travel,* for instance, I consulted several anthropological studies of the Iroquois. A balanced bibliography always results in a better book.

Don't limit your search for lively details to books, either. I love leafing through old magazines to get a feel for an era through ads, advice columns, radio shows, and lyrics. I often use song titles as section headings, such as "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To" (a WWII era hit) or "Fifteen Kisses on a Gallon of Gas" (an early car tune).

As Studs Terkel has demonstrated in his many collections of interviews, oral history brings the past to life. I've used personal reminiscences in all of my "People's History" books. In addition to quoting from Terkel's *The Good War* and other first-person accounts, I always try to do some original research. Posting notes on the bulletin board at a local senior center produced a lode of informants on WWII, including a charming saxophone player who had joined the Marines in order to play in the band and had ended up a Japanese POW. Most newspapers list community meetings, and I added some color to *This Land*

Is Your Land by attending a local reunion of the Civilian Conservation Corps. To track down a talkative trucker, I started with a phone call to a garage listed in the Yellow Pages. If you have access to the Internet, you can easily contact people beyond your neighborhood. From a small town in New York, I arranged interviews with transportation engineers on the West Coast by posting a note in a cyberspace discussion group. Eloquent or unpolished, these voices add texture to the collage. Their conversational tone makes history more accessible to young readers.

Nothing beats photographs for pulling the past out of the mist. Much admired authors like Russell Freedman (*Franklin Delano Roosevelt,* 1990) and Jerry Stanley (*Children of the Dust Bowl,* 1992) write books that are almost photo essays. Although most publishers, like mine, handle all the layout and illustration, editors always appreciate ideas. If you come across an exciting photo, make a photocopy—with credit information—to submit with your manuscript. Because color is expensive to print and stock photo agencies often charge hefty fees, black-and-white "public domain" snapshots from libraries, historical societies, and government agencies are usually more attractive. A small publisher might expect you to round up illustrations yourself. If you don't find appropriate pictures in published material and don't have time to comb through archives, you could hire a photo researcher.

These are a few major archives:

*Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC 20540

*National Archives and Records Administration, Still Picture Branch, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740

***International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, 900 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618

The three C's

Although most authors present history as a narrative, it may take other forms, too. In *Ticket to the Twenties: A Time Traveler's Guide* (1993), Mary Blocksma breaks down the decade into flashy chapters on everything from jive talk to breakfast. Did you know the first electric pop-up toaster hit the market in 1926? Instead of merely listing the presidents, consult *How the White House Really Works* (1989), George Sullivan's "upstairs, downstairs" tour of 1600 Pennsylvania

Avenue. While most titles fall into the categories of biography, survey, or "issue" book, your imagination is the only limit.

Once I begin writing, I stick to the three C's—*clarity, context,* and *cohesion.* Although the vocabulary you use may be simple, writing for children is often harder than writing for adults. Just try summarizing the causes of World War II in a paragraph or two for someone with no knowledge of European history. To the degree possible, keep background brief, points clear; write straightforward topic sentences, and leave the nuance to the details.

To aid the reader in evaluating an event or a person, try to include context about the period. This is the sort of low-key background that often appears in popular histories for adults, from Frederick Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931) to David Brinkley's *Washington Goes To War* (1988). Whether you write about Earth Day or Ralph Nader or highway planning in the '60s and '70s, remind your readers that in those decades, Americans were beginning to "question authority." Since many children today have working moms, they may not appreciate the change in women's roles that "Ro-sie the Riveter" represented during the 1940s. Therefore, in *"V" Is for Victory: The American Home Front During World War II,* I discuss the public relations efforts of the government Office of War Information and the ads that

defense plants ran to encourage people to apply for wartime work. Make it real. Describe the smell of Main Street in the heyday of horse-drawn wagons or the pastimes of Sunday afternoons before the advent of television and the NFL.

Finally, focus on themes. In a biography, you might want to trace the influence of a particular trait or skill over a lifetime—for instance, Rachel Carson's keen observation. Describing the World War II home front, I emphasized Americans' shared sense of purpose, despite racial and ethnic tensions. Since authors for young people face strict limits (in some cases, several centuries compressed into 60 pages of manuscript), they have to cull their research ruthlessly. The key-concept method gives you criteria for deciding what to keep and what to discard. Writing history, after all, is the art of pulling facts out of a grab bag and turning them into a story worth remembering.

88
WRITING BIOGRAPHIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

By James Cross Giblin

There was a time when it was accepted practice for young people's biographies to whitewash their subjects to a certain extent. For example, juvenile biographies either ignored or gave a once-over-lightly treatment to personal failings like a drinking problem, and they scrupulously avoided any mention of complications in their subjects' sex lives.

Such whitewashing was intended to serve several different purposes. It protected the subject's reputation and made him or her a more suitable role model, one of the main goals of juvenile biographies in earlier periods. At the same time it shielded young readers from some of life's harsher realities.

All this has changed in the last twenty-five or thirty years as an increased openness in the arts and the media has spread to the field of children's literature. Young people who watch TV talk shows after school and dip into celebrity tell-all books expect more realism in the biographies that are written expressly for them. As a consequence, juvenile biographies of Franklin D. Roosevelt now acknowledge that he had a mistress, and young adult studies of John F. Kennedy frankly discuss his health problems and womanizing.

Today, the chief goal of a young people's biography is not to establish a role model but rather to provide solid, honest information about a man or woman worth knowing for one reason or another. However, a children's writer still has to make judgments about what facts to include in the biography and how much emphasis to give them. These judgments aren't always easy to arrive at, as I've discovered with the biographies I've written for young people. Each book presents its own unique problems, for which unique solutions must be found.

Much depends on the age of the intended audience. For example,

when I was writing a picture book biography of George Washington for ages six to nine, I felt it was important to describe Washington's changing attitude toward slavery, from easy acceptance in youth to rejection as he grew older. With that background in place, I was confident even quite young readers could grasp the significance of Washington's will, which specified that his slaves would be freed after the death of his wife, Martha.

A picture book biography of Thomas Jefferson presented a much more complex set of problems. Although Jefferson had written in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," he never rejected the concept of slavery as Washington did. How could he? The very existence of his beloved Monticello depended on slave labor. After much thought, I decided there was no way I could avoid discussing Jefferson's conflicted position. But I tried to present it as clearly and simply as possible and was careful not to let the discussion overshadow Jefferson's many accomplishments.

The role of the slave Sally Hemings proved harder to deal with. Whenever I mentioned in talks with writers that I was doing a biography of Jefferson, African-Americans in the audience invariably asked how I was going to treat Sally. I told them I intended to incorporate items from the historical record in the main text—that Sally had come into Jefferson's household as part of his wife's inheritance from her father; had accompanied Jefferson's younger daughter to Paris when Jefferson was the American ambassador to France; and had become one of the most trusted house slaves at Monticello in her later years.

In the back matter, along with other additional information, I said I'd include the story that one of Sally's sons, Madison Hemings, told an Ohio journalist in the mid-19th century. According to Madison, Jefferson had made Sally his mistress after his wife's death and had fathered her seven children, five of whom lived to adulthood and three of whom "passed" as white.

My editor felt that the latter story, aside from being controversial, would be too complicated for six-to-nine-year-olds to absorb. She urged me to leave it out, and in the end I decided she was right. If the book had been directed toward an upper elementary or young adult readership, I would have insisted on the story's retention. But I decided it was probably too involved for a younger audience.

However, the references to Sally Hemings remain in the body of the book, letting readers know that a slave by that name figured in Thomas Jefferson's life. When those same readers grow older, they can read about Sally in greater detail in other books about Jefferson. Meanwhile, my book—while not going deeply into the matter—will at least have introduced Sally to them instead of pretending she didn't exist.

Biographies for older children confront the writer with a different set of difficulties. What sort of balance do you aim for between the subject's achievements and his failings? This question was brought home to me in a particularly vivid

way when I was working on a biography of Charles A. Lindbergh for ages ten to fourteen. Rarely in American history has there been such a sharp dichotomy between a subject's accomplishments—in Lindbergh's case his almost incredible solo flight to Paris in 1927, along with his other contributions to aviation—and his errors, namely his flirtation with fascism in the 1930s and his open admiration of Nazi Germany.

If I'd been writing a biography for adults, I might well have focused more intently on the part Lindbergh played in bringing about the appeasement of Adolf Hitler at Munich and his subsequent speeches urging the United States to take an isolationist stand with regard to the war in Europe. But while I went into this phase of Lindbergh's life in some detail, I decided it was my duty as a biographer for young people to "accentuate the positive," as the old song lyric goes.

An adult biographer may choose to expose or debunk his subject, assuming that readers will be able to compare his version of the person's life with other, more favorable accounts. I don't believe that option is open to the juvenile biographer, whose readers will most likely have little or no prior knowledge of the subject and thus will be unable to make comparisons. Such readers deserve a more even-handed introduction to the person.

Of course, that wouldn't be possible if one were writing about a destructive personality like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, or Senator Joseph McCarthy. But even in the portrayal of someone as reviled as these men, the juvenile biographer would have the responsibility of trying to help young readers understand how a human being could be capable of such inhuman acts. In other words, the writer wouldn't simply wallow in the person's excesses, as some adult biographers might be tempted to do, but instead would try to offer a full-scale portrait and locate the sources of the person's evil actions.

If you're thinking about writing a biography for young people, here are a few questions you would do well to ask yourself. Having the answers in hand should save you time when you're researching and writing the project.

Depending on the age group of the readers, how best can you convey an accurate, three-dimensional picture of the subject in ways that the intended audience can comprehend?

If the book is for younger children, should you discuss the seamier aspects of the subject's life, or merely hint at them and leave a fuller treatment to biographers for older children?

If you're writing for an older audience, how much space should you devote to the darker side of the subject's life and experience? In a biography of sports star Magic Johnson, for example, should you go into detail about the promiscuous behavior that, by Johnson's own account, was responsible for his becoming infected with the AIDS virus, or should you merely mention it in passing?

As you seek answers to these questions, you'll have to rely ultimately on your own good taste and judgment, combined with your knowledge of the prevailing standards in the children's book field. Perhaps the most decisive factor of all, though, will be your feeling for the subject.

Jean Fritz, the author of many award-winning biographies for young people, once said that she had to like a subject tremendously before she could write about the person. I'd amend that to say I must be *fascinated* by a subject in order to invest the time and energy needed to discover what makes the person tick.

The intensity of your fascination with your subject should be of great help as you decide how much weight to give the person's positive and negative aspects. It should also communicate itself to young people, making them want to keep on reading about the intriguing man or woman at the center of your biography.

89
BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE FOR CHILDREN

By Deborah M. Prum

Did you know Peter the Great practiced dentistry on his subject? That Botticelli means "little barrel"? Or that Ivan III's new wife was so heavy, she broke her bed the first night she stayed at the Czar's palace?

With marvelous facts like these at our disposal, there is no excuse for subjecting children to boringly written history. Of course, the primary purpose of writing history for kids is to instruct, not to entertain. However, once you lose a child's interest, you risk losing your audience. A good writer achieves a balance, presenting facts and concepts in a way that will entice a young reader to read on cheerfully and willingly.

Keep them awake with verbs

Nothing puts someone to sleep faster than the use of boring verbs. Granted, when you are writing about past events, you naturally tend to use verbs like "was, were, had been," but entangling your prose in passive constructions will slow down forward movement in your piece.

Whenever you can, use active image verbs. Consider these two sentences:

> By the mid-sixteenth century, the unhappy serfs were hungry and became violent.
>
> Starving serfs stormed the palace, destroying furnishings and attacking the royal guards.

Make them laugh

Use humor liberally in your writing. Catchy subtitles help, especially when you have to discuss subjects that ordinarily may not appeal to children. The subtitle "The Burning of the Papal Bull—*Not* a Barbecue!" will attract more interest than "Martin Luther Rebels."

When appropriate, include a cartoon. A cartoon will draw a child's eyes to a page. You can use a cartoon to poke fun with your material (i.e. a picture of Botticelli dressed in a barrel, apropos of his nickname). Or, you can use a cartoon to make a point. A cartoon depicting the disputing political parties prior to the Civil War may serve to inform your reader as effectively as a paragraph on the subject.

Highlighting an amusing fact makes children more likely to plow through less interesting information. For example, in a discussion of the Gutenberg press, you can start by mentioning that Johann Gutenberg started out life as "John Gooseflesh" (Gensfleisch). Once you have grabbed their attention, then you can go on to talk about the somewhat drier details of your topic.

Be careful when using humor. Avoid the temptation to distort fact in order to be funny.

Using sidebars

Not all factual information or lists may fit smoothly into your text, and may slow the pacing of your piece. For material that is tangential to your primary point, sidebars are a useful way to handle these problems.

A sidebar enables you to include greater detail on a topic without disrupting your narrative flow. Sidebars can give your reader an in-depth view of the period you are discussing. For a piece on the Civil War, you might include a few recipes of the dishes popular at the time. Or, if you are discussing Leonardo Da Vinci, you might include a list of all his inventions. Every once in a while, it doesn't hurt to include a nonsensical sidebar, like this one:

Places Marco Polo did *not* explore:

1. Lizard Lick, North Carolina

2. Walla Walla, Washington

3. Newark, New Jersey

When writing about history for children, you can easily get bogged down in confusing details. Good organization of your material is essential. A young child reading about the first few centuries of Russian history will be tempted to think that every last Russian of importance was named Ivan or Fedor. Of course, that's not true. But, you have to provide a way to sort through potentially confusing material. There are several ways to help your readers:

One is to show a detailed family tree at the beginning of your chapter, including dates, actions for which the person is

famous, and nicknames (i.e. Ivan the Great, Ivan the Terrible, Fedor the Feebleminded).

If you must discuss many events occurring over several years, consider using a time line to show the "who, what, and when" of any era in a clear and simple way.

Another way to help a child understand some of the forces contributing to an event is to tell a story. How did a lightning storm change Martin Luther's life? Talk about the time Borgia betrayed the Duke of Urbino: Borgia borrowed, then used the Duke's own weapons to attack his city. Mention that Peter III played with lead soldiers and dolls, and ultimately lost the Russian Empire to his wife, Catherine the Great. By telling these stories, you will make your material far more interesting and you will give children a better sense of history.

Controversy

Don't shy away from controversy. Make it your ally. Use the tension controversial issues create to add excitement to your text. When possible, tell both sides of the story. Readers know that historians disagree. Help your readers form their own opinions by including direct quotes from the controversial figures, quotes of correspondence, or transcripts of debates. Give the children a chance to hear both sides and an opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills.

Not all historians agree, but you can make controversy work for you. That statement will not come as a shock to most adults, yet it does pose a problem for writers. Which side of the story do you present to young readers? Maybe the "facts" are clear (although, not always), but one historian may slant a discussion in a completely different way from another.

For example, what about Machiavelli? Was he an ogre, an opportunist with dangerous political ideas? Was he a practical political scientist who merely described reality? Does the answer lie somewhere in between? Those are good questions, debated by one and all. How should you present the topic to children?

Fascinating beginnings

You must capture your young reader's attention at the beginning of a chapter and end it in a way that will make that child want to go on to the next chapter.

Begin with an interesting fact or a question: "What does the word 'Medici' mean to you? 1) an interesting pasta dish, 2) a new foreign convertible, 3) a deadly tropical disease, or 4) none of the above."

Capture your reader's attention by opening a chapter with a scene from everyday life at the time your book takes place. (Make it clear that this event "might" have happened but don't veer from accepted fact.) For example, you could start a chapter on Thomas Jefferson by describing him playing his violin for some guests in his drawing room at Monticello.

Ending your chapter well is just as important as beginning well. You want your reader to finish your book. Make a statement that will pique the child's curiosity.

Insofar as possible, make your book a visual pleasure. If you are writing about Ben Franklin, see if you can find museum photographs of his pot-bellied stove. Look for pictures of Catherine the Great's crown or Galileo's telescope. If you are discussing a war or an explorer, include colorful maps.

When writing history for children, be certain that you know your audience. Spend some time around the age group for whom you are writing. Listen to the words they use. Pay attention to how they form their sentences. Figure out what they think is funny. Then, in your own writing, use syntax slightly more complex than what they used. Include a few unfamiliar terms, but be certain to highlight and define any new word. When you are presenting a concept that is foreign to your readers, compare it with one they already understand.

Once your material is written, test it on a child you know. Find a curmudgeonly person who is a reluctant reader. You will be sure to get some valuable comments. A grumpy child will provide a good first test for your material. Then, if you have the opportunity, read your manuscript in front of a classroom of kids. Are your words greeted with excitement and interest, or just yawns and glassy-eyed stares? If you see tired looks and drooping eyelids, enliven your prose accordingly. However, if the children want to know more, you've got a winner.

90
WHEN YOU WRITE HUMOR FOR CHILDREN

By Julie Anne Peters

Children are born to laugh. In fact, humor is thought to be the first expressive form of communication. Good writers understand the value of humor when they write for children. Not only does humor entertain and amuse them, but it lures the most reluctant reader.

When my first book, *The Stinky Sneakers Contest,* was selected by third-grade children in Greater Kansas City as their favorite book of 1995, I was delighted—and shocked. Humorous books rarely win awards. In the kingdom of exalted literature, humor is relegated to serfdom. But the award confirmed my belief that even though funny books infrequently win prestigious literary prizes, they do become children's favorites.

Writers often tell me, "I'm not a funny person. I can't write humor." Piffle! Betsy Byars, grandmistress of humorous children's books, reveals the secret. "The funniest word in the vocabulary of a second grader," she says, "is 'underwear.'" Use it liberally. "Poo poo" works for preschoolers. Or you can rise above so-called potty humor and choose one of the standard humor devices that follow.

Surprise

Writers and illustrators of picture books are guaranteed laughter or smiles by springing the unexpected on their young readers. Books are the perfect vehicle for creating humor through surprise. James Stevenson demonstrates this very effectively in his book, *Quick! Turn the Page.*

To bring about surprise, take an expected event or consequence and create the unexpected. A boy bounces a ball. He expects it to go up and come down. Page one: Ball goes up. Page two: A wild monkey in a banyan tree snatches the ball and steals off to ... ? Next page.

Surprise can delight page after page, intermittently, or just once, with a surprise ending. Read Judith Viorst's poem, "Mother Doesn't Want a Dog," for a classic example of a surprise ending.

Exaggeration

The earliest American humor used exaggeration in its purest form: larger-than-life heroes performing superhuman feats. Remember Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, and John Henry? The American tall tale is still a favored form of humor for children. Anne Isaac's *Swamp Angel* moves this classic genre into the 1990s with her female superheroine. Not only does Swamp Angel fend off Thundering Tarnation, the marauding bear, she has to prove herself to taunting backwoodsmen who'd have her stay at home, quilting.

Transcendental toasters, madcap Martians, and articulate animals are all examples of truth stretching. My favorite mouthy mammal is the mutt, Martha, in Susan Meddaugh's *Martha Speaks.* After Martha dog eats a bowl of alphabet soup, she becomes quite the loquacious pooch. "You people are so bossy, come! sit! stay! You never say please."

Journey beyond the bounds of possibility to create exaggerated humor. How about a plucky petunia? A daring doormat? Even preschool children can differentiate between the real and unreal as they gleefully embrace the fun in make-believe.

Word and language play

With wordplay, language is key to the rhythm, sound, and rhyme that carries your story forward. Readers become reciters. Jack Prelutsky, Shel Silverstein, and Joyce Armor are wizards of wordplay in their witty poetry. Nancy Shaw's "Sheep" books are shear joy (yes, pun intended).

If you're not a poet and you know it, try your hand at literal translation. *Amelia Bedelia* books by Peggy Parish teach you how. Amelia Bedelia, the indomitable maid, takes every order, every conversation, every suggestion literally, and sets herself up for catastrophe. Children love trying to predict the consequences of Amelia's misunderstandings.

Role reversal

Eugene Trivizas chose role reversal to retell a classic fairy tale in his *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Had Pig.* To make the most effective use of role reversal, choose familiar characters acting out of character. Turn everyday events topsy-turvy. Harry Allard uses children's perceptions about substitute teachers (whether true or not) when he changes meek, mild Miss Nelson into bleak, vile Viola Swamp. You may choose to switch family members, as Mary Rodgers did

with her mother/daughter exchange in *Freaky Friday,* or people and their pets, aliens with automobiles, princes and paupers. Stay away from twins, though. It's been done and done and done.

Nonsense

Nonsense includes incongruity and absurdity, ridiculous premises, and illogical series of events. What makes a nonsense book funny is its weirdness. *Imogene's Antlers,* by David Small, is the story of a young girl who wakes up one day to find she's grown antlers. This is a problem. Imogene has trouble getting dressed; she can't fit through narrow doorways; her antlers get caught in the chandelier. Even worse, her mother keeps fainting at the sight of her. Though children recognize the absurdity of Imogene's situation, they also see how well she copes with her sudden disability. This book speaks to children's physical differences, which is a fundamental value of humor.

