HOLLY LISLE

MUGGING THE MUSE

Writing Fiction for Love *and* Money

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About the Author

Holly Lisle began writing in 1984, and sold her first novel in 1991. She went full-time in 1992 with a three-book deal from Baen Books, and has been supporting herself and her family exclusively by writing fiction since then (though along with the "man, are we solvent!" months there have been a few canned bean months). She has seventeen books in print and has been published both in the United States and abroad, in both English versions and translation. Her most recent novels, ***Diplomacy of Wolves*** and ***Vengeance of Dragons***, both published by Warner Aspect, debuted at #1 on the Locus Bestseller list and have a five-star rating from readers at Amazon.com.

Along with her fiction, she has been the publisher of **HollyLisle.com Forward Motion Writers' Pages (**http://hollylisle.com) since 1997, and she also publishes the FREE **Holly Lisle's Forward Motion Writers' Newsletter,** which offers biweekly information on writing, selling and publishing fiction from a full-time writer – writing for a living, beginner how-to's, feedback and discussions, finding an agent, how to quit the day job to write, workshops, reviews of recommended fiction and non-fiction books, editorials and much more.

To subscribe to Holly Lisle's FREE FORWARD MOTION Writers' Newsletter send any email to:

Forwardmotion_news-subscribe@onelist.com

Holly's books include:

Diplomacy of Wolves (Warner Aspect)
Vengeance of Dragons (Warner Aspect)
Courage of Falcons (due from Warner Aspect Oct. 2000)
Fire in the Mist (Baen)
Bones of the Past (Baen)
Mind of the Magic (Baen)
Minerva Wakes (Baen)
Sympathy for the Devil (Baen)
Hunting the Corrigan's Blood (Baen)

and more, and are available from any bookstore, or online.

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About Buying Books – Mine or Any Other Author's

In the back of this book, you'll find ads for my books. They're linked to Amazon.com because I'm an Amazon.com affiliate. I would, of course, love to have you buy my books, and the links are there in case you are so thrilled by my writing that you find you must have them the instant you finish reading this book. Or for those of you who live someplace where there are no bookstores.

But, honestly, while I hope you'll buy my books, I would actually be happier if you didn't buy them from me.

I can feel the eyebrows lifting. But this is something so important to every author that I feel it deserves space here at the front of the book. If you like the work an author does, the kindest thing you can do for him and his career (and the possibility that he will be able to afford to keep writing the books you like) is to buy his books from your local bookstore. Even if they aren't on the shelves there when you go in to look for them.

ESPECIALLY if you don't find them on the shelves there.

Every author you read, every author you like, is struggling to sell his work against an increasingly hostile computer ordering system that routinely decreases the size of book orders until it has decreased the author right off of the shelves. This system, called ordering to the net, is wiping out the midlist faster than you can blink, and with it, thousands of writers whose work you have read and loved for years. If you make it into print with a professional publisher, you too will be fighting against this pervasive evil.

It works like this. The chains put in an order for 10 books per store. (That's pretty high, incidentally, but I'm ever the optimist.) Of those, seven sell, one is read to death in-store and has to be scrapped, and two are still sitting on the shelves. This is a 70% sell-through, which will have your agent and you and your editor and your publisher dancing in the aisles. Nobody ever sells through at a hundred percent. 50% is considered acceptable, a 70% sell-through is considered terrific, 80% or better and you might as well be walking on water where you publisher and editor are concerned. I've had a number of books sell through at 70% or better . . . a couple way better. The sounds of jubilation are spectacular. While they last.

Because then the chains reorder. Logically, if you have a book that sells through at 70%, you will order twice or even three times as many of that author's next book, because ***sell-through remains constant.*** If you sell 70% of ten books, you will sell 70% of twenty books. Independent booksellers know this, and follow it. Chain stores do not. Chain stores order to the net – that is, they let the computer automatically reorder only the number of books that sold before. Therefore, they will not order twenty copies of your next book. They will not even order ten. They will order . . . seven. Why? Because they sold seven.

And because sell-through remains constant, they will sell roughly five copies of your next book. (70% of seven is four-point-nine, or about five.) And because they only sell five copies of your second title, they will order . . . you guessed it . . . **five** of your third title.

And because sell-through remains constant, the chains will sell three-and-a half copies of your third book, and will also show a three-book pattern of dwindling sales. The fact that they and their computerized ordering system caused this pattern will not be brought out in your favor. The fact that your books are still selling through in great percentages will not be brought out in your favor. Only the fact that the computer has been ordering less and less of your books will ever be considered within the chains. So after three books, all things being equal, you are probably doomed. The chains won't order your titles. Your publisher won't be selling enough of your books to make it worth his while to publish you. And you can go forth to write under a new name, or you can go back to work as whatever you were before.

You as a reader are the key that can break this destructive chain. If you can, buy the books you want locally. Special-order them if they aren't in stock. Tell the booksellers that these books and this author, whichever books and whichever author it might be, need to be in stock. This may be futile with chain stores (nothing seems to slow the onslaught of the chains' computers), but you might be able to get through to someone somewhere. It cannot hurt to try. Special-ordering the books you want

and recommending titles to keep on the shelves will definitely be helpful with independents.

For your consideration of this vital issue, you have my thanks. This is something that you do for me and every other writer like me . . . and it is something you do for yourself, both as a reader who wants to see your favorite writers keep writing, and as a writer who wants to make a living in this tough environment.

Keep writing, keep believing, and never give up on your dreams,

Holly Lisle

Preface

I've been self-supporting as a novelist since the end of 1992. I won't say that I've always managed to support my family in style, but I've never had to quit writing and get a day job in order to feed us. Writing is a challenging profession – writing fiction full-time is an exercise in lunacy. But it's great fun, and if it's something you've always hungered for, read on. This is how I do it, and how you can do it, too.

Holly Lisle

Introduction – Everyday Courage and the Writer

You want to write. You want to be a writer. But somewhere along the way, you've run into an obstacle that you haven't been able to get past. Maybe that obstacle is lack of time. Maybe it's lack of support. Maybe you aren't sure how to go about plotting a novel, or how writers come up with story ideas that sell. Or maybe you're just afraid to try, because you don't want to look foolish in front of strangers, or you don't want to fail, or you fear that you might not be good enough. I've written this book to show you ways to beat the obstacles that are holding you back, and to give you the courage to try.

You need courage to be a writer – a special kind of courage.

My definition of courage is nothing more than taking one step more than you think you can. It has nothing to do with feeling or not feeling fear, with doing great deeds (though sometimes courage accomplishes great deeds), or with conquering life-and-death situations (though in such situations it is certainly helpful.)

Courage is a form of tenaciousness, a refusal to quit when you want to quit because you're tired or humiliated or broken, and it is as necessary in everyday life as it is in moments of great upheaval. In fact, I could easily say that everyday courage is more important than the 'great deeds' sort, because every one of us will be in everyday situations, while not all of us will be called upon in our lifetimes to perform great deeds.

Courage is as essential to the writer as oxygen, no more and no less. The writer who lacks courage will never succeed.

And you're saying, “That's silly. A writer sits at a desk and types all day. Where’s the risk? I can't think of a safer sort of work.”

Really? Think again.

Let me define the act of writing for you. As a writer, you're going to attempt to sell the products of your mind to a world that doesn't care right now whether you breathe or not. You're going to strip your soul naked and parade it in front of editors and agents, publishers and eventually – if you're persistent and lucky and talented – readers. You're going to say, “What I carry around inside my head is so interesting, so compelling, so riveting, that you, the agent, are going to want to risk your reputation with editors for being a shrewd judge of talent to present the products of my fancy to them; and that you, the editor, are going to want to put your career on the line to fight to bring my imaginings to press; and that you, the publisher, are going to want to spend tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars presenting these imaginings to a world that has never heard of me; and that you, the reader, are going to want to put your hard-earned money on the line so that I can tell you a story that will give you nothing tangible.”

While you are reaching out to editors, agents and publishers, you're going to fail. Over and over and over again, you are going to send things out and they are going to come back with impersonal rejection notices, with no notices at all, with the occasional signed memo that “This isn't for us.” You are going to stare at your words and sit in a darkened room and wonder, “What the hell is the matter with me?” You are going to take the rejections personally, are going to hurt, are going to bleed. Agents will turn you down, editors will turn you down, places that don't even pay for stories will turn you down.

So say you have courage. Say you go on, and you take one step more than you think you can, and then one step more after that, and then one step more after that. Eventually you will sell something. You'll get paid. You'll 'succeed.' Your story or your book will enter the marketplace, and maybe you'll do well with it, or maybe you won't. In either case, let's say you keep going. You sell again.

Even though you've succeeded, you're going to fail some more. You'll get hostile reviews. Letters from people who don't think you can write. Comments from critics questioning your talent, your vocation, your species. These will, if you're lucky, come interspersed with glowing reviews, a nice sell-through, an offer from your editor to buy the next thing you're doing – but don't think for a minute that the good things will offset the pain of the bad. They run in parallel courses, these good and bad responses, and they don't touch each other's worlds at all. I'm always delighted by the good reviews, always hurt by the bad ones.

But go on. You take another few steps, and these seem easier. You do more books, find an audience, settle into a flow. You discover one of the ugly facts of success – that there are people who you thought were your friends who were only your friends when you were failing. Now that you have, in their eyes, reached success, you have become the enemy. A target. They want to see you fall down, because when you are standing, you make them feel their own failures more.

You leave the false friends behind. You keep writing, keep selling, get fan mail, generate some nice reviews, make guest appearances at conventions and seminars, become (as much as any writer ever does) a celebrity in your field. And somewhere along the way you realize that you want to stretch your wings. Try something you haven't tried before. You write this new thing, and your fans hate it because it's different, and your editor takes a beating, and you publisher loses money, and all of a sudden you're in a precarious position. You have to decide – pursue the new course and take chances, or stagnate in the old thing that has become popular and that is starting to feel like a prison. Or find some third writing course.

All along the way, you've had to face the certainty of various sorts of failure. You've been embarrassed by your family, who does not understand why you must do this ridiculous thing. You've felt pain and rejection and worthlessness. You've had your soul and your talent and your hope stepped on, and you've cried your share of private tears, and you've kept up a brave face in public more than you'll ever admit. Even when you succeed by your own definition of success, whatever that might be, you will continue to struggle, and you will never leave the struggle behind. Every story and every book is another chance to fail just exactly as much as it is another chance to succeed. Every new level of success raises the bar higher, making failure more public and more painful ... and more likely. Every day is a challenge, and every day requires courage.

I've learned this about writing – if you will not put yourself in a position to fail, you cannot succeed. The two are as inseparably linked as breathing in is linked to breathing out. You cannot have success without failure, though you can live a safe life and have neither.

Courage is standing at the bottom of the mountain, knowing that the climb is going to hurt like hell and that you might never reach the top, and climbing anyway. Courage is saying “One more step. Just one more step,” when hands and knees and heart are bleeding. Courage is saying that you might let yourself quit tomorrow, but that you're going to hang in today, just for now... and not telling your tired, hurting self that the next day is always today, and the next moment is always now.

What about my climb? I've done my share of falling, and I have the scars to show for it. It seems like there's as much mountain above me as there ever was, though when I

look back, I can see that I've covered a surprising amount of ground, every bit of it one step at a time. I still don't know what the view from the top is like. I do know what the view from the first ledge above the treeline is like, though, and it's been worth the climb so far. I'm still working my way up the mountain, because what you can see from up here is nothing you can even get pictures of down in the valley where it's safe. Part of the beauty of this place, I think, comes from having survived the pain. Part of the elation, too. If the climb were easy, it wouldn't be any fun.

This is the world of writing, and it is the only world of writing. Every writer climbs the same mountain, though we all climb it by our own path. You can make this climb. It takes courage, but it only takes the sort of courage everybody can have – the courage not to quit when quitting would be the easy thing to do. You will not be called on to perform heroic deeds – to leap into burning buildings or lift cars or fling yourself into the midst of a shark feeding frenzy to save a drowning child. All you have to do is take one more step. Remember to keep your head up, brush the dirt off your face and pick the gravel out of your palms when you fall, and know that every other person who climbed the mountain has done the same thing.

Good luck in your climb. My wish for you is this: May you have the courage to fail, because it is the courage to succeed.

Section 1: PREPARATION & PRACTICE

How I Found Myself Here, or Why I Became a Writer

I didn't set out to be a writer. I always wrote, you know, but it was just this thing I did; what I intended was to become a terribly famous artist, perhaps with a stopover as a singer. And I can't say I made much of a go at that. I got out of high school, and didn't go to college. My folks had spent most of their lives telling me that college was a waste of time and money, and that what I needed to do was get out of school and get a job. And in spite of the fact that I graduated in the top ten in my class (not top ten percent – top ten) and had taken all college preparatory classes, I believed them.

Which turns out not to have been the only stupid mistake I made in my life that turned out well. For the record, college is a good idea for most people, and if I still had my heart set on being a professional artist, it would have been important for me. Singing ... well, that takes more talent than I have, and I never wanted it enough to fight for it anyway. I had my moment in the spotlight there and that was enough.

But getting out of school and getting a job is what you do when your life has other plans for you, and just hasn't let you in on them yet. I discovered that the world is not panting in breathless anticipation for eighteen-year-old high-school-graduate artists. So I started to work at a newspaper, selling advertising. I found out quickly that I don't like working for other people – but I also acquired a little Vega station wagon that had to be paid for. When selling advertising turned out not to be my dream job, I dumped it for the first art job that came along. I began painting signs for a commercial artist, and discovered that that entailed working in a cold warehouse and dealing with people who hadn't been paid by this guy in months, and smelling kerosene all the time, and getting chapped fingers and chapped lips and paint in the cracks that the turpentine and the cold made in my hands. So I started teaching guitar at a local music shop, and while I was at it, picked up a couple of gigs at local restaurants as a singer. What I found from these jobs was that I was working lots of

hours for not a lot of money, and if I ever wanted to move out of my parents' house (and I did, let me tell you) I was going to have to do something that paid regular money, and a fair amount of it. I added McDonald's, so that technically I had three jobs at the same time, but while I was sure as hell employed, I wasn't making enough money to feed a dieting cockroach.

My mother (who also wanted me out of the house sometime in her lifetime) was working at a local hospital. She ran into some of the nursing students there, and came home from work one day and told me I ought to go to nursing school. It was cheap, it was local, and the uniforms were cute. (They were also polyester and hot as hell, but they were, indeed, cute.)

So I went to the community college, boned up on algebra, and took the test. I passed easily, and found myself at the very top of what was for some people a two year waiting list. And with about that much forethought, I started into two years of hell as a nursing student, where I discovered that the uniforms might have been cute but the work wasn't. I discovered more than that, though. I discovered the enormous variety of humanity, and life and death, and pain, and hope, and love and hate and fear.

Ten years of nursing following that put me in touch with the basic themes of my life. That people matter. That love and our time are all we have to offer each other that means anything. That death is a mean bastard, and that he comes for all of us. That life is worth living, no matter how painful or scary it sometimes gets. That magic is real.

That I hate the assholes who gravitate to administration.

Yeah, well ... not all themes are uplifting. I had to get out of nursing. The patients and the actual work were wonderful, but the paperwork was bullshit, and I don't know where hospitals dig up the creatures who end up as administrators and head nurses, but I swear, they need to bury them back where they found them and hire humans for the job.

I'd been writing all along. Short stories, poems, twenty-page “I'm going to write a novel now” false starts. I finally got serious. Writing was how I was going to make my way out of the increasingly bitter world of nursing. And to make a long story a little shorter, I sold my first fantasy novel, Fire in the Mist. I sold a couple more. And I quit nursing. I quit too soon, and I've had to run like hell to keep in one place most of the time since then. But I did it. I'm out of nursing. I work for myself (and I really am about the only person I willingly take orders from). And writing, for all that it's harder than nursing ever was, is also more joyous, and more fun, and a lot less dangerous. And the major themes of my life have become the major themes of my writing, too – so it has all worked out pretty well.

And everything I ever did prepared me better than college ever could have for what I do today. Like I said, this has been a long, hard road, but skipping college was one of the best dumb mistakes I ever made.

Could* vs. *Should and the Price of Your Dreams

A friend of mine is going through a crisis of faith right now. Not a religious crisis. A writing one – though from where he's standing, it probably feels much the same. He's written several books and a slough of short stories, and he has prepared them professionally, and he has diligently and tirelessly sent them around in the correct manner. He's done everything right, and he has a growing collection of rejection slips to show for it, and an upcoming publication in what he calls “the smallest paying market in existence.”

And he's starting to wonder why he's doing all this; as he points out, he has a great job that he's lucky enough to like, he's happily married, he makes good money and has what he needs in life. He's putting a lot of time into something that is feeling more and more like smacking himself in the forehead with a ballpeen hammer. Repeatedly.

Is he wasting his time? I have no doubt at all that if he sticks with his writing long enough, he'll start selling his work. He's smart and talented and funny, and I think it would be impossible for him to keep writing without those qualities showing in an irresistible combination on the page eventually. Sooner or later, an editor is going to fall in love, and he is going to find a publishing home.

If he is willing to pay the price.

The price?

Every dream has a price. You need to know this now, because the price can be enormous, and if you don't know about in advance, you can wake up one day to find that you have paid with everything you ever loved, and what you have to show for all of that isn't enough.

How much will you have to pay to be a writer? There's no way you can know in advance. How much might you have to pay?

You might have to live in poverty. You might lose your job, your friends or family, your children or your spouse. Your dream might cost you your health. Your happiness. Your life. Perhaps you think I exaggerate, but writers suffer from depression and die of suicide far out of proportion to our numbers. We have high divorce rates, far too many substance abusers, and as a group we are pathetically poor. I'm not saying that if you want to be a writer, you need to run out and get a divorce and take up heavy drinking. Far from it. A strong, stable relationship can get you through some desperate times. And only fools look for inspiration in the bottom of a bottle. What I am saying is that if you pursue your dream, some other parts of your life *will* fall by the wayside. You can't know what those parts will be yet. But if you persist, you will find out.

How much is your dream worth to you?

Could you be a writer? Yes.

Should you be?

That is a question that only you can answer ... and you'll have to answer it again every time you pay.

But before you walk away, consider this: If writing is your hunger and your thirst, and if you choose not to follow your dream because you're afraid, you'll pay a price for that, too – you'll pay with the progressive deadening of your soul, as time and your own disillusionment with yourself eat away at who you are. One day you'll wake up and discover that the part of yourself that knew how to dream – and how to fly – has died, and that you are forever after bound to the ground, with only the memory that you once had wings.

Every dreamer pays a price. But so does everyone who fears to dream.

Finding Silence

We who write or aspire to write make much of place. A place to work, a room of our own, an office, a nice quiet spot at a corner diner where the waitresses know not to ask how we're doing if the pen is moving ... a place in the world to call *mine*. We claim this space in the name of writing, and guard it jealously, because space set aside acts to validate our dreams, and reminds us of the promise we have made to ourselves – the promise to write. When we are in our space and writing, spouses need not visit, friends dare not call, children had better be bleeding or the house burning down before they interrupt. I have a place, and I love it. My office is half of a balcony over the living room, a big desk, a computer and a comfortable typing chair with a firm back. The desk itself makes up a sort of fourth wall, and it is sufficient to give me privacy and a sense that what I do is important enough to warrant space.

Place matters. I hate to think of writing again without it. I've done it before, it wasn't fun, I got away from it as soon as I could and have done everything in my power since to keep from sitting in the living room in the middle of mayhem. But place only matters if we also have the silence to make use of it. And silence is harder to find.

I'm not talking about the sort of silence you get when the kids are at school and the spouse is at work and the phone is set to take messages at the first ring. That sort of silence is fine, but not essential to work. I've worked in the middle of a convention with thousands of people streaming past me on either side, all talking loudly – I knew they were there, but I didn't hear them. And on many occasions I've tried to work in an empty, quiet house, and found that the noise in my mind made productive thought impossible.

The silence I'm talking about, the silence we as writers must have to be productive, is silence inside ourselves. That silence travels anywhere. We carry it with us as if it were a private retreat in the mountains nestled next to a crystalline, ice-cold lake, surrounded by forests and pervaded by peace. And this silence is hard to find and

hard to hold. It is as elusive as a rainbow, as easily shattered as sugar glass, as rare as a white stag, as skittish as a wild colt. A single worry about an unpaid bill or an appointment with a dentist or a remembered argument can destroy this silence for an hour or a day, and no amount of gritting teeth and frowning at monitor with fingers poised on keyboard will lure it back.

I have fought my battles with the noise of the mind, and have lost my own share of time and pages to stupid replays of arguments and fantasies of future greatness and worries that I can do nothing about at the moment. I've gradually come to a place where I've started winning the battle, though, and winning it often enough that I think I'm on to something.

The search for your characters' voices and your story's action and the truth of the world that you are building begins in the silence of your mind. You can reach that silence through training your mind to stillness – not an easy task, but one that offers tremendous rewards. While I'm sure people have found dozens of ways to lead their minds to quiet, I've found that meditation works for me. I advocate no religious systems and follow none – my meditation is nothing more than sitting cross-legged on the floor, my hands clasped in my lap in front of me and my eyes closed, breathing to a slow count of four. Inhale to four, exhale to four. I slow my breathing and counting as I begin to relax, I acknowledge stray thoughts that wander into my mind and immediately dismiss them, and I sit for fifteen minutes. No more, no less. I have a little timer that I sit in front of me, and I set it to run backwards – I'm to the point now where, when I peek at it, I'm almost always just a few seconds to either side of fifteen minutes, and when my mind has behaved itself for that long, it seems to be long enough. For the rest of the day while I write, I can reach that silence again with a couple of slow breaths while my eyes are closed. I keep a meditation journal, too, which most days doesn't say anything more than that I sat for fifteen minutes and more or less concentrated on my breathing. Some days in the middle of that lovely silence I have a revelation that electrifies my work. Occasionally while I meditate I break through a wall that has held me stymied. Mostly I just sit, and if I only just sat, it would be enough. Because on the days when I meditate, I invariable finish my allotted number of pages. On the days when I don't, and when my mind wanders and chatters and refuses to shut up, sometimes I still manage to succeed. Sometimes I fail.

Which would make you think that I would never skip a day of meditation voluntarily, wouldn't it? But I do. The mind resists being made to behave, and offers all sorts of reasons and enticements and cajoleries for missing a day, or a couple of days, or a week, or a month. 'You don't have the time,' or 'you have to pay bills,' or 'you already know exactly what you want to write today so why don't we just get to it?' Sometimes my mind is convincing enough, and sometimes I am lazy enough, that I skip it. And then I regret it.

Finding silence takes discipline, and I'm not always disciplined. It takes commitment, and sometimes I don't have the commitment. It takes living up to a promise that I made to myself, and sometimes I don't live up to it. When I do, I'm better, I'm happier, I'm more productive. And I keep hoping that the next time my noisy mind tries to get me to skip my morning silence, I'll remember that. Perhaps what it really takes is getting smarter. Maybe the silence will eventually even give me that.

Experts, Professionals, and College

Do I have to have a college education to make it as a writer?" "I haven't finished high school. Can I still write?" "I've always wanted to be a writer, and I've done a lot of writing, but I couldn't afford to go to college when I was younger . . ."

This question arrives in my e-mail box about once a week, worded in any of a dozen different ways. Some of the questioners tiptoe around it, embarrassed to ask, pretty sure they know what the answer is going to be, but hoping that it won't. Sometimes I can feel the frustration and the pain, the barriers erected by poverty or lack of a diploma or lack of time. Some of the questioners are as young as thirteen, some have been as old a sixty.

All of them are pretty sure that formal education is the road to writing; that a degree will confer legitimacy to their words and their lives; that if they could just get more schooling, publishers' doors would open.

They've been brainwashed by experts, by a system designed to create people who fit neatly into categories like 'accountant' and 'nurse' and 'manager'. They've been trained to believe that the best education is an education that comes from sitting passively in a desk in an overcrowded room, being talked at by an expert.

Obviously, experts have gone to a great deal of trouble to make sure they (and perhaps you) believed this. They've tried to get employers to make grades the basis for hiring – a move many employers have so far been bright enough to refuse. They have managed to close many fields to anyone who hasn't sat in the box like a good little drone for sixteen years or more. You now have to have a degree to be an architect, a doctor, a teacher, or an engineer. Experts are trying to make sure you have to have a degree to become an RN. They'd also prefer that you had to have a degree

in order to be a social worker, respiratory therapist, an interior decorator . . . and sooner or later, when they make degrees mandatory to those fields, I imagine they'll get to work on truckers and plumbers and bakers and hairdressers. College-educated experts are trying to close every field, because college education is big, pricey business, and the more people that have to go through it, the more money the experts make.

And if you think I'm full of shit here, and that people really do need college educations before going out and doing great things, consider this – the gothic cathedrals, the pyramids, and the Roman roads and aqueducts were designed and built by men who did not have college educations. Michaelangelo did not have a college degree, nor did Leonardo da Vinci. Thomas Edison didn't. Neither did Mark Twain (though he was granted honorary degrees in later life.) All of these people were professionals. None of them were experts.

Get your education from professionals, and always avoid experts.

An expert is somebody with a degree. The degree doesn't mean he knows how to do what he's an expert at – he might have absolutely no practical experience. But he has the degree, which confers on him the right to impress other people with his accomplishment (which was the getting of the degree), and to get paid for his expert opinions. An expert gets paid by third parties – his work is never placed in the open market where it will either sink or swim on its own merit. Experts earn more money and more security by conforming – if they conform for a long enough time without annoying anyone or doing anything unexpected, they can earn higher positions or, in college systems, tenure. Therefore, in an expert system, the talented, the challenging and the brash are weeded out, and the inoffensive mediocre remain. Many college professors are experts.

A professional is someone who makes a living working in the field in question. A professional architect designs and builds houses for clients. A professional hairdresser cuts and styles hair for clients. A professional writer writes stories, articles, or books for readers. All of these people get paid by the people who are direct consumers of their work. If they do bad work, they don't get paid. The open market will weed out the bad professionals, so the ones who have been around for a while and who are still working are probably worth learning from.

What I learned from two years of nursing school at a community college was primarily political – “Get involved in your local chapter of the North Carolina Nursing Association, fight to keep the ANA from making a bachelor's degree the entry level for an RN, don't stand up when doctors come into the nurses' station or give them your seat.” I learned some basics on patient care, too – but I didn't really learn to be a nurse until I was out in the field working with other nurses. They were

the ones who said, “Look, you see somebody who comes in looking like that, don't wait for the doctor to get here before you stick O2 on him and order a twelve-lead. Just do it. And break out the D5W and start a microdrip IV right away, too. And for godsake, make sure the crash cart is ready and the paddles are warmed up.”

In writing, too, I learned the things I needed to know about the profession from a brief apprenticeship with Mercedes Lackey and another with Stephen Leigh. From Stephen, I learned the nuts and bolts of writing:

1. Avoid passive voice
2. Use active verbs
3. Eliminate most adjectives and adverbs
4. Use concrete detail
5. Tell a story worth telling, and,
6. Know your characters.

From Misty, I learned how to be a professional – and ***that*** I learned from watching her. She came home from a full day of work and went straight into her office and wrote her ten pages . . . every day, no matter what kind of a day she'd had. Only when she'd done that did she come out and hang out. She was invariably polite and friendly to her agent, her editors, her publishers, and her fans. She worked on ideas for one project while writing another. She didn't have a shit fit about having to do rewrites – she just did them. She hit her deadlines. She wrote stories she wanted to write.

There. I've just given you a complete apprenticeship in writing. You have everything you need to know to become a professional writer, and it took you a couple of minutes of your time and didn't cost you a penny. The rest of being a professional writer is writing – sitting down and putting words on a page, one after another after another.

If you want to pay $40,000 or $60,000 or whatever for a college education, you can do that, and perhaps you'll even have one or two professors in your program who are actually working as writers. They aren't doing it full time, of course, because if they were, they wouldn't be supplementing their income by teaching, so you won't be able to model a full-time writer by watching them. You'll have to spend a lot of time doing things that have no relationship to what you want to do with your life. And you need to remember that most people who go to college to become writers don't. They find their focus shifted to education, or business, and they give up on their dream. College educations are designed by conformists to create conformists. Even those colleges

which point to their radical stance and ***avante garde*** teaching are creating students who conform to their mold – ***their*** sort of radicals, ***their*** sort of ***avante garde***. Students in college have to earn the approval of their teachers in order to get their grades and graduate. And you don't learn anything new if your main goal in life is seeking the approval of experts.

If you're looking at writing as a career, you're looking at a future of tremendous freedom. You can do what you want to do with your life, and publishers and editors don't ask if you have a degree, and don't ***care*** if you have a degree. They only care that you can put good words on a page, and that you can tell a story. They'll pay you well if you can do those two things – and you can learn to do them without a college education, without a high school education, without having spent a day in your life locked behind the walls of a classroom.

You'll learn to write if you teach yourself. Put yourself in situations where you can learn new things from the people who actually do them. Hang out with policemen and painters and long-distance runners and carpenters. Get them to show you the tricks of their trade. Learn how to build a stained glass window, how to paddle a canoe, how to swim, how to bait your own hook and tie your own flies and how to identify the flowers and shrubs and trees native to your region. Grow a garden. Paint your own house and fix your own leaky faucet. Go camping with a couple of outdoorsy friends. Read lots and lots and lots of good books. Read fiction, read non-fiction. Especially read lots of books about complicated subjects written for the intelligent layman.

Never, never pick up a textbook – textbooks are worthless. They're politically correct pabulum designed to spoon-feed tiny bits of information to people who aren't interested in the subject matter without offending those people's parents. Anything designed with being inoffensive as its primary goal isn't going to be worth your time – life itself is pretty offensive, ending as it does with death.

And while you're doing all this reading and self-educating, keep writing. Have the guts to believe in yourself, have the guts to ignore the experts who want your money, have the guts to take a chance on making your dream a reality. You can do it.

Am I sure?

Yes, I am.

You see, I'm a full-time professional writer, and I don't have a college education either.

Ideas: A Hundred for a Dollar

So if I offered to sell you a hundred novel ideas for a buck, would that be a good deal, a fair deal, or a lousy deal?

It would be a lousy deal. Trust me on this one. I can come up with a hundred usable ideas for novels without breaking a sweat. So can you. So can anyone. Novel ideas aren't unique, they aren't rare, they aren't breathtaking. They are the nitrogen of the idea world – plentiful, everywhere, and only useful if you know what to do with them.

Why do I mention this? Because it will be a rare conversation I have with a beginning writer that doesn't include within it the question, “How do I keep other people from stealing my ideas?” or “How do I copyright my ideas?”

If you aspire to write novels and you're worried about protecting your ideas, breathe a deep sigh of relief now. You don't have to worry anymore. Every idea you're ever going to have for the writing of your novels has already been written more times than you can count. And will continue to be written long after you and I are dust (if civilization doesn't blow the planet into oblivion.) And that is fine. Ideas aren't the engines that make novels run.

To prove this to you, I'm going to throw out a free idea for a novel. Here it is. A man falls in love with a woman he can't have, and determines to have her anyway.

Now let's have three different writers take that idea and run with it. Writer one wants to do a comic novel, so he decides that the man, in order to be get past the overbearing family to the woman he loves, disguises himself as a woman, takes up residence in the household as a servant, and waits for his big chance to make his presence known to the woman of his dreams. Unfortunately, the woman's brother

(who has a thing for rugged women) falls madly and wildly in love with the hero, thus complicating the hero's life. (You could fiddle around with this until it became Tootsie, but you could also run riffs on it that would make it uniquely your own.)

Writer two wants to do a science fiction novel, and decides that the man and woman are separated, not by family, but by time. The woman was a holo star who lived a lonely, tragic life, and died young and alone before the hero is even born. He “meets” her through her work, and decides that he will find a way to go back in time, make her fall in love with him, and save her from herself. His obsession drives him to develop time travel, though he spends most of his life doing it. He goes back into the past, does indeed meet her before she even becomes a star; she falls in love with him as planned, but after their brief love affair, he dies of old age. She is devastated; she goes on to become a great actress, never loves again, and dies young, tragic and alone. (Or not – maybe writer number two came up with a happy ending.)