Literary humor helps children grow. It offers distancing from pain, from change and insecurity, from cruelty, disaster and loss. Children are not always sophisticated or mature enough emotionally to laugh at themselves. Humorous books with subtle serious themes offer children ways to deal positively with life's inequities. They offer a magic mirror, through which children's problems—and their solutions—can be reflected back.

Slapstick

Farce and horseplay have been part of the American humor scene since vaudeville—maybe before. Who knows what Neanderthals did for fun? Physical humor appeals to the child in all of us. Hectic, frenetic chases and bumbling, stumbling characters cause chaos in the pages of children's books. Your plot will immediately pick up pace if you include a frantic fiasco or two. Check out Betsy Byars' *Golly Sisters.* May-May and Rose's calamitous capers are rip-roaring fun. Avi used slapstick masterfully in his book *Romeo and Juliet Together (And*

Alive) At Last! His high schoolers' rendition of Shakespeare's masterpiece would make The Bard weep (with tears of laughter).

Satire

You can achieve humor by poking fun at human vices, human foibles or the general social order, which rarely makes sense to children, so they love to see it pulverized on paper. My favorite satirical series is "The Stupids," by Harry Allard. I swear these people lived next door to me when I was growing up. James Marshall's illustrations add hilarity to the humor.

To write effective satire for children, you must recognize the ridiculous in youngsters' lives. Make fun of uppity people's pretensions, lampoon restrictions, and spoof the silly societal mores children are expected to embrace. Create characters who teeter on the edge, who challenge the status quo—and thrive. Read Sid Fleischman's *The Whipping Boy* for a lesson in writing satire.

Adolescent angst

Family and school stories, growing up and coming-of-age novels make up the bulk of children's humorous fiction. Adolescence just seems to lend itself to humor. Laughter helps older children deal with life's larger dilemmas: death, divorce, disability, senility, loss, and unwelcome change. Reading about characters who successfully and humorously overcome obstacles provides children with painless lessons on how to handle their own problems.

For my book *B.J.'s Billion-Dollar Bet,* I started with a troublesome topic—betting. Frequently, I overhear conversations between kids who are placing bets: "Oh, sure. I bet you," or "Wanna bet? Come on, let's bet on it." And they bet away valuable items—clothing, sports card collections, lunch money. To show the consequences of betting, I created B.J. Byner, a compulsive gambler who bets and loses all of his possessions, then begins to bet away his family's belongings. When B.J. loses his mother's lottery ticket in a wager, then finds out the ticket is a fifty-million-dollar winner, he has to get that ticket back!

I hope young readers will see that the risks of gambling are considerable; the losses more than they may be willing or able to pay. Betting can result in loss of friendship, family conflict, and, as with any addiction, loss of control and self-respect. If I hadn't chosen a humorous premise for this book, it would have been too preachy.

Middle-grade and young adult novels include more urbane, cerebral humor. These young people are developing their own individual views of the world, and social relationships take on a major role.

For my middle-grade novel, *How Do You Spell Geek?,* I began with a funny, offbeat character, Lurlene Brueggemeyer, the geek, and built the story around her. The issues are serious ones—judging people by their appearance, shifting alliances between friends, peer pressure, and self-examination, but I gave my main character, Ann, a sarcastic sense of humor and a wry way of watching her world get weird, which seems to lighten the load.

Read the masters of middle-grade humor: Ellen Conford, Barbara Park, Beverly Cleary, Betsy Byars, Daniel

Pinkwater, and Jerry Spi-nelli, among many, many others.

There are humor writers who defy classification; they relate to their audiences through rebellion, radicalism, and general outrageousness. Three young adult authors who fall into this special category are M.E. Kerr, Richard Peck, and Paul Zindel. Their books validate an emerging adult's individuality, passion, and self-expression.

If you plan to try your hand at humor, steer clear of targeting a specific age group. I've received letters from eight-year-olds who are reading my junior high novel, *Risky Friends.* And I'm sure you know high schoolers who still get a hoot out of Dr. Seuss. Even though sense of humor evolves as we grow older, we never lose appreciation for the books that made us laugh when we were younger.

Humor writing is a spontaneous act. It comes from deep within, from your own wacky way of looking at the world. One word of caution: Humor has power. What we laugh at, we make light of. What we laugh at, we legitimize and condone. Cruelty is never funny. Violence isn't funny. Torture, torment, neglect, war, hatred, and preying on others' misfortunes are not subjects for children's humor. There's a fine line between sarcasm and cynicism; between light-spirited and mean-spirited. So be aware. If you do write humor for children, observe the limits.

There's more than one way to connect with children through humor (beyond using "underwear"). In fact, with all the techniques available, and given the fact that children laugh easily, your chances of eliciting gleeful responses are excellent.

91
DYNAMIC DETAILS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN CHILDREN'S FICTION

By Beverly J. Letchworth

> Marcy edged closer to the lake, amazed at the large number of snow geese. She stood quietly, not wanting to disturb them. But despite her caution, an alarm jetted through the flock, and they rose together in a mob of blurred white, their flapping wings sounding like the clattering of a thousand clapping hands. Marcy gasped as the rising mass spewed into the air and spread quickly across the fields.

What made this paragraph so effective? Details—details that worked. Specific, well-chosen details that wove in sensory perceptions, imagery, and a simile helped make the scene come alive and made the setting real, believable. Readers could see the geese, hear their wings, and feel Marcy's wonderment. They felt involved.

That's the goal of good storytelling: Involve your readers so they feel they're part of the action. Readers must feel connected to your characters, settings, even to objects, or they'll lose interest in the story. This holds true for any fiction writing, whether for adults or children.

But in writing children's fiction, you must consider more restrictions, because children are bored by long descriptions about settings or characters. Therefore, details must be limited and chosen with care. Opt for those details that convey only the most significant aspects of a setting, character, or object.

Also, keep in mind that the younger the reader, the fewer details should be used. For young children whose attention span is short, details must be strictly limited. In a description about an attic, you may choose to say only, "The attic was dim and dusty. Cobwebs hung in the corners. Bulging boxes and broken furniture lined the walls." These few details offer readers definite sensory images that bring the scene to life. Sometimes, a single detail is enough to set the tone: "An owl hooted low and loud, making her shiver."

As children mature, they can grasp more details and appreciate the many layers of a character or setting; and, indeed, they can absorb some of the subtleties.

Let's go back to the attic and add more details suitable for older readers.

> The attic lay dim and dusty before her—a small room with a low ceiling that seemed a perfect size for an Alice-in-Wonderland escape. Bulging boxes overflowing with old clothes sat like curled-up sleepers, and a torn overstuffed chair seemed a fat lady at rest beside them. From all corners cobwebs hung in tattered white streamers, looking soft and gauzy in the dusky light.

More depth has been added, but you'd better stop here or the description will become tedious. Even for teenagers, don't overdo the details. The detailed style of Charles Dickens is passé today; children of the computer age with its easy access to quick information won't keep reading a book that's verbose.

You can achieve a fast-paced, stimulating style by using methods for selecting and using effective details. It takes practice, but it's worth the effort.

1. Establish what age group you're writing for to determine how many details to include.

2. Select the most telling details to describe the particular situation and connote specific aspects of the setting or character.

For physical description of a character, choose only one of two details, rather than a whole paragraph to reveal the essence of that character. For example: "Straight-backed, her head high, she strode into the room." Or, "He didn't bother to push the long, greasy hair from his eyes as he lurched down the steps."

To convey an emotional reaction without becoming wordy, you may show your character's sadness by simply saying, "Again she felt the familiar sharp sting of tears behind her eyes."

An individual object may often merit some detail. Again, choose the best detail to make it real to the reader. "The satin dress lay across the bed, as smooth and soft as melted gold." Or, "Amid the jumble of plastic glasses and shriveled plants, the silver bell glinted like a jewel on the sunny kitchen windowsill." Or, "The fern hung from the ceiling and dripped its lacy fronds onto the floor."

3. Use the five senses to bring your scene to life. Sight is vital in descriptions, but don't neglect the other senses. Bring in sound, smell, taste, and touch whenever possible, for they add depth and realism. And don't forget color.

4. Use specific details so readers can see and feel the scene. First, envision the setting you want to describe, and make a list of its specific qualities. A run-down bookstore may include details such as: water stains on the ceiling, books piled haphazardly on shelves and in corners, a cat meowing from a shelf, a crooked wood floor, cobwebs in the windows,

musty smell, dust and grit on books. From this list, choose three details that would set the ambiance of the scene without becoming tiresome.

5. If you can't visualize a setting adequately, visit the type of place you have in mind. A wealth of details will present themselves, some you never expected. For example: When you envision a boat dock, you can see water, fishing boats, nets and rods, heavy ropes. What you couldn't imagine was the slap of water against the boats, the gentle sway of the dock beneath your feet, the cloying fish smell, gulls. These sensory details will add the realism needed to make readers feel they are there.

Of course, it's not always possible to visit a place. Not many of us can take a quick trip to a rainforest or go to a circus whenever we want to. If you can't visit, then read, read, read about the setting you want to use. Study pictures that will give you a better sense of the sights, sounds, maybe even the smells of the particular locale.

6. Create similes and metaphors when appropriate. Remember the satin dress and the silver bell. Figures of speech enhance details, but for young readers, use details cautiously. Young minds can't always grasp the comparisons, so use them sparingly, and keep them simple and easy to understand. For older readers, figures of speech can be used more frequently.

7. Occasionally, allow your characters to describe the details of a setting or object. This technique offers a change of pace and gives the reader the benefit of a character's feelings and opinions about a place or object.

8. Break up descriptions in order to incorporate more appropriate details as interestingly as possible. Sprinkle details throughout the scene so there are no long stretches of solid text. One of my stories for middle-grade readers, set in 1850, features Lithia Ann, a free black girl who dreams of getting an education so she can become a teacher. Her walk into town with her brother Roan needed to include many details. I tried to scatter them in between dialogue, thoughts, and action to make the following scene more appealing.

> As they walked, the smell of the river wafted around them. It flowed on their right, a wide ribbon of currents, always moving, always changing. Lithia Ann felt its strength and it always revived her. Some of her worry dropped away, and she took deep breaths of the river's scent.
>
> In the distance blared a deep mournful steamboat whistle. The *James Hawthorne,* thought Lithia Ann. She could always tell the steamboat by its deep haunting sound, just as she could identify other steamboats by their particular-sounding whistles.
>
> As they passed shops and stores, Lithia Ann called out the names of various businesses. It was still exciting to be able to read the names and signs in the windows.
>
> "Some day you'll be able to read too, Roan," she said enthusiastically. "Then you'll know what everything is." She remembered the first time she had realized that a group of letters spelled a word: C-A-T. . . .
>
> Soon they reached the bustling wharf. Noises pushed aside Lithia Ann's thoughts. Grunts and yells, thuds, and bangs filled the streets as men unloaded cargo from flatboats and steamboats tied at the pier. Dogs barked, horses snorted, mules brayed. . . .
>
> Lithia Ann and Roan rested on the wooden boardwalk in front of the hotel. A fishmonger with his cart of fresh fish called to passersby, "Fresh fish, fresh fish, fit for the pan!"
>
> An old woman pushed a wheelbarrow filled with strawberries. "Straaaawberrrrries!" she shouted. Lithia Ann's mouth watered.
>
> Roan dashed up to the cart and held out his hand to the old woman. "No money, no berries," she said harshly, pushing past him.
>
> "I only wanted one," Roan said sadly, when Lithia Ann took him by the hand.

I hope that these specific details help you visualize the sights, sounds, and smells of a river town in the 1850s and make you feel as if you are walking the dirt streets with the characters.

Details are vital elements of any story, for they picture the world of the characters. Like yarn in a rug, details woven throughout the plot, ever-changing in color and pattern, offer readers a way to "belong" to the story. As a writer, you must strive to bring out this involvement. Only by presenting the most effective details can you make this happen.

92
CAPTURING THE YOUNG ADULT READER

By Cheryl Zach

Trying to capture the young adult reader is a bit like Alice's pursuit of the White Rabbit; these young people are almost as elusive and as hard to pin down. So who's really reading young adult books, and how do we write for them? There's no simple answer.

The young adult books you find on library or bookstore shelves run the gamut from innocent first-kiss stories to accounts of the much more serious consequences of an unintended pregnancy, from lighthearted running-for-class-president tales to suspenseful live-or-die mysteries.

Librarians were the first to search for young adult books that would be of interest to high school or mature junior high students. But as the concept of books aimed especially at this age group became common, bookstores stepped in to define the label "young adult." Some of the confusion may have been caused when booksellers and publishers, perhaps in an attempt to broaden the market, perhaps in recognizing that children like to "read up"—that is, read about characters slightly older than themselves—lowered the age levels of YA to include readers as young as ten or eleven.

At the same time, some editors and librarians feel that readers 16 to 22 are underserved. Many readers that age are turning to adult books, but do adult authors address their particular concerns?

Obviously, the subject matter portrayed in books for pre-teens won't be the same as in novels for older teens. To make the equation even harder to solve, the age at which teenagers and adolescents experience physical, emotional, and mental maturation varies widely.

So defining the YA reader depends partly on whom you ask. Yet despite this problem of definition, the YA novel is too important a genre to be ignored. The coming-of-age novel chronicling a young person's first experiences with romance, with death, with adult actions and consequences, with personal responsibility is too significant to be considered only as a marketing ploy.

As a result, authors and publishers strive for meaningful YA books, while sometimes targeting different age groups. Junior high students often enjoy Lois Lowry's perceptive, humorous Anastasia books and also feel the tug of Lurlene McDaniel's poignant novels of critically ill adolescents.

Older teens may be drawn to the darker threads of a Lois Duncan mystery, such as *Killing Mr. Griffin,* or to Christopher Pike's or R.L. Stine's more graphic horror novels. Novels such as my own *Runaway* and *Family Secrets* also deal with more mature themes—a pregnant teen on the run; an adopted teenager seeking her birth parents and discovering a dark secret in her family's past.

Some books seem to span the age groups; historical novels like my *Carrie's Gold* or *Southern Angel,* a Civil War saga, or fantasy novels such as Lloyd Alexander's Prydain Chronicles or Anne McCaffrey's Dragonsinger books, seem to attract readers from a wide age group, sometimes including adults. These books often have significant themes, but the fact that the stories are presented in another time or place, free of the restraints of modern costume and slang and social traditions, perhaps contributes to their ageless appeal.

Although topics and treatments may vary in books for younger or older teens, fortunately other aspects will not. Readers of any age will respond to well-drawn, three-dimensional characters, a significant problem that the protagonist (not a helpful adult) will resolve or come to terms with, realistic dialogue, and a fast-paced plot with compelling scenes.

In addition, modern readers expect a quick beginning that sweeps them immediately into the story. They want to be introduced to the main character right away, to see at least a hint of the problem this young person faces, and they want to care enough about his or her character to guarantee that they will hang around to see what happens.

How does the YA author create likable, yet vulnerable characters? Go into their backgrounds; examine their families, and their position in the family (the oldest child is often expected to be more responsible; the youngest may be more indulged). Look at their relationships with their parents, with their siblings, with school friends and teachers, with the neighbor next door, the neighborhood or school bully, the part-time employer. Consider a character's earlier experiences —even a child has a past!—and see what has helped make him into the person he is today. Your characters may not be perfect, but make sure they're basically decent; you have to like your characters first, if you want your readers to like them, too.

The protagonist should have a real problem, an age-appropriate problem that young people will identify with. Try to be honest with your readers; never condescend to them. I know that to a ten-year-old, getting the wrong teacher on the first day of school can be a real disaster; that a fifteen-year-old may really be in love, no pat-on-the-head infatuation here; that a sixteen-year-old could be in a life or death situation if he defies the local gang. Keep up with what's happening in real life, and keep in mind that adolescence today is not the same as it was twenty years ago. Watch the news, read teen magazines and listen to teen music. Make sure the setting and the dialogue are up-to-date. I get some of my best ideas from newspaper or news stories. (The plot of *Runaway* evolved from a short article in the back pages of my local paper.)

Also, remember that just as the novel itself has a shape, a rise and fall and rise to an ultimate climax, scenes also have their own shape and purpose. A scene that does not move the story forward, provide more understanding of the character, create suspense or humor, or provide information about the setting has no place in your YA novel. Test every line of dialogue and every paragraph of narrative to make sure it is absolutely necessary. For today's impatient readers, you must write cleanly and succinctly, in graceful prose. Make every word count.

Finally, be sure the climax is truly the most exciting part of the book. Show how your young protagonist rises to the most difficult challenge he or she has faced, and meets it head-on in a scene that is played to its emotional, physical, and intellectual zenith, so that your readers will sit on the edge of their seats and be unable to put the book down until they know what the resolution will be. And then, we writers—along with teachers and parents—will hope that kids, no matter what their ages, will be eager to read another YA novel, and another, and another.

93
TEN TIPS ON WRITING PICTURE BOOKS

By Diane Mayr

As a children's librarian, I do story hours for preschoolers ages 3 to 5. Children this age have developed language skills, but aren't yet able to read on their own. After more than 1,500 story hours, I know what these children like. By sharing this knowledge I hope to improve the chances of my wowing young patrons with some great picture book—yours.

Tip #1: Read. When wannabe writers tell me they have written a book for children, I ask them to compare their book to something already in print. I'm usually met with a blank stare, or "I haven't read many children's books." If you haven't read what's out there, how do you know if your book is better than—or as good as—the rest? How do you know your version of "The Three Little Pigs" is different enough from the traditional one to attract a child's (or publisher's) attention? [Suggestions of titles to "study" will be shown in brackets.]

Tip #2: Be Brief. Good books for preschoolers run 800 words or less—sometimes considerably less. Look at the word counts of some of the "classics": *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Eric Carle)—225; *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie* (Laura Joffe Numeroff)—291; *The Snowy Day* (Ezra Jack Keats)—319; and *Corduroy* (Don Freeman)—708.

Don't use a lot of description, the illustrator will fill in the details. (You may, though, wish to provide notes, separate from the text, about illustrative elements crucial to your story.) A balance of dialogue and narration works best.

Tip #3: Tell a Good Story. If your forte is "mood" pieces, then you're not aiming for the preschool audience. For them, something has to happen, and the story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The ending must not be ambiguous; predictability is expected.

Have you heard of the "rule of three"? The main character must complete three tasks, or face three foes, before winning the day. The rule has worked for generations of talespinners; try letting your heroine face the monster under the bed three times before she develops the courage to banish it. [Read: *The Wolf's Chicken Stew*, by Keiko Kasza]

Tip #4: Know the Preschool Psyche. Preschoolers are strongly tied to their homes and family. They enjoy hearing about situations they're familiar with such as the arrival of a new baby. It's your task to develop a twist on a familiar theme, but make the twist believable. [Read: *Julius, The Baby Of The World*, by Kevin Henkes]

As adults, we have a tendency to dismiss a preschooler's fears and "problems" as inconsequential, but they're very real. They need to be addressed and dealt with reassuringly. [Read: *Rosie's Baby Tooth*, by Maryann Macdonald]

The problems adults see as significant—death, divorce, abuse, etc.— are topics for bibliotherapy; such books have a place, but are not for the general audience. Nor are 3-to 5-year-olds the audience for a picture book that tries to explain the Holocaust. Childhood is short but critical in the development of character. Preschoolers deserve to feel secure.

Animals often appear as the characters in picture books, but don't allow the talking animals in your stories to do things a child wouldn't do. For example, don't have Baby Monkey cross a busy street by herself. If you do, preschoolers will invariably ask, "Where's the Mommy?" If Baby Monkey needs to cross the street without Mom in order to advance your plot, leave it in, but don't arbitrarily dismiss a young monkey's (child's) need to depend on responsible adults. [Read: *Baby Duck And the Bad Eyeglasses*, by Amy Hest]

Tip #5: Surefire Pleasers. Preschoolers love humor! But, they're not looking for subtlety. Think pratfalls without pain. Sophisticated punning is out, but nonsense words draw a laugh. [Read: Froggie Gets Dressed, by Jonathan London; *Contrary Mary*, by Anita Jeram; *Tacky The Penguin*, by Helen Lester; *Mother Makes A Mistake*, by Ann Dorer]

Noises are always a hit. Preschoolers will "moo" and "quack" along with the reader—and love doing it! [Read: *Is This A House For Hermit Crab?*, by Amy McDonald: *Peace At Last*, by Jill Murphy; *Small Green Snake*, by Libba Moore Gray]

Allow the audience to discover a "secret" before the main character does. Little kids, so frequently put down by older siblings, more advanced peers, and even by adults, appreciate the opportunity to feel "smarter" than someone else. This device is often used by puppeteers who have the audience see the villain before the lead puppet does. If you've ever heard the gleeful screams, "Look behind you! He's behind you!", then you know how successful this can be with preschoolers. [Read: any of Frank Asch's books about Bear. Two good examples: *Mooncake* and *Bread And Honey]*

Questions scattered throughout the story—for example, "Should he look under the bed?"—allow interaction between

the child and the story. Kids love to interact! [Read: *The Noisy Book,* by Margaret Wise Brown]

Tip #6: Pictures Are Essential. If your story makes sense without visual clues, then it is not a picture book. Text and pictures must contribute equally to telling the story. (One note of caution: Unless you are an accomplished artist/illustrator, do not attempt to illustrate your own work if you plan to submit it to a trade publisher. You need not seek out an illustrator, the illustrator will be selected by your publisher.) [Read: *King Bidgood's In The Bathtub,* by Audrey Wood, illustrated by Don Wood]

Tip #7: Watch Your Language! Preschoolers tend to take what you say literally. If I read aloud—'"Look, it's snowing!' he cried."— without a doubt, a child will interrupt me to ask, "Why is he crying?" Use "he said" or "he shouted."

Nothing destroys the flow of a story like having to stop to explain an unfamiliar term. Use language with which today's children are comfortable. Don't use "frock" for dress or "dungarees" for jeans.

Tip #8: Learn the 3 "R's." Repetition, rhythm, and rhyme work well with the younger set. Traditional folktales like "The Little Red Hen" still appeal to them because of the repetition. Rhyme, unfortunately, can kill a story if it's not done well. Rather than write a story entirely in rhyme, try a few repetitive rhyming sentences. [Read: *Millions Of Cats,* by Wanda Gag; *A Cake For Barney,* by Joyce Dunbar]

Tip #9: Read Aloud. Read your story out loud and listen. If you stumble, nine times out of ten, there's something wrong with the writ-ing. When it finally sounds right to you, try reading it to someone else for continuity and clarity.

Tip #10: Make a Dummy. Fold eight pieces of paper in half and staple at the fold. You now have a 32-page dummy. Cut and paste your words onto the pages, leaving the first three pages blank for front matter. You'll need to make decisions on length. Is the story too short? Too long? Does it flow smoothly? You may want to make notes about the pictures you envision for each page or spread. The suspense in a story could be jeopardized by raising a problem in the text on a left-hand page and having a picture on the right-hand page provide the solution. Remember, preschoolers are "reading" the illustrations as you're reading the words. It's preferable to have a page turn before providing resolutions or answers.

Bonus Tip: Make Friends with Your Children's Librarian. She can

introduce you to the classic picture books, as well as to the best of what's currently being published. She'll have review journals and publishers' catalogues for you to look at, and she can double as a critical reader.

I've been waiting more than ten years for the perfect picture book to share with my story hour kids; I can wait a little longer for you to write it!

94
WRITING FOR CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES

By Donna Freedman

Not everyone can write for children, but everyone should want to: Children's magazines can be a lucrative market. I've been paid as much as $350 for a 150-word article. And there are hundreds of free-lance opportunities, from Sunday-school papers to glitzy, hightech skateboard 'zines. The market has grown markedly in recent years: In 1985, the Institute of Children's Literature identified 354 freelance markets; today, ICL lists 582 such markets.

Writing for kids isn't easy. You have a small space in which to pack a lot of information. You have to write in language they can understand, and you need ideas that will grab the attention of youngsters who are increasingly distracted by CD-ROM, cable television, video games, and other competing entertainment.

Most important of all, you need to put aside any preconceived notions about childhood. Children are a lot more sophisticated than they were in your own childhood years, and they want articles and stories that are relevant to their world. Children's publications now call for writing that reflects the realities of modern life: latchkey kids, for example, or single-parent families.

Pastimes and hobbies may be a lot different from those you remember. Small-town kids may still go to the old swimming hole in the summer, but suburban and urban youngsters today are more likely to play soccer or spend their free time on their skateboards. Therefore, you need to familiarize yourself with what they are doing if you want to write for them. Borrow a friend's children, teach a Sunday-school class, coach a sports team, or eavesdrop at McDonald's. Do anything to get an idea of what kids are like today.

Although juvenile magazines publish a fair number of short stories, you're much more likely to sell nonaction: articles that paint vivid pictures of historical events or use colorful, down-to-earth imagery to explain a scientific or technological phenomenon. Profiles of famous people can no longer be dry as dust: Readers want to feel the wind on Amelia Earhart's face, or hear the crash as Thomas Edison's prototype light bulb shatters on the floor.

Editors are looking for more biography, history, and hard science. Nature is a perennial favorite, but most magazines already have backlogs of articles about Really Interesting Animals or Fascinating Natural Phenomena. It's not that these ideas can't make good reading, it's that they need a new approach.

For example, *Highlights for Children* recently published an article about a tiger in an animal sanctuary. Normally, the magazine doesn't use pieces set in zoos or sanctuaries, but this piece was different because the writer used her senses to create a picture of the sleekness of the tiger's fur, the roughness of its tongue, its ever-changing moods. It worked because it was evocative. If it had been encyclopedic— "Tigers live in Asia. They are endangered."—it would have been boring, and not held the attention of young readers.

Even an article that has a lot of information needs to be written in an exciting, attention-getting style. Since slang or jargon tends to sound phony when used by adults, concentrate on unusual details and the newest research you can find. Intrigue readers and show them how much you care about the subject, whether it's tiger fur or in-line skating.

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to write about the space program, or an entomologist to write about dung beetles. All you really need is a dedication to research, an ability to write clearly and concisely, and a respect for your young audience.

One of the most common mistakes writers make is writing "down" to children—being too sweet, too jaunty, or too didactic. Children don't want to be patronized or preached at.

The worst crime of all is to try to shoehorn in some moral. If there's a lesson to be learned, you should show it, not tell it. Your average nine-year-old isn't going to have an epiphany like, "Guess I should have listened to what the Sunday-school teacher/Grandma/my dad said." If he read anything preachy or boring, he'd groan out loud: "Give me a break!" Like most of us, kids read magazines to be entertained.

Articles and stories need to fit into very small spaces in the magazines. Even if a magazine specifies 800 to 1,200 words, don't feel com-pelled to use up all the allotted space. Editors love tight writing, because children, particularly beginning readers, are more likely to finish a short piece than a daunting 1,200-worder.

Marketing skills are as important as writing skills. There's no sense writing a piece on the maternal instincts of wolverines only to find that there's no market for such an article. And if you're sending out ideas blindly, without the

slightest bit of market research, you're not just wasting postage, you're wasting an editor's time.

A little market research would show, for instance, that *Cricket* doesn't publish horror stories; that *Highlights* steers clear of pop culture; that the editors at the Children's Better Health Institute don't like stories that feature junk food.

Also, it's not enough to know what kind of articles the editors want; you also need to know what kind of writing they prefer. It's almost impossible to get a sense of a magazine's voice from writer's guidelines. The only way to do that is to read several issues of the magazine to give you an idea of what you might be able to sell.

The stories and articles in children's publications may be slangy and colorful, or written in a graceful, literary style. Not a single word is wasted; each is carefully chosen for maximum impact.

You might consider subscribing to a few magazines, such as *Highlights, Cricket,* and *Cobblestone.* Or spend a couple of hours each month in the local library, reading as many children's magazines as possible. Go through back issues, too.

The Writer Magazine is a good place to find other outlets for your work. So are specialty publications, such as *Children's Writer* (published by the Institute of Children's Literature) or the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators *Bulletin.*

Sunday-school papers and other religious periodicals are always hungry for good writing, and they publish up to 52 times a year. They tend to pay less than mainstream children's magazines, but they're a good place for beginners to hone their writing skills, learn to work with editors, and compile some clips.

It's a lot tougher to sell to a high-profile magazine. The best-known publications may get as many as 1,000 unsolicited manuscripts each month. One way to break in is through the "front of the book" sections found in many magazines. These are made up of very short items about interesting or newsworthy children's activities. Your local newspaper is a great resource for front-of-book items. Did a youngster in your town start a recycling program, climb a mountain, break a 10k record in his age group? Other kids want to know about it.

Juvenile magazines devote a lot of space to puzzles, crafts, hidden pictures, dot-to-dot, and word finds. This can be another good way to break into the market. Your experience with children might also help you sell a story or an article. For example, you might package an article on Halloween with an easy-to-do crossword puzzle using lots of spooky words. Or a story about friendship could go hand-in-hand with a craft page on how to make friendship bracelets.

Some writers believe they can get away with lazy research or substandard writing because it's "only" for kids. Nothing could be further from the truth. Editors will accept only the very best for their young readers.

95
WRITING MYSTERIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

By Peg Kehret

Part of the joy of writing for children is the letters they send me. One of my favorite letters said, "It took my teacher two weeks to read *Nightmare Mountain* to our class. You wrote it in three days. Wasn't that hard to do?"

I have never written a book in three days! *Nightmare Mountain* took me nine months, and then my editor asked for revisions. Writing mysteries for children is not easy or fast, but it is fun and enormously satisfying. Here are some hints to help you write a mystery that will satisfy young readers.

• Begin the novel in an exciting place. Sometimes this means rearranging your material after the book is written. I wrote *Nightmare Mountain* in chronological order, but when it was finished, I realized there was too much background information at the beginning of the book. Although it was necessary information, it gave the story a slow start.

I took a letter from the middle of the novel and made it my opening. Now the book begins: "Dear Mom, Someone's trying to kill me." The letter is less than a page long; it became my whole first chapter. Chapter two starts at the true beginning, with the necessary background information. At the end of chapter six, Molly finally picks up her pen and writes to her mother, but meanwhile that letter has generated suspense throughout the first five chapters.

When you finish your first draft, read through it to see if there is a more exciting scene with which to open your novel. If so, try moving that scene to the beginning of the story.

Another good way to open a mystery is with intriguing dialogue. A fourth-grade teacher told me that she once read the first paragraph of six novels to her class and then let them vote on which book she would read aloud to them. My book, *Horror at the Haunted House,* was the students' choice. Here is my beginning: "Hey, Ellen! I'm going to get my head chopped off."

Such an opening makes the readers curious. They will want to read on, to see where the opening leads.

• Be sure all of the dialogue is appropriate to the character. A young child does not speak the same way his parents do; a belligerent teenager will sound different from one who is trying to please. The funny kid should get the laugh lines.

I try not to use current slang, even in dialogue. It dates a book too quickly. These days, kids say *awesome.* Several years ago, it was *rad* and before that, *groovy* was in. A book for children will often stay in print a long time; don't make it seem old-fashioned by using language that doesn't last.

• Give your protagonist a personal problem in addition to the main story problem. This will add depth to your story and will help you create a more believable and sympathetic character. For example: In *Night of Fear,* the main story problem is that T.J. is abducted. The personal problem is his unhappiness over the changes in his grandmother, who has Alzheimer's disease. Grandma Ruth, through T.J.'s memories, becomes a major character and her disease creates reader sympathy. Tension is also increased as readers wait to find out if Grandma Ruth got home safely after T.J. was forced to leave her alone. Because T.J. cares deeply about his grandma, the readers care, too.

• The title of any book for children must grab young readers and create curiosity; for a mystery, the title should also hint at danger. My working title for *Terror at the Zoo* was *Zoo Night,* but that title did not suggest any danger or conflict. (The editor said it sounded like a nonfiction title.) *Terror at the Zoo* makes it clear that the book is a suspense novel, and it arouses the curiosity of potential readers who wonder what scary event happens at the zoo.

Another editor once suggested that I try to use an action verb in every title. I have done so several times, with good results.

• Provide new information. Kids like to learn interesting facts, and if you weave the information in as a natural part of the plot, your readers learn easily and naturally. In *Horror at the Haunted House,* a collection of antique Wedgwood is important to the plot, as are historical scenes about Joan of Arc.

The characters in *Backstage Fright* find a stolen Van Gogh painting. I could have used a fictitious artist, but by using Van Gogh I introduced young readers to a great artist, thus broadening the learning experience of the students and the classroom usefulness of the book.

In *Race To Disaster,* the children take their dog. Bone Breath, to do pet therapy at a nursing home where they realize that an elderly patient has witnessed a murder. A subplot involves a patient who is drawn out of a shock-induced silence by continued exposure to the dog. Children who read that book get a mystery about a pair of diamond thieves, and also

information about pet therapy and how it works.

When I am writing the first draft of a book, I ask myself, "What will children learn from this book? What new topic can I introduce?" Often, unusual information adds a plot twist that I would not have thought of otherwise.

• Put some humor in every book. If your mystery involves a serious problem, humor will give a much-needed lightening of mood. It does the same in a suspense book in which the tension is high page after page. A character who makes kids laugh will quickly become a favorite, and readers will beg for more books about him. But make it genuine humor, not bathroom jokes or put-down jokes that make fun of someone.

• End every chapter with a cliffhanger. I've had children complain, "Why do you always quit at the good parts?" These are the same kids who then say they loved the book and couldn't put it down. The chapter ending makes the reader want to continue.

Sometimes while I'm writing I'll come up with a sentence that I realize would make a good chapter ending. When that happens, I space down a couple of lines to remind myself that this would be a good spot for a break. Other times, I need to rewrite until I have a good cliff-hanger sentence for the end of each chapter. Here is an example of a chapter ending from *Danger at the Fair:*

> Corey couldn't let the man get away. Forgetting his promise to stay with Ellen, he took off across the fairgrounds after the thief.

• Make the first paragraph of each chapter short and compelling. At the end of a chapter, readers will usually peek ahead, to see what happens next. If they see a long narrative, they may decide to put the book aside and go play soccer. But if the next chapter begins, "Hey, Ellen!" Corey waved from the sidewalk. "We got a video of you on fire!", chances are they'll keep reading.

• Let your book reflect who you are and what you stand for. This will help with that all-important quality, voice.

Certain themes surface over and over in my mysteries: kindness to all creatures; violence is not a solution; each of us is responsible for our own actions. My main characters are outraged by people who dump unwanted pets (*Desert Danger).*

The antiviolence message is strong in *Night of Fear* when Grandma Ruth tells T.J. to "win with your wits, not with your fists," and in *Race to Disaster* when Rosie and Kayo organize Goodbye Guns Day at their school.

You can't write from a soapbox; you need to write stories, not sermons. But if your characters deal with social and ethical problems, your mystery has a definite plus.

• Don't mimic what's already popular. For several years, the juvenile mystery market has been flooded with Goosebumps wannabes, but editors look for fresh ideas and new voices.

It's far better to risk writing a mystery that reflects your unique vision, than to attempt to imitate what some other writer did. Be true to yourself. Write what you love to write, and your writing will attract like-minded readers.

• Ask authorities to check your book for accuracy. There's nothing worse than having a reader point out that you have made an error. (Unfortunately, I know this from personal experience.) If you are dealing with factual information, double-check everything. *Terror at the Zoo* was read by two people from the education department of Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo, where the story is set. Whatever flaws the book may have, I know the information about the zoo and its animals is correct. My latest novel, *The Volcano Disaster,* deals with the eruption of Mount St. Helens. I did extensive research, but I also had the manuscript read by the Lead Interpreter at the Mount St. Helens Visitors' Center.

I have never had anyone turn down my request to check a mamı script. Actually, they seem delighted to share their knowledge. I do include their names on my acknowledgments page, and, of course, I see that each person who has helped me receives a signed copy of the book on publication.

• Make your mystery an appropriate length. If it's too long (more than 200 pages) it may be intimidating to all but the most enthusiastic young reader. A good length for juvenile mysteries is 125 to 150 double-spaced manuscript pages.

• Read current award-winning juvenile mysteries to become familiar with the best style and content. The Mystery Writers of America presents an Edgar each year to a juvenile mystery novel.

Many states have annual children's book award programs, in which students are encouraged to read selected titles and then vote for their favorite. A glance at the master list from any of these programs shows a large number of mysteries, which are often the books that win the prize.

School Library Journal and *The Horn Book* are magazines that review children's books and announce awards. Look for mysteries that have won a state children's book award, such as the Iowa Children's Choice Award, the Indiana Young Hoosier Award, or the Pacific Northwest Young Readers Choice Award. These books are recommended by librarians and are popular with young readers. Study them to see how the authors did it.

• Last, but most important of all, put the words on paper. Write until you have a first draft of at least 125 pages. Then go back and, using these hints, revise and polish your manuscript. You may end up with an award-winning mystery and wonderful letters such as this: "Dear Peg Kehret, Can I start helping you write your storys? I alredy have an idea. It is called Atack of the Killer Strawberries. Your $nul fan, Melissa."

96
WHEN YOU WRITE A BIOGRAPHY FOR CHILDREN

By Ruth Turk

Is writing a biography for children different from writing one for adults?

As a writer of seven published biographies for young readers, I must admit that while some of the basics are similar, there are enough differences to make this undertaking a challenging and rewarding experience.

From the outset it is important to keep in mind that the subject you choose must be attractive, not only to you, the writer, but to your young readers. While your primary goal is to impart authentic biographical information, you will write more convincingly if you have respect for your subject. When I researched the life of blind singer Ray Charles, I was impressed by the courage he manifested in dealing with blindness, racism, poverty, and a serious drug problem. As a result, I did not minimize these aspects of his life, but portrayed them with the clarity and honesty they deserved.

Whether the age level you are targeting is primary or middle grade, do not "talk down" to your readers. While your writing must be straightforward and uncomplicated, young readers will resent oversimplification. If you use technical terms, it makes sense to include a glossary. Equally important is the use of lively verbs and adjectives that jump from the page, maintain a brisk pace, and help create glowing visual images in the young mind. Conditioned by rock music, skateboards, television, and computers, young people today march to a different drum from those in previous generations. How to compete? The best way is to hook that juvenile with the opening paragraph, then follow through with the complete biography.

Author Lillie Patterson's young adult biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. opens with a dramatic account of the Rosa Parks incident in

Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. When Rosa refuses to give up her seat for a white passenger, the driver stops the bus.

"Look, woman, I told you I wanted the seat. Are you going to stand up?"

"No," said Parks.

"Well, if you don't, I am going to have you arrested."

"Go on and have me arrested," said Rosa Parks.

After starting her book with the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the author proceeded to introduce her subject, Martin Luther King, Jr. in chapter two, and followed through with the chronological development of his life.

If your subject is not alive, there are advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is the fact that the subject cannot object to what or how you write. Still another is that the last chapter ends with the subject's death and rarely has to be updated. Research on any subject, living or dead, starts with your reading everything written about her or him, including articles in newspapers and other periodicals, as well as history books concerning the relevant time periods. Reading the work of other biographers will help to determine your own insights and points of departure.

Reference librarians are particularly helpful in helping you find memoirs, journals, and letters of both deceased and living subjects. Browsing in secondhand bookshops and museums will often unearth nuggets of information that don't always turn up in public libraries or large bookstores. In researching the lives of Louisa May Alcott and Edith Wharton I was able to locate literary foundations in New England in areas where both women lived and wrote their timeless masterpieces. These organizations forwarded books, pamphlets, and photos that helped me create a composite portrait for each biography.

Incidentally, as you conduct your research, keep track of good photographs that you can later recommend to your publisher's photography department. An editor or publisher seriously considering a manuscript may appreciate photo sources, even though the photo staff usually tracks down their own. My experience with pictures for a juvenile biography of playwright Lillian Hellman was atypical, but rewarding.

When my editor informed me that a photograph of Hellman in her early childhood could not be located, I did a bit of detective work on my own. After learning the name of the playwright's last personal secretary, I surmised that she might still be living in the same city where she had worked years ago. I got her phone number and called to persuade her how meaningful it would be for young readers to see Lillian as a little girl. Did she know where such a picture could be found? She did. A week later the photograph was in the hands of my delighted editor. Moral of the story? Don't hesitate to go beyond authorship limits if it will enhance the quality of your work.

If your subject is alive, you may encounter a few frustrations on the road to success, such as his or her refusal to be interviewed personally. You may have to rely on friends, relatives, or possibly enemies (the third category is one I cannot recommend!). If you are fortunate enough to set up interviews, prepare a list of carefully thought-out questions, and plan to use a tape recorder. If your subject won't agree to being taped, be prepared to jot down notes you can incorporate later on. When you use quotations, be sure to cite accurate sources and dates; your publisher will require you to include these credits in the finished biography. Though it is comforting and convenient to have the subject's approval, it is not mandatory to obtain permission to write the story of someone's life.

Before you undertake comprehensive research about your subject, be certain to consult *Books in Print* to find what other books of a similar nature are available. There could be a half dozen or more authors who have chosen to write about the same subject. In that case if you are still determined to go ahead, you will need to come up with a different approach or format, or both.

For a children's biography, plan the number of chapters before you begin to write (ordinarily from six to twelve, depending on your organization of the material). As you accumulate dates, facts, and incidents, keep them in separate folders so they will be easily accessible as you develop the different chapters. Occasionally, you will come across items about the subject that appear to be unrelated, for example, an account about a friend or member of the subject's family. Don't discard these references; you may use one when you least expect it.

Scan current periodicals for mention of your subject's awards or citations for past achievements. If your accepted manuscript is already in its final publishing stage, your editor may suggest a brief epilogue to bring the biography up to date. For instance, when I learned that

Amy Carter was getting married, I was able to insert that fact on the last page of my biography of former first lady Rosalynn Carter. What happens to the family members in your subject's life will be of interest to young readers, especially when it is a famous family.