Writer number three takes the same idea, and decides that the man may love the woman, but the woman doesn't even know the man exists. He, however, is wacko, and sure that she shares his passion, and starts writing himself love letters that he pretends are from her in order to more completely enjoy this love. And so on ...

It doesn't matter what idea you have (or take from a published novel, or from a how-to book on writing, or whatever) – the idea is not the core of the novel. You are. You and what you bring to the book you're writing will be unique, because the characters will come from you, and their reactions, thoughts and feelings will come from you. And nobody can steal that.

How to Start a Novel

You've decided you want to write a book. Terrific. Maybe you've even tried it a few times, but haven't gotten one all the way to the finish line. It happens. I had a slew of thirty-page novel starts before I finally found out how to start a novel that I could finish.

See, that's the trick. You have to start the novel, but you have to have planned to finish it before you type the first word on page one. And that means laying some groundwork. What steps do you need to take to have the best chance of finishing the book you're starting with such enthusiasm?

Here are a list of suggestions that will help you start the novel in such a way that you can hope to reach the end.

RULES FOR STARTING OUT

- **Know your world**

  You might think that I'm off on the wrong track already – that maybe this first rule is sensible for people who are working on historical novels or science fiction or round-the-world thrillers, but that it doesn't apply to you. After all, you're planning on writing a novel set in the town in which you currently live, using thinly disguised versions of your friends and relatives as the characters, so you don't need to research your background.

  Yes, you do.

In your town, which streets intersect lanes; in which direction do the house numbers run; what kind of tree is that monstrous thing that grows in the library's side yard; what are the five most common varieties of birds you'll find around the bird feeder in January, or the birdbath in July? What is the family name on that elaborate tombstone that you notice every time you drive to the grocery store? What color are the handles on the carts in your grocery store, and if there's lettering on them, what does it say? Are the parking spaces straight in or diagonal? Which families started the town, and are they still in control of the place? What material has been used to pave the streets? How old is the oldest house and where is it? Who built the projects over on the east side?

I could ask a million questions like those – they're the sort of questions I always ask myself about any new world I'm creating. They are small, personal questions, which when answered offer intimate knowledge of a place. That intimate knowledge is what will make your book come to life – tiny, perfect details, mentioned so casually that you might not even realize you have included them.

To get these details you have to look around your world with the eyes of a stranger before you begin to write. You must become an innocent, asking silly questions and being willing to make a fool of yourself. And this is true whether you're using your home town or creating a complete world from scratch on the fourth planet out from an alien sun. You have to name the flowers and the trees and the grass, the streets and the houses and the stars, the animals and the rivers and the clouds – even if you don't intend to use these names, or this knowledge. Even if you don't think you'll need it.

The act of learning these details will make them part of your thoughts, and your mind will know they exist even if you don't put them on the page. And as a result, the book you write will live within a whole world, and not in a Hollywood set, where if you walked out in the front door of that beautiful house, nothing would greet you but the parking lot behind the propped-up set.

- **Know your characters**.

  Don't spend half an hour going through your baby name book to pick out a name for your main character and call that character creation. You want to have a feel for what your character would do in most situations (though if you've created him well enough, one of these days you'll try to plug him into

a scene and he'll look at you and say "I'm not doing *that*.") And even while you're angry with him, you'll be thrilled that he's real enough to stand up for himself.

And don't do a superb job of developing your main character and ignore everyone else. At barest minimum, you should feel that you have intimate knowledge of the two or three characters who take center stage in each of the first three or for scenes you've planned .

- **Know your conflict**.

  This should be fairly obvious, but I overlooked it in most of those thirty-page false starts. Conflict is the engine that drives any novel, and if you try to write one without first making sure you have an engine, you're not going to get far. Write out your conflict. (Or conflicts.) And don't go for the big generalities. "Gerri versus men," is a conflict, all right, but when you're stuck on chapter five and you look at your notes for something that will help you get back on track, something along the lines of "Gerri's hatred of her father drives her to take up with dependent men that she can then abandon, and the man she has now abandoned intends to kill her" might actually aim you in the right direction again.

- **Embrace a theme**.

  Know whether the story you are writing is about good versus evil, or about the transcendence of love, or about anything that can go wrong going wrong. You'll find additional themes as you're writing that will add depth and resonance to your main theme, and sometimes the main theme will shift focus part way through the book, but if you don't know what the theme is to begin with, you won't have any control of it when it shifts. And theme more than anything else is what will unify the beginning of your book with the end.

- **Determine a voice**.

  For salable novels, you need to resign yourself to either first person (Let me tell you about the time I found a diamond in my soup, and almost got killed by a hit man.) or third person (The stranger picked up his spoon and stirred

it through his chili. He chuckled and glanced up at the waitress. “Let me tell you about the time I found a diamond in by soup, and almost got killed by a hit man.”) Second person, the voice so popular in those choose-your-own-story adventure juveniles (You stir your chili with your spoon, then turn to the waitress and say, “Let me tell you about the time I found...”) turns off readers so quickly that, unless you're a screaming genius, your editor will bounce it back to you unread. It's ugly and awkward.

So figure out which one it's going to be. First or third. When you're a bit more experienced, it can be both in the same book.

First person is great fun to write, because the narrator will develop a distinctive voice with shocking ease. Its limitations are that you can't know anything except what your main character knows, and, because the main character is narrating, you're almost certain she survives the novel. Agatha Christie did some funky things with this, but I thought the one where the first-person narrator turned out to be the killer (surprise!) was kind of gimmicky.

Third person is broader in the scope of what it allows you to do (multiple points of view, varying emotional distances, shifts to omniscient viewpoint). It is easier to write a literary novel in third than in first. There are exceptions. Its drawbacks are the ease with which you can be drawn off into tangents, the ease with which you can fall into passive voice (boring) and the way that characters can proliferate, to the point that you start losing track of them.

I've written books in both, they each have their uses, and you will discover that one fits what you're writing better than the other. Give it some thought.

- **Know your genre**.

  In a perfect world, every book would be equally marketable to every publisher, and we'd all sell everything we wrote and make millions doing so. But we haven't yet reached that perfect world, so in the meantime, you're going to need to know what you're writing so that you'll have an idea of who might buy it. It really, really helps to know this BEFORE you type “The End” and print out your final copy. Or, worse, get fifty rejection letters from publishers who tell you they “don't publish books of this type.”

  Genre is: romance, mystery, horror, western, men's adventure, science fiction, fantasy, gay/lesbian, religious, historical, mainstream, etc..

Mainstream can have elements from any or all of the other genres, but will have some facet that publishers believe will make it appeal to a wider audience. Walk through a bookstore, and try to imagine where your book would likely be shelved. That's your genre.

And be honest with yourself here. If Fabio's presence on the cover of your book would, A) be appropriate, and B) increase sales, you have not written a mainstream novel. Ditto rocket-ships, women in chain-mail bikinis, or guys in cowboy boots and chaps.

- **Know your expectations**.

  If this is the first book you've ever written, give yourself a little slack. Nice as it is to imagine that you're going to get a million-dollar advance, a movie deal from Steven Spielberg, and foreign sales in every language known to humankind, the odds are against this happening. First advances generally float in the $2,000-$5,000 dollar range, and most first novels sink without so much as leaving an oil slick on the water to mark their passing.

  While having high *hopes* can keep you going, having high *expectations* can paralyze you. After all, if you demand of yourself that you write the Great American Novel your first time out, every time you try to type a word on the page, your mental editor is going to say "No Great American Novel ever included that word." And you'll never get beyond the first thirty pages.

  Give yourself room to learn, and to make mistakes.

If you do this ground work before you sit down at the keyboard and type "Chapter One," you'll stand a much better chance of getting to "The End." And the coolest thing about starting a novel is having justified confidence that you're going to eventually finish it.

How to Create a Character

No matter what sort of fiction you're writing, you're going to have to populate your story with characters, and a lot of them, if not all of them, you're going to have to create from scratch. Unfortunately – or maybe fortunately – there is no Betty Crocker Instant Character-In-A-Can that you can mix with water and pop into the oven for twenty minutes. There aren't any quick and easy recipes, and I don't have one either, but I do have some things that have worked for me when creating my characters, and some things that haven't. You may find my experiences useful. For what they're worth, here are my Do's and Don'ts.

- **Character Creation Do's and Don'ts**

Don’t start your character off with a name or a physical description.

I know this doesn't seem logical at first glance – after all, you name a baby before you get to know him very well. Why wouldn't you give your character a name and blue eyes before you find out anything else about him?

There are a couple of reasons. The first is that you have a lot of preconceived ideas about names and body types. Perhaps every Charlie you ever knew was a great guy, while every Barry you knew was an idiot. So when you decide to name your protagonist Charlie before you really get to meet him, he is automatically going to carry along a lot of baggage that you probably aren't even going to be aware of – but that baggage will subtly influence the direction of your story, and perhaps its outcome. And that influence won't necessarily be a benefit to your story. In the same way, maybe your heart has been broken twice by redheads, or the gorgeous surfer you dated briefly stole your credit card, did drugs in the back seat of your car and got your twin sister pregnant before dumping you and vanishing from your life forever. So you

might be carrying a grudge against redheads or good-looking men, and you might have a tendency to make every redhead in your books a bitch, or every hunk a creep in disguise.

Second, if you have a name and a physical description right away – Jane Meslie, 37, blonde with bright blue eyes and great legs and a habit of flipping her hair out of her face when she's frustrated – you're going to be tempted to look no deeper that her appearance. When she gets into trouble, you're going to fall back on that hair-flipping thing, and she's going to do it so often she'll be bald by the end of the book.

Do start developing your character by giving him a problem, a dramatic need, a compulsion.

Even if you don't have the foggiest idea what your story is going to be about yet, you don't know where it's going to take place, and you haven't found anything compelling that you'd like to say to an audience of more than one, you can do this. Say "My main character wants _____ more than anything else in the world."

What does the character want? Love, respect, courage, revenge, a kidney for his kid sister, to find the son she gave up for adoption when she was sixteen? Throw something down on the paper. It won't be written in stone and you can always go back later and change it. Or you can, when you create the character, bank him for a later book if he doesn't fit your needs once you get rolling. In writing as in life, nothing you do is ever wasted. So go ahead and jump in. Your character wants something. If he's like most people, he wants several somethings, and about the time you allow yourself to start discovering them, you'll begin to find out where your story is going, and what it will be about.

He also wants to avoid something – and these things the character wants to avoid can be more compelling by far that the things he hopes to gain. What scares him to death? Humiliation, disfigurement, pain, terminal illness, poverty? What will he do anything to avoid? What has he already done to avoid his greatest fears? Give him something that will wake him up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, hands clutching his covers, body rigid with terror. If you want to really make your character come to life, choose something that terrifies you – you'll find that when you write something that makes you shake, you'll make your reader shake, too.

A rule of good storytelling is that the protagonist will confront the thing he fears the most and overcome it in order to win the thing he desires the most. This isn't a hard-and-fast rule, and for every book where the writer followed it, you'll find at least one where the writer ignored it completely. But overall, the most satisfying stories will at least approach this rule.

Don’t rely on crutches.

I've read a number of otherwise-decent writing books that have you start out creating your character by giving him a hook – some little device that characterizes the person. Nervous whistling, jangling car keys kept in the right front pocket, a complete wardrobe of blue shirts, the anxious stroking of a rabbit's foot in moments of deep stress.

It doesn't hurt to do this, but I recommend that you do it later rather than sooner – perhaps at about the same time that you name your character. Maybe even later – say when you're in the middle of chapter three and you need your character to do something while talking to the bank teller that will make her wary.

And don't mistake a few nervous tics and a jaunty saunter for characterization. Your own character is what's inside of you – what you're made of when things get ugly and hard; whether you'll take something that doesn't belong to you if no one is looking, whether you'll tell the truth even if lying is easier, whether you'll be faithful to you wife when presented with the perfect opportunity for a no-strings-attached one-nighter. Your character has nothing to do with whether you wipe your bangs out of your eyes with the back of your hand or always wear something yellow, and the same is true of the people you'll be creating and writing.

Do empathize with your character.

This is sometimes easy. When you're writing your protagonist, and he's in deep soup, and you're pouring your soul into his struggles and his angst and spending plenty of words and sweat making making people see that he's a great guy in a tough spot, the empathy will be there. You'll know who he is and you'll care because you'll see yourself as him in the same spot. In the dreams you've had since you were a little kid, you've been the hero. You know how the routine is supposed to go.

Sometimes empathy comes a lot harder, though, and I think it's most important when it's hard. Recently I had to write the toughest scene in my life, a scene where a woman that I've gone to a great deal of trouble to make sympathetic over the course of a book and a half does something so utterly reprehensible, so unforgivable, that if I've done it right the readers will be praying for her death from that moment on. Given the choice between doing something right and doing something evil, she chooses the path of evil, and in the moment of her choosing lies the fate of her world and the rest of the story.

But her choice couldn't come out of the blue. I had to build toward it. I had to make what she did understandable, and in order to do that, I had to be able to understand it myself. It was a truly terrible act, one of the most horrible things I am capable of

imagining, and when I wrote the scene, tears ran down my face and I got queasy and I got cold and when I was through I went to bed and cried. I had to put myself in the place where that character was, and she was in hell, and she did a hellish thing – but she did it with my hands, and my mind, and my eyes.

When you write, you can only write those things you know (or the things you know will be the only things you write well, anyway.) So when you write the villain, you have to be the villain. You have to understand why the villain acts as he does, you have to know that if you were him in that situation, you would do as he does – because if you can't do this, no one who reads what you have written will believe in the characters you have created. Empathy in those moments is an agony. You have to look into the darkest part of your soul and find the part of yourself that could be a monster, and you have to put that on the page for people to see. There's no easy way past this, because your hero can only be as great as the evil he overcomes. If you can't face the evil in yourself, you hero will only overcome straw villains, and your work will lie flat and lifeless on the page.

Don’t sympathize with your character.

Empathy and sympathy are two sides of one coin – empathy is understanding, while sympathy is an affinity you share with your character that creates change, allowing the character to affect you. You must feel empathy for the characters you create, both the heroes and the villains, but you can never feel sympathy. In other words, you have to understand why your characters do what they do, but you can't let that understanding tempt you to ease their suffering, or let them take the easy way out of situations, or experience sudden miracles that remove their obstacles.

Finally, do write from your own life.

This is no picnic, either, but it's the single technique that has brought my best characters to life. I've found that when I take my worst moments, the painful, humiliating, disastrous, or simply dreadful ones that still make me cringe inside, and I change them enough to keep from getting sued, they make good fiction. And my responses, translated to the character, seem to live.

You can only write what you know, but you can take the fears and hopes and feelings you've experienced in a relatively mundane existence and translate them to a broader canvas with imagination and persistence. The fear you felt the moment your car almost slid over a guard rail or the elation you felt when you won first place on your 4-H project at the county fair translate very well into the fear your character feels on finding himself at the edge of a cliff with a sword-wielding army at his back, or the

elation she feels on discovering the secret code that gives her access to the hidden passageway.

All paintings are done from the same basic set of colors, and all characters are built from the same basic set of responses and emotions. How you use these elements – how you mix them and apply them – determines whether you'll end up with a masterpiece or something not even your grandma would hang on her wall.

I hope this list helps you get started and stay headed in the right direction while you're developing your characters. If you'd like to do more with this, do the Character Workshop in the WRITING AND SELLING section of this book. You'll have a new character when you're done.

How to Finish A Novel

The problem with novels is that you can't sit down in one day and complete one from start to finish. (At least I can't. If you can, you have my undying envy.) Novels are long. Generally, a salable length is between 90,000 and 150,000 words . . . and that, fellow writer, is a lot of words.

So how do you get from "Once upon a time . . ." to "THE END"?

These are the techniques that have worked for me.

First, know how it ends.

This may seem obvious – but then again, maybe not. Back in my days of thirty-page novel starts that never went anywhere, I never knew how the story would end. It was only when I figured this key point out that I finished a novel. (***Hearts in Stitches***), a supposed-to-be funny romance novel about a nurse and an architect that, fortunately, died by fire. Actually, was **killed** by fire. By me. On purpose. Trust me – it was kinder that way.)

You can simply tell yourself, "When I reach the part of this story where the heroine kills the villain with his own sword just as he's about to kill her in front of the bound hero, and then the heroine frees the hero and they both escape from the burning building." You can hold that in your head and work with it, and it may be enough.

If it isn't, go to the next step.

Write your ending, and then write to it.

You may discover, on thinking about your ending, that you can't quite get all the little ins and outs of that climactic scene or series of scenes clear in your head. There may be a lot happening – it can be very tough to keep multiple threads in a complex story straight.

If this is the case, as it often is for me, write the last scene or couple of scenes, or the big climax scene, if you're going to do a bit of wrapping up after that's finished. Pretend the entire rest of the book is done, pretend that everything is already in place, and just start writing.

When you do this, you'll probably discover that there are things you're going to have to put in place earlier in the book so that you can have them available to use during the climax. You know how all those carefully hidden clues in mystery novels suddenly reveal themselves in the last scene, and you smack yourself on the head and say, "I should have seen that coming – how did the writer **do** that so cleverly?" Well, this is how. The writer wrote the ending, then filled up the middle with all the stuff he'd already used, disguising it and throwing red herrings around it so that you wouldn't catch on.

Neat, huh?

But maybe you're having trouble bridging the vast gap between your hot beginning and that elusive end. If so, here's the first way you can get through the middle.

Create five or six "candy-bar" scenes, and use them to keep you moving forward.

First, let me define a "candy-bar" scene. It's one that you're just itching to write – something sweet enough that you can dangle it on a stick in front of yourself so that you can say, "When I've done these next three chapters, I'll get to write **that** one.

If you're doing fantasy, maybe one of your candy-bar scenes will be the one where the hero discovers for the first time that he can control some magical force or element . . . but that he can't yet control it very well. You can just imagine the trouble you're going to cause for him, and how much fun you're going to have causing it.

If you're writing mainstream, maybe the thing you're most itching to put on paper is the moment when your main character discovers that she isn't alone in the world – that somewhere out there, she has a half-sister . . . and now all she has to do is find her.

If you're writing romance, maybe the hot-and-heavy scenes are the ones you can use for candy-bars. (Or maybe not. Every time I write a sex scene, I feel like my mom is looking over my shoulder, saying, "And just where did you learn **that**?")

Make sure your candy-bar scenes are spread out through the book, not all clumped together. Write down a single sentence for each of them. Don't allow yourself to do anymore than that, or you'll lose the impetus to move through the intervening scenes.

Even if you have your ending in place and great candy-bar scenes to lure yourself onward, though, there are things that can keep you from finishing. If you're still having trouble, check out these next few suggestions and see if any bells start ringing.

Write about people you enjoy spending time with.

This isn't the same as writing about people you like. You can really hate some of your characters, but still enjoy spending time with them, simply because what they do is so interesting. You don't use the same criteria for picking story characters that you do for picking friends. But if, every time one of your main characters walks onto the page, your first thought is, "Oh, God – that old bore," it's time to rethink your cast list. Kill him, improve him . . . or just erase him.

Use an outline.

This is, I know, anathema to many writers. Some believe it makes the process of writing mechanical. Some think it removes the element of discovery from the writing process.

But I've been using outlines since I started. I've only written one book without one (***Sympathy for the Devil***) and I haven't found outlines at all restraining. Remember that an outline is only a map. If you find some unmarked side roads you want to explore once you're moving well, explore them. If you discover an entirely different route than the one you mapped out, take it. My finished books only bear passing resemblance to the novels that come from them . . . but the outline allows me to check from time to time to make sure my new route will still get me to my chosen destination.

Allow yourself to be surprised.

This is for the other half of the writing universe – the half that sticks rigidly to the outline, that takes characters who go off in their own directions as a personal affront, and that feels that the writer must control the story at all times.

Breathe, guys.

Control is seriously overrated. Take this from the person who used to write thirty-page chapters. Not twenty-nine. Not thirty-one. Thirty. Every chapter. I was proud of the fact that I could write a story that would have the exact word count called for in the contract.

Life is too short for that sort of nonsense. And when you're writing, why put yourself on a Procrustean bed and whack off your own feet, just to maintain your rigid sense of control? If your subconscious mind is taking your character in a new direction . . . it's still you. You're still the writer. You can stop the process at any time. But if you don't ever let yourself go off on tangents, you'll never discover the amazing secrets you've been hiding from yourself.

And your writing will be dry and forced, and you may discover that you have less and less reason to finish each book, because you know there will be no surprises.

Write because you want to, not because you should.

Nobody **should** write a book. If writing isn't something you're doing because you love it, don't do it, because it isn't a quick way to riches and it isn't a quick way to fame. It's hard work – the thing you might be finding out when you're sitting down to try to finish your book and hitting the invisible wall.

Write what you love, not "what sells."

Back to ***Hearts in Stitches***, the one romance novel I tried. I had this vision of myself as a romance novelist, putting out one book every two months and sitting on a bank account that would shame Fort Knox. The problem with this lovely image is that I was writing romance not because it was what I loved with a passion, but because I didn't mind romances, and some of them I thought were kind of cute, and I thought they'd be an easy way to make a buck. Here's a little lesson I learned from that experiment – there is no harder money to make than "easy money." I had to beat myself with a baseball bat to finish that book, and when it was done, it wasn't very good. It was competent – I got personal rejections with comments from each place I sent it – but it lacked heart and soul.

When I moved into SF and fantasy and started writing what I loved simply because I loved it, I started selling. I sold the first book I wrote to the first place I sent it. Which isn't a guarantee that you will do the same. You won't have to hurt yourself to finish your books if you're doing what you love, though. **What you will not do for love, you should not do for money.**

And that's my take on getting from the beginning of your novel to the end. I hope these tips point you in the right direction and make the experience fun and exciting for you.

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly, or How To Choose A Writers' Group

I know I'm not in the majority when I recommend that you get involved with a writers' group. Dean Koontz apparently loathes them, Harlan Ellison despises them, and I've read advice from dozens of other pros whose work I love and whose opinions I value who say writers' groups will do everything from steal your soul to cause your writing to break out in pox.

Nonetheless, I strongly recommend that you get involved with a good writers' group when you're getting started. I credit what I learned from my early groups (plus enormous amounts of hard work and persistence) with leading me to publication. The Unknown Writers' Group and Schrodinger's Petshop (Essentially Bizarre, But Cats Like Us) pushed me to succeed.

But I was lucky. I got in on the ground floor of each group, and each group was good. I heard horror stories of other writers' groups in the area (we acquired a lot of their fallout members) and discovered that not all groups are created equal.

In this column I'll assume that you have at least one writers' group in your area with an opening. (Many places do. If you don't, we'll fix that in a later column.) Print this list off, take it to a meeting or two with you, and keep your eyes and ears open. Here's what you look for.

(I refer from time to time to the Schrodinger's Petshop Handbook, which I wrote years ago, because as long as we used it, we had a great group. If you'd like to read the whole thing in advance, you'll find it in the following chapter.)

Good, Bad, or Ugly?

RULES	EXAMPLES
Does the group have a clearly defined goal, preferably in writing? This can be something as simple as “We want to see something new from each writer at each meeting,” or as elaborate as a mission statement. However, if the members of the group haven't taken the time to define their purpose, they probably don't know where they're going. And neither will you.	The Schrodinger's Petshop Mission Statement
Does the group have any interest in the type of writing you want to do? This may seem irrelevant to you – you may be thinking “We're all writers, right? They'll be glad to help me.” Unfortunately it isn't true. The worst horror stories I got were from writers who wanted to write SF or romances and attended meetings at the other large local group in the area. They found themselves and their work attacked as substandard, unworthy, and stupid – in spite of the fact that many of them did very good work. They were not, you see, considered sufficiently “literary” to be worth anybody's time.	Schrodinger's Petshop's Writer Requirements
Does the membership arrive and get to work, or does everyone just stand around and talk about writing? Pretty early in the meeting, everyone should start moving toward the chairs. Manuscript pages ought to start appearing in hands, and pens and notepads ought to come out. You should see people beginning to discuss the writing they have in front of them, in whatever critique format they use. The group should not spend more than half	

an hour hanging out and gossiping.

Are there any rules for people who are criticizing each others work to follow?

This is so important. One nasty writer with a mean streak can destroy a talented beginner, and use his critique time as a way to grind the "competetion" into powder. This is stupid, it sucks, and it's pointless. There is a better way. Critiques should deal only with the work, should be constructive, and should be short. If one person takes more than ten minutes to discuss a piece of work, that's a good sign that the meetings are poorly controlled.

Schrodinger's Petshop Rules of Critiquing p.38

Are there any rules for people whose work is being criticized to follow?

Again, this is essential. People get very defensive when others are telling them what they did wrong, and their first impulse seems to be to argue. The critique-ee needs to have rules to follow, too, and the first of these needs to be "Shut up and listen." If people have taken the time to read or listen to what you wrote, take the time to hear what they have to say about it.

Schrodinger's Petshop Rules of Being Critiqued p.39

Does the group have set guidelines for behavior, and a way to remove troublesome members?

Shouldn't be necessary, should it? After all, everybody's an adult. Or at least literate. At least that's the theory.

In fact, however, a removal rule is necessary. You can get a great group together, and you can be having wonderful meetings, and someone will unsuspectingly bring the Writer From Hell with him to a meeting. This writer

Schrodinger's Petshop Membership Guidelines p.37

will ignore the rules, attack the other writers, try to hog the meeting, refuse to even consider changing a word of his precious story, and make life miserable for everyone. The group MUST have a way, stated in advance, of getting rid of this nightmare.

Do the people who are there like each other?

If the other folks at the meeting spend most of the meeting talking about what a bitch Dorothy is or how they suspect John is writing in English as a poorly-learned third language, or if they snap at each other, cut each other down, or are brutal with each other's manuscripts, RUN AWAY! They will be no kinder to you and your work.

You'll need a few meetings to get a feel for the group dynamics. You'll usually find that the group falls into one of the following types: Circle of Friends, Master and Slaves, or Sharks and Dinner.

Circle of Friends

Usually a group of writers all working on about the same level. Either nobody has published yet, or a few have started making small sales, or everyone has started selling, or a bunch of pros got together to hang out on Saturday nights.

Sometimes you can find a Circle of Friends open to people working at all levels, from beginner to pro, but this has to be a group that is very tightly run or it will end up being a Master and Slaves group. Schrodinger's Petshop managed to be an all-levels Circle of Friends for years (though the group did eventually disintegrate), but while it held together we were careful to enforce the

handbook rules, we threw out anyone who broke them, and we had no group leader, by design. We made every effort to keep the group egalitarian and we actively recruited beginners. Most groups aren't like this.

In general, your best bet for a writing group will be a Circle of Friends on your level.

Master and Slaves

Usually a group put together by one pro and open to beginners. This is generally designed as a teaching group, with the pro as the teacher, and this kind of group can be either good or terrible, depending on the pro. If you have someone who loves to teach, who is genuinely interested in seeing the members get published, and whose work appeals to you enough that you think you could learn from him, then a Master and Slaves group will be okay.

If, however, your existence in the group is solely to provide ego-boosts for the master, then you aren't likely to get much that will help you get published. Listening to the master read a new chapter of his book every week on the theory that this will allow you to see a work in progress, while never getting to present your own work, is a sure sign that you are in the presence of a raving egotist. Say bye-bye.

Sharks and Dinner

Any tightly knit clique that tears apart those not in the Inner Circle. In a Sharks and Dinner group, you'll notice all the signs of evil in the first meeting or two – people

afraid to read their work to others, people speaking viciously of those not present, brutal critiques of works that are read, open hostility toward anything not written in the group's approved style or genre, people that come to one meeting and never return, and a general Fall of the House of Usher darkness.

NEVER join a Sharks and Dinner group. Remember, even if they let you be one of the Sharks ... when they smell blood in the water, sharks will eat their own.

Does everybody bring work to each meeting, or do you hear from the same three people?

In general, avoid all groups where you get to hear from only one or two writers, and everyone else sits around and talks about what they'll write someday.

Is anybody happy to see you?

Do people make an effort to include you? Did anyone ask you your name? Did you like anyone there?

Furthermore, are you happy to be there? Do you look forward to going to meetings? When you get home, do you want to write, or do you want to become an accountant?

I'd link the theme song from *Cheers* here, but it would slow your reading. Just think of the theme song, and you'll get the idea.

If it isn't fun, if it doesn't add something positive to your life, don't waste your time.

I hope this helps you find a writers' group that will help you get published.

HOLLY LISLE

- **Schrodinger's Petshop Members' Handbook**

Part One – Purposes and Goals

Schrodinger's Petshop, established in May of 1988, grew out of a core of aspiring science fiction and fantasy writers who wanted to write better and sell our work, and who weren't able to find a writers' group or program that met our needs and interests. We've met on a regular basis since, constantly growing and changing to meet the needs of our admittedly esoteric membership.

Our main goal it to help each other get published. We do this by presenting and participating in workshops on our varied areas of expertise, by reading and critiquing each other's work, and by encouraging each other to submit finished works. We also provide networking, contacts with professionals in the field, and a chance to meet other local talents with similar interests.

Some of our members have gone from unpublished writer to pro since joining, others have published in both commercial and small presses, and still others are just now beginning to submit work. Some are still learning how to finish work.

We are open to members of all levels of experience, and of all ages and interests. We have members who are experienced in novel-writing, in short-fiction writing, in non-fiction, and in poetry. However, we are strongly biased in favor of science fiction, fantasy, and horror (speculative fiction) subject matter. We are not a general-interest writers' group. If you want to write mainstream or non-fiction or works in other genres, but have no interest in speculative fiction, we are not the group for you.

While we have a great deal of fun at our meetings, we are not geared toward socializing. We are a working writers' group, and our main premise is that writers write. If you join, be prepared to read what you are working on, to take criticism, and also to give it. We'll help you achieve your goal of getting your stories into print – your goal is one we share.

Welcome to Schrodinger's Petshop.

Schrodinger's Petshop Rules of Order

Here are the rules of order used at meetings – far better in my opinion than Robert's Rules of Order.

1) No throwing of objects not actually owned by you.

2) No duelling indoors.

3) Absolutely no blood on the carpet, or on any latex flat-painted surface.

4) Anyone making allegations of questionable parentage about another writer must be prepared to provide proof.

5) Payment for all emergency medical services and supplies required during the course of the meeting are the sole responsibility of the person or persons who made them necessary.

Schrodinger's Rules of Critiquing

1) Critique the writing, never the writer. Never say, “You are...” or “You should...” Instead say, “The writing is...” or “The story should...”

2) Find what is right in each piece as well as what is wrong.

3) Don't say, “This is how I would write it;” how you would write it isn't the point.

4) Remember that subject matter is personal. You don't have to like a story to give it a fair critique.

5) Remember what your biases are and critique around them.

6) Remember that real people wrote this stuff, and real people have real feelings.

Things you may not say while critiquing.

“That's awful.”

“That's stupid.”

“You couldn't write your way out of a paper bag.”

Schrodinger's Rules of Being Critiqued

1) Listen. The person who is speaking has taken the time to listen to your work, and wants to help you find ways to make it better.

2) Wait until everyone has finished critiquing before making comments.

3) Explain only if necessary. Don't rebut.

4) Take notes.

5) Realize that everything can be improved.

6) Be willing to make changes. Conversely, don't change anything you feel must remain in order to make the story yours.

Things you may not say when being critiqued.

“You're wrong.”

“You're an idiot.”

“Your mother was a hamster and your father smelled of elderberries.”

General Information

Meetings are on alternate Wednesdays, beginning at 7:00 p.m. unless otherwise noted.

Traditionally, members bring food and drink to the host's house to share. No alcohol – some of our members are under-age.

Bring something you are working on to read.

Bring pen or pencil and paper (you'll need a notebook with tear-out pages so that you can give other members your critiques.)

For the time being, there are no dues, but stamps used for mailing the newsletter are needed. Note: for special members, (i.e., members who do not attend meetings but still want to get the newsletter,) stamps have become a necessity. We mail bi-weekly. Twenty-six first-class stamps will keep you up-to-date for a year.