When the first draft of your manuscript is completed, try testing parts of it on a few willing listeners, preferably those at the age level for whom you're writing—but do not include close friends or relatives! Most young people will be objective and will react quickly and honestly, which is what you want. If you belong to a writer's critique group, ask for their comments and make use of those that are constructive. Most writers, particularly those who write for children, will benefit from an impartial sounding board. Sometimes when a manuscript is read aloud, nuances may be picked up more readily than when the same material is read silently. If a human sounding board is not available, read what you've written into a tape recorder, then play it several times. You will be surprised at the changes you might make as a result of listening.

Another way to receive valuable feedback is to arrange visits to elementary school classes. Many teachers will welcome a local writer willing to read her work to children and then discuss it with them. Insights and reactions from unbiased young listeners are usually constructive and gratifying.

Researching and writing a biography for children is not a quick or easy project. It takes time, dedication, and discipline. It also means always keeping in mind the young person for whom you are writing. An adult reader may struggle a bit longer with a boring biography before he gives up; ten-year-olds will continue to read only as long as the first page unless you, the author, hook them immediately and hold them for the duration.

Exciting fiction can stimulate a child's imagination, but a carefully researched and well-written biography can present accurate information, intriguing insights, historical perspective, and unforgettable role models. Children's biographies do more than record facts. As the author, you are documenting creative human goals and achievements that young people will remember long after they grow into busy and sophisticated adults.

As a biographer for children you are performing a special service for coming generations. When you complete that first biography, you might be understandably weary, but you'll also feel proud. I know.

97
WRITING NONFICTION FOR YOUNG READERS

By Nancy Warren Ferrell

As a published author of nonfiction for young readers, I've often been approached by people who say they have a great idea and want to write a book, but they are not sure where to start.

First, go to your public library and study the type of books you want to write. See how other authors handle their material, and get a sense of the different grade and age levels of the books in print. Check *Books in Print* to see how many books have already been written on your topic. Obviously, if several have been published for the same age group in recent years, it might be best to turn to another topic, unless your slant is fresh.

Note the names of the publishers who bring out certain kinds of books. It's a waste of time and postage to submit nonfiction to a company that publishes only fiction. You can also locate marketing information in the Book Publishers section of this book. In addition, consult current publishers' catalogues found in the children's department of the library. Or you can write for catalogues and guidelines from the publishers themselves.

While at the library, locate books on creative writing and check references in them. Take a few home to study writing techniques. If you find one or two books you really like, order them from the publishers or buy them from the bookstore to start your home library.

After completing some preliminary research on your topic, write a one-page query letter to an appropriate publisher to see if their house is interested in your subject. In the letter, describe what you have in mind and how you plan to approach the material. Be sure to indicate if you have special knowledge of your topic, such as work experience. You might also write a brief outline of your proposed book to include with your query.

If you have photographs or know they are available, mention that in your query. Ordinarily, an author is not responsible for illustrations or photographs in books. Nevertheless, some writers who take good pictures should indicate their credentials. Arrangements for publication and payment are made in the final contract.

Send your proposal to about five publishers, including an SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) with each one. Note this information on a file card so you know to whom and when you submitted the queries.

Usually, you receive responses to your queries—yes or no. Let's say a publisher likes your idea, and after some talk and negotiation, you sign a contract. You will often receive comments and suggestions from your editor to help you shape your book to fit the publisher's needs. Now the serious work begins.

Check out a number of books on your topic from the library—both adult and juvenile. Read and make copies of specific magazine articles you can locate. Surf the Internet for additional material.

On 4" x 6" file cards, note such information as the title, author, where located, etc., for each book, article, or contact you may consult. Keeping a record of this data will help you build a bibliography if you should need one; it also gives a specific reference point if you wish to add information to your manuscript or check facts during the revision process. Otherwise, you could be frantically looking through piles of books and papers trying to find a quote or a fact that your editor has questioned. Taking time for these reference cards at the start of your research proves its worth over and over.

If it's important as part of your research to interview people in an agency or business, go to the top. Make appointments beforehand. As an example, when I researched my book on the U.S. Coast Guard, I arranged an appointment with the Alaskan commander, a rear admiral. I described my project, and he in turn sent a memo to the local offices explaining who I was, and requesting their cooperation. This clearance proved invaluable. Everyone I met took me seriously, and was willing to help.

As you read and digest your subject material, you might find that distant locations have valuable information or photographs you need. Write letters so that data can be coming back to you as you get farther into your project. Be sure to write a quick "thank you" when you receive the material.

Arrange for any on-scene experiences you know would be interesting. This can be the most fun, because you are actively doing, feeling, and understanding the excitement you want to convey to young readers. If, for example, you are writing a book about fishing, go fish; if writing about a historical site, visit that location to get a true-life experience, and then pass as much as you can on to your readers.

My most exciting hands-on experience was going up in a Coast Guard search-and-rescue helicopter to take

photographs. Again, this experience was cleared through the rear admiral first. At Sitka Air Station, the flight mechanic fitted me out in an orange mustang suit. I was briefed beforehand, and up we went. When the chopper flew high above Sitka harbor, a crew member wrapped a gunner's belt around my waist, hooked me onto a strap, and opened the cabin doors. There I was, breathless, the toes of my shoes clamped to the door sill, with nothing but air in front and beneath me! "There you are," a crew member said, "take all the pictures you want."

At this point, you should be aware of the one universal warning that flashes like a red light: Do not talk down to young readers; this is not a writing mistake, but a way of thinking—you cannot correct it with a comma or a paragraph break. Respect your readers, show them you have something fascinating to tell them, and give them credit for absorbing the information.

What I've found helpful in writing for elementary-grade readers is to conjure up, say, some eight-year-olds and figuratively plunk them down in front of me. Then I begin writing with them in mind. If I sense they are getting restless or do not seem to understand, I'm not doing my job.

While you are absorbing information on your subject, keep an eye out for unusual facts and anecdotes to include in your final version. For instance, while doing research for *U.S. Air Force*, I learned that when the first U.S. air force was formed in 1907, the division had no aircraft, and only three men—none of whom could fly a plane! To me that was a startling, amazing fact that had to be shared with young readers.

During this research-gathering stage, you have only a general idea of how to handle your material. Normally, it does not come in a rush, but in bits and pieces until a smooth, balanced manuscript emerges. There are changes, reorganization, insertions, deletions. It takes time and work.

Then when you actually begin writing, keep certain techniques in mind:

Make your verbs active, appeal to the five senses, and use dialogue to give life to your words. If possible, use actual dialogue from journals and letters, keeping in mind that youngsters can be experts in certain fields, too. Experts give authority to your writing. When I needed an expert role-model for my *Alaska: A Land in Motion* geography book, I located a 12-year-old boy who was the first young person to climb the highest mountain in North America—Mt. McKinley.

Make your chapter headings and openings as interesting as possible. One chapter heading in my book, *Battle of the Little Bighorn*, for example, was the Sioux Indian battle cry, "It is a good day to die!" In my book, *The New World of Amateur Radio*, I told of the strange behavior of cattle several hours before an Alaska earthquake. Grab your readers from the start, and pull them in.

Use newspaper headlines, actual cassette tape dialogues, bumper stickers, etc. in your narrative. In my *Fishing Industry* book, for instance, I duplicated actual boat radio talk. For my diplomacy book, *Passports to Peace*, I used authentic secret code phrases, and added excitement to *U.S. Air Force* by including video dialogue of a real intercept of a Russian fighter plane entering U.S. air space. Besides adding drama, these short units help break up text, catch the reader's eye and hold his or her interest.

Make adult role-models real; show your young readers that even successful adults, with all their accomplishments, have weaknesses, too. I found that a cadet in the first U.S. Coast Guard Academy class, who later became national commander, had trouble with seasickness. Mentioning this human frailty gave this role model another dimension.

When possible, relate your writing to the interest of young readers. For instance, when I focused on the devastation of an earthquake, I described it and found a photograph of an elementary school affected by the disaster. When I related the public's reaction to George Custer's death in *Battle of the Little Bighorn*, I mentioned school students in Custer's hometown. Such material personalizes the text for your readers.

Take care with your paragraphs. If you want real punch, use one-word or one-sentence paragraphs. But use this technique sparingly, or the "punch" will lose its power from overuse. And in the reverse, do not make your paragraphs too long. Lengthy paragraphs suggest detailed description, which often turns off the young reader. Breaking up paragraphs makes the material more inviting.

During this whole process of writing and working with an editor, remember that writing is a business. Meet your deadlines. Do not promise something you cannot deliver. Be sensitive to suggested changes. Proving that you are reliable and reasonable shows you can handle another project.

Once your book is published, good things may happen: You may receive letters from young readers and may be asked to speak to school or community groups, and publishers may prove to be more receptive to your new book ideas. So, if you are inspired to write, write. Remember, if your ideas remain in your head, or your written drafts remain in a drawer, nothing will happen at all. Send your manuscripts out. To quote my 12-year-old McKinley mountain climber, "Go for it!"

Practical Advice

You might locate a local writer's organization. Members of such groups give encouragement, critique creative work, and help with marketing information. They are, so to speak, your personal cheering section.

For a broader view, join a national organization such as the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators; you do not have to be a published author to join. Their monthly bulletins not only present practical information to members, but the Society also prints materials that deal with marketing, manuscript format, how-to books on writing, copyright and tax data, and much more—mostly for the price of postage. Becoming a member gives newcomers a sense of purpose. (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, 345 N. Maple Dr., #296, Beverly Hills, CA 90210. Yearly membership is $50.00.)

EDITING AND MARKETING

98
THE AUTHOR/EDITOR CONNECTION

By Eve Bunting

At a writers' conference once, I heard an author state: "Make no mistake. The writer and the editor are enemies. He's always on the side of the publisher and not on yours." I was astonished and appalled. This has never been my experience. Never.

As a children's book writer who "publishes around," I have several editors, male and female, young and older. Since I don't work through an agent, my contacts are directly author to editor. I have always been treated fairly and have always had the assurance that we are a team, striving for the best possible book.

This is not to say there have not been disagreements. Of course there have. But with compromise on both sides we have always been able to work a problem out.

To establish and keep a good relationship, there are some things the author should bear in mind.

1) Be prepared to listen when your editor suggests changes. Yes, the book is yours. Yes, every word is as perfect as you have been able to make it. But the editor has had a lot of experience, knows what works and what doesn't, and is as anxious as you are for a quality book. **But,** be prepared to take a stand if you feel you are right. Present your case. Be factual. Be reasonable. Chances are she (i'm using the generic "she" because I have more female editors than male) will come around to your thinking. Be gracious if you are proven wrong. The best editors during discussion will be careful to ask: "Do you agree?" and will often say: "Of course, you have the last word." That may not be exactly true, but it leaves room for further discussion.

2) Try to realize that your editor is a person who works hard. Do not burden her with unnecessary questions and complaints. Yes, you want to know how your book is coming along. It's O.K. to ask. But not every week. When it's finally published, you want to know how it is selling. Call the royalty department. Yes, you are upset that you can't find a copy in your local bookstore. Call the sales department and ask if they know why.

You don't think your work has been promoted with enough enthusiasm? (A lot of us feel that way. I was going to say *most* of us, but perhaps many authors are totally satisfied. I don't know any of them!) Talk to the Promotions Department to suggest what they might do, as well as what you are willing to do: bookstore signings, school visits, visits to your local library. Perhaps it can be a joint project between you and the publisher.

3) If you submit a new manuscript to your editor, try not to be irate if she doesn't get back to you right away. Understand that she has a workload that allows only a small percentage of her time to be spent reading manuscripts—even yours. She has meetings coming out of her ears!

4) If your editor tells you that your book will not be published this year, and possibly not until the following fall, or the spring after that, bite the bullet. Publishers' lists fill up, and you have to realize that you are going to have your book scheduled where (a), there is a slot for it, or (b), where the publisher feels it will sell best. There's no point in ranting and raving in your very understandable impatience. Your editor will bless you for not being difficult.

5) When you are asked to make corrections on a manuscript or galleys, do them promptly. The editor is making deadlines herself. Being on time can determine whether or not your book makes that list where it's slotted. If your manuscript is not ready, another book may replace yours.

6) Be absolutely certain of your facts. An error in a nonfiction book is unforgivable, and it is equally unforgivable in fiction. A reader or reviewer is going to pick up on it. Children's books are particularly open to scrutiny. The embarrassment of an error falls on the editor and copy editor, but yours is the primary accountability. A mistake will not endear you to anyone. In my very first middle-grade novel, I made an incredible blunder: I put the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor a year before it was actually there! Horrors! No one caught it, except an astute librarian who challenged me on it while I stood at a podium, talking about the book. Double horrors! I will never forget that moment nor the lesson I learned. Since I was a fairly recent immigrant from Ireland, I managed to exclaim, "Oh! Forgive me! I thought that wonderful statue was always there, welcoming the tired and the poor as she welcomed me." That got applause instead of boos! It was corrected in the next printing.

7) For picture book writers who are not fortunate enough to be able to illustrate their books, the key words are "be reasonable." Of course, we want the very best artists in the country—in the world—to illustrate our books. Surely, this is not too much to ask! You pine for Trina Schart Hyman. You know she'd do an exquisite job. You lust after Barbara

Cooney. Her style would be just perfect for your book. And how about Chris Van Allsburg? But if you are reasonable, you will know that every picture book author wants those illustrators and others equally wonderful, equally famous. The reality is that we are probably not going to get any one of them. It is all right to ask, but don't be aggrieved or petulant if it doesn't happen. Usually the artist is chosen by the editor in consultation with the art department and after much perusal of sample art and already published picture books. They are usually very good at choosing just the right artist. Perhaps they come up with a "first time" artist, and your first reaction is likely to be, "Oh, no! Not for *my* book!" But all wonderful illustrators start somewhere. I personally have discovered the thrill of having newish, relatively unknown artists turn out to be smash hits and lift my books beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary. I thank them. And I thank my editors. They know I trust them.

8) Try to accept the fact that you are not your editor's only author. She is juggling four, six, eight other writers and illustrators, too. She can't give you her undivided attention. You may think another author is getting more than her fair share of attention. That may be true. But that author may have paid her dues in many years of good books. One of her books may have made a million dollars for the company. It may have earned a lot of money and prestige-making awards. It's been said that 20% of a publisher's list supports the other 80%. Another author's book and the attention it gets may be making it possible for your book to get published.

9) If, by unfortunate chance, youi editor has to turn down your next manuscript, take a deep breath and swallow your disappointment. When she says she's sorry, she probably is. An editor does not easily reject a book, especially if she has worked with the author before. It is easier to be the bearer of pleasant news. Your editor may have fought for your book with a publishing committee and lost. Say, "I'm sorry, too. Can you give me any idea why you decided against it?" Listen to what she says. You may want to make changes before you submit it elsewhere. And remember, you may want to try her with another manuscript in the future, so keep that relationship cordial.

10) Remember that your editor is human. Show appreciation for her efforts in making your book the thing of beauty that it is. Flowers, candy, or other gifts are unnecessary. A simple thank-you note is sufficient.

Ten points about how to keep that author/editor relationship warm and cordial. A word or two about the editor/author relationship. What should an author expect to get from her editor?

• As quick a reading of a new manuscript as possible.

• As quick a response as possible.

• Enthusiasm.

• Open-mindedness.

• Support of the book with the sales and publicity departments.

• Attentiveness to your misgivings, if any.

• A commitment to keep in touch. Not to hear what is happening to your book is horrible, and since you would be out of line to bug her, she should be courteous and keep you informed.

• Praise. Insecure as we are, we need a certain amount of TLC.

• The assurance that author and editor are in this together. It's *your* book.

• To be a person of her word. If she says she'll call, write, see you, then you have the right to assume she is dependable, as you are.

So ... we have a good author/editor relationship, and a good book. Working together, with consideration for one another, we've done it!

99
WHAT DO AGENTS WANT?

By Nancy Love

Agents say they want new writers, but when you send a query or a proposal, they fire back, "No thanks!" What are you to make of this mixed message? Aside from those agents who really do not welcome new clients, the rest of us need a continuous supply of fresh offerings to submit to publishers, but since we are in the publishing business to sell books, we are constantly trying to select those we think publishers want. The question we ask is: *What do publishers want?*

Death by mid-list

The conventional wisdom these days is, *Publishers do not want midlist books.* The term "mid-list" refers to the place a book has in a publishing house catalogue. It is a book that is not "front-list" (books listed in the first few pages of the catalogue and declared thereby bestseller material), and it is not "back-list" (perennials listed in the back of the catalogue and kept in print season after season). Translation: Only best sellers need apply. That leaves high and dry the nice, little literary or commercial novel with no break-out potential. And what about first novels?

The reality is, mid-list and first novels *do* get published, often by smaller publishing houses, many of which have fine reputations for discriminating taste, and then the authors are poached by the mainstream houses that didn't have the guts to take a chance themselves. Or they are championed by stubborn editors at the larger houses who want to nurture a talented writer or who have enough clout to bulldoze through the disapproval of sales and marketing departments.

Another reality is that it is often easier to get a first novel accepted than a second if the first one bombed. Enter the Dread Sales Record. Once you have a sales history documented in bookstore computers everywhere, it will follow you around for the rest of your publishing life, and can be amended only by subsequent successes that balance out the failures, or by changing your name.

One of the dirty little secrets of agentry is that many agents will avoid novels with either of the above potential problems (i.e., a midlist book or a second book that follows a wipe-out first book), but might be less than candid about sharing these reasons for rejection.

Appetite for nonfiction

Sure, publishers want front-list nonfiction titles, too, but are more welcoming to a mid-list book that has a potential of being back-listed. Most fiction is here today, gone tomorrow, but a nonfiction title that yields even modest, but steady, revenue may be kept around for a number of years. Many publishers will take on a "small" book they believe will not only earn out, but will generate income in the long run.

But before you rejoice prematurely, remember that today publishers have an insatiable appetite for credentials attached to nonfiction books. Backing by an authority or institution is important, and for some books, essential. A health book needs a genuine medical (doctor, hospital, or health organization) imprimatur, foreword, or co-authorship. A cookbook needs a food establishment tie-in (restaurateur, chef, or TV or print food personality. For large publishers, credentials are a must for an offer of even a minimal advance on a nonfiction book. To really hit pay dirt, you might need more than credentials; it will also help if you have a "platform"—a following or a guaranteed promise of advance sales. In this scenario, the author is not just a gardening authority, but she can also attach the name of the Garden Clubs of America to her book and a promise that the organization will offer it as a premium to their members.

The agent connection: Do you even want one?

If you write short fiction or articles, academic or textbooks, or poetry, you don't need or want an agent. Often, writers of literary fiction also do better on their own when approaching smaller publishers or college presses that agents may not deal with because of slow response time and low or non-existent advances.

I know writers of both fiction and nonfiction who—initially, anyhow—like to represent themselves and do well at it. But be prepared to spend a lot of downtime with the nitty-gritty of that process. You might also come out ahead if you have connections and are more comfortable being in control.

Getting in the agent's door

What makes the difference?

Agents often specialize. First, research your target. Find out if you are in the right place before you waste your stamp and everyone's time. Use listings in authors' source books. Scan books that are similar to yours for an acknowledgment of

an agent. Use the name of the workshop leader or fellow writer who referred you. Go to writers' conferences where you might meet appropriate agents. Collect their cards and use the connection when you are querying.

Winning queries and proposals

There are whole books devoted to this subject, so I will stress just a few points:

• Queries need to be positive, succinct, yet contain the facts about who you are and what the book is about. A query is like a short story in which every word has to count. A novel can ramble a bit, but short stories and queries don't have that luxury.

• There is no excuse for bad spelling or grammar. If you and your computer can't be counted on to proofread, ask a friend to read your work.

• Proposals and summaries of novels can be more expansive, but they also should be professionally crafted. Your writing ability and skills are being judged in everything you submit.

• There is nothing in a nonfiction proposal more important than a marketing plan. Make suggestions for how the publisher can promote the book, and even more essential, tell the publisher how you can help. Do you have media contacts? Are you an experienced speaker? Do you have lists of newsletters in your field that might review or write about the book? Do you lecture at meetings where the book can be sold or flyers can be distributed? Do you have a web site or belong to an organization that does and will promote your book? You get the idea.

Authors frequently respond to a request for this information by saying, "I write the book. That's my job. Selling the book is the job of the publisher." Unfortunately, while that might have been true at one time, it is no longer. Even when large advances are involved, I have discovered that publishers need and expect input from authors, and their cooperation and willingness to pitch in with ideas and commitment.

As an agent, I have to be sensitive to that point of view, so I find myself making decisions on whether or not to take on an author based not only on what she has to say and how well she says it, but on her credentials, her visibility, and on her ability to promote and become involved in publicity. Also, if you are able to put aside some of your advance to pay for publicity and perhaps a publicist, be sure to let the agent know this.

A marketing plan is not usually expected from a novelist, but it is a pleasant and welcome surprise if one is forthcoming. Fiction is promoted, too, by in-store placement, author appearances, book jacket blurbs. Sales of mysteries are helped by authors who are active in such organizations as the Mystery Writers of America (regional branches), Sisters in Crime, and other mystery writer organizations that support their members and boost their visibility. All novelists can start a minor groundswell by making themselves known at local bookstores, by placing items in neighborhood newspapers, and by using other local media. Some writers have reached out to store buyers with mailings of postcards, bookmarks or reading copies. Signal your readiness to participate, and make known what contacts you have, when you are approaching an agent.

Start out by writing the big, the bold, the grabber novel every agent is going to want. This works only if an author feels that option is viable. I strongly believe a writer has to have a passion for the book she is writing, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, or it probably isn't going to work.

Till death do us part

You've succeeded in attracting an agent; now what? I would advise waiting until an agent indicates an interest before plunging in with such nuts-and-bolts questions as, What is your commission? Which other writers do you represent? Do you use a contract?

I'm in favor of author-agent contracts, because they spell out the understanding and obligations of the two parties, not the least of which is how either one can end the relationship. Basically, unless an agent commits a serious breach, she is on the contract with the publisher for the life of the contract. There should be, however, an agreed-upon procedure for dissolving the author-agent contract.

After all, the author-agent relationship is the business equivalent of a marriage. Attracting the partner is just the beginning.

100
BEATING THE ODDS OF REJECTION

By Dennis E. Hensley

Beginning writers have often shown me their rejected manuscripts to which the editor has attached a small note reading, "Thank you for your manuscript, but this does not meet our current editorial needs." What does that mean? Understandably, these aspiring writers, having studied the market and submitted a competently written article, wonder what had gone wrong.

My first response is that all writers get rejection slips, including me. Pearl Buck received a rejection for one of her short stories the very week she was notified she had won the Nobel Prize for Literature! It's part of the writing business: If you aren't getting rejected, you aren't attempting to break into new markets or explore new writing options. To risk rejection is to grow. In the long run, it's something positive. Of course, in the short run, it hurts. Writers put their heart and soul on paper. The manuscript becomes their "baby," and nobody wants someone saying, "Your baby has big ears." In essence, that's what a rejection letter sounds like. Since your manuscript cannot get published if you don't submit it, you must risk rejection by sending it out again. But there are better ways of coping with rejection and even of reducing the odds of ever having it happen.

First, a rejection slip isn't necessarily a sign that your writing is poor. A lot of superb manuscripts come across editors' desks that they wish they could publish, but sometimes factors unrelated to the writing make publishing them impossible. The editor may have just accepted a manuscript on the same topic from another author. He may have paid such a large advance on one project, his budget won't allow him to accept any new submissions for a few months. Or she may admire a writer's talent, but her publishing house has decided not to publish textbooks or cookbooks or children's novels any longer. Hence, the decision to reject isn't always related to willing talent.

Sometimes editors' personal lives get in the way. An editor may have a bias against the position an article is taking and reject it; another who agrees with your point of view may accept it. One editor may like the article, but may worry that it might offend one of the magazine's advertisers, so the article gets nixed. The editor may have a headache or may have had a fight with his or her spouse and everything gets rejected that day because of the editor's bad mood. After all, editors *are* human.

On occasion editors can be wrong in rejecting a manuscript. One editor might be too old to realize the high interest in techno games, so he rejects an article about it. Another editor might not like your staccato, short-sentenced style, so she rejects the manuscript, not realizing that a generation reared on MTV and split-screen images can readily relate to writing such as this. Just because one editor rejects a manuscript, it doesn't mean the topic or the writing style is not worthy of publication. It's a good idea to try your manuscript on several editors.

Understanding what an editor is saying in a rejection letter is also important. If you receive a form rejection slip, it probably means that the publisher has no real interest in your manuscript or in establishing a working relationship with you. But if you receive a rejection slip with a personal note from the editor, take heart. That can mean that while the manuscript is not what the editor needs, you, the writer, have caught the editor's eye. You should feel encouraged to send other material to that publication or publishing house.

On the other hand, don't read more into a rejection letter than is really there. When an editor says, "Thank you for submitting . . .," don't take it as enthusiasm when it is really just courtesy. Similarly, when an editor writes, "Perhaps you'll have more success with another periodical . . .," that is not an invitation for you to write back and say, "Please give me a list of those places you think I should be submitting my manuscript."

Rejection letters are good starting places for manuscript revisions. If two or three editors say that your stories have good plots but weak characters, then retain the plot ideas but work on making your characters more three-dimensional. Likewise, if several editors like your article concepts but say your writing mechanics require too much revision, then learn to do copyediting yourself.

Here are several other suggestions on how to reduce the odds of getting your manuscript rejected:

1. *Let it sit a while.* Don't try to edit your material as soon as you finish writing, because you will be too emotionally attached to it and too familiar with its contents. Let it "cool" for a few days or more, then go back to see if it still seems the best you can make it.

2. *Gauge your timing.* Send Christmas articles in the summer, not in December. Give editors plenty of lead time.

3. *Work your way up*. Before trying to compete in the mass market, get some experience by writing for smaller-circulation trade journals, specialty periodicals, or even your hometown newspaper. Editors of these publications often have more time to help you improve your writing and marketing skills. As you improve, you can expand your market outreach.

4. *Hone your mechanics.* Most editors do not have time to do a thorough copyediting job of your manuscript, then fax or mail it back to you, and wait for you to revise and then resubmit it. Instead, sharpen your writing skills so that your manuscripts do not have comma splices, sentence fragments, spelling errors, or grammar problems. If you need help in these areas, have someone in your writing group go over your work.

5. Don't underestimate the impact of the query letter and hook proposal. Too often writers just "dash off" a query letter to obtain a go-ahead for submission from an editor. You may think that even if your query letter isn't very persuasive, it's ok. It's the manuscript that really counts, right? *Wrong!* The query letter is the equivalent of a job interview. If an editor receives a query letter or book proposal that is weak, poorly written and unprofessional, the editor will assume the manuscript will be more of the same. So, put as much effort into your query as you do with the manuscript itself.

6. *Know your topic thoroughly*. If you are writing a novel, know the genre. For example, if you want to write a romance, read a lot of romances—both the classics and more contemporary works. If you are writing nonfiction, do exhaustive reseearch. Talk to experts, read whatever is available on the topic, and become something of a walking authority on the topic yourself.

7. Finally, *give networking a try.* Make contacts in the world of publishing by attending writers' conferences and meeting editors face to face. Bring your manuscript and schedule an appointment so that you can talk to an editor about your ideas, current writing projects, and finished works. Weeks later, when you write a query letter, you can begin with, "Thanks again for meeting with me at the summer writers' conference. I've used your suggestions on preparing this article and hope you will find it acceptable." This pre-established relationship with an editor can work in your favor; you are no longer a blank face.

Although getting a rejection letter is never uplifting, it doesn't have to be devastating, either. One of the secrets of coping with both rejection and success is momentum. Keep several manuscripts in the mail at all times. In that way, if a rejection letter comes in, you can comfort yourself with the knowledge that you have four other manuscripts out there that could get accepted any day. (Conversely, if you receive an acceptance, bear in mind that any of the four other manuscripts out there could get rejected.) That being the case, you'd better stay at your typewriter or word processor. This sort of thinking keeps a writer balanced.

101
HOW TO GET A LITERARY AGENT

By Lewis Burke Frumkes

Each year at the writers' conference I run at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City, the most popular panel is always the one on literary agents.

The reason for this popularity is that writers think they may be able to secure a good agent by attending the panel, or at the very least, that they will learn just what agents are looking for. Maybe, if a writer is lucky, he will be able to strike up a relationship with one of the agents on the panel and convince him or her to take him on as a new client. Maybe the agent will sense the writer's talent and potential and ask to see his or her work. By this time the writer is already fantasizing about being the next Saul Bellow or Barbara Taylor Bradford or Patricia Cornwell or John Grisham, because the agents on the panel all represent clients of this caliber. The writer imagines the millions he will receive from the auction of his manuscript: *Simon & Schuster offers 3 million for Sanguine Rudebaker's first novel . . . No, wait! HarperCollins offers 5 million . . . Simon & Schuster ups the bid to 7 million.* Instant fame and fortune are there for the taking: All the writer has to do is get an agent.

Is this realistic? "Of course not," says Eugene Winnick, the president of McIntosh and Otis, a leading literary agency that represents, for example, Mary Higgins Clark, one of the world's most successful mystery writers. "The odds against the beginning writer's becoming a best-selling author are astronomical. Nor should the writer be concerned with just fame and glory. Those who have the Hollywood starlet mentality and pursue only glitz and glamour as an end seldom produce anything of consequence. Writers who do become successful authors usually do so because they feel compelled to write, to follow their muse. They are passionate about their work and *must* write because it's what they love to do. The writer who is serious about writing must surrender his image of being rich and famous and be true to his craft."

Nevertheless, agents are important. While they cannot guarantee you sales, they certainly have a better shot at making a sale than you do. Agents know just which publishing houses would be interested in your book; they don't send out your manuscript randomly. And when they do send it out under their imprimatur, they usually send it to an editor who is senior at the publishing house. If you send your manuscript to the publisher, over the transom, it will probably be read by a low-level reader who may return it to you, never having shown it to anyone higher up.

Consider too that in the event a sale is made, your agent is the perfect person to negotiate the contract for you. Your agent regards you as a professional and will fight for the highest possible payment for your work. Your agent believes in you or he wouldn't be representing you. After all, he doesn't make any money unless he can sell your book. Think about that: The agent may charge you fifteen percent, but he won't receive his percentage unless he sells your book. Any way you look at it, fifteen percent of nothing is still nothing. However, if your agent manages to sell your book for a million dollars, you will most likely feel comfortable paying him fifteen percent for his hard work. (Curious how generous we become when we are counting millions!)

According to literary agent Tom Wallace of the Wallace Agency, "In negotiating with the publisher, your agent will retain certain rights you never dreamed of, never even knew existed." On the off chance that your book becomes a fabulous bestseller and sells umpteen-gazillion copies, you will appreciate that your agent did not sell Internet rights or the rights for Togoland, and Mauritius, and the intergalactic airwaves. "Your agent understands the importance of these rights," says Wallace, "and will exploit your manuscript to its maximum potential either by retaining certain subsidiary rights, or making sure the publisher pays top dollar to get them."

Also, in addition to being your agent/lawyer, he may also act as your financial consultant. Writers, by and large, are notoriously inept when it comes to finances, and often need advice in this area. Also, working together in close collaboration over a period of years, writers and agents often become close friends. It is a wonderful but underappreciated aspect of the agent/writer relationship.

Naturally, friendship is not the most important thing you are seeking from an agent, at least not initially; it is a byproduct. You are seeking an advocate who believes in you and will represent you in the best possible manner to publishers—and that is what you generally get. An agent who takes you on as a client believes in your work; he believes he can sell your work; he truly thinks you are talented, or he wouldn't agree to represent you. This already says something terrific about your agent ... he has good taste.

At this point I assume we agree that having an agent is worthwhile. So when do you begin looking for an agent? Well, not when you are trying to sell your first essay or short story to a magazine; no agent will try to sell one short story, or an

essay, or article for you. There is not enough money in it, and besides, it is something you can do yourself. In fact, it's very good experience for you to get to know the magazine markets, and to learn how to deal with editors. Book projects are different. Many publishers today won't even look seriously at an unagented book, so this is the time you need an agent. For their part, agents generally want to handle a book, because it will potentially involve a larger amount of money, perhaps an auction, and also because it really reflects your work in a more serious way.

O.K., so how do you find the agent? One of the most common ways is to ask writer-friends to recommend a good one. If you don't know any professional writers with agents, you should probably get in touch with The Association of Authors' Representatives (10 Astor PI., 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10003), which will send you a list of their members for a $7 check or money order and a 550 SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope). And there are many other organizations, some quite specific, such as The Screen Actors Guild, or The Romance Writers of America, which will also send you lists. Finally, you can consult this book's list of first-rate agents who don't charge reading fees, or any of the books on agenting that can be found in the reference section of the library, or possibly, in a good bookstore.

Tom Wallace suggests another way. "One overlooked method of obtaining an agent or an editor," he says, "is to pick up a book by an author you admire and whose work is similar in type to your own, then comb the author's acknowledgments. This may yield the names of his agent and his editor."

Now that you've narrowed the field and zeroed in on the agent or agents you want to represent you . . . how do you make your approach?

"Send a query letter first, with an SASE," says Robin Rue of the Writers House. "If the agent is interested, he or she will get back to you, asking to see more of your work."

Jonathan Dolger, of the Jonathan Dolger Literary Agency, says, "Usually I can tell quickly from a query—whether the author writes fiction or nonfiction—if it is worth following up. If fiction, I prefer a synopsis and a couple of chapters, and if nonfiction, I want to know why the book is different from all the other books on that subject now on the market. This also helps me in my presentation to the publishers."

Good agents are highly sought after for all the reasons I have outlined earlier and because everyone wants to be represented by a top agent—someone who represents successful writers and brings in the big-dollar contracts. This is only natural. People have heard that Amanda Urban, Andrew Wylie, Molly Friedrich, Ginger Barber, Lynn Nesbit, and Mort Janklow are "super-agents" who represent celebrity clients, big-time writers. It's as if the provenance of the agent accrues to you. Thus it is not uncommon to hear a writer subtly drop into a conversation that his agent represents Norman Mailer or John Updike or Tom Wolfe or Cynthia Ozick, or whoever the fashionable writer at the time is. However, beginning writers must keep in mind that what is more important than who the agent represents is that he love your work, and believe in you, and be willing to get out there and be an advocate for you. It won't do you any good if your agent represents only the most distinguished writers but leaves you at the gate, and pushes only the work of his star clients. You are better served by an agent who will give you and your work the attention it deserves, not put you on a back burner and leave you to deal with his secretary when she has the time.

"Put another way," says Carol Mann, a literary agent who has a mix of high-profile clients as well as unknowns, "it's only common sense that an agent with a lot of high-profile clients will not have as much time for you and your work. You are clearly better off with an agent who has an intuitive feeling for your work and will personally pick up the phone for you when you need her."

Suppose after approaching several agents, more than one is interested in your work. What do you do? Clearly, you are in a good position. You must realize that while personality is important, you are not marrying the agent. You obviously will want to go with the agent who convinces you she can do the best for you in terms of selling your work and managing your career. But it won't hurt for you and the agent to be compatible. If you live in New York, take the agent to lunch. You can meet face to face and ask any questions you may have. After you have lunched with your various prospects ... go with your gut feeling. It is that simple. There probably will not even be a formal contract between you. Your contract is a handshake. Clearly, no agent can compel you to give her your work, and conversely, you cannot force an agent to represent you well if she doesn't wish to.

Never question the agent who thinks you have talent. Probably you have, and probably the agent who recognizes it is someone you should think seriously about having represent you; you don't want to pursue an agent who doesn't want you.

102
NEGOTIATING THE BOOK CONTRACT

By Sherri L. Burr

Your dream is about to be realized. Your first book contract arrives in the mail. You go directly to the advance clause. It is exactly as you agreed. You look no further, sign the contract, and return it, confident of your great deal.

You are deliriously happy, until one day you run into an experienced writing friend. She's unhappy because she has not received a single royalty from her publisher since her advance.

"How could that happen?" you ask.

"I never read the fine print that said royalties were paid on net proceeds. I thought I'd be paid on the gross sales price. Instead, the publisher is paying me a percentage based on the amount that is received from booksellers, minus a few deductions for shipping costs and other overhead charges. My current statement says I owe the publisher money."

"That's terrible," you reply, secretly wondering if the same thing could happen to you. You rush home, take out your contract, and begin to read it. You are appalled by what you find and wonder what to do.

While this may never have happened to you, it serves as a reminder to review your contract carefully before signing. It is easy to understand why writers do not read their book contracts carefully. Contracts are usually written in "legal garbage-ese" and printed in the smallest type that the best computer scientists can design. The saying, "The big print giveth and the small print taketh away," is particularly appropriate to book contracts.

But don't despair; all contracts are negotiable. You just need to invest some time in determining what rights you should keep, and what rights the publisher will want. Here are some important issues to consider when reviewing your contract:

Manuscript clause

Many book contracts begin with a standard clause dealing with the specifics of the manuscript: the title, the name of the author, the length, the due date, how many copies you must deliver in hard copy and on disk. Sometimes, in this clause the publisher reserves the right to reject the final manuscript as unacceptable or unpublishable.

A savvy negotiator may be able to get the publisher to waive this clause, but don't count on it. Instead, try to insert that the publisher's right of rejection must be "reasonably exercised," which is often implied in the contract. Publishers rarely reject a manuscript at the final stages, unless they think that it is unpublishable.

What makes a manuscript unpublishable? The final draft may not be as well written as the initial proposal. Or the subject of the book has become dated: A psychological profile of Bob Dole that might have sold in 1992 would not be acceptable today. Or the manuscript may contain damaging information about a prominent family, and the publisher becomes worried about potential libel suits. For these and other reasons, the publisher will insist on keeping an "out" clause in the contract, permitting the return of all rights to the author.

If a publisher does exercise its "out" clause, what happens to your advance? Often, the advance is tied to the production of an acceptable manuscript. Under most contracts, if the publisher deems your manuscript unacceptable, you must refund the advance.

In Joan Collins' well-publicized dispute with Random House, however, a jury ruled that she did not have to return her advance—even though Random House found her manuscript unacceptable—and that the company had to pay her part of the additional monies due on her contract. Instead of the usual clause that the author must produce an "acceptable" manuscript, Ms. Collins' contract merely required her to produce a "completed" manuscript. Although this case has been unusual for the publicity it generated, there have been other instances where the publisher, as an act of good will, has permitted the author to keep the advance.

Copyright issues

Ideally, the contract should provide that the publisher will register the copyright *in the name of the author.* Some contracts, particularly those from university and small presses, state that the publisher will register the copyright *in the name of the publisher,* but this clause is negotiable.

The "Rights and Royalties" clauses are critical for you to understand. If your publisher has only the capacity to publish your book in English and distribute it in Canada and the United States, why grant the publisher all the rights to your

book, including the right to publish it in any translation throughout the world? Instead, tell the publisher that you want to sell the rights only to the English-language edition in specific countries. Also, consider selling the publisher audio and electronic rights only if the company has these divisions. If not, retain the rights for sales at a later date.

If your publisher is a major conglomerate with movie divisions and your book has movie potential, consider granting the publisher the movie rights, but only if you are sure that you or your agent could not sell the movie rights yourselves for more profit. Ask your agent about his contacts with Hollywood and whether he has sub-agency relations with Hollywood agents.

You should also be aware that the publisher may ask to split the movie rights 50-50. Try to negotiate to a more profitable (60-40, 75-25, 85-15) split, because the publisher will be acting as your agent.

Royalty provisions

Traditional publishers typically offer a royalty fee of 10% to 15% on the retail price for hardcover books, but less for paperback. On mass market paperback books, publishers may print 500,000 copies or more, offer authors a 5% royalty, and sell the books in discount markets such as K-Mart and Wal-Mart. Writers or their agents can propose a royalty schedule. For example, after the first 10,000 or 50,000 or 100,000 or so in sales, the royalty fee increases according to an agreed-upon scale.

Some smaller presses offer payment on net proceeds because they sell fewer copies and therefore receive less money. Make sure the term "net proceeds" is concretely defined in your contract; it is important to specify that net proceeds include the money that the publisher receives from its sales. In a net profit deal, you should be able to negotiate a higher royalty percentage payment, at least 10% to 15% or more.

Accounting provisions

Accounting provisions indicate when you can expect to receive royalty checks. Most trade publishers have semiannual accountings; most academic and small presses have annual accountings. Payments are made within 30 to 90 days following the close of the accounting period.

These provisions may be difficult to negotiate because they often depend on the publisher's overall accounting practices. However, trade publishers have been known to provide shorter accounting periods for their best-selling authors who are generating a great deal of revenue. You can ask for a similar arrangement, but if you do not yet fall into this category, do not be surprised if your publisher resists setting up a different system for you.

Warranties

Almost impossible to negotiate, these clauses require the author to guarantee to the publisher that:

- the author is the sole creator and owner of the work.
- the work has not been previously published.
- the work does not violate another work's copyright.
- the work does not violate anyone's right of privacy.
- the work does not libel or defame anyone.
- the work does not violate any government regulation.

If you or your work violates the above warranties, the publisher has a right to cancel the contract.

Warranty clauses are often accompanied by an indemnity provision, requiring the author to indemnify, or repay, the publisher, should the work violate a warranty provision. If the publisher is sued because of the author's work, the author must defend the lawsuit and reimburse the publisher for any related expenses.

Expenses, permissions, and fair use

Publishers may grant authors budgets to cover certain expenses, such as those connected with travel or interviews. This is obviously a negotiable point, though it may be difficult for a first-time book author to negotiate reimbursement for such expenses.

If you plan to quote from copyrighted works, you should get the permission of the copyright holder (usually either the author or the publisher) to do so. Sometimes the publisher will grant a budget for permission fees; other times, you must cover the cost of such permissions.