Bring friends. We'll find someplace to seat everyone.

Meeting sites rotate among members who have volunteered to host. You'll find a starter kit of maps folded into the back of this handbook. Glue, staple, or otherwise affix them to your handbook, or some other convenient location – but don't lose them. Members move, and maps change – you'll get updates as they become necessary.

You'll find a current member list with the maps. This is for your convenience – but strictly confidential. You'll note familiar professional names among our members, as well as folks who don't want their phone numbers or street addresses generally available.

Benefits of Membership

The biggest benefit is obviously the privilege of attending meetings (and sometimes the honor of hosting one). At meetings, your work is heard by professionals, semi-pros, and aspiring writers, and critiqued on the basis of its marketability. You will get marketing information and occasional updates on markets, meet folks who can help you make professional connections, and have a lot of fun.

Attending meetings is a privilege and not a right. Memberships can be revoked – for failure to follow critiquing rules, for failure to follow protocol in being critiqued, or by a general vote of the other members.

As a member, you'll also receive the newsletter HyperspaceZOO, which comes out every other week and keeps you up to date on Petshop events and the doings of its members. The ZOO also contains columns on writing, book reviews, and other things you may find useful.

Petshop members occasionally travel in packs. If you're going to a con and other members are going, you can save some money by rooming together.

We are currently discussing the possibility of hosting a SF convention in Fayetteville. This isn't a sure thing, but certainly something to keep in mind if you enjoy cons and would like to become involved in running one.

About Writing for the HyperspaceZOO

The ZOO has added an Outside Opinons column. If you would like to submit an article, maximum word length for a single article is 600 words. Maximum series length is three issues. I'm open to any aspect of writing, from articles on technical writing to personal experiences to how you do research. I require professionally

formatted submissions – that is, typed, double-spaced, with your name, title, and page number at the top of each page. I don't pay. I'm not a professional publication. If you send something to me, do it for the experience you'll get, or because you can share something of relevance with our membership, or because you love the Petshop. You'll retain all rights – because of our limited membership and mailing list, professional publications will not even consider a previous publication with us as the use of your First North American Serial Rights.

Note: If you submit a piece that has been published elsewhere, make sure you still own reprint rights on it and can legally do so. I don't want to infringe on anyone else's copyright.

Schrodinger's Petshop Press

We're considering doing chapbook-style publications of members' work. Format would be similar to what you see in your hand-book, printing costs would have to be absorbed by the members involved in each project, and marketing would be up to the interested individuals.

This is just something we're thinking about for the time being – if you're interested, let me know. The chapbook format would lend itself nicely to speculative fiction poetry, small collections of short stories, or individual printing of novelettes. I confess that I'd like to see theme-centered collections of short stuff, Schrodinger's Petshop Travels In Time, The Magical Petshop, and even ZOOfolk & Deals With The Devil.

One Good Enemy

Once upon a time, (back in 1985), I quit my nursing job to write a book. I was twenty-five years old, my husband made enough money that if we were careful we could pay bills and I could still stay home with both kids and work on the book, and I could have the chance I wanted to do what I wanted with my life. So I stayed home, and I wrote the book (it was a romance novel) and it was ... well, it was, at best, mediocre, and then only if I wish to be kind to my fledgling effort. Actually, it was bad. I was looking at writing romances as my ticket to freedom because they seemed easy to write, not because they were what I loved beyond words. My lack of passion came through on the page, and when I sent the book out, it came back. Repeatedly.

I was crushed. I cried. I sank into a funk. I'd been so sure that all I had to do to make it as a writer was write, and publishers would buy what I wrote. Well, I was young and naive, and I didn't yet realize that in order to sell what you do, in order to sell someone else on the words you've put on the page, you need to put your heart and your soul and perhaps even a pound of your flesh into them. You have to take your life and burn it onto the paper. At twenty-five, my experiences with life were still fairly limited, but even so, I could have done better than I did.

So.

Once upon a time, having quit a good Baylor weekend nursing job to spend a year writing a book, and having failed at the writing of said book, I had to go back to nursing with my tail tucked between my legs, while my husband and my family and his family all said, “Well, we didn't think it was going to work out anyhow, and we

were right, and now you know you can't make it as a writer." And other equally encouraging things.

I worked the new nursing job. I wrote some short stories in my spare time (now science fiction, because I was beginning to understand that I needed to be working on stories I cared deeply about) but everything I wrote came back. Everything. Time passed.

In 1988, I managed to place a story ("Beneath the Wailing Wind") with a magazine that paid in copies (Cosmic Landscapes). The editor, Dan Petipas, wrote me an enthusiastic note, and I danced around in glee and told my husband and my family that I'd finally sold something.

The response was underwhelming.

I hadn't made a million dollars, and everyone told me the "sale" was nice but if no money exchanged hands, well ... writing was really a waste of my time, wasn't it? From their perspective, it wasn't even a very good hobby, because at least with crocheting, you got a nice afghan for all the time you invested.

The story never made it into print. Dan changed the magazine format and I lost my computer copy, so "Beneath the Wailing Wind" died to the world. But in the meantime, I'd gotten in on the ground floor of a new SF/fantasy writers' group, and had become editor of the newsletter because I had more publishing experience than anyone else in the group. I did have that one acceptance letter, after all. And I had written a whole book, even if it sucked.

I kept writing. I kept not selling. My marriage, which had been a serious mistake, (I married a man whom I discovered much later was both a closet homosexual and a pedophile), hit the skids in a big way. I was still nursing. I was still writing. And suddenly I was looking for a way out of a private hell, and facing off against a determined enemy, who told me point-blank, "You've never been out on your own. You'll never make it without me."

Galvanizing words, those.

"You'll never make it without me."

My response, never voiced out loud, was, "Oh, yeah? Just watch me."

1989. I sold my guitar and my typewriter and a couple of other things to get together my first month's rent, and got myself a cheap place near where he lived (because I had pushed for joint custody, and had gotten it. I did research when things were going to pieces and discovered that the only kids not terribly scarred by the divorce of their

parents were those whose parents both remained equally involved in their lives. This statistic did not include children whose fathers turned out to be child molesters, but I didn't know anything about Barry's preferences yet. I just knew he didn't like me.) I worked my Baylor weekend nursing job to pay my bills, and I took care of my kids, and in my spare time I wrote.

God, I wrote like a fiend. Why?

Because of that smug smile, and that damnably calm little assertion – "You'll never make it without me." Because of the implication behind it – you are nothing on your own. Because I knew he wanted me to fail; because I knew that he, with his country club membership and Jaycees activities and the vice-presidency of his father's business, saw himself as a success; because I knew he took great pleasure in the fact that I lived in a tiny little apartment with cardboard boxes for furniture.

1991. I wrote, and the book I wrote was Fire in the Mist. You'll have heard of that one if you've read my work. It was my first published novel. I sent it out, and the first publishing house I sent it to called me back a month later to buy it. One month from mail to sale. A bit of magic I never expected, though I did dare to hope. Aside from two sonnets that I sold to Aboriginal, ($25 apiece), it was my first real sale. My first validation. My first proof (aside from the nursing job) that I could make my dreams into reality.

Why did Fire in the Mist sell?

Because I wrote my heart and my life and my anger into it; because I transmuted my pain into story; because I was battling against an enemy and my blood boiled and I raged inside and I was determined that I would ... not ... fail. I swore that I could not fail – that no matter how long it took, no matter how hard I had to drive myself, I would show him that I could make it without him. He would eat his words.

And he ate his words. I sold enough books to go full-time. My books showed up with great regularity in the local bookstores. People mentioned them to him. I became known in town as a Real Writer. I was a guest at conventions and conferences; I was nominated for and sometimes won awards; all of this showed up in the local newspaper, alongside pictures of smiling me. I knew that knife twisted, and I took pleasure in the knowledge.

This isn't an enlightening, warm-fuzzies sort of story. This is, instead, a tale of revenge won with no weapon but a computer and a brain; a tale of anger and hurt and disillusionment transmuted into gold; a story, finally, of growing beyond the need for revenge. Finally, years later, I could look beyond showing him that I could make it without him. Finally, I could walk away from twisting the knife, and take pleasure in

my accomplishments because they were mine, and because I loved my work. Finally I buried the ghost of “You'll never make it without me.”

But that came later. Much later. And without the drive I got from needing my revenge; I don't know that it would have come at all. I might have stayed with my nursing job, unhappy because I wanted something different, dreaming of writing without ever making it happen. I might have felt the desire without ever fulfilling it; I might have longed and yearned and done nothing. Failing that first time left its scars. I can still, after all these years, close my eyes and feel the humiliation and the shame of thinking I could win, and losing so publicly. Fear of feeling that humiliation again could have kept me in a cage of my own creation for the rest of my life. Without the push of “You'll never make it without me,” I might have succumbed to the fear, and in so doing failed myself.

Now.

Here is where this grim little tale reaches out and touches you. When you're complaining that you aren't getting enough support for your writing; when you're down because everything you write is coming back; when you aren't burning when you put the words on the page and the stories you tell come only from your head, and not from your soul; when you are praying that things will get easier ... maybe you need to stop and consider the possibility that you're praying for the wrong thing. Maybe you don't need a friend to tell you what you want to hear, to cheer you up, to make you feel good about yourself. Maybe you don't need positive feedback, warm fuzzies, understanding and compassion, people who will believe in you.

Maybe what you should be praying for is one good enemy.

That Our Reach Exceed Our Grasp

The first thing any good book has to do is tell a story that's worth reading. Writers' manuals give that advice pretty regularly – "Tell a story worth reading." Hard to argue with the advice. After all, it's true. And when you're writing, it also helps if you're telling this story about a character you care about; simply stated, if you don't care what happens to the character, why should anyone else? You ought to have a plot that holds together, as well, though some books that have no more plot than my cat sell remarkably well anyway, so I'd be lying to you if I told you this was essential. It helps if you can keep the story moving along at a decent pace, and *really* helps if you have the concepts of scope and sweep firmly in hand and are working on a book that has both.

If you have all of that going for you, you'll probably be writing bestsellers before too long, and that's a good thing. It isn't everything, but it is a good thing.

Why isn't it everything?

Because there are some books that are about more than story, character, plot. There are some books that not only give you a good read for the money, but that reach inside of you and grab your heart and your soul , and twist. Theodore Sturgeon wrote several, though the one that comes immediately to my mind is *Godbody*. It was about ... ah. It was about both the pain and the transcendence of being human. It was about love that encompassed all of life, that changed everything it touched, that transformed. It was a magical book, and it was magical because Ted Sturgeon was not afraid to rip his heart out of his body and type it onto the page where you and I and everyone could read it. He imbued *Godbody* with not just a story, but with a spirit, and if you can read the book and not be touched – ennobled – transformed by it, I wonder at your species.

People write for different reasons – they have different goals in mind. And I can't say that the writer who has made 'make a million dollars per book' his primary goal has anything to be ashamed of, or that the one who wants to touch the lives of each of his readers and leave them with something more when they finish the book than they had when they started should be nominated for sainthood. Personally, I wouldn't mind doing both, and I'm neither saint nor villain. I do know that the thing that keeps me happy as I write is not the hope of a big payoff but the hope that somehow I will someday manage to reach inside the hearts of my readers, as Ted Sturgeon reached inside of my heart, and twist. And that those readers will say, as I said, 'Oh. I understand more now. I'm more complete now. And I want to give back.'

It's a struggle for me to explain why this matters so much to me. I can't tell you with conviction that there is life after death; I can't swear that anything we do here will face an accounting later, and frankly I doubt any such accounting. I don't proclaim that searching for the meaning in my life will improve my karma, clear up my skin, or improve my sex life, either. But I do think that as humans, we owe the best of who we are – more ... the best of who we can be – to ourselves, to our fellow human beings, and to the future. Not because if we slack off an angry deity is going to blast us with thunderbolts or roast us in eternal torment. Not because its better to play the odds and be good just in case. I read a prayer once, and I believe it was attributed to Thomas Aquinas, and I'm probably misquoting it terribly, but the gist of it was, 'If I worship you because I hope to gain heaven, withhold heaven from me; and if I worship you because I fear hell, then throw me into hell; but if I worship you because I love you, don't deny me your presence, or turn your face from me.' I always thought that prayer showed guts, and what I'm saying here is, in a way, the same thing.

This isn't about worship, or about prayer. But it is about doing what we do with our lives not because we expect to get something good in reward, or because we're afraid we might get something awful as punishment, but because our love and our compassion and our *selves* are all we have to offer to each other or to the future that are worth a damn. Our best is the only gift we have to give that is worthy of us, or of those who will receive. Life is short. Love is rare, and hard to find. Your soul – my soul – poured freely into our work, no matter what work we do, ennobles the work. Ennobles us. Leaves a trace of something good behind, something that wasn't there before. Something that can, perhaps, continue after we're dust.

Ted Sturgeon was already dead when I read *Godbody*. I wept when I finished the book, not because he was dead, but because he had once been alive, and while he was alive his love had driven him to leave a legacy that made my life better. He had within him some magnificent species of passion that allowed him to paint his soul across the pages of a book, and leave it there where it could reach out to me, and where it could show me at a point in my life where I had given up on people, on love,

and on idealism, that I had quit too soon – but that I could stand up again. That I could go on.

Perhaps I'll never reach the place in my writing where I can touch the soul of a stranger from across the abyss of death. Maybe I don't have in me what it takes to change the world, or to change a life. But I want to live my life knowing that I gave everything I had – and if my reach forever exceeds my grasp, I will not die knowing I could have been more. To me, that is the challenge of writing.

More, it is the challenge of life.

Section 2: WRITING AND SELLING

Your Book is NOT Your Baby

I've heard a lot of writers refer to their books as their babies. And many have even extended the analogy further – they say they gestate the thing for nine months, go through terrible pain to get it out into the world ... and then it never calls or writes, and when it's out on its own, it doesn't become a rich doctor as they had hoped it would, but instead bums around the beach and drinks cheap wine out of a paper bag.

It's a cute analogy. But it doesn't have much to do with writing a book. I've written books, and I've had babies, and as I, (and a whole bunch of chagrined sixteen-year-old girls) could tell you, once the baby is planted, you don't really have to do a whole lot to make sure it arrives nine months later. It will come whether you're ready or not.

Unlike babies, books will not arrive if you sit around on you butt watching soap operas or reading the funnies or talking on the phone to your girlfriends. Books arrive only if you expend concentrated effort over a long term. Every day you have to hold what you wrote the day before and the week before and the month before in the back of your mind, and simultaneously you have to keep a part of your focus on what you intend to write the next day, and the next week, and the next month.

If short-story writers are like sprinters, and the writers of novellas are like milers, then novelists are marathoners. The ones who write books over 150,000 words are the Iron Men of the writing world.

Thinking about writing your book as running a marathon doesn't feel quite as charming as that image you had of popping out a cute little hard-bound baby, does it? I think the image helps, though. It keeps you honest with yourself. If you acknowledge that what you're doing, and what you intend to keep on doing, is hard work, you won't be so shocked when, thirty pages or a hundred pages or two hundred

pages in, writing the novel stops being unalloyed fun and starts hurting. You hit walls with writing, the same way marathoners hit walls in their running. You exhaust the inspiration that got you through the first part, and you're nowhere near enough to the finish line to find any comfort or encouragement there. You have a hundred or so pages behind you and four-hundred or so pages ahead of you, and all of a sudden you realize that somebody stuck a hill in the middle of your track. And it goes up, not down.

So what you need to hear now is that after a little bit the adrenaline kicks in and you get your second wind, right? That the hill turns out to be an illusion. That it gets easier.

Bad news. There ain't no second wind; the hill is real; nothing ever gets easier. Completing a novel is hard. Really hard. As hard as running a marathon. You're impressed with the people you know who have completed marathons, whether or not their times were any good? You should have the same admiration for the folks you know who have completed novels, whether or not those books have sold. Even crappy novels require a faith and a dedication and a commitment that says good things about the folks who wrote them.

What gets you (or any writer) to the end of the book is not inspiration, or second wind, or a visit from the Book Fairy. It's process – and dogged, unswerving, stubborn commitment to process. It's promising yourself that you are going to write every day, by god, whether you feel like it or not. And it's keeping that promise when you don't feel like it. It's doing ten pages a day on the days that you can, and at least one page a day on the days when you think you can't do any. It's putting bad words on paper if you don't have any other words, just to meet your goals and keep your promise to yourself. It's trusting that better words will come, even if only in the rewrites.

It is accepting that writing a book is not about finishing the thing and sticking it in the mail, because that happens only rarely, and lasts for only a moment. Writing a book is no more about typing THE END than running a marathon is about crossing the finish line. Running the marathon is about picking up your feet and putting them down, one step at a time, for twenty-six miles – every one of those steps is exactly as valuable as every other one. Writing the novel is about filling five hundred double-spaced pages, one word at a time, day after day, until it's done. And every single word matters.

When it's done, you don't have an infant to love and gush and coo over. You have a piece of work that will require fixing – demanding more words, more pages, more patience. But you also have an achievement that you and you alone can claim. The woman who gives birth to a baby can claim credit all she wants, but you know and I know and she knows that she didn't make that baby. It grew without any input from

her, and she can no more change the color of his eyes or the curve of his smile than she can give him wings and make him fly.

You, on the other hand, made your book. You built it one word at a time, and you can take credit for every cell and molecule and atom of its existence. You and you alone gave it life, and you did it the hard way.

One word at a time, plodding up the hill, going on because you promised yourself you would.

One word at a time. Process. Promises. Commitment.

When you finished it, you earned the right to be proud. And you probably were. Until you got an idea for another one. Writing books is like running marathons in another way, too. It's addictive. You crave the challenge after a while. You crave the “writers' high” that you get on those days when the pages flow from your fingertips. And you crave the pleasure that comes from knowing that you can do something most people only dream of doing.

So go write. You aren't hatching a baby. You're building your own trophy. And you can make it exactly the way you want it. “This is mine,” you'll say. And you will have earned the right.

Say What You Mean

You want to talk about fear? This is where the process of writing comes right down to sweat under the armpits, racing pulse, dry mouth, and the urge to get up and go to the bathroom, or to switch over from the word processor to Maxis “Space Cadet” for five or ten quick games of pinball, or where the dust on the ceiling suddenly becomes an unbearable affront that you have to get rid of Right Now. This is where facing anything else becomes preferable to facing the words on the page, because the words on the page are about to get up and bite you on the nose. You are faced with uncomfortable truth and the urge to pussyfoot around an issue, and you have to decide which way you want to go – be honest, or whitewash. Here's my advice.

Say what you mean.

Ewww. It has all the appeal of picking your nose in public.

Writers live in abject terror of saying what they really mean, of being clearly and absolutely understood, of having no room in which they can back and fill and say, “You aren't seeing that the way I wrote it.” They will, under most circumstances, choose to waffle, to squirm, to take the easy way out.

Don't believe me? Look briefly at the most pervasive current example of writers who, when faced with saying what they meant, chickened out. Princess Diana died in a car crash recently, and no matter how hard you avoid the news and current events, and how much you detest the sort of celebrity gossip that pervades common culture, you have probably heard about this. Writers have gotten more lines out of her death than they got out of anything since the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But in all those lines of print, in all those reams of notes read on-air, how many times did you hear or read that Diana 'died?'

Think about this for a second. I've heard that she 'passed' and that 'she's left us' and that she's 'gone.' I've heard of 'her tragedy' and 'her spirit living on' and a handful of other euphemisms. But for the life of me, I can't recall a single instance, outside of comedians making jokes about the whole thing, where someone said, “She's dead.”

Well, death is one of those uncomfortable subjects, because we all know we're going to die, and none of us are too crazy about looking closely at the reality of the matter. And Diana's death was unnerving. She was young and rich and pretty and famous and that didn't save her. She went into a wall in a car while not wearing her seat belt and she died, just like poor commoners do, thus proving that nobody gets out of this alive. So you can almost (not quite, but almost) excuse the nervous tap dancing of the writers who took on her death and crapped out.

But not quite. After all, they did crap out. They didn't say what they meant.

Usually it isn't a matter of life or death, though, is it? Let's say we're talking about you. You're working on your book, and one of the characters is loosely based on your Aunt Elene, who besides being fat and obnoxious also happens to be an alcoholic lesbian, and she makes a great character in a book except that you know damn well if she ever reads what you've written, she's going to know you were writing about her, and she's going to be pissed. And what about the readers who object to your use of the word 'fat?' Never mind that Aunt Elene weighs a bit over four hundred pounds and she does NOT have a glandular problem – you are going to have readers tell you that you shouldn't have called her 'fat.' Differently sized, maybe. And that lesbian thing – she calls herself a dyke, but when you call her a dyke in the book, you can hear the chainsaws revving up. 'Dyke' is a word that you can't use unless you are one, isn't it?

So now you have some hard choices to make, and they aren't life or death, but what you decide is going to determine whether you have a story with meat on its bones or something that won't offend anybody, but won't tell any truths, either.

I'm sitting here right now, and my heart is pounding, because I know that what I am going to say is going to anger some of you. And I also know I'm going to say it anyway, because it's important, and you need to hear it. You especially need to hear it if you think that 'differently abled' is an appropriate synonym for 'crippled,' or that 'appearance-challenged' is a better use of the English language than 'ugly.' Or if you buy into the nonsense that 'herstory' is a correct noun for 'revisionist history where women are the heroes.'

We are not all the same on this planet, folks. We are not actually black or white or red or yellow – we are in fact various shades of brown, and genetically we are closer to each other than a bunch of over-bred Cocker spaniels at an AKC show. But we are

not all the same. We are fat and thin and skinny; we are smart and stupid, geniuses and retards; we are straight and queer and everything in between; we are sick and healthy; we are tall and short; we are moral and immoral, good and evil; we are honest and we are liars. We come in two sexes, male and female, and no matter what current Women's Studies classes say, women are not inherently better or purer or more noble than men; and no matter what the old guard at the country club says, men are not inherently better or purer or more capable than women. Some women are smarter than some men, some men are smarter than some women, and screwing around with the English language to censor any admission of this fact is not going to change the fact. Nor is it going to change the fact that Aunt Elene is fat and stinks of sweat even on cool days, or that she's a rude, self-centered, demanding woman who thinks the world owes her something because she's a lesbian. She is who she is – a person and an individual. She is not a member of a class, nor is she an archetype or a symbol, and you can't compare her to any other people you know. She is who she is. And if you try to sugar-coat her to keep from offending people who are looking for the chance to be offended, you are going to end up eviscerating everything about her that makes her interesting.

Say what you mean.

Weasel words are for cowards. They are for people who cannot face up to the fact that life is not fair, and is never going to be fair. Weasel words are for people who want to tell everyone else what they can and cannot think, on the theory that if these weasel-writers can just control all those evil, smelly thoughts, the world will turn into a peaceful, matriarchal or patriarchal, gentle place where everyone is the same as everyone else – colorless, genderless, sexless, passive, obedient, inoffensive. The theory here is that if you call the turd floating in the toilet bowl 'feces' instead of 'shit', it will not stink.

I'm here to tell you that shit stinks, no matter what you call it, and if you genuinely believe that different words are going to change that fact, you need to have your head examined. I'm here to tell you that men are different from women, and that those differences are both normal and good. Men are shot full of testosterone, and while that testosterone gives men a push toward aggressiveness, that aggressiveness is the thing that men channel into the creative drives that have given us some of the world's best architecture and literature and art, and that have created in men a sense of honor and duty and self-sacrifice. Women are shot full of estrogen, and while that estrogen push can make us bitchy as hell, it can also be channeled into creative drives that have given us some of the rest of the world's great literature and art, and have given birth to some great kids and some of the world's finest next generations. Motherhood is not a crime. Fatherhood is not a crime. Families are good things. Sex is pretty cool, parenthood is vital and – done well – both life-affirming and rewarding. Further,

humanity is worth getting to know in the form that it takes. People as they really are are fascinating, challenging, diverse, wonderful, awful, amazing, complex, many-faceted, colorful.

Don't castrate your writing or your characters because you're afraid to admit this, or afraid to face the nuts that come out of the woodwork when you say what you mean. We as human beings are great and worth knowing and worth writing about because we are all different. That is the beauty of humanity – that we have risen above the inequalities and unfairnesses of life, and gone beyond our own weaknesses and handicaps and fears, and have made our stand based on who we are. Not who we wished we were, not who the censors from all walks of life demanded that we pretend we were... but who we are.

Write the words that tell your story, even if they hurt. Take a stand, knowing that the only way you are ever going to say something that matters is if you have the guts to say anything in the first place. Walk away from the weasel words, admit that death waits for you at the end of your life, call your character short or fat or skinny or stupid or ugly or perverted. Tell the truth, even if it leaves you standing naked in front of everyone – clothes don't do anything but hide the truth of what's underneath them.

Say what you mean.

The Writer's Toolbox

Every profession has its tools and requirements, and writing is no different. Hardware and software are nice, but they won't make you a writer. These four tools, used regularly and with the best of what you have in you, will.

- English – If you cannot spell, if you don't know how to punctuate a sentence, if you aren't sure about grammar, if you don't recognize the appropriate place to break a paragraph or remember how to set off dialogue from narrative, then stop right here. You must know all of these things so well that you don't have to think about them when you write. Your editor will not correct your awful spelling or sloppy punctuation; she will only reject your manuscript. Learn to use the written language first.

- Persistence – I could also call this “thick skin.” You'll need it, whatever you choose to call it. You must accept that some of your work will not be good enough to sell, that some editors won't like your work even if it's good enough to sell, that things you send out will come back rejected. You must strive to improve constantly. You must realize that everything you write you could have written better, if only you'd known how ... and then you must, on your next venture, figure out that 'how.' No writer, however good, is ever good enough.

- Faith – Conversely, you must believe that you have something to say, and that you alone are the best person in the world to say it. You must, on really lousy days, remember that you have a dream you are trying to make come true. You must have faith that what you want do matters – that you are not just selling books (for if your only dream is to sell things, then you can sell shoes or TVs much more easily, and save a few trees in the process), but that you are

reaching out to people, and trying, through your stories, to give them something they didn't have before.

- Goals – You must set them now, and set them high. Along with “write three pages a day” and “send off first story before next month” and “get paid for something I write,” add “make New York Times bestseller list” and “win Hugo” and “change someone's life for the better.” Set small goals for your sanity ... but large goals for your soul.

Middles

I'm in one right now – a middle, that is. Actually, I'm nearing the end of the middle, which in my humble opinion is the utter worst place in the universe to be.

The loathsome middle in question happens to be in *Curse of the Black Heron*, but it wouldn't matter. I've never met a middle I liked, and if the middle weren't CotBH, it would be something just as bad, or worse.

Writers come in all sorts. There are folks who dread the blank page, and who have an absolute terror of getting the thing started, but once they've been plugging on a bit, they're fine. There are folks who start well, middle well, and hate endings. And then there's my sort – we who start well and end well (or at least enjoy doing our beginnings and endings, which I admit isn't always the same thing) but who do awful things to ourselves in the middle of every book because halfway through, we're certain that whatever magic we once had is gone and that every word that spills from our fingertips onto the keyboard has become total crap.

My problems with middles come from several directions at once and conspire to leave me in a state of siege. First, middles are where my plots start to run amok (Amok, amok, amok!) When I first conceive the idea for a novel, I have the beginning and I have the ending, and I have a vague, fuzzy rope running from the former to the latter that sort of connects. When I start writing, though, the rope suddenly starts twisting itself into Celtic knot designs, with a few sheepshanks and nooses and a Gordian knot or two for variety – and I sometimes can't unravel a thing for days.

Next, new people start showing up and auditioning for parts, tap-dancing across the pages going, “See, and I can sing the *Star-Spangled Banner* and ride a unicycle, too!” And if they tap-dance pretty well and don't hit too many wrong notes, I tend to hire them – only to be left scratching my head and wondering, “Yes, but what do you have to do with my *plot*?” Medwind Song and Flynn the cat in *Fire in the Mist*, Felara in *Hunting the* ***Corrigan's Blood***, Earwax in *Sympathy for the Devil*, and Belinda in *When the Bough Breaks* are all characters who just showed up.

My characters keel over and die on me at the damnedest times, too. I had no intention of killing off one of the main characters in *The Rose Sea* until the very end, but he did something appallingly stupid, (yet totally within character), and got himself slaughtered in the middle of the book. And I was left wondering how I was supposed to do all those wicked things that he was supposed to have done.

Conversely, people who are plugged into my stories as redshirts in the beam-down party get smart on me and duck when the missiles start flying. And then they start demanding extra lines. Eowlie in *The Rose Sea,* Nokar the Librarian in *Fire in the Mist,* Seven-Fingered Fat Girl and Dog Nose in *Bones of the Past*, and Bytoris Caligro in *Mind of the Magic* should have all died early in their respective books. And yet some of them survived quite a bit longer than I'd intended, dodging bullets and deadly spells and grinning fiendishly at me all the while.

I forget things, too – for example, really neat plot twists I'd planned at the beginning that somehow seemed too obvious to include in the outline. So I go off in a different direction, and when I go back for my first edit, I discover that all my initial clues point in a direction other than the one in which the story eventually goes. So forgetting things means lots of rewriting. On the other hand, my forgetting things also means that the story often becomes multilayered, because it's frequently easier for me to figure out ways to tie the beginning of the book to the middle and the end, rather than take out all the stuff that no longer fits. When you read a fairly complex puzzle in one of my stories, you can guess that while I was writing it, I was lo-o-o-o-ost ... and about half the time, you'd be right.

Middles are where I rethink my beginnings and debate the wisdom of my endings, too – so the book feels much more finished to me when I'm just starting it (and still think I know where I'm going) than when I have three hundred or more pages done and am wishing a massacre would make a suitable ending.

So here I am, right at the end of the middle, finally remembering all the things I intended to do at the beginning (but didn't do), with a bunch of tap-dancing clowns singing the *Star-Spangled Banner* and a dancing bear who refuses to eat the clowns (though I wish he would), and my fireworks are exploding in the wrong places and at the wrong times, and I'm on that tightrope that now consists almost entirely of Celtic

and Gordian knots, but they're tied around my ankles so that if I cut them I fall and if I don't cut them I'm stuck.

Boy, do I hate middles.

Apples, Bananas

And now, a question. I throw you an object – roundish, reddish, with a short stem, a firm white flesh, seeds in the center, and you say “fruit” if you're being generic, or “apple” if you're being specific. I toss you another piece of fruit, this one yellow, maybe with a few brown spots, with a pulpy off-white flesh beneath a thick skin, and you say “banana.” Here's the question.

What did you say wrong?

This is a discussion about life, and how the writer must see the world, and how the world conspires to blind the writer. And the first thing you must realize in this discussion is that the fruit I'm talking about is not a metaphor for anything. When I say apples and bananas, I am talking about ... apples and bananas. The second thing you must bear in mind is that this matters, no matter how trivial it may seem.

Back to apples. You go into the grocery store most anywhere in the United States, most any time of the year. You can find apples. Red Delicious, Yellow Delicious, Granny Smith. Maybe Macintosh. They'll be in the produce section, well-waxed, beautiful to behold, stacked neatly in those geometric patterns grocers love. You take them home, you eat them, your brain says you ate an apple. But you didn't. You ate something with about as much taste as the wax fruit my grandmother used to keep on her table, and whatever that insipid thing was, it wasn't an apple. Unless you live in the North and have access to the roadside produce stands or to growers' orchards, and you go out driving on one of those breathtaking autumn days when the sky has turned an impossible blue and the leaves on the sugar maples are crimson and maroon and lemon yellow, and unless you have purchased a small paper bag full of apples with names you have never heard before, you have never tasted an apple. You have tasted a lie, and been told that it was an apple. There are hundreds of varieties of apples, and

there are apples that grow on abandoned farms in out-of-the-way back roads that are almost too ugly to look at and that have no names at all. When you bite into these apples, they are so sweet and tart and juicy and crisp that they bite you back, and your eyes water and their sharp, tangy scent burrows a hole into your brain and fixes there forever the taste of the apple and the rough texture of its imperfect skin and the color of the sky on the day you tasted it and the sound of water from the spring just above the roadside stand and the scent of growing grass and mouldering leaves and cold air touched with both the heartbreaking memory of summer gone and the promise of the coming of winter, and soaked overall in the unbearable beauty of the moment that vanishes before you can blink, but that will be with you always.