In some cases, authors claim a fair-use privilege to use other peo-pie's work, such as when critiquing it, in which case permission is not needed. Determining whether the fair-use privilege applies requires authors to use their best judgment. However, you should be aware that if the copyright owner sues, you have to pay to defend both yourself and the publisher.

New editions, author's copies, out of print

The contract may also specify that the publisher has the first right to publish further editions of the work. This should be a negotiable item. Authors of a continuing series (such as mysteries) and textbook publications should beware of such clauses, because they may give the publisher the right to name other writers to produce additional editions. Obviously, the original author would want to retain this right.

The author's copies clause specifies how many free copies of your book you will receive, and the cost of any additional copies you may want to purchase. Sometimes these clauses specify that you cannot resell reduced-price copies. Try to strike this portion of the clause or spell out circumstances where resale would be permitted, such as when you sell copies at a lecture, conference, or book signing.

Also, make sure that the contract provides that when the book goes out of print, all rights revert to the author.

Assignment

A clause that has become standard in the era of mergers and acquisitions is the assignment clause, granting the publisher the right to assign the contract to another publisher. You could easily sell your book to Publisher A only to have Publisher Q purchase or merge with Publisher A soon thereafter. With an assignment clause, Publisher Q would assume the responsibility for publishing your book. You would be protected because the book would still be published.

Your contract may contain fewer clauses than those mentioned here, or it may be more extensive. Whether it's long or short, in large or small print, you should read your contract carefully! You will not only avoid royalty payment shock, but also prevent your book contract dreams from becoming nightmares should some unforeseen disaster strike. Having read your contract, you will know that the price of a magnifying glass could prove a good investment!

103
KILLING OFF CHARACTERS ... AND OTHER EDITORIAL WHIMS

By Louise Munro Foley

Editorial comments are seldom greeted with enthusiasm by writers, but most writers drag themselves—however ungraciously— back to the keyboard to make the changes requested by the editors. Over the years I have often gnashed my teeth as I capitulated to editors' suggestions, but found that in most cases the points they made were valid. Furthermore, the editors' advice aided me on future books as well, helping me to identify recurring pitfalls of my own making— sort of a signal to keep me from repeating errors over and over again.

Did I learn from my mistakes? Yes, indeed.

My first mistake was selling the first book I ever wrote. After dropping over half a dozen transoms and being promptly being shipped back to me, it finally sold to Random House. That was the good news. The bad news was my attitude. This is a snap, right? Knock out a book, persevere in sending it out, and you'll eventually get a check in the mail. Not quite. My next three book manuscripts and their numerous form rejection slips still reside in my filing cabinet, silent reminders against getting too cocky.

Lesson 1: Respect the craft and the competition.

I learned something else from that first book: The letter I received from Random House expressing their interest led off with a mysterious line. "Several of us have enjoyed reading this chapter. When may we see the rest of the book?"

Well! Obviously there was a difference of opinion here about what age group I was writing for. I was thinking in terms of a picture book, but the vocabulary I had used prompted the editor to see it as a book for older readers. I did what any anxious writer would do: Using the same characters, I sat down and wrote more "books" (to me), "chapters" (to them), and sent them off.

Lesson 2: Know the age level you're writing for.

O.K. I was learning to follow the rules, and one piece of advice we've all heard repeatedly is *write what you know.* I could do that. With two sports-playing sons, I set out to cash in on those hot-dusty— cold-rainy (take your seasonal pick) hours I had spent on bleachers in local parks. I wrote a picture book about baseball. This time, I had the language level right, but the opening was all wrong. Delacorte expressed an interest. An editor called me, saying, "Your story starts out on page eleven." The first ten pages were cut before *Somebody Stole Second* was published, with my page eleven as page one.

I still tend to go through a narrative "warming-up" process when I start a new book, but a sign on my office wall —"Your story starts on page 11"—reminds me to do some heavy editing before sending out a manuscript.

Lesson 3: Introduce the protagonist and the problem quickly.

If you think that losing ten pages is bad, listen up. Figuring that I was on a sports roll, I turned my attention to football. (*Tackle 22,* Delacorte) This time the editor didn't stop at cutting pages. "You don't need this many kids," he groused. "Young readers will get confused." He killed off characters. Three of them. And had the survivors deliver the dialogue of my three excised players. In retrospect, I felt he was right.

Lesson 4: Don't overpopulate your book.

My next editorial lesson came when an editor I had previously worked with invited me to write a story about sibling rivalry. Would I give it a try? Would I?! Piece of cake! As the middle daughter in a family of three girls, I knew everything there was to know about sibling rivalry.

I wrote the book. Five-year-old Sammy finds restrictions are imposed on his lifestyle after the arrival of his baby sister: He doesn't go to the park as often; he has to curtail noisy activities during her naps; he gets less attention from neighbors and family.

But even with a relatively satisfying ending—after he came to grips with the changes—the book was a hard sell. Although the idea had been suggested by the editor, the folks at Western Publishing sensed there was something wrong with my manuscript. Several editors had a go at it, and the rewrites were drudgery. Finally, the correct diagnosis was made: The problem was with the flashbacks. In making comparisons, Sammy would think back to what it was like before baby sister's arrival. And picture-book kids don't handle flashbacks very well.

I solved the problem by introducing Grandma and a friend who could talk (in the present) with Sammy, about how it used to be, thus eliminating the flashbacks.

Lesson 5: Avoid flashbacks in books for readers eight years old or younger.

Then there was my "now you see it, now you don't" picture book—the vanishing act of my repertoire. By the time the editor got through writing her "suggestions," my locale was changed from rural to suburban; neighbors became family friends; a brother was now a neighbor; and a number of plot elements were dumped and replaced. The editor's letter ran over half as long as the book; I shelved my manuscript and wrote *her* book.

A cop-out? No, for this compelling reason. The editor had a slot in a series for the book she outlined, and I wanted to make the sale.

She hadn't asked me to write something to which I was philosophically or ethically opposed; "her" book wasn't better or worse than mine, it was just different.

Lesson 6: If you get an assignment, write it to spec.

Should we, as writers, always be compliant? Should we just roll over and play dead when editorial fingers snap? No, of course not. But be aware that putting up a fight doesn't always assure a win. Here's my horror story.

After teaching a class for six years on "Writing and Selling Non-Sexist Books for Children" at the university and community college level, I considered that I knew the language and nuances of sexism that creep into books for kids, sending subtle but lasting skewed messages. And I conscientiously kept them out of my work . . . unless I deliberately wanted them there for a good reason.

Such was the case with *Ghost Train* (Bantam), in which one of my male characters uttered a sentence that upset the editor (the third one to work on the book, thanks to the transient nature of publishing people).

The storyline goes like this: In a desperate attempt to salvage some of the peach crop when a trucker s strike halts shipping in the Okana-gan Valley, my character suggests they have a Peach Festival to lure tourists.

Harry, the orchard owner, excited about the idea, says: "I'll get some of my lady friends to bake pies. . . ."

"No," says the editor. "Delete 'lady.' It's sexist."

"Wait a minute," I argued. "Harry's fifty years old. A bachelor. A farmer. He doesn't know any *men* who bake pies. It's perfectly logical for him to say 'lady friends.' This is the way he would normally talk. It has to do with the integrity of his character."

I lost. In the published book, the editor has Harry saying that his housekeeper can get some of her friends together to bake pies ... a statement that has its own sexist connotation.

Lesson 7: Fight to keep your character's dialogue in sync with his or her personality, and don't willingly sacrifice a persona in order to suit the editor.

The most puzzling piece of advice I've ever had from an editor came when I was working on book four in *The Vampire Cat Series* (TOR) for middle-aged readers.

In my outline, I had the villainous vampire come down with chicken pox, transmitted by the little brother of the girl protagonist.

"I don't think so," said the editor.

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's not realistic," she replied.

"Oh. Realistic," I repeated.

I hung up the phone, promising to give it some thought.

In a series that featured a talking cat, a host of vampires, and a feline underground spy network, her response called for some intense deliberation on my part. I'm still working on it.

Lesson 8: Don't ever lose your sense of humor.

INTERVIEWS

104
A CONVERSATION WITH P.D. JAMES

By Lewis Burke Frumkes

Lewis Burke Frumkes: P.D. James is probably the most famous living writer of mystery novels. Let me begin by asking you, Phyllis Dorothy James, why did you choose to use initials rather than your name?

P.D. James: I made this decision as soon as I finished my first novel. Of course, I didn't know then that it would be published. I could have used Phyllis Dorothy James or my married name, Phyllis Dorothy White, or I could have P.D. James, and I wanted my maiden name rather than my married name. I thought it was important to write under my own genes, and, well, P.D. James is short, slightly mysterious. So P.D. James it was. I certainly wasn't attempting to hide my sex, which would have been foolish anyway, because as soon as a book is published, everyone knows you're a woman. I never wanted to pretend otherwise. Now, when I have to sign so many books, it's rather an advantage that **I**'m not Phyllis Dorothy James White.

LBF: Your novels have an incredibly complex array of characters. Do you think of yourself as a novelist, as a mystery writer, or both?

PDJ: I suppose both. I would describe myself as a novelist writing within the constraints of a classical detective story. I have at least two novels which haven't been detective stories. I like to think of myself as a novelist, but then I'm not in the least ashamed of writing mysteries. So, I suppose, crime novelist.

LBF: *A Certain Justice*, your fourteenth novel, is an extremely fine piece of work. It's set in the chambers in the British jurisprudence system, and shows a wealth of knowledge of that system. How did you do the research for it?

PDJ: I have a quite useful preliminary knowledge of the British legal system because I worked in the British Home Office, and I was concerned with criminal law. I'm interested in trials, and I have a complete set of notable British trials in my library. Of course, as I began researching the book, I realized how much I didn't know. I had immense help from lawyers, went to many trials, had lunch with judges, spent time in chambers, and wandered around the Middle Temple, where the book is mostly set.

LBF: Are female barristers as common as male?

PDJ: No, but there are far more of them than there used to be. I'm not sure there are equal numbers of them, but they're certainly growing in numbers. Not many of them become judges.

LBF: Can we say, without giving too much of the plot away, that there is a certain female barrister in this novel who is defending an unlikable character, and ultimately becomes a victim herself, and then in the rest of the novel we try to find out who did her in? Why did you choose a female barrister lead for this? Have you any particular animus against female barristers?

PDJ: No, no, not in the slightest. Readers will see from the clues and what happens to her daughter, that it was natural for the victim to be a woman. I was very much interested in her past and what made her the kind of woman she was. She fascinated me. I think I enjoyed writing about her more than I would have had I been writing solely about a male barrister, but of course I do explore the lives, the motives, the compulsions, and the professional concerns of the male barristers who are in chambers with her.

LBF: When you have as complicated a story as *A Certain Justice*, do you plot it out beforehand? Do you come up with your main character, then develop her character, and then fill in other characters around her? How does it work for you?

PDJ: It takes quite a long time. Often, it takes as long to plot and plan the book as it does to write it. It begins with a setting, with an idea that I have murder coming right into the heart of chambers, into offices of distinguished lawyers and the striking down of a distinguished criminal lawyer. I had the main idea, which was the setting. Then, of course, Venetia came next: her childhood, her life, her relationship with her daughter, with her ex-husband, with her lover, who feels that as a politician it's expedient to return to his wife before the general election. Venetia's relationship with other lawyers with whom she works. She really is at the heart of the book. Then, indeed, come all the people whose lives touch hers.

LBF: Venetia and Octavia. Both are interesting names ending with a, kind of a certain type. How come they weren't named Carolyn or Margaret or Elizabeth?

PDJ: Naming is very important and very interesting to me. It's odd you should have asked that because I left

something out of the book, something about Venetia's father. I had intended to say in the book that he was fake. He ran a boys' school and everything about it was a big fake. The cops weren't really cops, and the staff weren't really qualified. He used to say, 'My daughter Venetia, she was conceived when we were in Venice,' and his daughter knew he'd never been to Venice, so that even her name seemed to her a little false. And in the book, her daughter Octavia is born. One of the other lawyers, when talking to the detective about her daughter, said, "She's called Octavia because she was born in the first minute of the first day of October." Her mother, Venetia, is always rational. It was, in my mind, a contrast. She was named Octavia because of the day on which she was born.

LBF: Who were some of the writers who inspired you when you were growing up? Which ones did you read that may have led you to write mysteries?

PDJ: I think where mystery writing is concerned, it was the women who were writing when I was an adolescent, the time between the wars, specifically, Dorothy L. Sayers. But apart from her, certainly Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, as far as style is concerned. I think he was probably the greatest stylist of his generation. I've learned a lot from my enthusiasm for Evelyn Waugh—and Jane Austen.

LBF: They were wonderful models! There is something about mystery writing—you are a charming, intelligent woman, and yet you also love murder and gore. What, do you think, makes a writer in this genre so in love with crime? Is it the murder, is it the mystery, like a game or a puzzle to solve, or is it the acts of violence and crime in itself that you find most fascinating?

PDJ: I don't think it's the acts of violence, and it certainly isn't the gore as gore. Very rarely in my books do I actually describe the act of murder. Nearly always the body is discovered by someone, and that can be very horrific because I try to make that very realistic. The person who discovers the body is horribly shocked.

LBF: How the blood is drained from the face of the person who discovers the body.

PDJ: Absolutely. I would like to think the blood drains from the faces of the readers as they observe this scene. So I don't think it's horror for horror. I couldn't write a book about the torture of one human being by another. And I can't see that on television or on film; I'm repelled by it. I think it is the *mystery,* it's the construction, it's the form, the structure of it. It's bringing order out of disorder, using this unique crime and the disruption it always brings, as an opportunity for exploring characters. Just providing a credible mystery in itself is, for me, absolutely fascinating. I think that on a more psychological level I'm aware that I'm very frightened of violence, both physical and psychological. Writing about it is one way in which one can deal with it. I think that for some readers it's a very reassuring form because it does suppose we live in a rational, comprehensible universe, and it is the duty of human beings to try to achieve some kind of justice, however imperfect that justice is.

LBF: It's been said that you have a truncheon, or something like it, near your bed, so that should anyone break into your room, you would be prepared—and unhesitatingly . . .

PDJ: (Laughs). Well it's one of those things that journalists make up. It isn't a truncheon, it's a little policeman's club. What had happened, actually, just before I was setting out for a major American tour years ago, was that someone downstairs hurled a brick through my drawing room window. The glass was 19th century glass, very thick. I was awakened in the middle of the night by this astonishing noise—it was as if a tank had driven into the house, let alone a smashed window. So, of course, I went downstairs to investigate, and then I called the police. It was highly inconvenient because I had to get a friend to get the window patched up, because I was flying off from Heathrow the next morning. People said I shouldn't have gone down to investigate, but, I thought, it's absolute human nature to investigate. I'm not likely to cower in my bedroom. I had this policeman's club, and I thought.

I'll just keep it by the bed, so if it happens again, I'll still go down, but at least I'll have something in my hand.

LBF: When you are not writing or reading Dorothy Sayers or Evelyn Waugh, do you read any contemporary work? Whose books do you enjoy?

PDJ: On the whole, I enjoy contemporary writers like A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble. I prefer today's women authors to men. Maybe an odd thing, and one I'm not particularly pleased or proud about, I find that as I get older, I do read less contemporary fiction. I regularly reread old fiction, novelists who were difficult for me. Henry James was one, and now I'm reading his novels quite seriously. I love biography, autobiography, and history. So really, I'm rereading fiction or going back to the classics.

LBF: Have you discerned any difference between American mystery writing and British?

PDJ: There's probably less difference now than there used to be. I'm not really an expert on mystery writing. It seems to me that when I first started reading it, there was a great difference. The American writers—you have some absolutely magnificent novelists who wrote mysteries, and of course, one is thinking of Hammett and Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald. They're wonderful novelists. Generally, they have private eyes who worked as much against officialdom as

they did against the murderer. Sometimes quite violent, whereas in England they were somewhat domestic, really. British police may have been totally inefficient, but they were virtuous. However inefficient they were, they were somewhat class-ridden in the 1930s. Not particularly notable as novels on the whole. When you think of the big names, you think of Dick Francis. He's always got a bit of violence in his books, but it's not a violent society, really, nor is it with Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse. The differences, I think, are still there.

LBF: Do you write longhand, do you write on a computer or typewriter?

PDJ: I certainly don't write on the computer or word processor, because no machine devised by man is user-friendly to me. It's partly my age. I do like writing by hand. I like the feeling of words almost coming down from the brain and the arm, onto paper. But my handwrit-ing is atrocious, and of course it gets worse as I write more quickly. So when I've done that I dictate what I've written onto tape while I can still read it. Then my secretary types it. In a sense, that's the first draft on which I work. I have an old electric portable which I'm rather fond of, and I bash away happily at that. But of course when that gives out, I'll be in trouble because those typewriters can't be replaced. Now, everything's on the screen. Everything's a word processor.

LBF: Do you work at night, during the day? Do you work every day?

PDJ: Once **I** begin writing, as opposed to plotting and planning, **I** do try to work every day. Whether I'm feeling like it or not, I get up early and write. I move into the world of the book, and I move in with these characters.

LBF: What advice would you give to young writers starting out?

PDJ: I would say develop your use of language by reading good writers, not so that you can copy their style, because writers need to develop their own style. But when you meet an unusual word, get used to it, write it down, find out what it means. Try to increase your vocabulary, because a good writer needs a good vocabulary. You need to read, you need to practice writing, and you need to go through the world with all your senses alert to what is around you: the natural world, the world of men and women, the world of work. For a writer, nothing that happens is ever wasted. It's developing that sensitivity to life, and at the same time trying to hone the craft, thinking of it as a craft.

105
A CONVERSATION WITH RUSSELL BANKS

By Lewis Burke Frumkes

Lewis Burke Frumkes: Russell Banks is one of this country's best writers. You probably read him previously in *Rule of the Bone*, or saw the movie version of his book, *The Sweet Hereafter*. Russell has split the clouds with his new blockbuster novel, *Cloudsplitter*, published by HarperCollins. Where should we begin with this, Russell? John Brown is getting a lot of attention these days. What brought you to him as the basis of a big novel?

Russell Banks: I think of him as a door that opened into a whole world for me, which is one reason I suppose the book is as long as it is. John Brown was very important to me when I was a college kid in the sixties, and was politically active in the civil rights and anti-war movements. And Brown's face would be on the wall of an S.D.S. office alongside Che Guevara and Jimi Hendrix. He was very much connected to literary figures that I was obsessed with at the time: the New England transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau. All that was in the back of my brain, and then it kind of faded out as the sixties faded out, until I moved into upstate New York and bought a house in the Adirondacks. It turned out that Brown and eleven of his cohorts from the Harpers Ferry raid were buried down the road, where he'd had a farm for many years.

LBF: Is it near Mirror Lake?

RB: It isn't very far from Mirror Lake and Lake Placid. It's North Elbow, just over the hill, and faces Mt. Marcy (the highest mountain in New York), an Indian name meaning "cloudsplitter," thus the title of my novel.

LBF: A great title.

RB: Brown became suddenly a ghostly presence in my life, at the same time very tangible and real, because these were the hills he walked over, the place he lived, and the place where he ran slaves north into Canada. It's from that house that he launched the famous raid on Harpers Ferry.

LBF: You tell the story through the eyes or the memory of his son, Owen—an unusual device. Why did you choose Owen?

RB: It's not really an original device. Basically there's the same situation in *Moby Dick*, in which an apparently minor character tells a story about a larger-than-life character. It was a necessary route for this charismatic, larger-than-life, emblematic figure of John Brown, since I wanted to tell his story from inside and up close. I wanted to tell a domestic story, a relational story, and I wanted to humanize him, and make him real—to me and to others. So his son, Owen, in the 1840s and 1850s, was perfect, because he was present at all the most important moments in his father's public life. And he was at Harpers Ferry and escaped—and lived to tell about it. And to make the story perfect for a novelist, he never told about it. He disappeared into the equivalent then of the abolitionist underground after Harpers Ferry. He was a wanted man, and reappeared on a mountaintop in California.

LBF: Psychologically, what are the resonances in this story for you with your own father?

RB: I think the father-son story, in all its various shapes and permutations, has fascinated me since the beginning of my writing life, and since the beginning of my life, for that matter. But it was an approach that I had never quite entertained before. What happens in a relationship between a father and son, for instance, in which the father is a dominating, controlling figure, but also happens to be right? John's an idealistic man, not a brute, not a sadist, not a psychopath, but something more complicated and seductive. To me, it's the Abraham and Isaac story, but told from the point of view of Isaac, the son. In Sunday school, that story was always told from the point of view of Abraham; it was a test of Abraham's faith: Would he sacrifice his son for his God? I always identified with Isaac, the son. This is tough: Your father takes you out onto the mountain and sharpens his knife. It always chilled me. Why did they tell this story after all? Was it meant to scare kids? It's a story I wanted finally to go to the heart of and see from the point of view of the son.

LBF: And well you did. *Cloudsplitter* is a big book in every sense, and it's getting such good reviews that it has almost moved you to another level. Are you getting different kinds of attention?