Real apples don't make it into the grocery stores. Only the apple-shaped frauds that are so durable that they can be waxed and preserved and fixed like bugs in formaldehyde and kept almost forever touch the lips of most people. Most people have never tasted an apple.

Have you?

Well, then, on to bananas. Bananas. What can anyone say about bananas? They aren't like apples. You can concede that the best apples don't travel well, that probably by the time they've sat in storage forever the market apples don't have much flavor ... but a banana is a banana is a banana, right? You have Chiquita, you have Dole, and maybe one or two other kinds, and every banana you ever tasted has been pretty much like every other banana you ever tasted, and if there were ever a mediocre fruit, that fruit would be the banana. Bland, inoffensive, polite. Nice. A cornflakes-and-lunchboxes fruit.

And every banana you have ever tasted – if you get all your bananas from the grocery store – has been as much a lie as those pathetic excuses for apples you know so well. There are as many kinds of real bananas as there are real apples. Tiny bananas the size of your fingers that are so sweet and rich they make an ambrosial desert all by themselves, bananas long as your forearm that are bitter unless fried in strips and eaten hot and crunchy, bananas with reddish skins, bananas with firm flesh, bananas with bite. Coming soon to a grocery store near you? Not likely. You can buy all these wonderful bananas in the open-air markets in Central America by bargaining with the old, dark-eyed woman who sits on the cobblestones next to the white-plastered, bullet-riddled ruins of the old Catholic church. They arrived in town that morning on the back of her burro, and next Saturday she will bring more. You will not see these bananas in Nebraska or Arkansas or New York because the good bananas, ripened by the sun and eaten immediately, have no way to get from that far-away place to your kitchen. Unless the fruits you have come to think of as bananas are cut from the banana trees when they are hard and green and miles from ripe, they will rot in transit. And if they *are* cut from the tree while green, they will never have the flavor

they would have had. And the exotic bananas look funny to the eyes of consumers, and wouldn't sell in sufficient numbers anyway. So if you get your bananas from a grocery store, you will never taste a real banana.

Apples ... bananas ...

What else in your life has been lying to you? What other banal, insipid excuses have been masquerading as the real things, convincing you that you have lived and experienced the world when in fact you have been led around in blinders? If you are going where everyone else goes, and if you are doing what everyone else does, just about everything in your life has been a thin, weak broth, colored to look pretty and palatable, mass-produced to sell to a least-common-denominator clientele who are led into buying what isn't very good because they have been ignorant all their lives that better is out there.

Unless you have been to Alaska in the middle of the salmon run, when the black flies are biting like hell and the mosquitoes make blankets on every inch of exposed skin, and unless you have cut an inch-thick steak from a king salmon pulled fresh from the river and gutted right there, and unless you have wrapped that salmon steak in tin-foil filled with butter and perhaps pepper, and buried it in coals to cook, you have never tasted real salmon.

Have you ever walked across the tundra, feeling it give beneath your feet as if you were walking across a mattress that stretched as far as the eye could see – a mattress with shot springs and a coating of blueberries the size of your thumb and salmonberries and stands of fuchsia fireweed that grow eye-high? Have you ever ridden your bicycle along eastern Ohio's hilly back roads on a June day when the maples and the oaks shade the road and make the world look like a green cathedral, and the heat suppresses the sounds of everything but the drone of insects and the crunch of your tires on the gravel – when you stop and pick wild blackberries from the side of the road and get thorns in your thumb? Have you ever pulled a live crayfish from under a slick, moss-coated rock in the chilly, clear stream where you are standing with your feet bare while your toes squoodge in the slick, sensuous mud – and the crayfish, cool and coarse-carapaced, waves claws and antennae at you and you admire the armor that covers his tail and the way his beady eyes watch you before you drop him in the water and he darts away backward?

What parts of your life are not homogenized, pasteurized, FDA-approved, plastic-wrapped, unscented, tasteless, pabulum? What have you seen that has not been filtered through the lying eye of television, or the movies – what have you heard that has not been influenced by radio, what have you read that is untouched and unsullied by corporations, the press, advertisers? What do you participate in that has no sponsor, no advertising, no board or council to promote it? What in your life is real?

And what does this have to do with writing?

Just this. If you have never tasted a real apple, you will never write about an apple that is real. If you have never felt an icy November rain soak through your clothes and drizzle down your spine and leave your nose cold and dripping and your eyes half-blind and blinking like defective windshield wipers, your characters will only be able to show readers the world from the inside of a heated automobile, or through the plate-glass window of a suburban house. If you have never lived, how are you going to write characters that live?

Real is free – or at least damned cheap. You want real? Turn off the television, go outside, get away from people. Let your cheeks get chapped by the cold, burned by the sun. Take a chance on that ugly fruit at the produce stand. Buy cloudy apple cider from your next-door neighbor who presses his own from the trees he grows in his back yard. Walk or ride a bike. Smell the air around you – even if it stinks of sweat and exhaust from cars and trash from the dumpster at the corner, it's better for your writing than the recycled air-conditioned air that you've been hiding in.

At least once, don't take anything when you get a headache. Let yourself hurt, and accept the hurt, and pay attention to it. At least once, cry when you're sad instead of pretending everything is fine.

At least once, give yourself something real to hold on to, because if all you know is sanitary plastic, all you will ever write is sanitary plastic.

Dialogue Workshop

I got a question in my e-mail not too long ago on how to do dialogue. As far as I've ever been able to tell, writing good dialogue comes from being able to hear voices in your head that aren't there – which in times past has been enough to get you burned at the stake or drowned at a dunking post, and which currently, if you admit to it in the wrong company, can get you a quiet room with rubber walls and all the free Thorazine you can swallow.

Never let it be said that writing well is not without its risks.

That said, I need to tell you that dialogue in a story is NOT about two people talking to each other. That's what it <u>is</u>, but it isn't what it's <u>about</u>.

BIG IMPORTANT POINT

<u>Dialogue is about demonstrating character through conflict, either internal or external</u>.

Memorize that, because when you've memorized it, about half of your problems with dialogue will melt into oblivion. But dialogue is easier to do than to talk about doing, and if you have a block of it in front of you, you can see where you're going right and where you're going wrong.

Get out your trusty spiral-bound notebook and a smooth-writing pen with lots of ink. (I have a preference for Pilot Precise Rolling Ball pens because they flow smoothly across the page and never seem to hang up, and you know when you have enough ink. Some of the gel pens are nice, too, but they have a nasty habit of dying in mid-

sentence, and while writing dialogue, you don't want anything to break your flow.) Also have a timer nearby. The one on a stove or microwave will work better than a stopwatch or some other timer that doesn't have an alarm, because you will have a tendency to get sucked into this and write past your allotted time.

This workshop works better on paper first time through than it does on the computer. I'm going to set up a limited scenario for you, and I want you to follow through with it. But I want you to see the scenario in your head clearly. (This is essential to writing good dialogue. You have to know WHY the people who are talking to each other are talking.)

Keep in mind as you read through the scenario that you have to find out the following things from the dialogue in which the two characters will engage.

1) What does each character want?

2) How do their desires conflict?

THE SCENARIO

A man and a woman who have been married for fifteen years meet on the sidewalk in their front yard as she is coming home and he is on his way out. The day is gray and blustery, with the smell of snow in the air and rapidly falling temperatures. She is dressed far too lightly for the weather. She was supposed to be home all day. He wasn't supposed to be home at all. One of them has to tell the other something important. The other one has to keep the first from finding out something important.

- **THE RULES FOR EXERCISE #1**

1. Sit with your eyes closed until you can see these two people standing in front of their house. See where they're standing in relation to each other (near? far?), how they hold their bodies, the expressions on their faces when they surprise each other on the walk.

2. Remember that one of them has something to hide and the other has something to tell. You have to know what these two things are before you begin. The two bits of business can be anything you like.

3. Remember that one character is going to avoid telling the truth for what seems to him (or her) to be a logical reason (and it may be benign or malignant), and the other may have a hard time saying what he or she has to say.

4. When you can see your two people, and when you can hear their voices, write for ten minutes. Do not use any words outside of quotes at all. This includes even 'he said' or 'she said.' Just let their voices come through. (Don't include their thoughts, either. You'll know what they're thinking – just don't write it down.)

5. Write the words as they say them – don't correct their grammar for them, or go back to change anything you have written. Don't cross out anything, don't erase anything – just let it all ride and force them to deal with the consequences.

6. Do not allow them to call each other by name.

When you have finished, sit back for a few minutes and cool off. Then read what you've written. You should notice at least a few of the following details if you have really heard your characters' voices. They'll interrupt each other, they'll change the subject, they'll change moods, they'll talk at cross-purposes, and/or the whole conversation will flow very fast. You should be able to tell just by what they say which is the man and which is the woman. You should be able to sense their lies or hesitations. Their moods and tones of voice should be apparent even though you have nothing outside of the naked dialogue to tell you how they say things. And you as the reader should have a few guesses about what they're hiding (though if you as the reader can't tell for sure, that's better than if you can.)

A few things you should not expect. This will not be finished dialogue. It will not be ready to go into a story or book. It will have places in it that stink, that are clumsy and awkward, that don't sound real. That's okay. This is just first draft.

I strongly suggest that you do Exercise #1 before continuing, but once your conversation is on paper, if you would like to see how my take on this exercise turned out, take a look at the sidebar. (See Exercise #1, at the end of this chapter.)

Here are a few recommendations about writing convincing dialogue. None of them are cast in stone, but until you're comfortable enough with the rules to know how to break them, you'll work better if you keep them in mind.

RULES FOR BETTER DIALOGUE

Avoid phonetic spelling.

Dialogue of the following sort – "Ah reckon ah don' haff ta go dowan tuh th' rivuh tuhday, 'cawse we gots awl th' feeush we a-gonna need" – gives the reader a headache

and makes you look like a moron. With dialect, less is definitely more. ”I reckon I don't have t' go down t' the river today, 'cause we got all the fish we gonna need,” is much more readable and still suggests a particular character.

Avoid goofy tags.

“Really?” he ejaculated, or, “My God!” she blustered don't do much for your credibility. If you have to tag your dialogue, use he said or she said. They’re essentially invisible, if not overused. Frankly, most of the time you don't even need that. Your dialogue, if you've been true to it, will speak for itself. Additionally, I don't object to the occasional he muttered or she whispered. I do always check in those sentences where someone hisses to make sure there was an “S” somewhere in the sentence he supposedly hissed. You just try hissing a sentence that doesn't contain “S”s.

Keep to the conflict.

If there is no conflict for the two characters in a piece of dialogue, then the dialogue has no place in your story. The conflict can be internal (he's lying to her, she doesn't like him) or external (a wall of water is sweeping down on the two of them, someone has stolen her purse or their car). But it has to be there. Dialogue illuminates character faster than any amount of exposition, but only if you give your characters something interesting to talk about, and something that moves your story forward. And that means conflict.

Don't let characters “speechify.”

What worked in a Shakespeare monologue does not work in a dialogue between two people. Fictional dialogue is about give and take, meant to sound realistic but sharpened by the fact that each character needs something, and by the fact that their needs do not mesh. You won't get two-page speeches if you remember this.

Remember that people breathe while speaking.

Read your dialogue out loud, in your normal, conversational tone of voice. If you run out of air part of the way through a sentence, rework it. Add punctuation, break it up, rip out the flowery stuff.

Avoid “talking heads.”

Have characters do something while they speak.

- **EXERCISE #2**

In Exercise #1, you wrote classic "talking heads." (The last thing I mentioned that you were supposed to avoid. Well, I told you it was first draft, right?) So for Exercise #2, you're going to go back, take the exact dialogue you wrote, and fill in. Add setting, speech tags, thoughts, and anything else that will flesh out the scene you saw in your head. I've done this in Example #2 (at the end of this chapter). Read it and compare it to my first dialogue. Then rework your own first exercise in the same fashion.

- **EXERCISE #3**

When you've redone that, try a situation with an external conflict – something that is happening to both characters. Or try a scene with three characters. Try a character talking to himself in the mirror. Remember conflict. Remember to see your scene in your head first.

A final word about conflict – it isn't always something bad happening. Conflict can be something as terrific as winning a million bucks in a lottery or falling in love or discovering your character is going to have a baby. However, conflict always portends change. And dialogue always gives you a window to see into the way that characters feel about that change, or at least the way they want each other to think they feel, which may not be the same thing.

Good luck, good writing, and many happy conflicts to you and your characters.

- **Example #1 – Dialogue Workshop**

MY DIALOGUE – EXAMPLE #1

Jesus, you startled me. I wasn't expecting you here.

It's been a real day for expectations. Where were you? I've been waiting here for an hour. You didn't leave a note or –

I wasn't planning on going anywhere –

I can see that. Where's your coat?

I left the house in a hurry. I ... um ... my mother ...

The hospital reached you? God, I'm sorry. That's why –

The hospital?

They called me when they couldn't get you.

I don't understand.

Your mother. You said –

I ran out to buy some flowers for her. She's been so down.

For three hours you've been buying flowers?

And then I drove around. I've had ... a lot on my mind. But I'm fine now. Fine.

You didn't go by the hospital?

No. Look, I'm freezing. Let's go inside. Why did the hospital call? Does the doctor need my signature for more tests?

We have to go to the hospital.

I've had a terrible –

We have to go to the hospital. Now. The rest of your family is already there.

Oh. Oh, God. Mom's all right, isn't she? Oh, Christ, she isn't. I'm being punished ... she's dead.

NOTE: He came home to tell her that the hospital called him because it couldn't reach her, to tell her that her mother died. She has been having an affair, and broke it off today. You'll notice that this has some awkward places in it. You expect that in first draft.

- **Example #2 – Dialogue Workshop**

DIALOGUE – EXAMPLE #2

Lisa had just gotten out of the car and was heading around the corner of the garage when she ran into Brian. "Jesus, you startled me. I wasn't expecting you here." His face looked sort of pale and pinched. He's found out, she thought. I finally broke it off, but I was too late.

He said, "It's been a real day for expectations. Where were you? I've been waiting here for an hour. You didn't leave a note or –"

"I wasn't planning on going anywhere –" Which sounded like bullshit when she said it, and she knew it. She was wearing a navy dress with a fitted waist and a low neckline, which had been a gift from Kevin. Heels. Hose. Make-up. The last time Brian had seen her in make-up when they weren't on their way to church or a restaurant had been right after the second baby was born. Eight years ago? Yeah. About that.

He raised an eyebrow. "I can see that." Pure sarcasm. For a moment his face lost the pinched look, and she saw suspicion in his eyes. "Where's your coat?"

"I left the house in a hurry. I ... um ... my mother ..."

The pinched look was back around his eyes, and she stopped, suddenly frightened. He knew she hadn't been visiting her mother in the hospital. Maybe he'd hired a detective to follow her. The sound of her heart pounding roared in her ears. If he really knew, she would lose everything. The boys. Brian. Her home. Her friends.

But he was saying, "The hospital reached you? God, I'm sorry. That's why –"

Now the scared feeling was worse. Different. But worse. "The hospital?"

"They called me when they couldn't get you."

"I don't understand."

"Your mother. You said –"

The lie came easily, easier than the lies that had preceded it over the last three months, pouring out of her mouth without any effort on her part. She shivered and rubbed her arms and interrupted him, saying, "I ran out to buy some flowers for her. She's been so down." Breast cancer and a modified mastectomy at fifty-eight. Mom was in the hospital doing chemo, and she was coming through it like a trooper, but

she really had been down. Not that Lisa had done much to cheer her up. She'd had her mind on ... other things. No more of that, though.

The suspicion was back in his eyes. "For three hours you've been buying flowers?"

"And then I drove around. I've had ... a lot on my mind. But I'm fine now. Fine."

He looked a little sick. "You didn't go by the hospital?"

"No." She'd been saving that for when she could look her mother in the eye again. No, Mom, I'm not cheating on my husband. I'm not cheating on my family. I'm a good wife. A good mother. Now she could do that. "Look, I'm freezing. Let's go inside. Why did the hospital call? Does the doctor need to talk to me about more tests?"

He was shaking his head – no, no, no – and his eyes were as bleak as the day. "We have to go to the hospital."

Her mother was being demanding again. Lisa couldn't face that right now. Not after the scene with Kevin. That had been ugly. Ugly. Never again, she promised herself. "I've had a terrible –"

He cut her off. "We have to go to the hospital. Now. The rest of your family is already there."

Everything shifted. He hadn't come home because he knew about the affair. He hadn't come home because the hospital had been trying to reach her when her mother started giving the nurses headaches again. Everything Lisa did to make things right, she had done too late. "Oh. Oh, God. Mom's all right, isn't she?" But the look on his face told her what she already knew. "Oh, Christ, she isn't. I'm being punished ... she's dead."

NOTES: You can see how filling in actions and thoughts add depth to the bare dialogue. Again, though, keep the additions light. Not every sentence needs a corresponding action. The reader's mind will fill in a lot.

In an additional edit of this, I think I might let Lisa tell her husband that she was at he hospital visiting her mother before he has a chance to say anything. Since he came home because the hospital couldn't reach her, that would not only dump her mother's death on her head at a terrible time, but would also let him know she was lying and maybe blow open the defunct affair. But those are all changes for later drafts. This at least gives you a look at a first draft and a second draft.

Maps Workshop

Most of the books I've written have started with a map. Not with an idea, or a character, or a theme. With a hand-drawn map, doodled out first while I was sitting and keeping someone else company, or while I was on break, or when I couldn't think of what to write and had no ideas to speak of and knew that if I drew a map something would come to me. Some of the maps were fairly artistic from the start. Some began on napkins or the backs of throw-away paper, and only became things of any artistic merit after they'd served their initial purpose of handing me an idea for a novel.

If you want specific titles of books that began as maps, I give you *Fire in the Mist*, *Bones of the Past* and *Mind of the Magic* (the Arhel novels), *Sympathy for the Devil*, *The Devil and Dan Cooley*, and *Hell on High* (the DEVIL'S POINT novels), *The Rose Sea*, *Glenraven* and *Glenraven: In the Shadow of the Rift*, *Hunting the Corrigan's Blood*, *Curse of the Black Heron*, and finally the trilogy I'm currently writing, *Diplomacy of Wolves*, *Vengeance of Dragons*, and *Courage of Falcons* (the SECRET TEXTS trilogy.) In other words, you'd have to look through your stacks a bit to find a book I've written that didn't begin as a map.

Now I know this is a weird little quirk of mine, and I can't guarantee you that if you'll just draw a map, it will give you a novel that will sell. But on the chance that what works for me will work for you, too, I'll go through the steps I use in doing my maps, and maybe my process will spark something for you.

I have favorite tools for mapping. I like graph paper, and I like the drafting markers that you can get from Office Max or Office Depot for about six bucks a set that come

in five thicknesses, from .1 mm up to .5 mm. (Tech-Liner Drawing Pen Set, from Alvin) I don't use pencil, ever, and while you're doing this workshop, you shouldn't either. If you like the technique but find the inability to erase a detriment instead of a plus, feel free to modify it, but at least this first time, do not give yourself waffling room. Use pen and grit your teeth.

This first map is going to be your continent. I frequently also draw city and town maps, and in some instances street maps. I usually draw floorplans for ships, houses, and other indoor places where my characters will spend a lot of time. I've never written a book that didn't have mapping as one stage of its production. It's just that occasionally mapping is the second stage, or even the third – say around about the time I get the first two chapters written and realize there are important things about my characters' world that I do not know.

Before we get started, I want to be VERY clear about one issue that I know some of you are already sweating over. This doesn't have to be pretty. You do not get extra points for artistry. I'm showing you a technique for generating ideas and creating a story where you didn't have anything before, not trying to turn you into an illustrator. If you can't draw a straight line, no problem. You aren't going to need any straight lines. Wobbles are part of the process. Nobody but you ever has to see this map. Nobody but you ever has to know it even exists. It doesn't have to go in front of the book you're going to write, and if you decide you do want it in the front of your book, your publisher is going to hire an artist to redraw it, no matter how cool you made it look. So stop already with the complaining about how you can't draw.

Okay. Read all the following instructions BEFORE you start drawing, down to the line of asterisks (****). Then go back and draw your map.

Get out your graph paper. Draw a dot. Draw another dot. Draw a third dot.

Draw some upside-down V's in a line (but not necessarily a straight line). These are your mountain range. Name the range. You can have more than one. You can make it thick or thin. If you leave any gaps between the V's, these can become passes.

Draw some snaky lines from the mountain range outward in a couple of directions. Name each snaky line “Something” River. (Do not be a smart-aleck and take this literally).

Draw some broken (- - - - - - -) lines separating at least two of the dots from each other. Call these borders. Name the states, counties, or countries on either side of each border.

Add a couple of other things that you find appealing – maybe a lake or an ocean or a desert. If you give yourself a shoreline (another long, wavy, wobbly line) stick some

islands offshore. Maybe doodle in a forest. I use those kindergarten cloud shapes to indicate forests. You know, a whole bunch of little puffy, fluffy thingees all crammed in together. To me, these look like a deciduous forest as seen from the air in the summer. At least, they come close enough to satisfy me.

Now name the dots you've already drawn – they're major cities. Draw a few more dots in interesting places, and name them, too. They're towns. Draw two small squares in out-of-the-way places. These are ruins from previous civilizations. Call them whatever you want.

****

It's time to make use of your mistakes. Find the places where you wanted to erase. You drew a line someplace where it didn't belong, (you right-angled off a river, maybe). That's okay. That right-angled thing was designed by engineers. Really it was. It's an aqueduct, or a canal, or a wall. You have a road that goes nowhere? That's cool – somebody made it, and it used to go somewhere, and now all you have to do is figure out who made it, and where it used to go, and why it doesn't go there anymore. You have a ruin-box in what accidentally became a lake, or an ocean? No problem. Once upon a time that ruin was above ground. Or maybe it wasn't, and once upon a time there was a civilization that lived under the water.

See what I mean about mistakes? They're a treasure-trove of story ideas waiting to happen.

Now ...

Put the art supplies away and get out a few sheets of notebook paper, or sit down at your computer (I usually do this stage on paper, but that isn't essential). This is the essay portion of the workshop. Don't groan – this is a lot more fun than drawing the map was.

Answer the following questions, taking as much space as you need for each answer.

Why are the borders there? By this I mean, why do these people have borders in the first place? A border always implies that conditions, people, philosophies, governments, or something else is different on each side.

What goes up and down the rivers? (People, contraband, products?) How does it get there? Who takes it?

How are the people on one side of the border different from the people on the other side? (Religion, government, race, species ... go into detail. Really take some time

working out what these differences are, and put some effort into figuring out why they were important enough to necessitate the creation of that border.)

What lives in the mountains? (Animals, people, big scary things, all of the above?)

How does the weather endanger the lives of the people who live in your world? (Along with weather – stuff like tornadoes, droughts, hurricanes, snowstorms, avalanches, and so on, you should include things like areas where you'll have earthquakes and volcanoes. Don't be afraid to be generous in heaping out troubles. You'll find plenty of use for them.)

What else endangers the people on your continent? (Plagues, barbarians, people from the other side of the world, monsters from the oceans or beneath the earth ... Again, take some time on this. And be generous.)

Do a quick timeline in hundred year increments, for maybe two thousand years. Write down one really big thing that happened in each of those hundred-year periods. It can be geological, political, religious, magical, whatever. But it needs to be big. (Example: Invasion of the Sheromene headhunters into the country of Dormica, and subsequent decimation of the native population and establishment of the Sheromenes in the southern half of that country.)

Write whatever else you can think of right now. See where you're starting to get the feel for a novel? A big novel? Good. Keep moving back and forth, from your map to your notes. Add stuff to the map as it occurs to you. Add stuff to the notes until something inside your brain goes “ding” and lets you know that you have a book idea that you're genuinely excited about.

You can follow this same process with a single city. (You should have seen the map I did of Ariss – it was so cool. I started out with a compass, and drew something like ten concentric circles, called them walls, and filled in the spaces between with roads and buildings. And divided the city right in half. The first book I ever sold was born from those circles with the line right down the middle. I still get goosebumps thinking about it.)

Good luck. If this works for you and you get something you really like, let me know. I'd love to hear about it.

Timed Writing Workshop

I am indebted to Natalie Goldberg, author of ***Writing Down the Bones***, for what has become one of the staples of my own writing practice. Though I don't do timed writing quite the way she says most of the time, I still find it essential to cutting through the murkiness of my own mind when I'm stuck, and for sharpening images while I'm working on a book.

Here is timed writing my way.

I prefer working at a keyboard to writing in longhand, so I almost always type my timed writings directly into the computer. If you don't like doing raw material at a keyboard, try it anyway for a while. You can always go to a notebook and pen when you're waiting at the dentist's office – timed writing is much more interesting than reading the June, 1974 issue of Field and Stream that he still has in there. (After you've read the Patrick F. McManus article, anyway.)

In either case, sit. Note the date and the time you start at the top of the page, and your topic, whatever it might be. As soon as you've done this, throw words on the page. Do not stop to correct typos or change words, do not second-guess the images spilling out onto the screen, do not stop to think of what comes next. If ideas follow that make no real sense, or if words hit the page that seem unconnected to anything, that's fine. Let them. If you write things about people that you know they would never want anyone to know, that's fine too. You don't ever have to show anyone your timed writings. Natalie Goldberg says, “Keep your hand moving.” If you're typing, it's 'keep your fingers moving,' but either way, write steadily for the time limit you've set for yourself. Try for at least ten minutes – you can usually get into serious meat in that

length of time. Go for half an hour sometime, or for an hour straight just to see what it feels like.

This is regular timed writing, and Goldberg recommends that you do it every day. I do my novel pages every day, so I only do timed writing when I'm having trouble with my pages, or when what's hitting my pages feels stiff and stilted, or false.

If you're doing timed writing in that latter instance, you do it a bit differently. Directly on the page where you're working (or on a separate sheet of paper if you aren't doing your book or story on a computer) write down the problem that your story is giving you, in three or four words. Drop down a line, check the time, and timed-write on that problem for ten minutes. Go get a drink of water when you're done, give yourself a few minutes to relax, then sit down and read what you wrote. More often than not, when I do this, I find the solution to the problem in the block of timed writing.

Finally, here is a partial list of the topics that I write on when I'm doing regular timed writing. I hope these spur your ideas, and get you writing. (See the Topics Table, next page).

Some Topics for Timed Writing

The past	A color	Hurt
The future	A smell	Dreams
Ghosts	Water	Reality
Anger	Weather	What feels good
Hope	I fear ...	What feels bad
Peace	I love ...	Family
Rage	I hate ...	Who I am
Today	I want ...	Who I wish I were
Yesterday	Wind	What I am
Tomorrow	Walking	What I wish I were
Food	I Remember	Who I was
Fantasy	Places	What I was

Editor Etiquette

First off, let me tell you that you're getting a writer's, not an editor's, perspective on how a writer should approach and work with an editor. The editing I've done has been on a high school yearbook, and on several newsletters over quite a few years, and while working as a writing instructor for Writer's Digest (briefly), but none of those count as a professional credit, so I cannot give you the scoop from the other side of a professional editor's desk. I have, however, managed to work with and maintain happy relations with the editors I've had, and I can tell you how I did that.

I'll break the process down into several sections for you so that you can either read this whole thing or just hit the sections that apply to you. Your relationship with any editor will contain some or all of the following steps. Some steps you only have to go through once with any editor, while some steps you dance through over and over again for as long as you're writing.

• Approaching Your Editor-To-Be

Most of the time, the way you're going to meet your editor is through the mail. (For exceptions to this, jump down to Conventions, Dinners, Hanging Out at the end of this article.) This is pretty neat, really, because you don't have to dress in a suit or hose-and-heels, you don't have to worry about stammering or forgetting her name or your own (always a big concern of mine when meeting anyone in a high-stress situation), and if you have a bit of parsley stuck between your front teeth when you meet, she'll never know. The down side is, if you look fantastic in your business duds and you have a megawatt smile and the most stunning personality this side of the solar system, it won't do you a bit of good.

The only side of you your future editor will see is your work. And your work can make you look like an idiot, no matter how well you might come off in person. Here are some things you must remember, and this advice you will ignore at your own peril.

1) DON'T try to make your manuscript 'stand out.' This means don't put your book in a fancy box or an artistically decorated envelope; don't use any color of paper but white; don't use any color of ink but black; don't include your sketches or painting for the cover art (and I don't care how fantastic an artist you are); don't include sketches of the characters or little sculptures of them; don't put a box of chocolates in the box; don't put a check for a thousand dollars or ten hundred-dollar bills in the box. EVER.

2) DON'T try to make yourself 'stand out.' Don't begin your cover letter with the words “This is your lucky day” or any sentiment of the sort; don't threaten to kill yourself if she doesn't buy your book; don't do a cute cover letter that says, “Once upon a time an editor received a manuscript that changed her life and made her rich beyond the dreams of avarice”; don't include nude photos of yourself, erotic photos of yourself, photos of yourself with your pet tiger, or even nude erotic photos of yourself with your pet tiger.

3) DON'T waste your time with the sob story cover letter that says, “I have twenty starving children and I've been fired from every job I ever had and my husband left me and we're about to be evicted and only you can save us if you'll just buy my book.”

4) DON'T tell the editor that you expect a ten million dollar advance and a hardcover printing of 250,000 copies and a book tour and a guest spot on ***Oprah***. Don't say that you'll do this first book for nothing, either, if she'll just publish it, or that you'll wax her car or her legs or be her sex slave. Don't mention money at all – you don't know each other yet, and strangers do not talk about money. (Actually, you won't be discussing money at all, because you're going to be smart and get an agent. Agents talk about money.)

   A woman called me on the phone back when I had a listed number, demanding the name of my agent. She left a message that said, “I know you've published a

few books, and I want the name of your agent. I've written a cookbook, and it will be a hardcover, and it will have full-color illustrations, and I will expect a large advance." Maybe you have to have been doing this for a while to know how truly funny that call was, but I heard her message and laughed my ass off for about an hour. Then I returned her call and told her, briefly, that this was not the way the world worked. I recommended some reference book to her (Writer's Market, I think) and to myself I suggested that she also look into therapy. I didn't say that out loud, of course. But I'm a writer, and I can afford to be nice to morons. If I'd been an editor and had gotten that call, I would have had the woman's name put on my Idiot List, and I would have made sure that anything that arrived on my desk with her name on it would have forever after been returned unopened. Editors are so swamped they DON'T have time to be nice to morons.

Here's a little clue for those of you who have never sent anything out before – EDITORS DON'T NEED YOU. They need publishable manuscripts, but one of those manuscripts doesn't have to be yours. If you are a complete idiot or a jerk (this woman managed to be both, but since I'm not an editor maybe it won't cost her) your little book will come home to you so fast it will make your head spin. With thousands of manuscripts pouring into publishing houses every month, editor's don't have to go too far to find something to buy.

5) DO include a self-addressed stamped envelope or manuscript box with enough postage on it to get your manuscript back home to you, and do follow normal submission guidelines. (There are a zillion books on how to get your manuscript ready for market. Writer's Digest Books publishes about half of them. Do yourself a favor – if you haven't done so before now, go out and buy one or two and read them.)

6) DO query the editor first to see if she wants to look at your book, and have it completed when you ask so that if she says yes, you can send the book out by return mail. Before you query, do be sure that the publishing house already publishes books like the one you've written, and that the editor you're querying works on similar books. Marketing guides, like ***Insider's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents, 1997-1998*** by Jeff Herman (Prima Publishing) will give you this information. In fact, I strongly recommend this particular guide, which offers more in-depth information on agents, editors, and publishers and what they're looking for than anything else I've found.

7) DO find out the name of the editor to whom you're sending out your manuscript, and address the cover letter to her, and spell her name correctly. Never send out a manuscript "To Whom It May Concern." If that's all the trouble you can go to, your book won't concern anyone.