RB: My audience is much larger, but it has also changed. My books are being read increasingly by younger people, people in their twenties and teens who are serious readers; that's incredibly gratifying to me. I'm 58 now, but I can still remember that when I was young, a book could change my life. Whatever I read could turn my head in an important way. So it's very gratifying to know that my book is being read by people whose lives—in their minds—are at stake when they

read. But it has changed my life in other ways as well. Naturally, it's changed it economically. It means that I don't have to teach any longer and I'm pleased by that, as much as I like teaching.

LBF: Your other novel. *The Sweet Hereafter*, has been getting a lot of attention because of the film.

RB: It's a brilliant film, a marvelous piece of work: very imaginative and serious without being somber. Then, to my astonishment, it's also been well-received by the public, Academy Award nominations for Best Director and Best Screenplay, and it's even making money.

LBF: You've had other books that were made into films.

RB: Yes, *Affliction* has been making the festival circuit. It's a terrific movie, I think. It's a brutal movie, a wonderfully powerful movie.

LBF: *Cloudsplitter* will undoubtedly be a big film.

RB: I hope so. If properly done, that'll be the difficulty. It could easily be ruined.

LBF: While most of the literary community knows your work, where did you come from? How did you originally get into writing?

RB: I kind of back-doored my way in. I came out of a blue-collar world in upstate New Hampshire, where the idea of being a writer was like the idea of being a butterfly or something. And so I didn't take myself seriously as a writer for the longest time. In my early twenties

I tried college for about six weeks and fled. I worked as a plumber. My father and my grandfather were plumbers, and I had been a plumber's helper as a boy; it was the only thing I knew. I was writing at night, because I was falling in love with books. When I was 24, my wife's mother, bless her soul, decided that this boy should go to college, and she paid for my bachelor's degree at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

LBF: That school is considered one of the best.

RB: It's a great school, and it was fabulous in the sixties. It was so exciting to be there, it really politicized me in a way I never understood before. Up to then my politics had been basically an adolescent fantasy. But suddenly in the middle of the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement, it was fish-or-cut bait time, and it really changed me. When I got out of Chapel Hill in 1968, I was publishing fairly widely and was able to get a position teaching freshman English.

LBF: You have a lot of rough-edged stuff in your books. How much were you involved in?

RB: You mean troubled, turbulent youth? I grew up an angry boy and became an angry young man, in some ways self-destructive. Someone once asked me, "If you hadn't become a writer, what would you have become?" And I thought about that for a while, and I said I think I would have become dead on a parking lot outside a bar in Lakeland, Florida, by the time I was 22 or 23. I had a lot of rough edges. I was trying to blast free of what I felt to be a constricting past or family background. I was lucky, very lucky, that I escaped alive and didn't injure or maim anyone else in the process.

LBF: How do you actually work on a book? When you get an idea, do you get right down to writing? Do you do research?

RB: *Cloudsplitter* required a good deal more research than anything else I'd ever written, mainly because I was working outside my turf, 150 years into the past. I needed to know what it was like to lead a daily life in rural America in the 1840s, so I had to do a great deal of research, and I did that first. In a way, the John Brown story is a given: Every school kid knows it ends at Harpers Ferry. The characters were not givens: I had to find them and invent a few. But I basically spent a year and a half doing nothing but research, till I reached a point where I wondered, "Now, how do I enter this story? How do I tell this story?" And I discovered Owen Brown, by tracking down a footnote to the dusty shelves of the Rare Book Room at Columbia University to research materials that had been accumulated at the turn of the century, including interviews with the surviving children of John Brown, by then elderly men and women. And I thought, "Now, that's the way. I'll have Brown's son, Owen, as an old man, telling the story at the turn of the century to a young woman research assistant of an historian. He will recount what happened, and he'll get so carried away by his tale, that before he knows it he'll be telling his own most inner feelings to this woman."

LBF: Do you write every day?

RB: Pretty much.

LBF: On a word processor?

RB: Whatever works. Some days I can write better on a word processor, and the language seems to flow, and then it'll all get bottled up, and I'll start to feel strangled, and I have to switch to a yellow-lined pad and a pencil and continue that

way. That'll work for a while, and then I'll start to feel strangled again, and I'll switch again.

LBF: What's your advice to young writers starting out?

RB: Going back to what you were saying earlier about things changing with this book, and the scale of my career, in a sense, changing. It won't have much effect on my writing because it's happening to me in my middle fifties. Had it happened to me in my middle thirties, it could have had a disastrous effect on me, before my habits were set, before my routines and my values were set. I would say to any young writer, "Don't confuse your career with your work. Your work is the one thing you can have control over, and you must have control over it, but your career you can't control. You just have to let it happen to you."

106
A CONVERSATION WITH ARUNDHATI ROY

By Lewis Burke Frumkes

Lewis Burke Frumkes: Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things,* published by Random House, has received extraordinary notices in this country and around the world. *The New York Times* called it "a dazzling and brilliant novel." Arundhati, is this very heady stuff for you? Are you able to keep this in perspective?

Arundhati Roy: I haven't found it that difficult to deal with what has happening. It *has* been a big surprise. It took me four and a half years of solitary work to write this book, and I think to do something over such a long period of time and then to get such a positive reaction is very rewarding.

LBF: I would imagine. Why don't you introduce us to the book? What is it about, from your perspective?

AR: I'm always tempted to say that it's about everything. It's not as if I had a three-point program and then wrote a story around it. I've always believed that a story is the simplest way of presenting a complex world. It's a way of making sense of the world.

LBF: Through the small things?

AR: Yes, through the small things. Technically, the book is set in Kerala, south India, but it isn't really a book about India or about Kerala. It's a book about how, over years, human society continues to behave in very similar ways, even though the details may be different.

LBF: Human nature is human nature, a thousand years ago or today?

AR: Exactly. Kerala, the southernmost state in India, where I grew up, is a unique place and an incredible backdrop for a novel, because it's the only place in the world, I think, in which four of the world's five big religions live together. Against this sort of backdrop human drama plays itself out, and you realize in the long run it really doesn't make such a huge difference because human society continues to divide itself up, it continues to make war across those divisions.

LBF: You speak English fluently. Do you speak English in India? Do you speak Hindi, Bengali? Urdu?

AR: Almost all educated Indians will speak at least two, if not three, languages. I speak three: Hindi, Malayalam—which is the language we speak in Kerala—and English.

LBF: And what language do you think in?

AR: I think and write in English.

LBF: Tell us about yourself, how your career developed.

AR: I grew up in Kerala on the banks of this little river, sticking labels on my grandmother's pickle bottles. She runs a pickle factory there.

LBF: As does someone in the book.

AR: Yes. I finished school partly in Kerala. My mother started the school, and I studied there. I was the guinea pig; the only person in the class. Then I went away to boarding school and came back.

After school, all I wanted really was to leave. I found Kerala in many ways a very terrifying place to grow up. When I was admitted to the School of Architecture in Delhi, I left home, and I didn't go back again for many years. I lived on my own with a group of young people. We were all teenagers with no supervision, nobody to order our lives for us. I think that's not as unusual here as it is in India. In India, it's unheard of that somebody would be in that situation, especially a woman. I lived in what we call a slum colony within the walls of an old monument in New Delhi. I actually enjoyed myself immensely. We had no money but we had a lot of fun. When you're that young, somehow the future doesn't scare you, you just live from day to day. When I graduated, I decided I was going to be a flower child. So I went off to Goa, where I used to make cake and sell it on the beach. After a bit, I came back to Delhi and met my husband. He was making a film, which he asked me to act in. Acting wasn't something I ever wanted to do, but I felt it was a good way to observe the process of filming. So I did act, and then became a screenplay writer. I wrote and designed the films I worked on.

LBF: As a former filmwriter and actress, do you want to be involved with the film of *The God of Small Things?*

AR: Nothing that I've done in film has been remotely as satisfying as writing my novel, and I continue to think of it as

a visual but unfilmable book. I don't know if I want it to be a film. I don't really see cinema as the last stop for literature. The language, the narrative, the characters would have to be somehow broken apart and made again to be a film. Even translating the book into different languages— though it's been translated into many—is difficult to do, it has to be reimagined in some way.

LBF: Your book was written in English, but where was it first published?

AR: It was first published in India. I was very keen for it to be published in India first.

LBF: In Hindi?

AR: No, in English. There are more people in India who speak English than there are in England. It's the only common language.

LBF: Your use of language is wonderful. Do you have favorite words—words that you use more often than other words, or words that do something for you, are very special to you, musical?

AR: Because Indians tend to speak more than one language—in my case, as I said, three languages—I think that sort of revitalizes the language that I write in. I try to make my language do what I want it to do; I don't like to do what the language wants me to do. Sometimes that process is so instinctive that I don't think about it.

LBF: What advice would you give to other writers starting out?

AR: I'm very suspicious of free advice.

LBF: Do you want to charge me for it? (Laughs)

AR: No. By free advice, I mean people who just advise people un-necessarily. Each person has to do it in his way. The way I worked was not to open my work up to opinions until it was finished. I worked for four and a half years without discussing it or showing it to anyone. Sometimes when you start soliciting opinions, your work just gets up and walks away. You have to be focused enough to know that you have to do it regardless of whether it's published or not, or whether it's successful or not.

107
A CONVERSATION WITH JOYCE CHRISTMAS

By Claire E. White

Claire White: Joyce Christmas is the author of 11 mysteries, eight featuring Lady Margaret Priam, expatriate Brit living in Manhattan. Her second series stars retired office manager, Betty Trenka. Joyce, let me begin by asking you what inspires you when you write.

Joyce Christmas: Finishing what I'm working on. And the money. I don't think a professional writer has to be inspired. It's a job.

CW: How do you write: computer, dictation, or longhand?

JC: Mostly on the computer. But I do drafts on a good old electronic typewriter and lacking that, in longhand.

CW: Do you write every day?

JC: I try to, but I have a full-time job, so sometimes work obligations get in the way. But I try to write early in the morning and in the evenings, and when I have a deadline, as much as I can get away with at work.

CW: You must have an understanding boss!

JC: He is my best friend and my Constant Reader.

CW: That helps, certainly. Do you ever get writer's block? What is your "cure" for it?

JC: Sometimes. Lying down and watching old sitcoms or going someplace different, like a museum, or buying something. Out of the writing life for a while usually cures it.

CW: How did you make your first sale of a book you wrote?

JC: My very first book was a ghostwriting job, and I was asked to

help the author. She didn't quite know what a book was, and even though it was nonfiction, it had to have a beginning, middle and an end. My first novel, now out of print, was *Hidden Assets,* and a writing partner and I were asked by an editor to write it. (For whatever reason, she wanted a book about a male stripper. Go figure.) Because I had a dozen ghostwritten books behind me, I guess it was assumed that I could write a novel.

CW: Did you use an agent?

JC: Yes. I have a wonderful agent. But it is not easy to get one. Again, because I had a track record of completing books, I didn't have a problem.

CW: What is the hardest part about writing in the mystery genre?

JC: The competition, thinking of plots that are as good as other people's. Mysteries really are highly competitive, and there are a lot of them out there. It's a real challenge.

CW: Lady Margaret has an on-again, off-again romance with New York detective Sam De Vere. Is it difficult to integrate romance into a mystery?

JC: Yes. The genre isn't really suited to romance unless it's an integral part of the plot. But I think the protagonist needs an emotional partner to rely on. You know, writing a book means filling up pages with something happening, and it can't always be a murder.

CW: Yes, true. How do you create your characters?

JC: First I think of what kind of character I need. A society lady, a suburban neighbor, and so forth, and then I start thinking of qualities and likes and dislikes, maybe basing them somewhat on people I know—but I do not base any character completely on a real person. The characters do take on a kind of life of their own, and then you think of something you can add to make them more realistic and often more valuable to the plot.

CW: How much research is involved with writing the Lady Margaret Priam books?

JC: I try not to say anything wrong, so for the books not set in New

York, I either "research" by going to the place where they are set— Caribbean (although I lived there for many years), Harrods, Beverly Hills, and Forest Lawn, etc. I walk about New York to look at the streets and buildings that Fm writing

about, I read the gossip columns, and I formerly did public relations work for various charities, so I absorbed a lot of information that I put to use. It's not heavy-duty research, but as I noted, I try not to say anything really wrong. Traffic has to travel in the right direction on one-way streets, stuff like that.

CW: In mystery writing, which do you believe is more important— plot or character—and why?

JC: Plot and character are equally important to make a good book. Some readers prefer character-driven books, others like plot-driven. And writers are either character or plot people, and their books reflect which they are.

CW: Your newer sleuth is Betty Trenka, an older, retired office manager. What does she like to do in her spare time? What are her pet peeves? What music does she like? Where does she shop?

JC: Betty was forced to retire in her sixties, and she hates having spare time after years of comfortable routine. She's busy trying to make a life for herself after retirement. Peeves? Being forced to do anything domestic, and of course that damned cat someone left on her doorstep. (Actually, she and Tina the cat have reached a detente. I think Betty would miss her if she were gone.) I've never mentioned it, but I think Betty likes Frank Sinatra, music from her girlhood during and just after World War Two. She buys her clothes at the mall and from L.L. Bean catalogues. Betty likes the wine chosen by her neighbor Ted Kelso, who also cooks her favorite meals. She is without vices (so far).

CW: Does she have a sense of humor? What are her best qualities?

JC: She sees the absurdity of things, and her best quality is common sense and determination. Finishing a job once started.

CW: How did you create Betty?

JC: My editor asked me to start a new series, and I had had a number of older characters in my books, so I thought a senior sleuth would be fun. Then it turned out that senior sleuths were Hot!! I have a lot of friends who are in their 70s and 80s, so they provided role models.

CW: You were Associate Editor at *The Writer* Magazine for a number of years. What did that position entail?

JC: Editing articles for the magazine, and for the company's other publication, *Plays*, one-act plays for children (I wrote a few). Writing letters to authors, getting market information and writing it up, proofreading, layout of the magazines, and editing books of plays, seeing them through the press, buying paper, specifying type. Everything. And my bosses, Sylvia Burack, still the Editor, and the late Abe Burack, Editor, were better than a college education in publishing. True publishers of the old school, which are fast disappearing. I learned about writing, and the whole business.

CW: What is the difference between the "old school" of publishing and the new?

JC: I don't think the Buracks, or the rest of us, went out to a lengthy business lunch more than once a year. The old school cared more about what they were publishing, and didn't have an eye out for the "mega-deal." They cared about helping new authors along; they wouldn't dream of paying a has-been a million bucks because they knew the market, and knew whether they would make the money back. They believed in "the profession" and they weren't bottom-line-oriented in the way today's publishing conglomerates are. They didn't think of books as the equivalent of toothpaste. Books were not just a bunch of units to be sold. Mind you, there are wonderful, caring editors today, like mine. But the book business is Big Business, but alas, not every good book is a blockbuster, ready to be sold to be the movies. I still avoid business lunches.

CW: What were the biggest mistakes you saw in submissions to *The Writer?*

JC: Most submissions were by invitation, but I was always surprised that famous fiction writers had trouble writing articles about writing. Many of them were not always good at writing straightforward expository prose. But I confess, it's not easy to write meaningfully about fiction writing. A plug for a friend: Mystery novelist Meg Chittenden's book, *How to Write Your Novel*, is excellent (and was published by The Writer, Inc.).

CW: Does being an editor affect the way you write?

JC: Definitely. It helps greatly in doing revisions; you know that the passage you *absolutely love!* should probably be removed. I guess the critical eye for things like sense and grammar comes from my editing days.

CW: It seems that over the years the mystery genre has gotten a lot more violent and grisly in the storylines (plots about serial killers, etc.) Do you see a trend toward gore in this genre?

JC: Again, there are readers who adore serial killer books. I read them only occasionally because I don't like grisly stories, but yes, I do think publishers are asking for them because there's an audience for them. I can't begin to analyze why. I won't blame it on TV, but America has this romance with violence that doesn't sit well with me.

CW: Do you find the Internet useful?

JC: I *love* the Internet. I love e-mail, I love reading Dorothy L, I love finding sites that talk about things I'm interested in. I like being able to find news stories from a few days ago that I missed. It's a terrific resource that I use for entertainment, writing and for company business. Long may it wave!

CW: We love the Internet, too! Now, for the aspiring authors out there . . . how useful are writers' groups and conventions ?

JC: Conventions are great fun. Writers get a chance to meet fans, and fans get a chance to see us make fools of ourselves on panels. Bouchercon is very large, but there are lots of smaller conventions (Cluefest in Dallas, Malice Domestic in Washington, Mid-Atlantic in Philadelphia, Left Coast Crime in San Diego, to name a few) that are easier to handle. I belong to a number of writers organizations. Mystery Writers of America helps foster a sense of fellowship with other mystery writers. In the recent past, there have been problems reported with MWA, but every organization has problems, and MWA's were blown out of proportion. It's a good organization. I also belong to International Association of Crime Writers, which gives me a chance to meet overseas colleagues, and Sisters in Crime is a terrific group for both writers and fans.

CW: What is your best advice to the aspiring mystery novelist?

JC: Read, read, read in the genre. Write, write, write, everything you can. Writing is like being a professional musician. You have to practice the scales over and over so that when you sit down to perform, you don't have to think about where the notes are. I've never had any experience with writing critique groups, but if you trust your colleagues, it's very helpful to have astute readers who can help if you go astray or get stuck, or don't understand what you're trying to say. Publications, electronic or otherwise, that talk about writing can be helpful by giving you ideas you might not have thought of, and help with technique. I find Dorothy L very helpful in getting a sense of what readers care about, what they hate or find trite. My agent is helpful, too, but I think he's probably too kind.

108
A CONVERSATION WITH ELMORE LEONARD

By Lewis Burke Frumkes

Lewis Burke Frumkes: I'd like to begin by asking Elmore Leonard to tell us a little bit about how his novel, *Riding the Rap,* differs from any of his other books.

Elmore Leonard: I'm not sure that it is different, because it still has my cast of characters, or at least, the type of characters I like to work with; I spend at least half the time with the antagonist. Every year or so, while I'm writing a book, I get a letter from a friend who's in the business. He says, "Well, has your first chapter become your chapter three yet? Has your main character decided to do anything?" Because I'm so intrigued with the guys who are pulling the crime, whatever it is. I like their attitude. They never get along with each other. You always see that two of them are going to bump heads. You wonder which one might kill the other and be left then for the main character. I'm never sure myself, until I get to the scene where it's going to happen. Then I realize, it's got to be *this* guy, because my characters have to talk. In fact, they're auditioned. The characters are all auditioned in the early scenes so I can see how important they really are.

LBF: So you don't actually plot a novel out in detail before you begin?

EL: No, **I** don't. In *Riding the Rap,* Harry Arno, a character from my previous novel, *Pronto,* disappears. What happened to him? His former girlfriend Joyce asks her new boyfriend Raylan Givens, who's also the U.S. Deputy Marshall, "Would you look for Harry? What do you think happened to him?" Raylan, the lead character, isn't sure he cares what happened to Harry, because Joyce is so concerned with him, but he starts looking for him. That's the idea: What happened to Harry.

We see that Harry's been abducted, but not in the usual way. This is a scheme that was inspired by the hostage-taking in Beirut. Chip Ganz, the fellow who comes up with the idea, had watched stories on television about the hostage-taking and wondered, "Could there be any money in that? What if I took a hostage, blindfolded him and chained him to a wall in a filthy basement somewhere?" One of his accomplices says, "But, where are you going to find a filthy basement?" So, they end up holding the hostage in a fairly nice beachfront mansion. The idea is that instead of sending a ransom note to someone, they deal with just the hostage. "You tell us how you can get two million dollars to us without anyone knowing about it. If we like the idea, we'll let you go. If we don't like the idea, you're dead." These are the guys who are into money and manipulative with money. Harry Arno, for example, is a sports bookie. Another guy that they pick up is a savings-and-loan scoundrel who may have thirty million dollars hidden away somewhere—all his investors went broke, that kind of guy.

So, that's the scheme that I start with, and I develop it with different points of view. Among the bad guys, I have three points of view: Chip Ganz and the two fellows who work for him. Then I have Ben Rolins's point of view, Joyce's point of view, and Harry's point of view. So, in movie fashion, I can cut to anyone's point of view at any given time. That's the key—*point of view*—because I am always writing from the point of view of one of my characters, never from mine. I'm not the omniscient author. I don't know anything. If a character is looking out the window, and there's a reason to describe the weather, it will be as he sees the weather, not as I see the weather, not as I use imagery and fall on my face trying to be poetic in describing the weather. I avoid the difficult things in writing prose.

LBF: Do you always write that way?

EL: In studying Hemingway, I came upon this technique: letting the dialogue pull the story as much as possible. I've always been interested in dialogue, but I don't know that I work any harder at it than anyone else. I just have a good ear. I don't hang out wherever criminals hang out and listen. There's always the sound of a character. In some cases, it's more pronounced than others, but you never hear *me.* That's the main thing.