8) DO believe that if the editor says she doesn't look at science fiction, or romances, or non-fiction, she means what she says. No matter how brilliant your book might be, if you send it to an editor who doesn't work with, want, or even like that sort of book, you might as well brand "I AM AN IDIOT" on your forehead. In this instance, I will use an experience of my own as an example. When I was teaching for Writer's Digest, my students were carefully matched to my interests and areas of expertise. But one student, who in his bio described himself as a future science fiction writer, decided, once we were ready to get to work on his book, that he wanted to write a literary novel of life in academia, and sent along the first chapter, and told me he figured this would be a good learning experience for both of us. Wrong. I have read such books. I uniformly loathe them. I would sooner go back to the day job than be forced to wade my way through endless hundred-word passive-voice sentences and passive scenes of flat characters indulging in self-pity and navel-contemplation. My idea of editing such a book would consist of setting each page of the manuscript on fire individually, and mailing the ashes back to the author. I know this sounds rabid, but what you have to realize is that every editor has equally strong feelings about the books she likes and the books she hates.

   But you're saying, what difference could it possibly make if you send your book to an editor who hates that sort of thing. After all, how could it come back to haunt you? Do I even remember this guy's name all these years later?

   You bet I do.

- **Concept Discussions**

This is more of an "I've already published a few books and now I've sold one on an outline and a sample chapter" sort of section, but sequentially, this is the point where the process takes place, so let's go through how it works.

NOTE: I have done this many times, it can be grueling, it can beat your ego into pulp, and you have to be good at it or you will find yourself making enemies where you need allies.

Here's the scene. Your editor calls you on the phone, (or sends you a letter) and says she likes the look of your book outline and sample chapters overall, but she sees some areas where the story could be stronger, and some where it could be shorter, and she has a problem with the motivations of some of the characters, and so on. Hope that she sends you a letter first, because you will deal with this so much better if you don't have to deal with your first reactions while on the phone.

But let's say you do. Worst case, she calls you cold. You thought when you sold the book on the basis of the outline that the outline must have been exactly what she wanted or she wouldn't have bought it. You, after all, thought it was perfect. Now you're finding out for the first time that while she wants the book, she doesn't want it precisely as you envisioned it.

Here are the rules when you're discussing concepts.

- **Rule #1: Shut mouth, open ears**. Tell your editor you want to write down everything she has to say, grab a notebook and a pen, and carefully write it all down. At this point, it doesn't matter whether you agree or disagree with her remarks – we'll assume for convenience's sake that you have the typical writer ego and you're certain she's out of her mind. Write everything down anyway. Don't say a word, unless it is, "I missed that last little bit, could you repeat it?" Don't defend your concepts, don't defend your characters, don't defend yourself. Shut up, write.

- **Rule #2: Get immediate distance**. When she finishes telling you everything that needs to be changed, and when you've gone over what you've written down once to make sure that what she said is what you heard, say, "Okay, this is a lot to go over. I'm going to have to study what I've done and see how I can work these changes in. When can I call you back to discuss it?" Get a date, smile and say bye, hang up. Memorize this step and practice it front of the mirror, imagining that you are foaming at the mouth while saying these words. Practice sounding both calm and rational. You probably won't be when the time comes – that's why you're practicing.

- **Rule #3: Hit the roof in private.** Anything you say when no one can hear you can't be held against you. You're off the phone, you're alone in the bathroom, you've finished beating your head on the wall. Now is the time to scream and snarl and make comments on your editor's parents' species and marital status, your

editor's IQ and sexual practices, and anything else you're inclined to shout when really angry. Or, if you're of a tenderer disposition, now's your chance to bask in self-pity and sing three quick verses of "Nobody Likes Me, Everybody Hates Me, Guess I'll Go Eat Worms." You're permitted anything from ten minutes to twenty-four hours for this phase. Get it out of your system, then knock it off.

- **Rule #4: Lock your ego in the closet**. Time to get back to work. The truth frequently hurts, and it's about to bite you in the tender spots. You're about to discover that the reason your editor has her job is because she's good at it. Go over your outline, synopsis, and completed chapters with her comments in hand, look carefully at each one she's made, and honestly try to figure out why she said what she did. Run the story in your head with her changes in place. You're going to realize that if you put most of her suggestions into practice, it will actually get better. Most times, a whole bunch better.

You'll also discover a few things that she suggested that won't work, but this will usually be because what you have down on the outline she bought is only a very small part of what you already have in your head. When you come across one of these exceptions, write down your reasons for wanting to keep the item as it was, and make sure that they're good reasons, and that the item will make the story better. Figure out how you're going to incorporate the changes your editor was right about, too, and give yourself a few notes on each so that you won't forget how you're going to do it all when you're on the phone talking to her; otherwise you could end up sounding lost or not too bright or like you've been hitting the sauce.

I'm as defensive as anyone about my writing – probably worse than most. I have a quick temper, too, and my first reaction to criticism is to attack. If that were the reaction I ever let get the upper hand, I would have a miserable time dealing with my editors, and I would have a short and unhappy career. I am pleased to report that I've never blown up at an editor, I've never let my mouth get away from me, and I've always been able to see (once I've had the time to calm down) how much my editors' initial suggestions would improve my stories. And because I've taken the time to find out where each editor was right and figured out how I was going to make the changes she wanted, when I hit an area that I felt was important to keep as it was, I've always been able to get the okay to let it stand.

Writing professionally requires mastery of the art of negotiation. Never forget that.

• First Draft, First Look

You've finished the book, and you have the overwhelming urge, upon typing the last words, to immediately print the thing and send it out in the mail. (At least I do. By the time I finish my books, they feel like houseguests who have way overstayed their welcome. I want them out the door yesterday.)

Take ten slow breaths, say your mantra, hit your thumb with a hammer – do whatever you have to do to put the brakes on. Don't send the book out yet. You have things to do to it before your editor ever sees it. Go ahead and print out a draft copy. Get out a notebook and a pen. Start reading through from the beginning. If you find typos, fix them of course, but you're looking for more than typos. What you're doing now is a continuity check. Make sure that your days and hours track – that if a full moon hung high in the sky at the opening of the scene (meaning the time was right around midnight) you don't have the grandfather clock tolling six. Or that your hero's eyes don't go from brown to blue halfway through the book. Or that you haven't left a scene with little markers in it that you were going to go back and fix when you figured out what happened there, without ever going back to fix them. (I've found whole sections like this in books I've thought were finished, and I've been ever so grateful that I took the time to go through the manuscript before I sent it out.)

Also look for clumsiness in the writing itself and places where you used almost, but not quite, the word you intended. Check for places where you spelled a character's name in different ways, and so on. By going over the manuscript as carefully as you can after completion of the first draft, you'll make sure that what your editor reads is what you sent, and not what you think you sent. There can be a world of difference between the two.

• Deadline Concerns

Your editor says the first draft is due in December and the published book will be on the shelves a year later. So you actually have some fudge time, don't you? You can be a few weeks (or a few months) late getting the book in, right?

No. You can't. First draft is just the beginning of the process of getting your book ready for publication. Once you're done with it, the editor will read it – and she needs some leeway on the time it will take her to do that, because yours is not the only project she's working on. She'll make revision requests (more on those in the next section). You'll need time to do your rewrites. She'll read (and we hope approve) your rewrites, then send the book to the copyeditor. The copyeditor will work on a tight deadline, and get the book to the compositor, who will set in into type. At some point

in this process, you'll get typeset galleys to go over and proof. Keep your rewrites to the bare minimum at this point – it costs money, and usually a lot of it, to reset typeset print. Look for typos, things that are just plain wrong, and typesetting errors (like the last word of a sentence orphaned at the top of a page, or a place where lines were duplicated or inexplicably put into a different typeface.) You'll do galleys on an incredibly tight schedule; I've had turn-arounds of one day before. The galleys go back, the compositor finishes setting the type, the proofs are sent to the printer, the pages are printed and bound, and a book emerges. In this process, too, there has been cover design and marketing work going on simultaneously, and perhaps the preparation of bound galleys to go out to reviewers (usually prepared from the same galleys that you proofed).

All of these things take time, and the one thing that will screw up every single link in this long and complicated chain every time is you being late with your first draft or revisions. Take the deadline your editor gives you as being chiselled in stone, handed down from on high like the eleventh commandment. In fact, for writers, it IS the eleventh commandment.

THOU SHALT NOT BE LATE WITH THY BOOK!

If you are, assume that you will not be on terribly warm terms with anyone at your publishing house for a while thereafter. If you have a thereafter.

- ## Revision Requests

If you skipped the section on Concept Discussions at the beginning of this article, read it now.

If you have read it, there are still a few extra things you need to keep in mind.

- **One: Your editor knows the market better than you do**.

  This is a tough nut for most writers to swallow and if you aren't careful, can become a point of friction between you and your editor. If you editor says, “The ending is too downbeat to do well in the American market; we need to think about ways you can give it a more upbeat ending,” for example, you can take one of two tacks. The first is to say, “Look, I'm the writer, and this is the way I envisioned the story, and I don't <u>care</u> how the American market prefers upbeat endings. I claim artistic license, dammit; I don't want to change so much as a comma, much less rethink the ending.” This may get you some points among your peers as the Artist with Integrity and Vision, but your editor is going to be justified in labelling you a Pain-in-the-Ass Artiste, and at this point in your career, your buddies at the cafe

aren't going to be putting money in your pocket, and your editor is. The second way you can approach the situation is to say, “Okay, I can see how that ending might be a little dark. Do you have any recommendations for giving it a more upbeat feel without gutting the whole meaning of the book?” Then you listen to her ideas, and come up with a few of your own, and sit down at the computer and rework the ending in the manner that feels best to you. And you send it off, content in the knowledge that you have made your book as marketable as you can.

And I do hate to sound like the Commercial Sell-Out from Hell here, but if you don't work to make your book as marketable as you can, you can kiss any hope of a full-time writing career goodbye. Publishers – all publishers – publish books in order to make money. If you aren't willing to help your publisher out by writing books he can hope to sell, he will simply stop buying books from you. Put your heart into your stories, and your soul, and the best of what you have to offer. Then be willing to reshape your stories to make them better, more marketable, more accessible. Keep the heart and the soul in there – don't get cynical, however easy it may be to get cynical. But keep your eye on the sales figures and the bottom line, too.

- **Two: Nothing you write is perfect.**

  I know this comes as a shock; it's a shock to me every time I finish a book and find that it still needs work. But you cannot let the fact that your editor will want rewrites on what you thought was a finished book (and she will) shake you. No matter how good you are, you editor will be able to spot places where you were lazy or sloppy or didn't think consequences through carefully. She will find ways to make your book better. This is her job. Don't give her a hard time for doing it. Remember that in the long run, she's making you look brilliant, and however tough this whole process might be for your ego right now, you will be the primary beneficiary when you get through it.

- **Three: You can be replaced.**

  If nothing else I tell you sticks, make sure this does. Your publisher doesn't need you. Your agent doesn't need you. And your editor doesn't need you. For every 'you' out there who has gotten far enough to have a book accepted and to think that now you have the world by the throat, there are ten thousand others waiting for a chance, with their manuscripts ready and their minds made up that this is what they want to do. If you have a shitty attitude and think you're God's gift to the field, well, one of them won't. And you'll find that your books stop selling and your agent stops returning your calls, and you can take full responsibility for your crash onto your own shoulders. Why should anyone have to put up with a jerk when there are people out there who write just as well as you do and who are

pleasant to work with? You don't have to grovel, you don't have to eviscerate your work to sell it, you don't have to kiss ass – but you do have to remember that you are not the answer to everyone's prayers and the salvation of the book industry. Not yet, anyway. When you sell like Stephen King, come back and we'll talk.

- **Manuscript Proofing**

This is an essential, but technical, pain. Do it, do it promptly, and do it well. To make life easier on yourself, get the book Copyediting, A Practical Guide, by Karen Judd (ISBN 156052143-0). Read it, keep it by your side while you go through your manuscript, do the best you can. And be grateful that a real copyeditor will be doing the same thing. My eyes don't pick out a third of the things that a professional's do, but I do manage to find and correct some things that might otherwise get missed.

- **Marketing, Cover Design**

Here is yet another opportunity for you to either be wonderful to work with or the dreaded Pain-in-the-Ass Artiste. If your contract calls for it, or if you're just lucky, you'll get to have some input on how your cover is designed and how your book is marketed.

Cover design first. Once again, it's best to remember that, unless you came to novel writing from a career in a publisher's art department designing covers for the sort of books you write, there are other people out there who know more about what will make your book sell than you do. Give your input, but let them do their jobs. My best recommendation on working with your editor is to stay very general with the first discussion.

I'll draw from my own experience for this. My editor called me up and said, “Have you given any thought to cover design yet?” I had. I said, “I've noticed that the books like mine that sell best have the same artist for every book in the series, that the covers are set off by a border that makes the series connection clear, and that in each instance the artist was basically an unknown who got his big break by illustrating those writers' covers. So I would like to get an artist who will stay with me for however many Matrin books I write. I'd prefer that he or she not be someone whose work is already associated with a big-name writer. And I'd like to have the cover artwork edged by an attractive, distinctive border.” That was my big contribution to my cover design. Not, “Yes, I want this scene illustrated, and I want the primary color to be blue, and I want this particular artist to do the work, and I want the main

character standing on the left holding a bowl of fruit in one hand and a flaming sword with a gold pommel inset with cabochon rubies in the other." You see the difference? The neat thing is, my editor liked my ideas enough that she decided to use them.

When I got the preliminary sketch for the cover, I was delighted. There was one element on the cover that didn't exist in the book, but that I liked so much that I wrote it in. I did note that the main character's hair wasn't long enough, that her sword looked to heavy for her, and that the building in the background needed to have three stories above the ground. Again, I kept my requests simple, and made sure my editor knew they were requests. I worked briefly as a commercial artist, and I'm still pretty good, but I do not mistake what I know about art for sufficient knowledge to guarantee myself top-quality covers.

And what about marketing?

You may be asked to provide suggested cover copy for the inside flaps or back cover of your book. This is not the easiest thing in the world to do, and having done it many times now, I have tremendous respect for people who write good cover copy.

The key word here is "suggested." You don't get a guarantee that your cover copy will be used. And if you want it to be used, keep a couple of things in mind. First, you'll do better if you write several different approaches and send them all, noting which ones you like the best. Second, you'll do better if you read cover copy from other books, and if you make notes on why that copy worked for you. (It probably worked for you, because you bought the book, right?) Pay attention to how many words were in the effective copy, how much of the story the copy gave away, how much it said about the characters, and what sort of cliffhanger it used at the ending. If you want to make your life a little easier, write cover copy for some books you like right now. Get the feel for doing this when you aren't under any pressure to produce.

And one final suggestion. A friend of mine who worked in marketing before he became an unbelievably successful writer of superb space opera novels (David Weber, who writes the Honor Harrington series, among other wonderful books) does a marketing package for each book. In this package, he includes not only the finished first-draft manuscript, but a folder-bound, typeset "reader's copy" of the book that other people in the office can take home and read and get excited about, a page with his suggested back cover copy, and a page with a suggested teaser page for the paperback edition (the teaser page is the one you open to first in some paperback books, that has a cliffhanger scene from the novel itself). Don't send a marketing package if you haven't sold the book yet, but if you have, I think this is a thoughtful way to provide some input into the marketing of your book.

Your editor may ask you for a list of conventions and bookstores you'll be visiting. Keep track of where you'll be going and keep your list current, because if she knows where you'll be a guest or signing books, she can send one of the publisher goody packages to the site. These packages can include such cool things as bookmarks imprinted with your book cover, posters of your book, the occasional cover-imprinted T-shirts for the staff to wear (so that they can advertise for you), a couple of bound galleys for the bookstore staff so that they will have an advance chance to get excited about what you've written, balloons imprinted with your publisher's name, and other things to generate excitement about you and your book.

Your editor might ask you to participate in an autographing session with other writers she works with. Here is my advice on this. Remember that the opportunity to sign your books for the people who want to buy them is, 1) an honor, and 2) a privilege. People who have read your work (and have paid to do so) will be taking time out of their lives to come out to meet you. Remember that without them, you don't have a job. I have seen writers be incredibly rude to readers who wanted to meet them, say hello, maybe get an autograph, and I have seen those readers walk away hurt and determined that they would never buy another one of that writer's books. I've been treated badly by writers, too, and I no longer buy their books.

If you cannot be kind and appreciative to the people who make it possible for you to do what you do, then do yourself a major favor and become a recluse. Don't do autographings, don't go to conventions or book fairs; stay home and write your books. If your editor discovers at one of these signings that you're a jerk, she probably won't ask you to do any more of them, and may go so far as to recommend that you don't. Some writers aren't presentable in public, and editors work around this. But if you already know you're going to end up being rude, spare yourself the embarrassment of having your editor tell you, “We would really rather not have you participate in the promotion of your books anymore.”

If you can be pleasant and open, you're in for a treat. You'll discover that the people who read your work turn out to be people who have a lot in common with you. As well they should be, if you think about it. After all, you put a lot of yourself into each book you write, and people respond to that. I always find something to talk about (not including my books) with the people who like my stuff – we share common ground or life experiences that they have responded to when I wrote my experiences in my stories. If you remember this, you can find autographings and conventions a marvelous experience in meeting new friends.

And you editor won't ask you to stay home next time.

- ## Conventions, Dinners, Hanging Out

Here we have yet another series of opportunities to either have a great time or wake up the next morning wishing you were dead. We'll deal with conventions, writers' conferences, and so on first. You go to them hoping to meet editors, and maybe you'll be lucky and get the chance. If you do find yourself talking to an editor who publishes books in your field, DO NOT whip out your manuscript and offer to let her read it. Do not lurk outside the restroom stall and shove it under the door at her, either. (One editor told the story about this happening to her. I shuddered.) Do not corner her and start telling her the plot of the book. Do not, in fact, say anything more about you book than, at the end of your conversation – which will NOT be exclusively about how you are a writer, please – "I've finished a novel that I'd really like to submit to you. May I?"

If she isn't backlogged for the next two years (and some editors are, so take her word for it if she says she can't accept anything right at the moment), and if you were pleasant and interesting to talk to, she'll probably say yes. When you get home, write a little letter to cover your manuscript reminding her where she met you and under what circumstances – "I loved your story about the publisher and the conch soup!" for example – and ship out the manuscript, following all the rules for correct submission.

The exception to this, of course, is if you have already sold something to the editor, and have set aside a meeting time strictly to discuss your work. Then, of course, you talk shop. Otherwise, you'll still be talking shop (because when writers and editors get together, we always fall back on talking about writing sooner or later), but it will be generic shop talk. Pay attention to subjects – I fell into doing a story for an L. Sprague de Camp anthology because in general conversation with my editor at breakfast I enthused about The Compleat Enchanter, noting that it was the first fantasy that I read that made me want to write fantasy. Turns out she was putting together some Compleat Enchanter stories by other writers, edited by de Camp, and asked me if I thought I'd like to do one. Talk about moments of magic.

Which segues us neatly into dinners, lunches, brunches, and breakfasts. Just a few rules here.

- **Listen more than you talk.**
- **Don't be a bore or a boor.**
- **Don't get drunk.**
- **Don't order the most expensive thing** on the menu just because she's paying.

- **Don't make a pass at her** no matter how cute she is and how studly you are (or any variation on the gender thing).

- **Listen more than you talk.** (Yeah, I know I already said that, but I wanted to be sure you remembered it. It's the most important rule.)

Finally, hanging out. A few more rules.

- **Don't hog access to the editor**; you won't be the only writer at the party (or fair, or whatever) and others will want to hang out with her, too.

- **Don't get drunk.** This one comes up a lot, really. Where there are editors, there tends to be free booze in almost unlimited amounts. You would be wise to go very, very light on it; I have seen otherwise cool writers do incredibly stupid things when they got drunk. And anything you do not only can be held against you, but tends to show up on film, and in conversation between other editors and writers forever after.

- **Don't talk business**. Business time is for business. It's why you get to deduct your phone calls to New York. Hanging out is for fun, and editors like to have fun, too. And you still get to deduct hanging out, because you are Networking and developing Meaningful Relationships with Colleagues. I got to deduct the balloon fight at the SFWA party, as well as the rest of that glorious trip. Granted I sold three books that weekend, but even if I hadn't, I met some wonderful people, and still work with many of them.

That's my take on how it's done. Now go, write, submit. Brace yourself; your editor awaits.

About Literary Agents

ABOUT AGENTS IN GENERAL

Please realize that finding good representation requires a major effort on your part, professional and courteous conduct, and a top-quality product. About using the term "product" to describe your work: do remember that your book is your product; not your baby. You'll probably have to give it a nose job and whack off at least one of its arms before it reaches publication, so start thinking of it as your product now. The surgery hurts a lot less that way.

Don't query any agent before you've completed your manuscript – no reputable agent is interested in an unfinished first novel. The exception to this would be if you have a hot topical idea and impeccable access to an otherwise inaccessible subject, and time is of the essence. Think celebrity tell-all (non-fiction) in this category. Otherwise, finish the book. I can think of no instance where fiction would be better served by that sort of hurry-up high-pressure sales pitch. Even if you've published a few short stories in professional publications, you'll be better served to have a completed novel in hand when you start querying. That way if you generate interest, you can immediately ship the whole thing off to the interested agent.

The majority of queries any agent receives – probably around 99% – are rejected because they lack whatever spark that agent is looking for. This doesn't mean they're hopeless – what is wrong for one agent might be right for another. Remember that the agent you want will love the genre you work in and know the publishers and editors who publish it, **and** will love the work you do. Make sure the work you send out is your best, that it is professionally formatted, free of errors, and entirely yours. (Which means don't query about anything to which you do not own clear copyright. Books that contain Star Trek and Star Wars and Dragonlance characters are examples of

this). Also, don't query every agent in Writer's Market regarding your novel. Read their descriptions of what they're looking for and believe them – an agent who doesn't like science fiction won't like your science fiction, and won't appreciate having his time wasted by yet another beginner who has proved by querying him that he is a beginner, and worse yet, can't follow instructions.

When contacting any agent, have a career plan in mind. Know what the next book you want to write is, and have an idea about the next three or four. Know what you want to accomplish in five years, and in ten. The odds are that your first published book isn't going to set the world on fire, but if you have a plan to offer that shows you know how to build on what you're doing already, (instead of coming to the table with one book and no idea of what you'll do for an encore) you'll have a better chance of finding representation.

SPECIFICS ABOUT MY AGENT

Lots of people have asked. Here's the information on my agent.

He is Russell Galen, one of the founders of Scovil, Chichak, Galen, and one of the best agents in the business. I recommend him and the agency wholeheartedly. About what he is willing to represent, he says, “There really are no limits on what we handle. SF and fantasy is the largest fraction of what we do but it's still a fraction, maybe 40%. I sell at least 25 nonfiction books a year and currently have a nonfiction bestseller in ANGEL IN THE WHIRLWIND: THE TRIUMPH OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION by Benson Bobrick (Simon & Schuster). I do not like to be thought of as a SF/fantasy specialist but as a generalist with a special love for and expertise in SF and fantasy.” He does not represent poetry or short fiction. He prefers to receive queries from writers who have previously published fiction (either short stories or novels), but is open to queries from unpublished writers, with a couple of caveats. He says, “...we do take on things out of the slush, though of course very rarely. We found Terry Goodkind that way and he's now #15 on the Publisher's Weekly bestseller list.”

However, the agency is large and successful, and not actively lobbying for new clients. If you have something really special to present, SCG will be interested, but the agency is in a position where it can afford to be choosy about which clients it takes on, and it is. Also, don't query unless you do so by following the guidelines below.

If you would like to query him (or the agency) regarding representation of your own work, send a single-page query letter that includes your previous publications, if any, along with a brief description of your completed book, including its genre, word

count, and subject matter. You may also include a single-page, single-spaced synopsis of the book. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Do not send the manuscript itself unless requested, and if requested, remember to enclose a manuscript envelope or box with return postage sufficient to cover the cost of returning your manuscript. Unsolicited manuscripts are returned unopened. Query first.

You can mention that you saw the recommendation for Mr. Galen and SCG on my writing page; please do not say that I recommended your work or that we are close personal friends. The agency checks, and you will damage your credibility and ruin your chances.

If your work shows merit but does not strike his fancy, he may recommend you to one of the other agents in the agency.

You may contact him at the following address:

Russell Galen
Scovil, Chichak, Galen Literary Agency
381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1020
New York, NY 10016

How to Query an Agent

I received a letter recently asking if it would be better to send a humorous letter to an agent when asking for representation than a more serious one. I've included my response below, along with a sample query letter and suggestions that you might find helpful if you've reached this stage.

There is no secret to getting an agent but persistence, sadly. I **wouldn't** recommend a gimmick or a "funny" letter. Every agent and editor and publisher I know is inundated by people trying to be different, when what all of them desperately want is someone who is professional. I **would** recommend including a one-page single-spaced synopsis of the work you're hoping to have the agent submit that tells the complete story, including the ending. I would keep the letter as businesslike and short as possible.

About persistence – when I finished **Fire in the Mist**, I queried Russ. He turned me down by form letter, but I was determined that he was going to be my agent (he's one of the best in the field). I didn't bother querying anyone else, because I didn't want anyone else. So I sold my first novel on my own, and when I did, wrote him a note that said, basically, "You suggested that I query you again once I sold something. I sold my first book the first time out to the first place I sent it, within a month of sending it out. Would you be interested in representing me now?"

He contacted me by phone the day he got the letter.

That's the hard way to get an agent, kind of like drawing a spades royal flush in a game of five card draw with nothing wild. But there isn't an easy way. There will only be your way, and the way of the other few who persist until they succeed.

Here's a sample of what you say in a query letter to an agent:

Joe Writer
Address
Address
Phone Number

Date

Agent Name-spelled-right
Brilliant Literary Agency
Address
Address

Dear Agent Name-spelled-right,

I have completed a 90,000 word stand-alone dark urban fantasy manuscript titled _Knights and Daze_, and would like to have you represent me in selling this and the many books I plan for the future. I'd like to send you the manuscript, and am interested in your evaluation of its commercial potential and any recommendations that you might have on how to make it a better book. Both your clients Mark Twain and C.S. Lewis recommended you highly, and from what they've said and what I've seen, I believe you are exactly the agent I want to have representing my work.

To help you decide if you might be interested in representing me, I've included a one page synopsis of _Knights and Daze_ with this letter, and will mail the completed manuscript or a portion at your request. I've enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your reply.

Thank you for your time and assistance. I eagerly await your response.

All my best wishes,

Joe Writer

Pointers:

- Be specific. Know exactly what you've written, and describe it by its genre. Time-travel romance, mainstream thriller, high fantasy trilogy (NOTE – If you've written a book that will require more than one volume to tell the story, and have no track record with an agent or publisher, you need to have the complete story finished before you send it off, no matter how many volumes it takes. Single-volume works are easier for a beginner to sell. There are exceptions. If you're Robert Jordan or J.V. Jones, you might be one of them. But if you aren't, my advice stands.)

- Be polite. You are asking for someone to invest his time in reading your work. You are asking a favor of a stranger. PLEASE keep this in mind. You are not yet in the position to grant favors, and comments implying that you are – for example, "You are one of the lucky few to whom I'm offering the chance to represent me." – will only get your letter dumped in the trash.

- Be modest. Don't say your manuscript is the best book ever written, or that it will make a million dollars, or that you are the next William Shakespeare. Let your work speak for yourself. If you're any good, the agent will figure that out by reading what you've written. If you try to tell him how great you are, you'll just come off looking like a boor and an idiot.

- Be reasonable. Don't demand that he represent you, or threaten to kill yourself if he doesn't. Don't offer bribes. Don't write on pink stationery with purple ink. Don't send your entire manuscript unasked. Put yourself in the agent's place. Imagine that you got dozens of letters a day from complete strangers who all wanted you to do things for them. Imagine that most of the requests had no merit, that most of the people were rude, and that most of the work they sent you was anywhere from mediocre to downright awful. Imagine getting one polite, intelligent, businesslike letter in the midst of all that chaos. Now – be the writer of that letter.

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Life Changes Writing; Writing Changes Life

I don't know a writer whose life hasn't influenced his writing. We all borrow heavily from the angst and joy in our past. I know that I've strip-mined large sections of my weird childhood in Alaska, Guatemala, Costa Rica and small towns throughout Ohio to fuel the collisions of cultures and people that fill my books. Trekking through the Costa Rican rain forest gave me the Wen jungles (though not, thank God, the mobile trees). My own kids gave me Barney and Carol, Kirtha, Karen, and bits and pieces of other kids in my books. My friends have strolled across my pages in many guises; they are never exactly like themselves, because characters *will* come to life, but those characters would have been very different if' I'd never known the people I used as models.

It's that way, I know, with every writer. You cut out chunks of your own memories, rework them, bleed into them, breathe into the raw clay, and hope the creature lives.

That isn't the miracle of writing, though. That isn't the secret that keeps so many of us at it.

This is the secret.

Writing will change your life and influence the way you see the world more than your life will ever influence your writing.

I've made this assertion. It's a big one. So how has writing influenced my life?

In a million tiny ways, and a couple of huge ones. Let me tell you a story. I had exactly one month from the time I started *Sympathy for the Devil* until I had to hand it

in. This wasn't a cruel publishing trick – the book was supposed to have been a collaboration, but my collaborator couldn't do the book I needed, and I found this out late, and ended up doing it alone. I was pushing through the novel at twenty pages per day – for me, that's fourteen to sixteen hours a day on good days. I'm steady, but I'm not a blazingly fast writer. I submerged myself in the book, and it started to flow. I was writing, but the part of me that had a lot to say in that book wasn't my conscious mind. My subconscious took over, feeding me scenes, and I reworked and shaped them at a feverish pace. My subconscious self was furious at the injustices I recalled from my years in nursing, and that fury fueled the opening of the book. As I mentioned in the autobiographical chapter, Nursing, Hell, and Sympathy for the Devil, Dayne Kuttner, the hero of the book, was basically me. She was a nurse who'd seen hell on Earth while working in the intensive care unit, and who got angry with God over the very idea of Hell, and who challenged God to make things right.

Well, at this point in my life, I (unlike Dayne) wasn't on speaking terms with God or my faith at all. The unfairness of Hell and the cruelty of any God who could condone eternal torture under any circumstances had sent me away from religion years ago, and I'd written off spirituality and God entirely. But as I sank deeper and deeper into the novel, and as Dayne challenged God and God answered, I began to find, through their interactions, the answers I'd been fighting to understand for most of my life. Even though I'm still not on speaking terms with religion, I relocated my faith through the process of writing that book ... and just in time.

Halfway through the book, my kids told me that my ex-husband (their biological father) was molesting them when they were at his house. We called in the police and Social Services immediately. I kept writing because I had to. A couple weeks after I finished the book, my parents walked out of my life. The week after that, my nine-year-old was hospitalized for symptoms of acute depression. While he was hospitalized, we moved out of the town where I'd lived for fifteen years and started trying to sell my house. The next month my daughter was hit by a car (both kids are fine now, by the way). The following month my second marriage started to fall apart. That same month we bought another house to replace the one we'd had to sell, and went deep into debt. Five months after that, the second marriage fell completely apart and I had to pack up the kids and move again, and I lost everything I owned.

And all of this might sound terrible, but in fact the things that happened were necessary – and underneath the pain and the suffering, they were good. At first I looked at those months as a curse – I wrote *Sympathy for the Devil*, got back on speaking terms with God, and God exploded my tranquil life. In fact, though it took me time to see this, my life was already poisoned under the surface, and the explosion that followed the writing of the book and the changes that wrought in me blew open the terrible lies that were destroying my children and me and endangering our lives.

The explosion removed a lot of people I loved from my life, but those it left were the ones who loved me, too. It made my kids and me stronger, brought us together, made it possible for us to be honest with each other in a way many parents and children never find.

And what did that have to do with writing? I don't know that I could have survived the two terrible years that followed the revelations of August 7th, 1994, if I had not found my faith. I could not have found my faith without my writing. I had forgotten that things happen for a reason; that life has both meaning and purpose; that we always have the choice to use the events of our life for our own good; that we become stronger not when times are easy, but when they are hard. I remembered these things because I was writing them, and finally I felt the truth of them.

Writing fiction is a fire that burns inside of you, and burns you from the inside out. It sears away the lies you tell yourself, it sears away the masks you hide behind, and in the end it refines you the way fire refines gold. What you put into your writing you get back a hundred-fold. Your characters teach you how to live, how to love, sometimes how to say goodbye.

When you write honestly, you give a gift to yourself that will change your life for the better.

How to Quit Your Day Job to Write Full Time

There aren't many things that go without saying in writing; one of the few is that most people who write at all dream about writing full-time without the hassle of a day job, too.

First let me tell you that if you're looking for something you can do to walk away from the job tomorrow, I don't have the answer for you. It took me about eight years from the time I decided that I wanted to leave nursing to write full-time to the day in November of 1993 when I was able to give away my stethescope and do it. And even then I did it wrong, and jumped too soon, and cost myself some momentum and some money.

However, if I knew that by staying in nursing for another five years, I could have had an easier time now ... I think I still would have jumped when I did. Writing full-time is as cool as you might ever hope it would be on the good days, and scarier than you can believe on the bad ones, and I wouldn't trade any of the rollercoaster ride that it has been up to now for the security a few more years in the day job could have given me.

First things first. If you are wedded to the idea of security and you like knowing that you're going to be able to pay your bills on time every month, kiss the idea of full-time writing a permanent goodbye. At levels of success higher than those I've yet reached, I imagine money is a bit more secure. At my level – which is fourteen or so books in print, all in a solid genre that generates a good audience, no single title breathtakingly successful, but several that have earned out and pay regular if small royalties – it is an adventure. And remember that the definition of adventure is “some

poor shmuck having a hell of a hard time of it a thousand miles away." I'm doing what I love, and getting paid for it, and I wouldn't do anything else unless I were in imminent danger of starvation. Life doesn't suck. But I'm one of those people who never minded a bit of adventure. And even for me, sometimes the sheer amount of adventure makes the whole thing dicey.

So how do you go about telling the boss and the 9-5 grind goodbye forever? Read on ...

- **Dealing With Money**

The first reality of writing full time is that money is always tricky. You have it in large chunks, then you don't have it at all. You can't count on a check every week, or every month, or even every six months. It comes when it comes, and you have to figure out how to make it last until it comes again, even though you never know when that will be. Here's how you do it.

1. Put aside more money than you could possibly need before you leave. Figure out what it takes you to survive for a year, and add about ten to fifteen percent for things that go boom. Things always go boom, and they do it with a real passion when you don't have a regular paycheck.

2. Brace yourself for the taxes. They suck. You pay the regular amount on your income for whatever bracket you're in, plus you pay self-employment tax. Take a look at your paystub from your last paycheck. Note the amount that's currently going into Social Security or FICA. Double it. If you maintain the same level of income, that's what you're going to be paying, because you don't have an employer who takes half the bite for you anymore. Self-employment tax will add several thousand dollars annually to your tax burden even if you only manage a moderate income. Also remember that once you're out on your own, nobody takes the money out of your check for you every week. You do it yourself, quarterly, and I'll tell you right now that you feel it more than you ever did when it just wasn't in the paycheck in the first place.

3. Set up a checking account *and* a savings account for yourself. Figure out how much you have to have per month to get by. Pay yourself weekly or monthly from your savings account into your checking account, and at all other times pretend the money in the savings account isn't there. Otherwise, when you see that you have $15,000 dollars in the bank, you will forget that that is your paycheck for six months, and you will go out and do stupid things with the money, and then you won't have six months of paychecks in the bank. Things won't be too bad in January, but along about

May and June, when you're living on spaghetti with tomato sauce breakfast, lunch and supper because it's all you can afford, you'll regret the new TV and the Playstation and the motorbike.

4. Kill the bills before you quit. If you have debts, do whatever you have to do to get rid of them. Pay off all credit cards (and get rid of all but one). Look for places where your bank account bleeds, and stop the leaks. Don't buy a new car, don't buy a new house, don't take out a second mortgage on the one you have, get yourself as close to no outlay as you possibly can. Get used to paying by cash or check for things instead of by credit card, and if you can't afford to pay by check, get used to doing without. Don't use the card you keep. Ever. The only reason you have it is so that if you're seven hundred miles from home and your car breaks down and no one at home can wire you money and without it you'll have to panhandle your way home, you won't *have* to panhandle your way home. If you do have to use it, pay it off immediately – don't let the balance run.

5. Get some sort of health insurance. Writing does not come with it. Writing has benefits, but they tend to be of the intangible sort. Try to find affordable health insurance that has a reasonable deductible, that will let you go to whatever doctor you want, and that doesn't exclude everything you might ever possibly have from its list of covered items. My insurance is with International Benefit Services Corporation. They're pretty good.

6. Have your next year or two of work lined up before you quit.

Which takes us to ...

- **Having the Contracts to Quit On**

If this sounds ominously like I'm saying you have to sell a book before you quit, that's because I am. Don't quit the day job because you got a killer idea for a series, or because you're sick of work and you think writing would be more fun (it would – but that's not the point) or because you've finished your first book and your friends all love it. For that matter, don't quit the day the editor calls you and tells you that she wants to buy your first book. Don't quit the day you sign the first contract, or the day you receive your first advance. The best book I've read on being a professional writer, The Career Novelist, by agent Donald Maass, has an article describing when you should consider quitting your day job. Buy the book and read that for an in-depth analysis of when you're ready. In brief, though, and from my experience, you're safe to quit when:

1. You're making as much money at writing as you are at the day job.

2. You've made that much money for at least a couple of years, and it isn't all in advances on books that you haven't written yet and won't be able to get to for a while. Most if not all of it should be in royalties, although mine isn't. This fact makes my life a lot hairier than it would be otherwise, but I can't tell you that you can't live off of advances. I can only tell you that you shouldn't.

3. You're getting royalties on at least some of your titles, and at least some of your books are being reprinted.

4. Your agent gets you a deal that will cover your finances for several years and guarantee your work for several books (if you follow the money rules above and don't get crazy).

When you reach that point, it's time for the next big obstacle. Telling your family.

• Dealing With Your Family

Families come in all kinds, but no matter what kind yours happens to be, they are probably going to think that quitting a nice, stable job to go haring off into the woolly world of full-time writing is a dumbass thing to do. And from the point of view of nice sane people everywhere, they are probably right. If you were one of the nice sane people everywhere, though, you wouldn't even have made it this far in the article, so I feel safe in addressing you, the wild and woolly fellow writer. Here are the rules when dealing with family.

1. **Do not expect them to understand**.

They won't. They will not get what you are doing until and unless you are as successful as Stephen King or John Grisham, and I'll bet even those two writers occasionally get calls from their mothers asking when they're going to get real jobs. You can hope your husband or wife (if you're married) will understand, but don't bet the farm on it. The spouse will perhaps be laid back about it all while there's a fair amount of cash in the bank and you're at the keyboard every day, (though he or she is likely to complain about feeling neglected) but when things get hairy, expect cold looks and newspapers at the breakfast table open to the Help Wanted section. If you know money's coming, stand firm. If you aren't currently writing (because of a block or whatever) and there aren't any pending contracts and things are hard, get a job that will bring in money without killing your desire to write, and pitch in. (Blue-collar

work is better than a career-type job if you don't want to watch your dream die forever. You get another career-type job and try to walk away from it and your marriage will not be happy, and your family will side with your spouse.) Write on the side the way you did before.

2. **Do not expect emotional support**.

When things get rough, the response you can count on getting is not 'hang in, you'll make it, I believe in you,' but 'I told you so before you quit your job. Maybe if you're lucky they'll take you back.' Hang in anyway. *You* believe in you. You cannot expect everyone else to see your dream; you can only hope they'll see the reality. Grit your teeth and make it a reality.

3. **Do not expect consideration**.

You have a job, right? You're going to be sitting at a keyboard stretching your brain for God knows how many hours. Your family (and friends) will keep this in mind, right? *Wrong*. Your family and friends will figure as long as you're home all day, you might as well be doing something useful, like laundry, or running the kids everywhere, or going out to breakfast or lunch or shopping or .... The list of things other people will find for you to do is endless, and destructive beyond belief. Given the opportunity, they will kill your writing, then shake their heads when you fail and say they always knew it wouldn't work. Guard your time fanatically.

I know I make the people you love sound like the enemy, like conspirators against your dreams and aspirations. I write from experience. I got all the above responses the first time I quit my day job to write full time. I didn't mention earlier that I had one miserably failed attempt at this way back in 1985. But I did. When I tell you what you need to have and do in order to quit and win, I'm telling you from experience I got the hard way. The first time I quit, I wasn't ready, and my then-husband was looking at writing as: a) a quick road to millions of dollars and b) something that was going to make us rich beyond his wildest dreams of avarice overnight. It didn't, he got very caustic, and a year almost to the week from the day I quit, I had to get another nursing job. When I had to go back to nursing, my family was right there with the I-told-you-so's, and my now-ex husband was first in line.

The second time I quit, I was prepared. And the second time, it stuck.

Incidentally, there are spouses and family members and friends who won't act like the folks described above. They will support, encourage, and believe in you. If you have them, hang on to them forever. They are worth more than gold. I have such a family now, and they are my pleasure and my anchor in rough times.

And for the other people who will believe in you and your dreams ...

• Agents, Editors and Publishers

You gotta have a good agent if you're going to write full time. No quibbles, no waffling, no 'maybe I'll jump first and get one later.' And when I say good agent, I mean one who loves your work, is enthusiastic about your career and your prospects, can see you doing more and bigger things than you're doing right now. Even if your spouse doesn't believe in you, your agent has to. I'm lucky. I have a spectacular agent, and he told me that if I wanted to keep selling I was going to have to write bigger books, and he beat me over the head until I figured out what he meant by bigger books, and he tirelessly read drafts and outlines until I came up with something that worked – and then he sold the project for more money than I'd ever made before. (I was a nurse, so we're not talking fortunes here, but the deal he got me was damned nice and was a show of faith in the project on the part of the editor and publisher who bought it, too.)

You have to have a good agent. Then you have to listen to what he tells you. You have to act on his advice. You have to work and re-work and be willing to admit that no matter how many books you already have out there, you don't know everything. If you do that, your good agent will hook you up with a good editor, who will read what you've written and tell you how to fix it. Once again, listen. Learn. Follow advice.

If you have an accessible publisher, he'll give you advice, too, but most publishers are invisible. I had one who was accessible, and he was great – I got some story ideas from him, and did a few books where he pitched the idea to me, and I found him willing to listen when I pitched ideas to him, too. It was very personal, and a fun way to work. Now my publisher is a name on a masthead and I'll probably never meet him. If your publisher is involved in your books, enjoy the fact. If he isn't though, don't worry about it. A good editor and a good agent are all you need.

Except for ...

• Doing the Work

All of the above assumes you're able to produce books that sell. Here's what you do to keep yourself in business.

1.) Write every day even before you quit.

If you aren't able to make yourself write regularly before you quit your day job, the odds are that you aren't going to be able to make yourself do it after you quit. Writing

is a business for self-starters. It's hard. If you don't know beforehand that you can sit down and make yourself produce pages in spite of weariness, boredom, lack of inspiration, or over-abundance of distractions, don't kid yourself that writing full-time will magically cure this.

The weariness, boredom, lack of inspiration and plethora of distractions will still be there once you quit, and along with them will be the pressure of knowing that at least one person in the world is now counting on you to put words on paper – and make them good enough to sell – no matter what. Do not let yourself forget that once writing is your job, it is exactly that. A job. You have to sit down and do it when you don't want to, when you do want to, when you feel crappy, when you feel great, when the sun is shining outside and you can hear a mockingbird in the tree and you know that the fish are biting down at that shady spot in the river.

You will, as a successful writer, work harder for yourself than you ever did for anyone else. You'll work longer hours. You won't be able to do a half-assed job on the days when you really don't want to be there, because if you do, the only person you'll be hurting is yourself. Yes, you get to take days off whenever you want, but remember that they aren't paid vacation days anymore. The person who pays for your days off is you, so don't take too many.

2. **Get used to giving yourself a page quota**.

Mine varies from book to book and from deadline to deadline. It's been as few as five pages per day and as many as twenty. I'm comfortable at ten, I'm tired at fifteen, I thought I was going to die the time I had to produce twenty finished pages every day. Five, which is the page quota for my current book, is wonderful, and I find myself going over it some days just because I can do it without feeling strained.

3. **Act like you're in business**.

Make a habit of meeting deadlines. Get a reputation for being pleasant and easy to work with. Take reasonable suggestions, and deal with suggestions that don't work for you in a calm and reasonable way. For God's sake don't become a pain-in-the-ass artiste. If you do, you may find yourself first against the wall come the revolution. And revolutions go through the publishing business about once every two or three years, where editors and publishers all leap up and race madly to grab some other chair, and writers are orphaned and culled and forgotten. Never forget, publishers, editors, and agents will not die without you, but you will certainly find your life unpleasant without them.

4. **Spend time developing new ideas even when you're working on a book**.

Keep notebooks, doodle out concepts, create characters you don't need and don't have any place for yet, write down lists of titles that sound cool, draw maps to noplace, develop lists of names. Keep plowing the field of your mind, so that when this book is finished, stories will already be growing in it and you will be hungry to write the next one. And the next. And the next. The writer's work is never done. (But if you set yourself sensible page limits each day, you at least get some guilt-free free time.)

5.Remember to have fun.

Like what you write, create projects for yourself that you enjoy working on, don't get cynical about the process, which is tough, and can be grueling, and sometimes heartbreaking. Remember to love the writing, and to find pleasure every day in the fertile imaginings of your mind. Make yourself laugh sometimes. Don't give up.

And with that in mind, we come to ...

- ## Handing In the Resignation

I only have two pieces of advice here.

1. Don't resign while naked.
2. Don't resign by using firearms.

Otherwise, whatever you do is probably cool. A friend of mine danced on his desk in the law office while cutting his tie into small pieces. The second time I quit the day job – the time I quit for real – I went home and had a bonfire in my back yard in which I burned my uniforms. (There are times when living in the country is a wonderful thing. That wouldn't have been nearly as satisfying in a fireplace.) It was great. And my life has been an adventure ever since.

Best of luck to you, wild and woolly fellow writer. This is what I have to offer that got me out of the day job – what I did as well as what I should have done. I hope you make it, too. It's worth every bit of struggle, and it's worth it every single day.

Section 3: TROUBLESHOOTING

How to Tell Who ***Won't*** Make It in Writing (And How Not to Be That Writer)

I've met thousands of unpublished writers since I started selling my work. I've corresponded with at least a couple thousand more. I've heard every possible hope and dream about writing, commiserated with sad tales of rejection, cheered over jubilant good news, and listened to more plots than the FBI and more dirt than the parish priest sitting in his confessional.

And I've discovered something important. I couldn't in a million years tell you who among those thousands of hopeful writers will eventually succeed. But I can tell you in about five minutes which writers are guaranteed to fail.

The guaranteed failures among writerdom carry their amateur beliefs and attitudes and methods like a bad perfume - an ever-present cloud of Eau de Doom that rolls off of their bodies and wafts into the noses of publishers and editors who might otherwise be interested in the writer's work, sending the pros fleeing to green rooms and bathrooms to escape.

If you're wearing this particular scent, you need to lose it. Fast. Read below for a quick sniff-test, and for the best ways to come clean.

- **The Writer's** Stench O' Doom **Checklist**

The Big But

I'm a very good listener, I'm patient, and I'm interested in seeing beginning writers succeed. In consequence, I spend much of my time at conventions and writers' conferences leaned up against a convenient wall or doorframe, listening to the dreams and aspirations and tales of woe and book descriptions of unpublished or rarely published writers. These writers usually want a listener more than anything, so mostly I just listen. But from time to time, a hopeful writer will ask my advice. I always take my time, give the question my full attention, and try to offer the best answer I can, based on my experience and what I know of the markets and the industry.

About two thirds of the time, my questioner's immediate response starts off with, “But I can't do that because . . .”

At which point, I'm out of the conversation. I'm starting to look for a quick exit and just about any exit will do. It isn't that I think my advice would turn this writer into an overnight success, or even necessarily get his or her manuscript looked at; it isn't that the writer has hurt my feelings by ignoring me (you don't get this far in the business without developing a pretty tough hide).

The problem with people who say “But . . .” is that they have already decided that they know everything they need to know about writing. They may be chatting me up in the hopes of networking, or because they want me to tell them that theirs is the most brilliant idea I've ever heard. But they aren't interested in getting published. And they aren't going to get published.

Of all the possible sins that the hopeful writer can commit, The Big But is the worst. **You cannot make excuses for your writing and hope to succeed.**

If someone who knows the industry tells you that your manuscript isn't right for Knopf and you need to submit to other markets, don't say, “But I only want it to be published by Knopf.”

If a pro tells you that your plot is hackneyed and your characters are thin, “But I intended it to be that way . . .” is decidedly the wrong answer.

If an editor tells you that you're going to have to give the story a real ending, “But I want to leave the reader in suspense . . .” is going to get you round-filed and lose you a big opportunity.

Here are some of the amazing excuses I've heard. “But the editor can clean up the spelling and the grammar.”

“But I don't want to write a second book until the first one sells.”

“But the first book is the start of a twelve-book series - the editor **has** to buy that one first.” (Not necessarily. The editor can buy someone else's book. If it isn't selling anywhere, write something different. Something that stands alone, maybe.)

“But if there isn't sex in every chapter, no one will read the damned thing.”

“But I want it to be hard to read - I want to sell my books to intelligent readers.”

“But it doesn't need to have a plot - it's literary.” (This may, in fact, be true - but since the book hadn't sold, I'm willing to bet that in at least this instance, even the editor of literary books would have welcomed a story that seemed to be going somewhere.)

“But I'm a published writer now; I shouldn't have to revise.” (I didn't understand this one either, but I add it for your edification. The writer had sold one book many years earlier and had failed to sell anything else.)

One more time, then. **You cannot make excuses for your writing and hope to succeed.**

Open Mouth - Closed Ears

They sit in the front row of each writing panel at a convention with their arms crossed over their chests, smug smiles on their faces. They know all the answers, and they talk over not just the other attendees, but also the panelists. They corner the pros in the hallways after the panel is over and launch into long spiels about their future publishing career.

Their entire goal in attending is to prove to the writers, editors and publishers there that they know as much about the field as the pros - that they have done their homework - that they are a part of the inner circle.

The problem is that they never shut up long enough to listen to anyone, and as a result they miss the important information they could have gained, and kill the good-will they could have won. Yes, they are smart people; I've been talked at by a bunch of 'em. I've been amazed by their erudition - but appalled by their oblivious head-on charges and oblivious to the fact that the very people they hope to impress are gnawing off the arm they're clutching at the wrist in order to get away from them.

So, if you recognize yourself as being the adult version of the kid in class with his hand always up going “Me, me, me,” here are a couple of tips.

Life is not school.

There is no test.

You don't get an “A” for shouting out the answers.

Nobody cares how smart you are - they care how willing you are to treat them like equals.

The art of conversation does not consist of thinking of the next witty thing you're going to say while waiting for the other person to breathe so you can jump in and say it. It consists of actually listening and responding.

If you cannot learn to listen, you will not succeed.

Sacred Writ-ism

The third leg of the Holy Trinity of Doom Signs is the phrase “I don't believe in revision.”

Robert Heinlein offered some wonderful advice to writers, and created some brilliant books and some unforgettable characters, but he also offered this one piece of advice that simply leaves me open-mouthed with disbelief. He said, in his list of rules for writers, “Rule Three: You Must Refrain From Rewriting, Except to Editorial Order.”

This is a great rule if you're already writing publishable prose. But I've had this rule quoted back to me with a sanctimonious little sniff by people whose sentences didn't parse, whose grammar indicated that the story had been written in one language and translated into a second by someone who only spoke a third and unrelated tongue, whose characters were dead on page one and who wouldn't have known a plot if one reached up out of the open grave of their manuscripts and strangled them to get their attention.

If you are not writing professionally publishable prose, the only thing that will get you an editorial order for revision is a whole lot of un-ordered revision while you learn what you're doing. And the best way to find out if you're writing professionally publishable prose is to ask yourself this one easy question. “Have I ever had a professional editor (or reputable agent) send me a personal response, telling me that if I fixed something specific in my story, he would buy it (or represent me)?”

If the answer to that question is “no,” you have two choices. You can assume that your work does not yet meet professional standards, or else you can hope that it simply has not yet found its market.

While it would be nice to believe the second, repeated submissions will either confirm this for you (someone will buy it or tell you it's great and with a few changes, she'll buy it) or deny it in pretty short order. If you never get any feedback that indicates that you're close, assume that the work is not yet of professional caliber and get busy revising.

If you assume that the words that flow from your fingertips were dictated to you by God and are thus sacred and immune from revision, only you and God are ever going to get to read them.

Now here's the good news. No perfume - not even Eau de Doom - sticks forever if you wash it off. Even if you've been making excuses, failing to listen, and believing that revision was evil, you can leave your doomed past behind. You can sell your work. Go to it.

The Perfect Busman's Holiday

I've been writing books under contract since 1991 – a happy state for me that has primarily meant I've known I had some money due when my book was finished. For a long time, I didn't see any real downside to writing under contract. I was writing my own stories, after all – my own worlds, my own characters, my own plots. Even when I did collaborations or work-for-hire, I was fortunate to be working in worlds or areas of worlds that I took a large role in designing, writing with characters that I either created myself or with my collaborator. I never got stuck writing characters that someone else controlled.

So I felt free, in command of my own destiny, comfortable with my writing and the state of my life. There were times when I was writing four books in a single year just to keep my head above water financially, but I was okay with that. I figured I was paying dues, and I kept going. I developed a big solo project – a trilogy that went to a respected publisher for respectable money, that got me my first solo foreign resales, and that allowed me to slow down to one book in nine months. These were bigger books, much more complex than anything I'd previously written, so we're not talking vacation here, but I wasn't having to pull fourteen-hour days to hit my deadlines either, so I was right with the world.

Through the first book, anyway.

Then I started hitting brick walls. I'd never had what I would call writer's block, though I had suffered the occasional stall-and-tailspin when I went off in the wrong direction on a book. I always managed to pull out by backing up to the last point where the writing was going well, cutting out everything I'd written from that point (and pasting it into a separate document) and picking up from my trouble spot in a new direction. But in Book Two of the Secret Texts (*Vengeance of Dragons*) I started

losing whole days, and even whole weeks, to endless sessions of solitaire while I tried to figure out what to write next. It wasn't that I didn't know what I wanted to have happen; I knew. The story was clear in my head, I knew the characters, I knew the twists. It wasn't that I'd gone off in the wrong direction – what I had was good, and I knew it. It was, instead, that I had given myself over to the effects of a painful malaise. When I sat in front of the keyboard, my fingers felt like lead and my mind moved like sludge.

I was tired. I'd been working damned hard for years, and it was catching up on me. I needed a vacation away from tight deadlines and large numbers of necessary pages-per-day – I needed a few worry-free months on a beach, doing nothing but reading great novels by other people. Unfortunately, as I've mentioned elsewhere, writing is my sole source of income. If I want to eat, I have to write, and those pages have to be done on time, and done in a manner acceptable to my editor and my publisher.

So I made it through *Vengeance of Dragons* on pure nerves and good outlining – there were places where the story did the work for me, and it's a good thing, because if I'd been writing something with less of a plot to pull me through, I don't know that I would have gotten to the end. As it was, I finished late with an extension okayed by my editor, and rewrites that cut way into the time I had for the last book.

When I was done, I was tireder than ever. I'd stopped updating the web page when things got rough, I cut way back on my e-mail, and I still didn't have enough energy to meet my necessary pages per day. And I still had to finish *Courage of Falcons.* I got off to a steady start, but the malaise hit again, worse than before. I wanted to write the book, I was excited about the story, but the sheer physical demands of having to do a certain number of pages every day in order to meet my deadlines was eating me alive.

I was in a bad place, and I couldn't see my way out.

But there was this project I started putting down on paper all the way back in 1993. A novel so different from everything I'd done that the only way I would ever be able to sell the thing would be to write it on spec and submit the completed manuscript. I'd been sending little snippets of it to my agent for years, and he remained excited that it was potentially a breakthrough book for me – but I'd never had the time to write it. Too many deadlines, not enough money.

But any idea that can seduce you out of a sound sleep after floating around in your head for six years is an idea with staying power, and every time I thought about this book, I got shivers. I wanted to be writing it. I've been wanting to be writing it since the idea and the characters first came to me, and the yearning has never gone away.

So here I was with a book that I couldn't get through that I had to have done, and a book I was dying to do but didn't have the time to get to, with burnout and frustration keeping me from accomplishing anything.

And Matt handed me the solution, though at the time it sounded insane to me. He said, "Give yourself Fridays to work on *P.R.*." (The code name for my secret project.)

My first response was, "Right. Cut into my time on *Courage* by whacking a day off of every work week when I'm already behind on my deadline and getting further behind every day. That'll be a lot of help." Fortunately for me, I didn't go with my first response. I was really, really stuck, and really down, and I figured any solution was better than keeping on doing what I was doing, which was beating myself on the head with a brick every day and playing too much solitaire.

So the first week, I promised myself that Friday would be my day to work on *P.R.*, whether I'd accomplished anything on *Courage* or not. That was a hard decision to make – deadlines make me edgy anyway, and I was behind on this one. And the first week, I didn't accomplish all that much on the paying project. Some – which was better than what I'd been getting in the previous two months – but not a lot. Still, I kept my promise to myself, and Friday morning I bounced out of bed at 6:30 a.m., pulled on my bathrobe, and trotted straight to the computer. For the next several hours, I immersed myself in the guilt-free bliss of *P.R.*. When I had to stop, I'd done about ten pages, and I was happy. I felt good.

Monday rolled around, and I was back at work on *Courage.* And suddenly, it started to kick into gear, too. I got five pages on Monday, eight pages on Tuesday, ten pages on Wednesday, eleven pages on Thursday. In that same time, I started having ideas for updates on the web page, too, and I began doing them. Come Friday, I kept my promise to myself again, and sat down with *P.R.*. And again it flew. And this Monday, I got *thirteen* on *Courage*, plus two on *P.R.*. Plus this essay. Plus some e-mail that's been hanging fire for too long.

Giving myself more work actually eased my stress, eased my workload, brought the fun back into my writing. Will it continue to do so? I don't know. No one solution works forever, I guess, but this one is working very well right now.

You might not be at the point where you're stalled because of burnout, or deadline pressures, but if you keep writing, eventually you're likely to hit some variation of this problem. We all seem to run over most of the same ruts in the road sooner or later, after all. If and when you do bounce across this one, keep my busman's holiday in mind. Sometimes the only thing that will set your writing free is to write just for yourself. No matter how tight your deadline is or how desperate you are to get a particular project out the door, remember that your brain is not hardware. It doesn't

come with software programmed to produce two thousand words a day, day in and day out. Your mind is a mystery, and one that likes to play. It can do more than you can imagine, but only if you give it a little time of its own, to just burst free without constraints or specified objectives.

Give yourself a busman's holiday. Sometimes that's the very best kind.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

In which we discuss that moment in your life when you're sitting at the kitchen table at three-twenty-seven in the morning with a cup of coffee that once might have tasted like something other than toxic waste but that now would make drinking from Love Canal back in the 60's preferable; when you've bitten the head off of every human being who has dared to breathe loudly in your presence for the past week; when the sound of fingers on keys (or even the scritch of a pen on paper) makes you want to weep; when any inspiration you ever had is now dead and mummified and collecting dust in the corner; when you don't remember the last time you strung three words together that were recognizably English; and you haven't written.

You haven't written.

Those words start to loom after a while, don't they? “I haven't written.” What they mean is “I'm worthless, I'm talentless, I have nothing to say and even if I did no one would want to listen, I don't know why I think I can do this, and I don't think I want to and I *just can't stop*. And you don't have to be writing full-time – and counting on making your deadline in order to make the rent – for those three words from Hell to pound through your brain with the awful portent of Poe's narrator's telltale heart.

“I haven't written.”

Well, maybe I know why you haven't. When is the last time you had fun while you were writing? When is the last time you made yourself laugh – when did your characters last do something that was both outrageous and perfectly right, when did your lead rip out a zinger of a come-back that you would have given your left arm for when *you* had that argument last month? When did you last say, “To hell with literary immortality” and just allow the words to hit the paper without regard for their beauty

or their perfection or their odds of winning you a Pulitzer or at least the local newspaper contest? When did you last write just because you loved to write?

When I was a kid, I loved to run. And I was fast. My best friend Laura Leonhard and I invented a game in first grade that we gave the original name of "Steal Hat". On the playground, we would swipe Mark McMath's brown corduroy hat with the earflaps and then we'd run like hell with it. I was usually the instigator of the game, because I was the one with the crush on Mark. I'd run until I got tired or until the streaming trail of kids pounding after me in gleeful pursuit managed to corner me, and then I'd throw the hat to Laura. Laura would run until the masses headed her off, and then she'd throw the hat back to me. We were the two fastest runners in the first grade, and nobody ever caught us. We didn't give the hat back until the recess bell rang and we had to go in, or until a teacher realized that we (both blonde, hazel-eyed, and entirely too angelic-looking) were the culprits instigating the screaming mobs of children that streamed like herds of really loud buffalo from one end of the playground to the other.

Christ. It was like flying. Feet pounding, legs and arms pumping, lungs going like bellows, and always in the lead. Always free, ahead of the pack, with the clear ground in front of me and triumph in my heart – and that damned brown hat clutched in my fist, symbol of my wild first-grade passion and Mark's unending frustration. I was weightless, soaring; I was the antelope and the gazelle and I was immortal.

Running felt like that to me until the day I showed up for track practice my freshman year of high school. God, I was excited. I was finally, finally old enough that I could be in track. And then I found out about starting blocks, and form, and drills. I found out that I was doing everything wrong. Some girl two grades ahead of me absolutely blew my doors off in tryouts. The immortal in me died that day. I could still outrun every guy I knew. I was still damned fast. But there on the cinder track, eating the dust of a runner who knew how to use blocks and who was a competitor, I could no longer fly. My wings clipped, my feet turned to lead, I went home almost in tears because I hadn't known I'd been doing everything wrong. All my life, I'd been doing everything wrong. I started doing the drills. I practiced the starts from home-made blocks. I had my little brother time me, and run with me. And then, with the magic dead inside of me and the joy gone, I dropped out of track and I stopped running.

Every once in a while, when I was running to catch the mailman, or running across a parking lot after a letter caught in a high wind, a little twinge of that old hunger would well up inside of me. I would be, for just an instant, on the verge of lifting off. Half a second from airborne, three steps from once again joining the immortals. And then the voices of my past and the pain of my hard-earned lessons would bring me back to earth. Knees up! Elbows in! Eyes forward and keep your head up! Lift those

feet! I'm amazed you can walk across a street, much less run! Do you call that *running*? And the magic would die back.

You started writing because you loved to write. You loved to tell stories. You wanted to let your mind run. And somewhere along the way, unless I miss my guess, some coach told you that you were doing it all wrong. Wrong grammar. Wrong style. Wrong subject matter. Somebody who had been doing it for a while blew your doors off, and you looked at him, and you listened to that coach, and you started giving up the part of you that loved to run because that part of you didn't run right. You were trying to be some other writer, someone who was already out there doing what you wanted to be doing, because all of a sudden you realized that you weren't good enough. You got so caught up in doing it right that you lost sight of why the hell you were doing it in the first place.

Remember why you were doing it in the first place? Because while you were writing, you could fly. You could do magic. You were one of the immortals – and, dammit, isn't being one of the immortals heady stuff? Remember? You have written because of love, and you know what that blood-pulsing, heart-pounding, adrenaline-high, I-can-do-anything rush is all about. You *know*.