LBF: Now, it's no accident that you began by writing Westerns, right? The closing scene in *Riding the Rap* is like a Western thriller, with two men who could be called "fast guns" facing each other. It's an incredible scene. What in the Western do you take into the crime novel?

EL: Well, when I started writing in the 1950s the market for Westerns was tremendous. Almost all magazines except women's magazines were publishing Western stories, and Western movies were big. But, in the eight Western books and the thirty short stories that I wrote, I never once ended with that face-off in the street where they're going to draw, because that never happened. I would read the accounts in the *Tombstone Epitaph* of shootings. A guy is standing at a bar, and another guy walks in with a pistol, fires at him three or four times, and misses. The guy at the bar turns around,

chases him out, and hits him once or twice as the guy's running across the street. That was a gun-fight. Why would they stand waiting for somebody to count to three or for a twitch? Why would they do that? These men were not honorable, not like gentlemen in old French duels.

Now, in the climactic situation of *Riding the Rap,* there is a little dishonorability, and the reference, of course, is to Western movies when one character says, "I want to know what it's like to meet a guy like that, like in the movies, and draw."

LBF: In *Riding the Rap,* you deal with a psychic, the beautiful Reverend Navarro, who has a gift for reading Tarot. It was an interesting subplot.

EL: In a way, she's sort of a central character. A lot of the plot hinges on her. The guys in the book are attracted to her for different reasons. She practices her art—or her con; we are not always sure that she really is psychic. Sometimes she is. When she's talking to someone on the phone at night, and she says, "Turn the light on. I can't see," you wonder, "Hey, wait a minute." Or when she says to Raylan, "You're from West Virginia. No, you're from Kentucky originally, and you were a coal miner." How did she know that? She's holding his hands, but he could have been a dishwasher.

LBF: Who were your models when you were first starting out in crime writing?

EL: When I began to study writing, I studied Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Richard Bissell—he wrote 7 *U2 Cents,* which became the play *The Pajama Game.* I loved Hemingway for his dialogue, but I realized I did not share his attitude about anything. He took himself and everything else so seriously. A writer's style really comes out of his attitude and how he sees things. So, I had to look around at other writers, including Mark Harris, who wrote *Bang the Drum Slowly,* John Steinbeck, and John O'Hara. I could never get into Faulkner. I could never read *Crime and Punishment;* there seemed to be too many words.

LBF: What do you read for pleasure when you're not writing?

EL: A book I enjoyed quite a bit was Stephen Hunter's *Dirty White Boys.* I like Pete Dexter. I like Ed McBain. I think you can't touch his police stuff. I like James Lee Burke, Jim Hall, and Carl Hiaasen. I don't read them all the time, but I think they are all pros.

LBF: Do you work on a word processor?

EL: No, I write in longhand, and then, I put it on the typewriter as I go along. I bought my first electric typewriter a few summers ago. For twenty years or so, I had been using a manual that I'd bought secondhand. Finally, I became tired of changing and hunting for the ribbons.

LBF: What's your writing schedule?

EL: When Fm writing a novel, I work from 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. every day and most of Saturday—unless it's summertime. I start a book in January and finish it by May. Then, I don't write anything for several months, and the time just flies by. By fall, I start thinking of the next book. About five years ago, I saw a picture of a female marshall in the paper. She was a good-looking woman in her early thirties, standing in front of a federal building in Miami with a shotgun on her hip. Just looking at this picture, I thought, "That is the next book." It wasn't the next book. I wrote a couple others first, but I kept the clipping. Finally, I used that character in a collection of short stories Otto Pen-zler put together for Delacorte, called *Out of Sight.* He asked me to write one, and I thought, "Well, I'll try out my female marshall, whose name is Karen Cisco. I'll get to know her in this short story."

LBF: What advice would you give to writers just starting out?

EL: Read. You read and study what the writer is doing. Find a writer you feel you have a rapport with, and study the paragraphing, study the punctuation, study everything. I think the paragraphing is extremely important. Learn how to paragraph to keep the story flowing. Find out by experimenting how you write most naturally. You may be a traditional prose writer, an omniscient author whose words and descriptions are the most important elements. Or, like me, you hide behind the characters and let them do all the work.

109
A CONVERSATION WITH JOAN DIDION

By Lewis Burke Frumkes

Lewis Burke Frumkes: Joan Didion is one of our finest writers. Her newest book, *The Last Thing He Wanted,* is a thriller, quite different from her earlier novels, like *Play It* As *It Lays.* I'd like to begin by asking her how she decided to write a thriller.

Joan Didion: In a real sense, *The Last Thing He Wanted* is a thriller— a political thriller and a love story. That surprised me. I hadn't expected it to be a love story, but it turned out to be one. It takes place in 1984, at the height of what we later came to know as Iran Contra, and is about a private person who becomes involved and gets in over her head.

LBF: You write literary novels. Why did you want to write a thriller?

JD: I had never written anything that depended totally on working out a plot, where everything has to mean something. It was a technical exercise. It is quite hard to do, but quite interesting.

LBF: Do you read thrillers?

JD: I read Conrad, of course.

LBF: What writers besides Conrad inspired you as a young person?

JD: Hemingway, because of his clear, clean sentences. It was exciting to me when I discovered them.

LBF: Many of your heroines, protagonists, are people who walk into situations. In one of your novels a woman walked across an air field. In another one, you imagined a plot out of seeing a woman in a particular place. Is that a stimulus?

JD: Absolutely. *Play It* As *It Lays* came out of my seeing a blonde woman in a white halter dress. I know who she was; she was a minor actress who was paged in a casino at one o'clock in the morning. And, you just start wondering what brought her to that moment. There are a lot of moments that came out of actually observed things, but the most vivid was seeing a woman in a restaurant in the middle of the afternoon eating a chocolate parfait and bacon. This stayed with me.

LBF: While *The Last Thing He Wanted* is fiction and a thriller, as you describe it, there's a lot of non-fiction woven into the fiction. Could this possibly be described as roman a clef? Is Treat Morrison based on anyone we would know?

JD: No. He's based on a lot of people. There are threads of real people in him, and things he says are echoes of things others say. The situation did occur, however. In Central America during that period, there was the plot to attempt an assassination of an American Ambassador by people who wanted to increase American involvement.

LBF: Your husband, John Gregory Dunne, is also a writer. Do you ever edit each other?

JD: He reads everything I write. I read everything he writes. We might make suggestions of where something could go. A couple of years ago, for the first time in all the years that we've been married, we were simultaneously working on different projects. We never had this kind of sync before. And what it meant was that he finished his book the day before Christmas, and I finished mine the day after. But, from the end of August until Christmas, we never saw anyone. We didn't go out, we didn't do anything, we worked every night until eight or nine and would go to dinner in the neighborhood or build a fire. It was great. I think we would both like to duplicate that.

LBF: You love poetry. You write wonderful novels. You write essays. Is there some genre that you have not tackled that you would like to? Or was your new thriller an example of trying something new?

JD: Yes, I was trying something new. I have never wanted to write a play. I don't think I would like to write poetry because I like the long sustained format of a novel.

LBF: When do you do your writing?

JD: I used to write at night because when I was working at *Vogue,* that was the only time I had. But when I stopped working, I started to go to bed early and started writing at about 10:30 in the morning till 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. I now start writing late in the morning because there are certain household things I have to do, which I try to finish before 10:30. From then till about 5:00 p.m. I do rewrites, and then the rhythm starts kicking in for me, and I overcome my dislike of

the things I have to do when I wake up every day.

LBF: What advice would you give to beginning writers?

JD: The most important and hardest thing for any writer to learn is the discipline of sitting down and writing even when you have to spend three days writing bad stuff before the fourth day, when you write something better. If you've been away from what you've been working on even for a day and a half, you have to put in those three days of bad writing to get to the fourth, or you lose the thread, you lose the rhythm. When you are a young writer, those three days are so unpleasant that you tend to think, "I'll go away until the mood strikes me." Well, you're out of the mood because you're not sitting there, because you haven't had that period of trying to push through till the fourth day when the rhythm comes.

LBF: What part of the writing process is the most exciting for you?

JD: When the rhythm comes and you go into overdrive. When a book starts to move and you know you can go with it. Between then and the time you finish it is a good period.

110
A CONVERSATION WITH PETER MAYLE

By Lewis Burke Frumkes

Lewis Burke Frumkes: Fm going to begin by asking Peter Mayle to tell us how his new book, *Chasing Cézanne,* which is kind of a mystery story, is different from his other books, and what it is about without giving too much away.

Peter Mayle: I guess it's slightly different because it does go beyond Provence for some of the action. Some of it takes place in New York, some in Paris, some in the Bahamas. It's about the art business, and what got me interested in that was a piece from *The Chicago Tribune,* I think, in which the journalist interviewed the head of the Scotland Yard Art & Antique Squad in London—which I didn't know existed. In the course of the interview this guy who makes a business of knowing what's happening in the art world said that the latest estimate of the value of stolen art around the world was over three billion dollars.

LBF: Stolen art? Three billion dollars?

PM: That's what he said. I wondered who had stolen it and where it had gone, because it wasn't destroyed. Somewhere, somebody has it. So I got interested in finding out a bit more about the art business. Through friends of friends of friends, I began to talk to some people who deal art in New York and London and asked about stolen art. They said it was probably a highly exaggerated journalistic story. That didn't ring very true to me. I then said I was trying to work out how I would steal a piece of art if I were a criminal.

The first thing I would need to know is the name of a good forger. "Now, maybe you can help me with the name of a good forger." And all these art dealers again said, "Forgers, no, we deal only with work of absolutely impeccable provenance. You'll have to go to one of these hole-in-corner dealers in Hong Kong or somewhere." They were all giving me a line that didn't seem to make any kind of sense, so I knew I was onto a reasonably good idea.

I was working out a scheme of stealing a famous painting, and I chose Cézanne because he's a local lad from Aix-en-Provence and I like his work very much. I thought, if I wanted to pick up a Cézanne, the current value of which is about $30 million, how would I set about doing it? The first thing I'd do, I decided, is I'd have it forged, and then, in the dead of night, I'd switch the forgery for the original. Then I had to work out how I'd get into people's houses or galleries or wherever the art was kept. That proved to be slightly more complicated, but I think I've come up with a fairly plausible way in which to persuade the rich, the wealthy and the art collectors of this world to open their doors to people and let them poke around with complete respectability.

LBF: Is *Chasing Cézanne* really a primer for an art thief?

PM: It could be. I don't think there's anything in there that isn't possible.

LBF: Will you feel awkward or untoward if you read in the newspaper one day, "Cézanne Stolen! Peter Mayle not Responding to Phone Calls."?

PM: It won't be the first time a Cézanne's been stolen, and having spoken to a lot of people—and jumped to several conclusions, which I like to do—I'm quite sure there are fakes hanging in the world's galleries and homes and collections, and people still think they're the real thing.

LBF: And there's a lot at stake. You're talking about a $30 million painting, and it's a major difference to a collector if it's real or it's fake.

PM: Oh, sure. But so many of these things are given the nod on the basis of one or two experts' opinion.

LBF: You also chose a photographer as your protagonist.

PM: He's essential to the plot of getting into people's houses. I don't want to give too much away, but what I've done is to invent a glossy magazine that does features on people's homes in various parts of the world, and reconnaissance is necessary to find out about security arrangements and that sort of thing.

LBF: Now, everyone knows you from *A Year in Provence* and *Hotel Pastis,* but in *Anything Considered,* you made a little bit of a foray into the mystery. Are you gradually making a transition to mystery writer?

PM: Not really. I'm always fascinated by nonviolent crime that's ingenious. I don't find anything at all attractive about guys who go into banks with submachine guns and blow everybody's head off. But when you get a criminal who's intelligent, who's imaginative, who does his homework and who pulls off an elegant crime, then I'm rather interested.

Having said that, my next book, which I'm working on now, is a nonfiction book set in Provence, so I'm not continuing on a mystery run.

LBF: Peter, tell us how you started out. You've had a very interesting career.

PM: I started out in advertising. I got promoted and was made into an executive. I also had, at the time, some pretensions as to writing something a little bit more permanent than a commercial or newspaper ad, and so I wrote a little book for my children about the facts of life. And that did well enough to encourage me to think that I may have a future as a writer.

I left advertising at a time when my contract was coming up for renewal, and started ten years of acute financial shortage while I was working on my writing and doing everything that struggling writers do to get on. And then, after about ten years I sort of got back to where I was financially ten years before in the advertising business. My wife and I always wanted to live in France, and one day she said, "Look. You're a writer. We don't have to live in England to write. Why don't we go and try it?" So we did. I was going to write a novel, and I got distracted by the events of everyday life and started writing what turned into *A Year in Provence.*

LBF: How many copies has it sold?

PM: It's still going, remarkably. There are over four million copies around the world, in 22 languages, and I'm still astonished. And that's six years after publication. People want to know if there's some sort of secret for aging advertising men to get out of business, write bestsellers. . . .But maybe it comes from the fact that I've always regarded myself as the first person who ought to be amused by what I do, because I reckon that if I can't entertain me, how can I proceed to entertain anyone else? So I have fun. I don't write things I don't want to do.

LBF: Tell us about your writing habits. Did you start out writing longhand and now are on a computer? Did you always write on a computer?

PM: I always used to write on an automatic portable, one of those little tin things. I had one of those for twenty years. Then I broke my wrist and couldn't use a manual typewriter. So, struggling against progress I got hold of a Powerbook PC, and that's what I use now. It's wonderful, it makes writing so much easier because you can chop and change, you don't have to feed new bits of paper into the typewriter every five minutes. I use it as a typewriter and a filing cabinet.

LBF: Do you plot out your books carefully before you write them?

PM: Yes. For *Chasing Cézanne,* for instance, I did a 60-page outline before I started writing, because when I start writing I just want to concentrate on the words, rather than trying to think of the story at the same time. And so I do a long outline, chapter by chapter, working out what is going to happen in which chapter, which is quite fun. Also, the most fun of all for me, in researching a book, is deciding where a character is going to stop for lunch. And so in the outline, I'll sort of see places in the story and the plot where a conversation over a meal might be appropriate. I wonder where the characters are, if they're in New York or Paris or the South of France or wherever, and that is because I don't want them to eat anywhere I haven't tested myself. I go to these places.

LBF: You're obviously having a terrific career and enjoying it.

PM: I'm having a wonderful time. I feel very, very lucky. I can live where I want to live, write where I want to write, and people are kind enough to support my endeavors in this way. What makes people go for your books and not somebody else's, who may be every bit as hard-working, every bit as good a writer, might even have a better story, all sorts of things like that. I have to believe that a lot of it is work, obviously, but an awful lot of it is luck, for which one can take no credit at all. So I don't.

LBF: What authors do you read when you're not writing or when you're not reading your own work?

PM: I'm dying to read Tom Wolfe's newest book, *Ambush at Fort Bragg.* I also like E. B. White very much. I read and reread him. Also some of the mystery thriller writers that are so good in America— Nelson DeMille, Walter Mosley, James Lee Burke. I've really enjoyed *How the Irish Saved Civilization,* by Thomas Cahill. Fm reading Christopher Isherwood's diaries at the moment. I just read anything, really.

LBF: Can you give some advice to would-be writers?

PM: Write. There's no substitute for doing it. And you have to do it every day until it becomes a habit. It doesn't necessarily have to be a book. I think a lot of people are over-ambitious at the beginning and they try for too much. Try a short story or an article first and then gradually start writing longer and longer as you get your confidence. The thing to do is to write and to finish. There are so many books that are still in a state of half-completion in drawers all over the world. And they may be quite good, but if they never get finished nobody's ever going to know.

WHERE TO SELL

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All information in these lists concerning the needs and requirements of magazines, book publishing companies, and theaters comes directly from the editors, publishers, and directors, but personnel and addresses change, as do requirements. No published listing can give as clear a picture of editorial needs and tastes as a careful study of several issues of a magazine or a book catalogue, and writers should never submit material without first thoroughly researching the prospective market. If a magazine is not available in the local library or on the newsstand, write directly to the editor for the price of a sample copy; contact the publicity department of a book publisher for an up-to-date catalogue, or a theater for a current schedule. Many companies also offer a formal set of writers guidelines, available for an SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) upon request.

While some of the more established markets may seem difficult to break into, especially for the beginner, there are thousands of lesser-known publications where editors will consider submissions from first-time free lancers.

All manuscripts must be typed double-space and submitted with self-addressed envelopes bearing postage sufficient for the return of the material. If a manuscript need not be returned, note this with the submission, and enclose an SASE or a self-addressed, stamped postcard for editorial reply. Use good white paper; onion skin and erasable bond are not acceptable. *Always* keep a copy of the manuscript, since occasionally material is lost in the mail. Magazines may take several weeks, or longer, to read and report on submissions. If an editor has not reported on a manuscript after a reasonable length of time, write a brief, courteous letter of inquiry.

Some publishers will accept, and may in fact prefer, work submitted on computer disk, usually noting the procedure and type of disk in their writers guidelines.

Here were the market list, but left out to reduce the size. (T)

WRITERS

Here are the writers who share their expertise with you . . .

Joan Aiken ♦ Moira Allen ♦ Poul Anderson ♦ Rita Berman JudyBodmer ♦ Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff ♦ Kent R. Brown ♦ Eve Bunting Sherri L. Burr ♦ Laurie Winn Carlson ♦ Helen Marie Casey Madonna Dries Ciiristensen ♦ N.I. Clausson ♦ Pat Lowery Coluns Barnaby Conrad ♦ David Copelin ♦ Madeline Costigan ♦ Wendy Dager Peter A. DePree ♦ Diana Der-Hovanessian ♦ Susan Dexter ♦ Genie Dickerson Eijssa Ely ♦ Loren D. Estleman ♦ Janet Fabyankovic ♦ Nancy Warren Ferrell Joseph Finder ♦ Sid Fleischman ♦ Thomas Fleming ♦ Louise Munro Foley Marjorie Franco ♦ Donna Freedman ♦ Lewis Burke Frumkes James Cross Giblem ♦ Christine M. Goldbeck ♦ Rachel Hadas ♦ Elizabeth Hand Carolyn Hart ♦ Shelby Hearon ♦ Dennis E. Hensley ♦ Edward Hower

Fred Hunter ♦ Eleanor Hyde ♦ Julie Jensen ♦ Lou Anne Johnson Erica Jong ♦ Eileen Herbert Jordan ♦ PegKehret* George Keithley Susan Kelly ♦ David Kirby ♦ Bharti Klrchner ♦ Kathleen Peelen Krebs Jan Roadarmel Ledford ♦ Diane Lefer ♦ Beverly J. Letchworth ♦ Beth Levlne Sonia Levitin ♦ Nancy Love ♦ Sarah Lovett ♦ Eloise McGraw Graham Masterton ♦ Diane Mayr ♦ Peter Meinke ♦ Alyce Miller Marcia Muller ♦ Donald M. Murray ♦ Martin Naparsteck ♦ C.J. Newton Diana CTHeiiir ♦ Gregory Orr ♦ Joy Parise ♦ T. Jefferson Parker Katherine Paterson ♦ Edith Pearlman ♦ Catherine Pigora ♦ Juue Anne Peters Deborah M. Prum ♦ Colleen Mariaii Rae ♦ Dan Rafter ♦ Ian Rankin James A. Ritchie ♦ Peter Sagal ♦ Christopher Scanlan ♦ William Sciioell Bob Schultz ♦ Barbara Shapiro ♦ Sidney Sheijxjn ♦ Jennifer Shepherd Linda Simon ♦ Alison Sinciair ♦ Elizabeth Spencer ♦ Nancy Springer Janet Steinberg ♦ Ruth Turk ♦ Lucian K. TruscottIV ♦ Dorothy Uhnak Sharon Oard Warner ♦ Leslie What ♦ Claire E. White ♦ Sylvia Whitman Rosemarie Wiluamson ♦ Elizabeth Yates ♦ Cheryl Zach ♦ Lance Q. Zedric

FOOTNOTES

1. This predates the electronic age. Things have become more complicated since, so this rule should be amended to: Read submission instructions in the latest issue. tGranny Weatherwax is a witch (Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters).*

2. The Mentor Program was initiated six years ago by the New York Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America to help its unpublished members break into print. Published writers volunteer to critique fifty pages of an unpublished writer's mystery novel or short story. The program is limited to MWA members in the area covered by the New York City Chapter and to the number of published writers who volunteer for this service (approximately forty). A small fee is charged to cover mailing costs. Quite a few beginning writers have been helped by this program.

3. From *50 Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process* Alberta T. Turner. Editor. (David McKay and Co.)

4. 'Excerpted from "Abigail," in *The Pheasant on Route Seven,* by Kaye Starbird. Copyright l968 by Kaye Starbird. Reprinted by permission of Marian Reiner for the author.

5. Linda Pastan's "love poem" is reprinted here from *The Imperfect Paradise,* © 1988 by Linda Pastan, and published by permission of the publishers, W. W. Norton & Company.

6. "A Jewish lawyer defends the First Amendment rights of a man who says the Holocaust did not happen." (*Denial,* I.ong Wharf Theater, Dei 1995)