Yes, if you're going to write professionally, you do have to spell the words right. Yes, you do have to be able to make your sentences make sense. And you'll have to learn to type (or pay someone an awful lot of money to do it for you) if you want to be a professional. But writing cannot be about going pro. It has to be about *writing* – first, last and always. Being a pro is a benefit you get from doing what you love every day – if you hated to write, why would you want to do something so hard?

Shake off the coach and the competitors. Forget about the race for a while – sooner or later if you aren't writing for love, you're not going to write at all. Kiss off the compulsion to be Hemingway – Hemingway is dead, and so, for that matter, are Shakespeare and Faulkner and Capote. They've run their races, they're out of the game, and the game has changed. You can't compete with them. You can't, for that matter, compete with me. I am the only person in the world who can write my books. I'm the only writer who can compete with me, and you are the only one who can compete with you, and as long as you keep that truth in mind, you will be able to find your way back to the place where you can fly. You will find the part of you that has something to say. You will find the story that is yours to tell, and to hell with the person who says you aren't telling it right. It's your story, isn't it? If you don't tell it your way, it simply won't get told. Cut loose. Have fun. Run, and find the immortal. It's still there inside of you.

Losing – And Regaining – Writer's Hunger

At the heart and soul of writing is the desire to write. And your relationship with writing, like all other relationships, can atrophy from the day-to-day wear of disappointment, from lack of support, from lack of feedback, from lack of incentive, from just plain exhaustion, and from a thousand other things. It can be as tough to maintain love in a long-time marriage to writing as it is to keep the love alive in any other relationship. Maybe that sounds improbable (after all, how can writing be both your job and your romance?) but it's true.

And the really silly thing is that the same things that will keep your personal relationships alive will keep your writing alive, too. If too much drudgery and lack of attention have left you and your writing not on speaking terms, here are some strategies for putting the hunger and the passion back in your romance.

- **Make dates**

  While it probably wouldn't make a lot of sense to take your writing out to dinner or to a movie, it makes perfect sense to make dates with a local writers' group, or with a friend who writes. Give yourself one night every two weeks, or one afternoon a month, where you can give yourself over to the luxury of talking about writing with other people who are equally smitten by this passion of yours. Use these dates as an opportunity to 'get dressed up' – that is, to prepare some writing to take along and show around.

If you don't have a local writers' group and would really like to start one, you can find out how some friends of mine and I put together a writers' group that made all of us better writers and got some of us published by checking out Appendix A – The Schrodinger's Petshop Handbook.

- **Bring home flowers**

  Well, not really. Bring home books instead. Books about writing, books you wish you had written, books about subjects that interest you but that you know nothing or next to nothing about ... surround yourself with words that inspire you, words that entice you, words that tempt you, words that make your heart beat faster.

  Personally, (and I know this sounds about as sexy as unwrapping a mummy), non-fiction books about archeology, anthropology, and ancient cultures and civilizations really float my boat. I get goosebumps just looking at them in bookstores – tomes with titles like *Renaissance Diplomacy*, *Ancient Inventions*, *The Handbook of Ancient Greek and Roman Coins*, *Life in a Medieval Village* ... I renew my romance with the writer in me by reading them, and throwing myself into those long-lost times and places, touching those foreign soils, hearing those forgotten tongues. And when I can feel them in my marrow and in my breath, I find that I'm usually full of excitement about writing again.

- **Listen to what your love is saying**

  You've been plugging along on the same novel for five years, doing a chapter a year more or less, writing and rewriting the first five pages, and frankly you're bored stiff with the people who inhabit the book. They lost your attention a long time ago, and have failed to do anything interesting enough in the last couple of years to get it back. But you don't want to be one of those writers who has twenty three-chapter novels stuck in a box under your bed (which is admirable of you, incidentally) so you grit your teeth and refrain from killing of those bores, and swear that you're going to get to the end of this novel or die.

  Well, you just might. Die, that is. Don't let a book kill your writing. Sometimes you have to figure out what it is that you love, and what it is that is keeping you from what you love. You *love* the writing. Your *passion* is for the act of sitting down and putting words on paper, telling stories, weaving webs. You do not love the individual book (and, believe me, when you're entangled in the middle of one, I know this is a tough distinction to make). The book is going to be gone from your life sooner or

later, and another book will take its place. And another, and another. They will leave you, they won't call, they won't visit. Only the writing will remain, but nurtured, the writing will sustain you, and will grow stronger and more beautiful with the passing of time. Just like your other loved ones.

Kill that five chapter book that's been eating your heart out, and sit down and do a timed writing (see the chapter Timed Writing in the Workshops section to find out how) about the story that's waiting to be born in you right now. About who you want to meet on the page. About the city or the land in which you want your new, wonderful tale to travel. Or (and I know this sounds weird, but it works) do a timed writing in which you ask your writing where it wants to go, and let it tell you in the first person.

- **Wrap yourself in Saran Wrap**

  I couldn't resist the image. Sorry. But in is, in a goofy way, applicable. Do something with your writing that you wouldn't normally do, or wouldn't do in public. If you would never consider writing poetry, then write ten poems. If the very idea of erotica makes your ears turn pink and your palms sweat, write the raciest scene your mind can conjure up. If you only write literary fiction, break out and write the climactic scene from a murder mystery or a romance novel. If murder is already your thing, write a pastoral medieval literary scene.

  What you're doing here is, a) having fun by doing something you don't have to expect yourself to be good at, and b) stomping hell out of your internal censor, who will be so shocked by your rebellion that it will shut up for a while and let you write what you want to write. If it starts to nag again while you're making progress, telling you you're no good and that you don't know what you're doing, you can always threaten it with more erotica or sonnets to your refrigerator.

- **Go someplace special together**

  If you write science fiction or fantasy (or to a lesser degree, mysteries) you already have a ready-made special place where you and your writing can go. The SF/F field is loaded with wonderful conventions. Find ones where more panels are dedicated to writers and books than to role-playing gamers and media fandom – you want to be inspired, and you'll get the most inspiration by meeting the writers, editors, publishers and agents who bring out the sorts of books you want to be doing. The mystery field has, from what I've heard, far fewer conventions, but a much higher percentage

that feature writing.

If you aren't writing in either of those two specialties, you can still look into writers conferences put on by state and regional writers' associations. I've served as faculty at one of these, and have attended one other, and I've decided they aren't for me, but they're evidently the thing for a whole lot of other folks.

And don't forget taking along a notebook and pen when you go places you've never been before, (no matter why you're there), to record images that surprise and tantalize you.

- **Remember anniversaries**

  Keep track of the dates of your successes, no matter how minor they may seem. The day you get up the courage to mail something off for the first time, your first rejection slip, your first personal rejection from an editor, your first acceptance in a non-paying market, your first acceptance in a paying market, your first acceptance in a pro market – all of these count. Put them up in your workspace, and celebrate them as proof that you're working and producing and improving.

- **Make plans together**

  Plan to do both great things and small things with your writing. Plan to finish a story for a specific market. Plan to complete the first draft of your new book before you celebrate your next birthday. Plan to research agents and publishers. Plan to enter a contest. Plan to compete for a writing grant or a residence at a writer's colony. Write your plans on index cards, along with the date that you planned them. On a second line, write in the date that you want to accomplish this goal (try to find a happy medium between raging optimism and head-in-the-sand conservatism). Leave a third line blank, and fill in the date that you make each of your plans a reality.

You and your writing were in love once. You can be again. I hope these suggestions help you get there.

How to Collaborate – and How Not To

Collaborations are the proverbial double-edged sword – they can hurt you even as they help you. They're fun to do, but they're harder to sell than solo novels. If you get one with a big-name author and no one has ever heard of you, the chances are the book will sell pretty well and you'll make some money, but you'll do ninety percent of the work and even though a lot of people will read the book, no one will know who you are. If you get one and you *are* the big-name author, the collaboration won't sell as well as your regular work, you'll do ninety percent of the work, and the few of your regular fans who read the book will complain that it isn't much like your usual work.

And now the careful readers and the math whizzes among you will be saying, “If Collaborator A and and Collaborator B each do ninety percent of the work, that's one-hundred eighty percent. That doesn't add up.

Unfortunately it does. Collaborations are much more work than solo novels. They can be much more frustrating. They present special legal problems. They can cost you in a lot of hidden ways.

And you're saying, “Yes, but my friend and I have this idea and we still want to do a collaboration.”

All right. If you're going to do one, here are the things that I've learned that can help you, and the things I've found out the hard way can hurt you.

- **Always determine in advance who will do what and who will own what. And put down your agreements in writing.**

Now **you're** going to say, "Okay, that one doesn't apply to me because I'm going to be doing **my** collaboration with my best friend. Next!"

Wait. Please. This is the most important thing that you can do, right now, to make sure that you and your friend are still friends after the collaboration is done. I lost a friend – a good friend – over a collaboration, and I might have lost her anyway, but if we had written down, in advance, what each of us would be required to do to complete an acceptable collaboration, maybe we wouldn't have ended up never speaking to each other again.

Here are the absolute minimum number of things you need to agree on, in writing, before you start your project.

1. Who owns each character and the universe you have created (or each part of it), and whether either of you has the right to do solo works in the universe or whether it can only be used for collaborative ventures.

2. What each of you may and may not do to characters owned by the other.

3. Who gets final edit on the manuscript or manuscripts, or if this will change from book to book, how you will determine in advance who will get final edit each time. (And I'm telling you right now, you cannot both have final edit. Only one person can ever have the last word. Figure out before you type the first word who that person is going to be.)

4. How you will divide the work itself.

5. What will happen to the universe and its characters if one or both of you want to drop out.

6. How you will resolve differences if one of you does work that the other deems unacceptable, inappropriate, or simply wrong for the world.

7. Whose name will go first on the cover. It's going to have to be the same one every time, so figure it out now.

There is a further list of things that you'll need to work out in advance if one or both of you have already sold solo works, or has an agent and/or a publisher.

1. Whose agent or agency will negotiate contracts and subrights.

2. Who will deal primarily with the editor.

3. Who will write outlines and treatments.

4. How the money will be divided in both best- and worst-case situations, and who will be the one who receives payment and will be responsible for paying the other one.

An agent can help you with some of this stuff, but some of it you're going to have to figure out on your own. It isn't fun. It is important.

If you're like most potential collaborators, this little list has startled you. None of us, when we're sitting down with a friend hammering out story concepts and shaping our universe and characters together, is thinking, "Now who's going to get first billing on the book and who is going to edit whom, and what happens if my friend turns out not to be able to finish his half of the work so that I get stuck doing all of it?" We're just having fun, playing around with the magic of creation, and all the things that can and eventually will go wrong are still a million miles away. Please believe me when I tell you that all the best intentions in the world won't help you when things start going wrong. Then you need to have things in writing.

- **Write a good outline and stick with it.**

This doesn't seem like such a big deal. You and your friend share a vision. You've talked endlessly about it, you know who your characters are and where you want them to go, and the fact that you don't have the whole story worked out doesn't seem relevant.

However – from my own experience here – the act of writing changes the vision, and even with an outline you can end up in trouble. My friend and I had agreed to write a book together in a universe that I created in which the heroine was so strong in her faith and her love of her fellow humans that she transformed and redeemed the fallen angel who was sent to lead her astray. It was supposed to be both a life-affirming and a funny book, the start of a series of collaborative books in which humans would interact with denizens from Hell and Heaven, and in which God would demonstrate a seriously warped sense of humor. I wrote the outline, she was to do the first draft, I was to do the final draft.

Somewhere along the way, she veered seriously from the outline. What had started out a fun and funny book turned very dark, ending with the heroine seduced away from her faith, left hopeless and broken and bound for Hell, with the fallen angel triumphant. When I got her manuscript, I had a problem. As she'd written it, it no longer set up the second, third, and fourth books, which I'd sold at the same time with three other writers, all of whom were already working on their books. I tried to rewrite it, but I couldn't. It was too far from what I had to have, in both tone and content. I ended up sending it back to her with a long letter explaining why I couldn't use it – I wrote a completely different solo book in just under a month to meet the

deadline, an exhausting experience in itself, but made worse because my friend was deeply hurt that I'd rejected her book, deeply hurt that I had written a letter to her explaining my decisions instead of telling her in person (a piece of sheer stupidity on my part – my publisher told me to give her the news in writing and instead of treating her like a friend I did as he suggested and treated her as any other business associate), and just plain hurt because. She never spoke to me again, and I'll tell you, no book is worth a friend.

- **Divide your workload clearly.**

If one of you is going to do the even chapters and the other one is going to do the odds, fine. If one is going to do all the scenes with Elmira Fairclothe and the other is going to write only from the point of view of Studly Stallionbritches, that's okay too. If you want to write the first draft and have your friend do the second, that also works. What you don't want is to be bopping along on chapter three and have your collaborator suddenly start having ducks because you've stepped on what he saw as his territory. Nor do you want to have your collaborator complain that you're a lazy slob who's not holding up your end of the workload.

Figure out why you want to do a collaboration in the first place, and both of you sit down and work out what each of you contributes.

The ideal collaboration is one in which the book you are writing together is one neither of you could write alone. If one of you is a brilliant mathematician and the other is a professional-caliber sculptor and you're doing a book on the mathematics of sculpture, you're heading in the right direction. If one of you has vast knowledge of military history and the other is equally proficient in all things magical and fantastical and you're developing a huge fantasy series that involves magical battles with well-thought-out tactics and strategy, you're right on the money.

If, however, both of you are doing this because you think it will be easier than writing a whole book by yourself, go home, go to bed, and stay there until you come to your senses. Good collaborations are not simply as hard as solo novels; they aren't even merely twice as hard to write as good solo novels. They are harder by a full order of magnitude.

- **Remember your priorities.**

This can be tough once you're well into the project, when it stops being one big hoot and starts feeling like real work. So give some thought to the question while you're still having lots of fun. Was your goal just to do a fun story with your friend? Was it to get both of you published? Was it to make both of you financially independent? (Good luck if that's the case – collaborations are not usually the golden road to

riches.) Or were you aiming for something else? And what is going to satisfy both of you? Just completing a whole book? Selling it? Still being friends once it's done?

The deal is different for two established pros working together than it is for two beginners. Agents frequently introduce potential collaborators – you frequently meet the person you're going to be working with for the first time after you've already signed the contract (though you both will have done a fair amount of prep work before.) You don't have emotion or the potential loss of friendship riding on your project if it fails. Usually both of you already have a pretty good idea of how the business works. It's less exciting, but you have less to lose – and you can make some good friends if you and your collaborators get on well.

If you've gone through this list and you know how you want to divvy up the work and you've covered all your potential trouble spots and worked them out in advance and you still want to do the collaboration, you should do fine. Remember that joint projects always take longer than you planned, always contain some surprises, and rarely go turn out the way you expected. They can be fun if you if you know this in advance and have already made allowances.

Section 4: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

• Questions About How To Write

Do I have to have a college education to write?

The short answer is “no.” The long answer is very long. If you want to know why you don't have to have a college education, and why, in fact, I suspect you'll have a better chance of becoming a professional writer if you don't, read the chapter “Experts, Professionals, and College.”

How do I stay on track?

I usually get this one from folks who start things well but have a problem finishing them – they either have a lot of good ideas but their stories run out of gas partway through, or they look at what they've done before they finish it and decide that they stink, writing stinks, and life is starting to smell like roadkill too.

This is tough. When I was getting started, I was the author of uncounted thirty-page novels that never made it to page thirty-one. Big plans, no follow-through. I'm not sure what finally got me through those times, but I do remember how I finished my first book, and I think I know why I stalled constantly before that.

I decided when I was around twenty-five that I wanted to finish an entire novel before my next birthday. I sat down and tried to figure out how I was going to do this – I rarely even reached the end of short stories at this point in my career, and the idea of doing two hundred and fifty pages in one project loomed before me like an unclimbable mountain. I figured the number of words I needed (fifty thousand for the genre series book I intended to write). I figured out the number of words I managed

to fit on a correctly formatted page. (Roughly 200 in those days.) And I figured out the number of pages I could do in a day when things were going well.

Then I gave myself a page limit, sketched out a tiny little outline, and came up with what I thought would be a pretty nifty last line.

I cannot overstress the importance of this to the beginning writer who's struggling to finish things. It seems totally unrelated, doesn't it? You ask how to keep on track and I say 'set a page limit for yourself and do a little outline.' But it only seems unrelated.

Your mind is a complex and tricky thing. It looks at the endless plain of a story stretching before you – a plain that you must traverse with no landmarks, no signs, no map and no compass – and it says, “Nope. Not me. Not today. Not gonna do it, don't think that's my sort of thing, I believe I'll stay here by the river where the water's calm and I know the terrain, thank you. Try me again tomorrow, won't you?” And when you try again tomorrow with a new idea, you again present your mind with an enormous, uncharted terrain.

Even the sketchiest of outlines creates a few landmarks for you and a bit of a map to help you navigate. And when you know how long you'd like the book to run and you set a page limit for yourself, you give yourself a compass. It doesn't tell you which way north is, but it does tell you when you're done for the day, and it lets your mind begin planning the terrain you'll cross tomorrow.

As for all those ideas you come up with while you're working – keep a notebook on hand for them if you'd like. I'll tell you a secret, though. I don't usually write down the neat ideas that flit through my mind while I'm writing. The really good ideas will brand themselves on your brain and still be there when you're ready for the next book. The mediocre ones that only seem really good will fall through the cracks and trouble you no more. I don't sweat the ideas I've forgotten. If they were worth my time, I would have remembered them.

And as for thinking that your writing stinks . . . don't worry about it. Just keep writing. You'll get better and your internal editor will eventually shut up. And then you'll discover that you're a lot better than you thought you were.

What is a chapter and how do I know when I’ve finished one?

The big secret about chapters is that they're not much of anything but a convenience for the writer, and secondarily for the reader. There are days when you simply aren't getting the pages done that you want and you desperately want to say you've finished a chapter because your brain needs to focus on something fresh. So you come to the

end of a sentence, make the next one a cliffhanger, and break. Chapter Two appears and you can tell your significant other that you did an entire chapter in one day. You feel better, the book doesn't suffer, and the next day you get to work on a new character or a different location or whatever.

Technically, a chapter needs two things. It should consist of one or more complete scenes, and something ought to change. (Lawrence Block did some chapters that were only one sentence long, and that constituted the entire chapter. The one that comes to mind is “Chip, I'm pregnant,” from one of his Chip Harrison books.) Beyond that whatever you decide constitutes a chapter (and your editor will let you get away with) pretty much does. I was anal about chapters for a while, insisting that each needed to consist of three scenes of ten pages apiece. This was totally unnecessary from an artistic standpoint, but the Procrustean bed I made for myself while I was doing that taught me some important things. First, a writer can fit just about any amount of information into just about any amount of space. Second, that writer will develop a real feel after a while for the pace of the writing – if you must accomplish a certain amount of action in ten pages, then you will, and sooner or later you'll almost know your length to the exact word count. Third, anyone that anal needs to be smacked upside the head a few times.

I got over that stage eventually. (And you're wondering why I ever got into it in the first place? I was writing ten pages a day and wanted to finish a chapter every three days in order to meet a couple of deadlines. Obvious, huh?)

How long does a book have to be?

Long enough to fit between the covers.

Seriously, though, if we're talking novels for adult readers that are not series books for a specific line (like Harlequin Romances), if you write something that runs from 80,000 to 120,000 words you'll be in the prime marketability range. Shorter than that and the book will look thin on the shelf and have a harder time convincing readers to part with six or seven bucks. This is a thing called 'perceived value' and you will ignore it at your own risk. Longer than that and your publisher will have to invest more in paper and printing for each book, and if it's your first novel and he isn't sure it's going to be a blockbuster, he'll have to worry about getting his money out of it.

For series books, write off and request the guidelines. For children's and young adult books, the lengths vary by age, and since I haven't done any of these, I'm not a good source for information. There are books that can tell you what you need to know.

How do I know when my book is good enough to sell?

This is such a reasonable question, and I wish there were a reasonable answer for it. There isn't. You know when an editor calls your house and offers you money for it. Short of that, there isn't any way to tell. If you believe in your book, keep sending it around (while you work on the next one). The fact that it's gathering rejection slips doesn't mean it isn't any good. The Postman Always Rings Twice got its title from the fact that the way the postman let the author know his manuscript had come home in its little brown body-bag again was by ringing the doorbell twice. That book not only sold (eventually) but made its author's reputation and made everyone involved with it a lot of money.

What about the schism between art and commercialism? Do I write for the art, or for the money?

What schism?

Okay. You have to remember who it is you're talking to here. I am one of very, very few writers who makes a full-time living from my writing and who doesn't do anything else on the side. So there are people who are going to insist that this fact alone puts me in the camp of the commercial hacks. I think that attitude is stupid, but it is pervasive, and if you want to make money for your writing, you'd better come to grips with the fact that if you do, there are plenty of people out there who will be more than happy to call you a whore.

What you need to remember is that the fact that they believe it doesn't make it true. People write for one of three audiences. They write for their buyers (publisher, editor, agent, readers), they write for the critics, or they write for themselves. You can do good work and write for any of these audiences, but you're just as much in danger of whoring your soul if you try to please academe as you are if you try to please your fans. If you write to please yourself – if you're sitting at your computer telling yourself stories every day that make you laugh, make you cry, make you think – then you're going to do the work that's truest to you. And that may not become critically acclaimed art, or it may not become commercially successful art, but it will by God be art, and it will be yours, and you will sleep better at night for doing it.

Is it better to start with short stories and work up to novels, or is it better to start with novels?

Depends on what you like and what your goals are. If you dream of being a novelist, start with novels and stick with them. If you want to be the next O'Henry, start with short stories. If you love both, do both.

From the standpoint of sales, I've found that it's easier to sell novels than short stories – there are more markets and they pay a whole lot better. But there are plenty of writers who don't think at novel length, and who would be hurting their work if they spent all their time trying to write novels when they have the sort of mind that bursts with fresh ideas, new characters, and strange twists every day.

How do you write the synopsis that you're supposed to include with the chapters you send to an agent or editor?

A synopsis is a typed single-spaced single page (two at _absolute_ most) that tells the bare bones of your story in present-tense.

Example:

David Wagner has a problem. He comes home to find his house broken into, his wife and children gone, and three dead black mice dangling from their tails on his front door. No note, no signs of violence, nothing else but his family taken. The police cannot find any fingerprints in the house – _any_ fingerprints, not even David's or his wife's or children's. There's no sign of forced entry.

He is, of course, their primary suspect, and he discovers that he's being framed when . . .

Anyway – like that. I was starting to get interested in the idea, and I have to get back to my book. I don't need David Wagner running around in my head looking for his wife and little Tyler and Griffin and the killer of the three black mice. Go all the way to the end of your story, and write the ending. Don't be coy and leave a cliffhanger, just tell the editor what happens. Leave out dialogue, description, and minor secondary characters.

I'll tell you now, good synopses are hard to write. Plan to spend a week or two getting it down and refining it and clearing out the deadwood. Focus on the action, and on the main characters and the main storyline. And remember that one page is better that two where a synopsis is concerned.

• Questions About Publishing

How do I pick a publisher for my book?

The best way to find the publisher who will be right for you is to find the books that you read that are most like the one you have written (in genre, in style, in tone) and see who publishes them. If they bought books like yours, the odds are vastly improved that they will buy yours, too.

Don't waste time sending off your book to those "publishers" who advertise in the backs of magazines. (Not even the ones who advertise in the back of Writer's Digest.) They'll accept your manuscript. I almost guarantee it. They'll also charge you for the privilege of being "published." This is not the way the business works.

Never send a manuscript to a publisher because you "noticed that you don't have any romance novels out there – my book will fill a hole in your list." Your book will fill an out-slot in the publisher's mailbox. A key rule in publishing lists is "same, but different." If the publisher does romance novels, then your romance novel with a new twist on a favorite theme will be right on target. Your shoot-em-up western, however, will stand out like a drunken gunslinger at a debutante ball, and will be kicked out the door just as fast. Fantasy publishers publish fantasy. Religious publishers publish spiritual tomes. Literary publishers want The Great American Novel. No publisher wants a manuscript that is completely different from anything else it has ever put out there – and there aren't exceptions to this rule, either.

So the key to success here is to know what you write, find out who is already putting books out there like it, and from that list, pick the publisher or publishers whose books you like best to query first.

How much do I pay a publisher to publish my book?

Nothing. Not a dime, not half the expenses, not "a modest sum," not anything. Not ever. You don't pay to have your book published. The reason you don't pay to have your book published is as follows: If you're a writer, then writing is your job. People get paid to do their jobs – nurses get paid to nurse, ditchdiggers get paid to dig ditches, and writers get paid to write.

How much do I charge a publisher to publish my book?

I love this question. It is the flip side of "how much should I pay to have my book published?" The droll answer is "you should be so lucky..."

Again, this is not the way the business works. You want to have an agent represent you in the negotiation of how much you're going to get for your book (and how many rights you'll keep and how many you'll sell), but how much the publisher pays for the book is, in the end, entirely up to the publisher. Don't expect a fortune. Don't expect, in fact, to make more than you would have made from flipping burgers part-time for the same number of hours of work for your first novel. $250,000 first-novel advances like the one my agent, Russ Galen, got for Terry Goodkind are rare indeed. Much more typical is the $5000 I got for my first book, back before I had an agent.

What are rights and which ones do I sell?

Rights are what you hang onto with insane, frothing-at-the-mouth determination.

Okay. I'll be a little more specific. Rights are what publishers, movie-makers, book clubs, and so on, buy (actually lease) from you on your book. When you sell your book, you are not actually selling the book. You are selling to the publisher his right to publish that book in a limited format for a limited amount of time, and the more you can control the limits, the better off you'll be. Standard rights sales for books permit the publisher to print the book in your country, or perhaps in the region that speaks the same language as you wrote it in. Foreign language rights are separate, and a good agent will help you hang on to them. Movie rights are separate, and again, a good agent will help you keep them. Internet publication rights, compilation rights, book club rights, all of these are rights that BELONG TO YOU from the second that you write the book. They are YOURS, they are WORTH MONEY, and there are unscrupulous publishers out there who would just love to grab them all up in one neat little "World rights, all formats, for all time" clause that essentially robs you of ever being able to resell them, while telling you that the sale of world rights is standard. It isn't. It isn't even close to standard.

Worse, there are publishers out there who will claim that their publication of your book under their copyright is a standard business practice. These people are thieves. Never sell your copyright on an original work. Never. Your copyright says that you wrote the book. If you sell that, and the publisher (or agent) puts his copyright on the book, then he in effect wrote the book. It's his, and will be his forever after. You can never get anything from that book again, you cannot fix this, you cannot get

reparations for it. Legally the publisher can buy copyright, and legally you can sell it, but you'd be insane to do so.

You may at times write books for which you do not own the copyright – for these (movie novelizations, media tie-ins, series books packaged by a packager, etc.) make sure that your agent sees that you are well-compensated up-front, and that you are going to get lots of royalties, because you will never see a dime in subrights sales, and for a writer, that is a Bad Thing.

How do I sell to foreign countries?

I don't know. That's one of the many reasons I have an agent. He does know. At the point where this becomes an issue for you, get an agent – and get a good one.

• Questions About Agents

When do I need an agent?

When you have at least one novel manuscript or screenplay completed and an idea of what your next couple of books (or screenplays) will be. You don't need an agent to represent you on short stories or poetry. If you only want to sell the one book that you've completed and you never want to write another, you might need an agent to get the best terms for the book you've done, but you probably won't be able to get one. Agents want clients who work in profitable fields (novels, screenplays) and who will produce salable work on a regular basis.

How much should I pay an agent to read my book?

The instant an agent tells you that he charges a fee to evaluate your manuscript, RUN – do not walk – in the opposite direction. NO REPUTABLE AGENT charges a reading or evaluation fee. The AAR (Association of Author Representatives) forbids its signatories from doing so, just as it works in other ways to uphold the ethics of the field. Good agents are signatories of the AAR. Real agents make their money by taking a commission when they sell your books. They, like real publishers, take you on because they believe in you and in your work. They read your material, they say to themselves, “I can sell this writer's work and make enough money from my fifteen percent to make it worth my while. I can see this writer becoming something special in the field, and I can help him get there.”

Ripoff agents feed you the following lines – "I charge a $50 processing fee. If the manuscript is sold, the fee is refunded. If the manuscript is not ready to be submitted, the writer gets a professional critique as to what must be done to the manuscript." Oh lucky you. Or, "$60 reading fee for first three chapters and outline or synopsis – but only when I request this material once I've read the query letter. Fees for reading complete manuscript are on a sliding scale." Gee. How generous. (These come from actual agent entries in a popular writers' guide to agents, publishers, etc..)

Here is the unspoken translation to the agent's reason for requiring a reading fee. "I absolutely suck as an agent. I cannot make as much money off of my sales of books for my clients as I can by ripping off naive writers who don't know that my job as an agent should be to sell books and make money for my clients, and that my search for new clients should be part of my cost for doing business, just as the writer's investment of time, talent, office supplies and postage is part of his. Furthermore, I have the ethics of the scum you scrape off the underside of a dead tree, and I've found that P.T. Barnum was right: There is a sucker born every minute. I'm out to milk my share of them."

Never pay an agent a reading fee. Never work with an agent who charges reading fees. There are no exceptions to this rule.

How do I find an agent?

The best way to find an agent is through the recommendation of a happy client. Your time will be well spent if you meet writers whose books you read at conferences or conventions or online and ask them who their agents are, what their agents have done for them, and whether they would recommend their agent to anyone else. ***Don't*** ask if they'll recommend you to their agent (unless the two of you are friends and the writer is familiar with and likes your work). That is an imposition. But just asking about their agents is not an imposition. It ain't top-secret information. And most writers are more than willing to brag or bitch about the person representing them.You can learn a lot from these conversations.

There are two reasons why you only ask writers you've heard of these questions. The first is because you have heard of them, so you know their agent must be doing something right. The second is that most writers write the sort of stuff they read – so if you read SF and want to write SF, you'll be eliminating a lot of agents who loathe SF from your query list if you get the names of agents who already represent SF writers.

The next best way is to go through the most current edition ***Insiders Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents*** or a similar guide and look for agents who express an interest in the kind of work you do.

When you've found an agent that interests you, query. Don't send the completed manuscript without his having requested it first.

Do I have to have an agent to be a writer?

No. Of course not. You don't even have to have an agent to be a professional writer, or a successful professional writer. Writers have successfully represented themselves before, and if you're a lawyer with previous experience in the publishing field, you are probably safe representing yourself.

The old saw about the doctor who treats himself having a fool for a patient, however, is not without its applications here. I would be much worse off professionally without my agent. Good agents do much more than find homes for manuscripts. If he did nothing more for you than remove bad clauses from contracts, he'd be worth his ten or fifteen percent.

How do I know the publisher or agent won't steal my idea?

You know this because you are going to take my advice and find both a reputable agent and a reputable publisher, and because real agents and real publishers are in the business of getting good books into print. They wouldn't fool around with plagiarism any more than they would voluntarily contract bubonic plague.

Who is your agent?

Russell Galen of Scovil, Chichak, Galen. You'll find more information about him, including his contact address and what he's willing to look at, later in this book.

Can you hook me up with your agent?

Not unless I know you and I know your work. I can and do recommend my agent, and have made the information freely available if you choose to use it, but getting him to represent you will be your job.

How do I tell a good agent from a bad one?

A good agent will represent people you've heard of, and will be willing to give you references. He will be able to tell you the titles of a couple of books he's agented recently, and these will be books you'll be able to find in the bookstore. A bad agent will tell you that his client list is confidential, and will not be able to point to any books currently on the market that he's agented. Evasiveness surrounding this issue should set off warning bells in your head.

Good agents will be members of the Association of Author Representatives.

Good agents will never, never, never charge a reading fee, up-front expenses, a charge to take you on, or any other charges or fees in advance of selling your book. This is really important. There are a multitude of agents out there who do not make their money from selling books. They make their money by gulling naive hopefuls, either by charging reading fees to "evaluate your manuscript" or by taking on clients who pay in advance to have the agent place the book. This is not the way good agents make their money. Good agents receive a percentage of the advance and royalties for every book they sell, usually fifteen percent. They get no money from you until they have produced results. If an agent asks for money from you before producing results, fire him.

Good agents, those who believe in your talent as a writer, will not receive your manuscript and immediately recommend that you send it to Book Doctor X to punch it up. Good agents will frequently recommend ways that you can make the book better yourself. If you prove incapable of following these suggestions, good agents might suggest a collaborator or someone to help out, I suppose. Still, if an agent recommended to me that I spend money on a manuscript before it was sold, I would be suspicious.

Should I take my manuscript to conventions with me so that agents there can read it?

No. Agents go to conventions to shmooze with their clients and publishers and meet potential new clients. But they don't go to read manuscripts, and they don't go prepared to carry dozens of manuscripts or disks home with them to evaluate later. If you meet an agent you like, and he likes you, enjoy the conversation you have and see if he'd be receptive to having you send your manuscript or a partial. When both of you get home from the convention or conference, write him a letter reminding him of who you were, what you talked about, and that he said he'd be willing to look at what you've done. Send only what he said he'd be willing to look at. If he said, "I'd love to see the first three chapters," don't send the whole book and hope he forgets what he said – he probably never requests more than the first three chapters, and you won't look too good for being pushy.

How creative should I be when querying agents?

People who ask this question almost never want to know how creative their book should be. They want to know how to get the agent's attention. They want to stand out, be different, be colorful. They ask if they should paint their envelope in rainbow hues so that it will stand out, or write a funny query letter, or send photos of themselves dressed in a barrel and nothing else, or enclose a couple of hundred dollar bills with the manuscript.

Agents want to represent professionals. You'll stand out by being one. White paper and black ink, a simple typeface, professional courtesy, brevity and concision in your letter, and the inclusion of a self-addressed stamped envelope with your manuscript will move you ahead of the majority of queries the agent receives.

Save your creativity for your book.

Why should I pay an agent if I have to sell my first book on my own anyway?

Because a good agent doesn't just sell your manuscript to your publisher. He also negotiates your contract to remove harmless-sounding but deadly clauses; gets you more money for your work than you could ever hope to get for yourself; tells you when it's time to move on to greener pastures; sells subrights to foreign publishers; hounds slow-paying publishers for the money they owe you; tells you when you've ridden on your laurels for long enough and when it's time to write bigger, more challenging books; helps you figure out what your next project needs to be; keeps an ear open for editors who are looking for projects you'd be perfect to write; and listens to you bitch and cavil about things that are going wrong in your life (but do keep the bitching and caviling to a minimum).

For all of this, your agent gets fifteen percent of what you make – and if you realize how lucky you are to have such a gem of an agent, a dedication in your best book.

• Questions About Money

How much should I pay to get my book published?

Nothing. Not a dime, not half the expenses, not “a modest sum,” not anything. Not ever. You don't pay to have your book published. The reason you don't pay to have your book published is as follows: If you're a writer, then writing is your job. People get paid to do their jobs – nurses get paid to nurse, ditchdiggers get paid to dig ditches, and writers get paid to write.

Writers get paid to write.

Writers get paid to write.

Repeat this until it sticks.

Real publishers pay writers an advance. It may not be much of an advance, or it may be more money than you would know what to do with (though I'm sure you would think of something) but they pay. They pay because they believe in your book, and they believe they can sell it and make a profit from it, and they are willing to invest in a product they believe in. They will also pay royalties against the advance, and they will pay extra for subsidiary rights, or else you will hang on to those rights to resell later.

The publishers who are actively soliciting for your manuscript in the backs of magazines, and who pretend to evaluate your manuscript when you send it to them, and who cheerfully write back to you that they are thrilled to accept your wonderful manuscript, and that you will have 10,000 lovely books printed with beautiful covers, professional design, and all you have to do is send them $4000 so that they can start you on the road to being an author, are NOT REAL PUBLISHERS. They are not starting you on the road to being an author. They will publish anything, because the only thing they believe in is your money. They are lightening your pocket of $4000 to print books that you will not be able to get distributed by bookstores, advertised by marketing departments, or sold. If you deal with such a publisher, you are buying 10,000 (or however many) books that you can use to insulate your basement or give away to friends who will politely accept them and then not read them. And I hope you have a lot of friends. If you pay to have your book published, you aren't really published.

There are two exceptions to the Never Pay To Have Your Book Published rule. The first is if you are well-entrenched in the lecture circuit and you need to have a non-fiction, topic-related book to sell along with your lectures. In this case, go ahead and pay a subsidy publisher to make your book for you. Market it yourself, keep track of your income from it, promote yourself and your lectures mercilessly, and if you do well enough, you may be able to get a real publisher to publish it and distribute it nationwide.

The second time you might want to consider vanity presses is if you want to put together a nice little book that you can give away to your family and friends, and you have the money to spend, and you are under no delusions that what you are doing is in any way related to being published, and you realize that vanity publication is, in the world of publishing, worse than having no publication history at all. If you really want to have a book with your name on it, and you have no interest in making money from writing, go ahead and pay someone to print your book. This is a legitimate route to consider if you're big in genealogy, for example, and you have your entire family tree mapped and you've written a family history. By all means have copies printed and give them to your relatives – this isn't the sort of book a publisher would ever print (unless you have some fascinating, famous relatives).

But otherwise, repeat after me: Writers get paid to write. Writers get paid ....

(Note for the e-book edition: This refers to publication in vanity presses, not in legitimate small presses, or self-publishing ventures. Both of those are outside of my current area of expertise.)

How much should I charge for my book?

I love this question. It is the flip side of "how much should I pay to have my book published?" The droll answer is "you should be so lucky..."

Again, this is not the way the business works. You want to have an agent represent you in the negotiation of how much you're going to get for your book (and how many rights you'll keep and how many you'll sell), but how much the publisher pays for the book is, in the end, entirely up to the publisher. Don't expect a fortune. Don't expect, in fact, to make more than you would have made from flipping burgers part-time for the same number of hours of work for your first novel. $250,000 first-novel advances like the one my agent, Russ Galen, got for Terry Goodkind are rare indeed. Much more typical is the $5000 I got for my first book, back before I had an agent.

How much money do writers make?

Mostly not as much as we'd like, though I doubt if either Grisham or King has any complaints. The majority of writers don't make any money at all, or so little that they can't count on it for anything more than taking the kids out for a treat now and then. Most writers don't make a living from their writing, ever.

Looked at in the greater scheme of things, though, most ice skaters never skate in the Olympics, most football players never play in the Super Bowl, and most violinists never fiddle in Carnegie Hall. I like your odds of making it as a pro writer a lot better than your odds of making it as a pro football player. You have much more control of your outcome, and you won't age out just as you're starting to get good. And knees are never an issue for a writer.

For those writers who do go pro, money ranges from “starving in a trailer park” to “opulent beyond your wildest dreams of avarice.” Assume that there are more “starving in a trailer park” writers than “rolling in the salad” writers and you'll be right. Assume that if you go for this, you'll be one of the former for at least a while. The cool thing about writing is that you always have a chance to become one of the latter.

How much money do you make?

My mother always told me it wasn't polite to ask about people's sex lives or how much money they make – and all I can say is that my mail is proof that a lot of people out there weren't raised by my mother.

The answer I'll give: I'm not a “starving in a trailer park” writer anymore (though I did spend my share of time there), but Grisham doesn't need to give me the name of his tax attorney yet.

How do writers get paid?

Infrequently, irregularly, and usually late.

Okay, that's not really as specific as you wanted, was it?

Writers get paid advances, royalties, and “other”. I'll discuss advances first. The writer will get a portion of his advance when he signs his contract. He sometimes gets paid another part of the advance when he finishes the first half of the book, paid more of the advance when he turns in the completed manuscript, and sometimes more again when the book is published. A good agent works out the details of how advances come to the writer. There are details like front-ending, back-ending, and the avoidance of basket accounting, etc., that all come within the purview of the advance, and which are best dealt with by you and your agent discussing your needs and your agent going to bat for you to try to see that they get met.

Royalties are in the hands of the publisher, and if you ever see them (and don't assume that you will – most novels never earn out their advance), you will wait a long time before you do. The usual scheme for the payment of royalties goes like this. The publisher agrees to pay royalties in the first accounting period that comes after the end of the first full year after the book's publication. So if your book is published in January 1998 and your publisher's accounting periods are June and December, you might be able to hope for a royalty statement in June of 1999. Maybe.

Don't spend the money yet, though. Royalties are figured "against the advance," meaning that your book has to have earned the publisher enough money that he has already made back your advance from sales before your royalty clock starts ticking. Now, if you got paid a $5000 advance on your first book, the publisher doesn't figure out that he has made back your advance when he sells $5000 worth of books, or even when he has made a net profit (as opposed to gross sales) of $5000. He figures that advance when he has sold enough books that he's made back your advance out of your royalty percentage.

Assuming you had a mass market paperback release of your novel and got a relatively standard first novelist's 6% royalty agreement in your contract (this is not good – it's just common), here's what you're looking at. The publisher has to sell a minimum of $83,333 worth of your book before you'll see a dime of royalty money. If your first novel costs $6, he has to sell 13,888 books, right? That doesn't seem so bad.

But it's not even that easy. Your publisher will probably do a print run of around 30,000 books for a first novel. That's about average for a mass market original (a paperback that has never been printed in hardcover or trade paper). If the publisher's reps pitch your title pretty well, he may ship most of those copies to bookstores. Some of them he may give away for free to reviewers and others who might want to sell the book, but the number of gimmes is never very high. Assume you have a first shipping of 26,000 copies. (This is a bit optimistic, but not extreme). If publishing were a kinder and gentler industry, you would have to sell slightly more than half of all the books that shipped at full price (no remainders – you don't get paid for those) . . . and you would have to do it before bookstores start ripping the front cover off the remainder of their copies and returning them. In a lot of cases, you have about a month. But it isn't a kinder and gentler business. You have something even tougher to contend with, and here's where things get grim.

Publishers have a "reserve against returns" clause that allows them to not count a percentage of your sales because they will use those sales as a buffer against the inevitable returns. Bookstores order titles with a right to return unsold merchandise, but the only part of mass market originals that they return is the front cover. The rest of the book is destroyed. Returns cut seriously into a publisher's profit – he still paid for those books to be printed and shipped after all. Some of your books will be

returned; this is a fact of publishing. The publisher knows it, and you had better know it, too. His reserve against returns in your royalty statement can run from a low of ten percent to a high of fifty or sixty percent. This means that you have to sell up to twice as many books in order to start earning royalties. And returns for most first novels are higher than fifty percent. In most cases, much higher.

So if more than fifty percent of your books are destroyed before anyone has a chance to buy them, and if you don't see any royalties until you've sold anywhere from sixty to one hundred percent of your first shipping, how are you ever going to make any money?

You aren't. This is why most writers have a day job. In order to make money, you have to have a high sell-through (the percentage of books your publisher ships minus the percentage of books the bookstores return) and you have to have fairly good-sized print runs. Your publisher has to be willing to keep you in stock – to gamble on the fact that bookstores will keep ordering your older work, and that people will keep buying it. You have to sell the copies of your book quickly, you have to stake out shelf space in chains that prefer to return (destroy) older titles to make space for newer ones, you have to build a reader following, and you have to add new titles to your list on a regular basis in order to give the stores a reason to keep up your backlist (the older books you've written).

Authors whose first three or so books have returns of fifty percent or more are out of the game. Publishers will stop buying from them – not just your current publisher, but also the other publishers you might hope to sell to. Because if you have a publishing history, the first thing any prospective publisher will want to see is your numbers – your print runs, your returns, your total sales, and especially your sell-through. If your sell-through with your old publisher was less than fifty percent, a new publisher will turn you down. Maybe not your book, if he really loves it, but you. This is where pen names can be useful – more than one author with bad numbers has started over with a new name, in essence becoming a first novelist again and acquiring a clean publishing history in the process. It's a bit like being able to become a virgin all over again – but still getting to keep your experience. Which is another reason why writing is a better career choice than pro sports.

So how much of the publication process do you control? You control the quality of the books you write and how frequently you write them. All else is is the hands of an industry where the odds are stacked heavily against you.

This is why most writers are a little crazy. If God owes you any favors, the time to call them in is when you start publishing.

And finally, a discussion of "other" money. From time to time, your agent will send you checks you didn't know were coming. These occur because he's been quietly selling subsidiary rights to your backlist books while you were plugging away at the new project at home. These include foreign rights, book club rights, movie rights, book-on-tape rights, and who knows what else. If you managed to hang on to most of your rights, and if your agent has been talented and fortunate enough to sell them, you'll occasionally open the mailbox to discover a nice surprise. Sometimes a very nice surprise.

This is one of the things that keeps us crazy writers from doing the otherwise drastic and sometimes irrevocable. And no, I'm not talking about suicide. I'm talking about going out and finding the sort of job your mother wishes you had. You can't count on this money. You can't even really hope for it. But when it falls on your head, it sure is nice to get.

How do you run a household while writing full-time?

[The writer sits with her eyes closed for just a moment, pondering.]

If you've read the rest of the money questions, you know how hairy the money situation for writers can be. Usually is. Almost always is. [The writer winces and wishes you hadn't asked].

If you're going to write, the safest way to run a household would be to either have a full-time job of your own or to be sharing income responsibilities with someone who is A) very understanding and B) employed in a safe, regular-hours, high-paying job that covers all of your expenses and at least some of your desires.

But most of us who write don't want to keep our day job. We dream of writing as a way out – a way out of low-paying, dangerous or depressing jobs that are all we can get, or out of work that takes us away from our homes or families, or out of the soul-tearing frazzle of hectic, frantic, high-pressure employment. Or perhaps we have physical handicaps that prevent other forms of work. It may be a way out of poverty. A way out of rote. A way out of feeling insignificant.

For me, back a few years when I was recently divorced with two small children, with no child support or alimony, and with a job as a registered nurse, writing was the way I was going to be able to get out of my income-limited and dangerous nursing job (you make enough money as a staff RN that you can survive on your own and feed your children, but you know that the life you're living isn't going to ever be much better than it is at the moment when you're looking at your options), to be home for

my kids all the time, and to still have a chance to radically change my standard of living for the better.

I do write full-time and have been doing so since 1992, and my household has no other source of income. This is how I did it.

- **I wrote every day.**
- **I sent stuff out as often as I could.**
- **I spent less than I made.**
- **I never used credit (credit cards are the path to destruction for a writer – something I discovered once I'd "made it" but after hard times returned).**
- **I reused, used up, and made do.**
- **I banished television from the house, so that the time I had with the kids I actually spent with them.**
- **I never gave up on my dream.**
- **I never quit.**

If your eyes paused on the little phrase above – "after hard times returned" – you have good instincts. If they didn't, you aren't paranoid enough yet. A writer is only as secure as his last book's sales, and the publishing industry has a short memory. You can never breathe easy until you have enough money in secure long-term investments that you're living off the interest. I'm not close. Frankly, I'm not even in the "breathing-easy" ballgame yet. If at any point in the game I have three consecutive books that tank, I'm going to be in the line of writers who have to change their names in order to sell, just like the beginner who has the same thing happen.

I have the advantages of having had some success, and having a good agent – so with a different name I will probably be able to sell new work. But there are no guarantees. Not ever. No matter how good I am, or how prolific, or how dedicated. Making a living from writing is living on the edge of somebody else's calculator, and the numbers on that calculator are hard and cold and they know no mercy.

If you're smart (I wasn't for a while, but a couple of very rough years gave me back my brains) you'll never break the rules I listed above. If you do break them, you'll probably live to regret it.

And now you're thinking, "Why would any human being do this?"

Since I quit my day job, I've been broke quite a few times; I've been flush quite a few times. But no matter how rough things got, my kids had food every day and a roof over their heads, and writing has given me relationships with them that I couldn't have had any other way. Writing has given me friendships and challenges that I never could have imagined. It has opened doors, let me reach out to people, let me touch lives. I have seen places I would never have gone to otherwise. I have done things I would never have had the courage to try otherwise.

My life is an adventure, and almost every morning I wake up amazed that I'm the lucky shmuck who gets to do this for a living. Yep – even when I'm broke. Writing is hairy and scary and uncertain, but it's also wonderful and thrilling and a hell of a lot of fun. If I could be anyone in the world doing anything in the world, I wouldn't be Stephen King or Dean Koontz or John Grisham with all their success and all their money . . . I'd be me, and I'd be doing this. Right here, right now, making it on my own and climbing the mountain by myself.

What else could anyone ask for?

• Questions About the Business of Writing

How do I keep my work fresh and my enthusiasm up?

Sooner or later, everyone wonders this about any job, and writing is no different, as evidenced by the number of times this question comes in. You want to think you're going to stay as fresh on the fiftieth book as you are on the first, but reading through the works of some of your favorite authors who have been in the business for twenty or more years, you start noticing a tiredness of plot and characterization, a sort of gray sameness that creeps in and leeches the fun out of the latest things they've done. Then there are those other writers who seem to be able to bring everything in them to every single book – they just keep getting better.

I want to be in that second class of writers, and I'm guessing you do too.

Here are the steps I'm taking to improve my odds. I share them with you in the hopes that you'll find them useful. If you have anything additional to suggest, I welcome your comments.

- **Read widely outside of your field.**

No matter how tempting it is to say, "Well, I love romances and I only intend to write romances, so why waste time reading westerns or hardboiled detective novels?" you have to resist. This is, I believe, the single most important tool in the professional's arsenal. Read everything. Read fiction and nonfiction, read old stuff and new stuff, read mainstream and genre, read biographies and how-to's and the labels on the foods you buy.

- **Don't only read things you like, either.**

If you hate romances, ask someone who is both knowledgeable about the field and a bit discriminating what some of the good ones are. Pick up two or three and read them from start to finish. Ditto if you hate SF or fantasy or mystery or mainstream or whatever. You can find tools everywhere, and you will find more of them in fields that have been fallow for you for most or all of your life than in the fields that you have been plowing and depleting for years. If you want to stay fresh, you cannot afford to be a snob. Snobbery is one of the characteristics of a rigid mind . . . and rigid minds are not full of freshness and vitality.

- **Write outside of your field.**

I'm currently working on a novel that no one might ever see. I've been dinking with it for a few years, doing a couple of pages in my spare time or when I'm stuck on the books that I have contracts for and know I'll get paid for. It's not SF, it's not fantasy, and my agent has already let me know that although he loves the idea and the bits of it he's seen, it's going to be tough to move. I might not be able to sell it, and if I do sell it, I might make first novelist's pay for it.

Doesn't matter. I'm not writing it for the money. Like this page, I'm writing it for love. I love the story, I love the characters, I love the themes and the directions it's taking. And knowing that it's there and that I can work on it whenever I want makes me happy. It reminds me that I am not confined to the walls of the genre in which I work – that I can write anything, that I have no limits except those that I impose on myself.

This page is something else I do for love. Writing it brings me a lot of happiness, and so do the letters I get from readers telling me that something I've said has helped them. And this page helps me to focus on how I write, and helps me to remember why. Both of those things have kept me going through some rough spots.

- **Work in other mediums.**

I paint; I draw; I write music and play the guitar (though not well); I knit sweaters and crochet lace and afghans; I do beadwork. At times in the past I have spent some time learning the basics of how to play the hammer dulcimer, the cello, and the pennywhistle. I write a middling amout of poetry. None of these things is ever going to earn me a dime (well, maybe the painting might someday, and I have done the maps and such in some of my books, but in general none of this is going to earn me a dime.) It does allow me to express myself in forms that move beyond the structure of words on page and the linear logic of story, and I suspect it allows my mind to approach my work from angles that it wouldn't otherwise get. I've used my experiences with music and art and crafts in my work, too, but the verisimilitude I've been able to bring to the books because of that has been secondary to the gains I get from having other outlets for creating.

You don't have to be good at any of this stuff to do it. You're doing it for yourself. Cut yourself some slack – you can be a lousy painter and still enjoy the delightful smell of linseed oil and the sensual feel of dabbing paint on canvas, or the homely pleasure of restringing and tuning your guitar and playing a few chords that suddenly sound pretty nice together.

- **Grab opportunities to learn new things.**

Once a week, go someplace in your town that you've never been. Go to a church or synagogue that you don't belong to, in a religion other than yours. Stop by that little one-man museum curated by the old guy at the end of the street. Pick up a book on growing roses just because you've always thought it would be cool to try, and learn all about organic fertilizers and the uses of ladybugs and praying mantises. Take a class in stained glass work or CPR or bookkeeping. Learn to ice skate or tango. Ask the beautician and your accountant and the old woman sitting next to you at the bus stop to tell you about their work.

Sooner or later, these excursions will work their way into your subconscious, and from there begin to filter into your work.

- **Listen more than you speak.**

You only discover the cool things in the universe when your mouth is closed and your senses are open.

- **Pay attention all the time.**

Ask yourself why your neighbor leaves his house at 4:30 every morning and returns exactly one hour later, wearing different clothes. Why does that woman in front of you in the checkout line keep looking over her shoulder? What are those teenaged girls huddled around over there in the corner of the park, and why are they laughing like that? Notice people, cars, buildings, street names, the way light falls on water and on old brick, the smell of the earth by your back door on a hot day in August.

- **Don't write more of the same.**

If you write series books, permit your characters to grow and change. Or write books away from your series. If you write stand-alones, write male and female characters, young and old people, those who have had easy lives and those who have had it rough. If you keep writing the same character and just giving him different names, or telling the same story but from different places, you're going to get stale fast, and the joy will go out of everything you do.

- **Keep the machine in good working order – stay healthy.**

And you're saying, "Eh? Like . . . exercise and shit like that?"

Oh, yes. Exercise and shit like that. You won't be lifting those bales and toting that hay, but to work your mind, your brain still needs a good supply of oxygenated blood, and healthy highways to get it there and back to the heart and lungs. Twenty minutes of aerobic exercise four times a week or better, and a diet as low in animal products (none is best) and as high in raw fruits and vegetables as you can manage will strip the cholesterol out of your arteries and keep them from hardening. Cadavers from apparently healthy children as young as eight have shown fatty deposits and the beginnings of hardening of the arteries, so no matter who you are or how young you are, this is an issue.

How do I face the computer each day?

It should be fun most of the time. If you're following the steps I've listed above and you're still dreading sitting down in front of the keyboard, and you're still miserable while you're there, you need to reconsider what you want to do with your life. Don't try to make a career from something you hate.

When should I start marketing my book?

If it's fiction, when it's done. If it's nonfiction, when you have a good proposal and some good sample chapters, or when it's done.

How do I treat my writing as a business?

Write every day.

Give yourself a page limit and set deadlines for project completion. Write your deadlines in on a desk calendar and meet them.

Don't answer the phone while you're writing.

Don't take time off from your writing to do housework or go out to lunch with friends or find the kids' mittens. If this means that you have to write at weird times of the day, write at weird times of the day. My work hours are from five a.m. to noon.

Create a workspace for yourself that is yours alone, even if it's just one corner of a room and your own particle-board mini-workstation.

Identify yourself as a writer, to yourself and to others.

Keep all your writing-related receipts.

Do I need an accountant?

If you're spending any money on writing supplies, computers, office equipment or postage, yes. If you're making any money at all, yes. If you're typing with a thirty-year-old Remington on second sheets and only popping for a ream of good paper for your final draft once a year or so, and if you aren't yet selling your work, don't sweat it.

Should I incorporate?

At the point where this crosses your mind, ask your accountant. You'll already be making money, and will have one.

If you aren't making money yet, worry about selling your work first.

What about taxes?

Save all your receipts for everything, follow your accountant's instructions, pray.

What about setting up corollary incomes?

I've got to admit I've considered doing this. At one point, I tried working on the side as a Writer's Digest instructor, but it didn't pay enough to give me the safety cushion I'd hoped for and drained a lot of my energy from my regular work. I've considered setting up a class, but haven't done it, mainly because I'm afraid it would turn out like the Writer's Digest thing, and I don't want to pull myself away from my books.

(Addendum for this issue)

I'm currently exploring e-books via the Internet as a method of having fewer canned-bean days and more fresh vegetable days – we'll see how it goes.

• Questions About Going Pro

How do you set up book signings?

It's fairly easy if you want to set up something locally. You just go into the bookstore dragging copies of some of your titles (don't assume that the folks in the store will stock your books or recognize your name – I have yet to be recognized by a clerk even when I present my drivers' license. Writers are perennially incognito.) You find the manager or the person in charge of events for the store and say, "Hi, I've written these books and I'd like to see if you'd be interested in scheduling a signing or a reading." Look your best when you go in, try not to do your Quasimodo impression or wave knives around, and they'll probably be happy to work with you.

Important point – you'll have much less success with this if your book is self-published. In fact, in most places you'll have no success at all. Independent bookstores in small towns might give you a break, while the managers of bigger bookstores are likely to smile coldly and say 'no, thanks.'

If you're trying to set up something for a trip you're taking, call directory assistance well in advance of your trip and get the names of area bookstores. You're going to have to cold-call, and if you are not among the shameless self-promoters of the world, you're going to feel awkward. (But don't feel bad. You aren't alone. I die a thousand deaths every time I have to do this). Follow the same steps you would do in person, except this time you don't have to dress up and you can wave knives around if you want.

If your publisher is sending you on tour, you get to go along for the ride, and you don't have to do anything but show up. I haven't done a book tour yet.

How do you get invited to conventions?

First, you need to have a book contract with a publisher. Contract in hand, you can then call up or e-mail the folks who run the conventions or conferences you'd like to attend and let them know you exist, and that you'd like to be part of their programming. Once you've done some programming, you'll discover (if you were nice to the attendees and didn't make too much of an ass of yourself on the panels), that you'll be invited back, and invited to other conventions in other places. Try to line up convention spots fairly early, so that you can be on the program and so that dealers have time to get copies of your books in.

When is it time to change publishers?

This is a tough one. In an ideal world, you'd get one great publisher and stay with him through the life of your career. He'd pay you better and better money, and you'd write better and better books, and everything would be beautiful. This not being that world, you consider a change when you get an offer too good to miss and your current publisher won't beat it, or when you current publisher stops buying your books, or when you agent says it's time. Maintain cordial relations with your old publisher – if you hit it big with the new one, maybe he'll keep your backlist up, and you can always consider him a market for new books in your old series.

Do you write the book first or get the contract first?

Depends. If it's the first one and it's fiction, you'll write the book first. For non-fiction, the publisher may be willing to go to contract with a newbie for particularly hot topics, if you are a recognized expert in your field or if you have breathtaking

connections with some big celebrity. If not, you're going to have to produce the manuscript on spec (which is short for on speculation – meaning you're gambling your own time and money to write the thing).

Once you've published the first one, things change. You may have to write one or two more on spec – if they do well, you may be offered contracts just on an outline and sample chapters, or just on an outline, or just on a very hazy concept discussion with the publisher or editor over lunch in a classy restaraunt. You might enjoy working to the deadlines that such contracts impose (I do) or it might drive you nuts and you might discover that you prefer to write all your books on spec and let your agent submit them when they're done. Writers go both ways on this, and even writers like me who get our contracts (and some of our money first) usually have one or two things we're working on that are strictly speculative.

A publisher has offered to publish my book, and has asked me to pay some expenses toward publication? Should I do this?

Run away. Shoot him. Or just say no.

A publisher has offered to buy my book? What do I do now?

Say, “I'm delighted you're interested. I'll have my agent call you back.” Hang up.

Sing in the rain. Dance on your rooftop. Drink champagne with your significant other.

Then call up the agent you've queried, the one who showed some interest but wanted some sales first, and say, “Look, the editor of Major Books just called me up and offered to buy my novel. I didn't agree to anything – I said I'd have my agent call back. Would you represent me in negotiating this contract for your usual percentage, and consider taking me on as a client if this deal works out well for both of us?”

You may get an offer from the agent to take you on as a client right then. Since you will have already checked this agent out and you will know that he is legit and someone you want to have representing you, you will say yes. After you hang up you can dance in the rain and drink champagne some more because you are now an agented writer, and that is a cool and happy thing to be.

I'm looking at this contract and I have no idea whether it's a good one or a terrible one. What do I do now?

Call the agent you didn't call when you got the offer, and say, “Help! Can we work out a deal where you will vette this contract for me and negotiate out the odious clauses, and where you will consider taking me on as a client for this and future work?”

Please trust me on this – publishing is not the field for the naive beginner to be negotiating his own contracts. There are some odious clauses floating around out there waiting for poor innocent lambs to wander too close, and if these inobtrusive little clauses latch on to you, you can find that you no longer own your subrights, or your copyright, or your name. Once you start selling, get an agent.

My editor wants me to make huge changes in the book. What do I do now?

Take a deep breath.

Now define “huge.”

I know of one writer who got peeved that he didn't get to detail the placement of individual words on the page, and quite a few who get seriously bent out of shape over commas. I also know a couple who don't even blink when their editors require complete rewrites, or even when their editors rewrite them without telling them in advance. I'm neither as uptight as the former nor as mellow as the latter. There are things I'll go to bat for – there would be things worth losing the sale over, too, though I haven't had to face that situation yet. If you've caught your breath and you still feel that the requested changes are excessive, make a list of those you would be willing to make, those that don't fit with your goals for the book, and find out if you have some bargaining room. And before you call your editor back, read Revision Requests in the Editor Etiquette section of this book.

My first book disappeared from the shelves after fifteen minutes and has never been seen since. What do I do now?

Write another one.

You can spend a lot of time and energy promoting the one that sank, or you can put the same time and energy into writing something new that may sell better. If you write something that sells well, its sales may spur sales of your other work. If,

however, you flog your dead horse, it will still be dead when you're done flogging and you will be discouraged

I realize that this information flies in the face of everything you've heard from the determined self-promoters. This is my experience, though, and what seems to be more or less working for me. If you're experiences are very different and you feel that vigorous self-promotion has been worth your time, please let me know.

(Addendum for the e-book version of this column – I have developed a web page and am currently promoting both my backlist and new books via it. Because of the nature of royalty publishing, it is absolutely impossible to tell if this is making any measurable difference in my overall sales. You haven't had fun until you've tried to decipher the average royalty statement. But I'm doing it anyway.)

My editor won't return my calls. What do I do now?

Call your agent. See if he knows if something big is going on with her, if there might be a problem she's having in her life, if she took off for the Bahamas for a month of rest and relaxation . . . or if you might be in trouble with your publishing house.

If you find out that you do have a problem, ask yourself whether you might have caused it. Did you call her to tell her that you were running way behind on the novel, and that you needed an extension? Did you trash her the last time you were on the Writers Talk About Writing panel at the state writing conference? (These sorts of things get around.)

Is the problem something you can't help? Did you find out that your novel sold less copies than ***Bert's Book of Pretty Okay Recipes for Guys***? Is your publisher cutting its lines. Did your editor change to a different house or a different job?

Take a deep breath. That's what you have an agent for. He'll get you through this, move you to another house if that's what it takes, help you smooth ruffled feathers, keep you from sinking yourself. Don't panic yet.

My agent won't return my calls. What do I do now?

Call a couple of your fellow writers who share the same agent and see if they've heard anything about your agent and anything that might be going on in his life. See if they've had any problems reaching him lately.

Consider, too, that your expectations might be unreasonable. I'm in contact with my agent once every three or four months when nothing big is going on. Sometimes less when nothing small is going on either. While I'm writing a book, if Russ has something to tell me, he calls me because I'd never be in touch otherwise. On the other hand, when we're doing an auction or negotiating a contract or something intense, I sometimes hear from him hourly. If you're not involved in something that requires your agent's immediate and constant attention and you're wanting weekly reports, consider that your problem with your agent might be you.

If it turns out your problem really is with your agent, it's time to make the hard choices. You can call and leave a message on his machine offering to work things out. You can fire him and ask your colleagues for recommendations or referrals, understanding that you might have a long haul to find another agent.

Finally, remember that your agent works for you. As his employer, you have a right to be satisfied with the service you're purchasing. You can handle this. Just don't panic.

My first three books tanked and no one will return my calls. What do I do now?

Now you can panic. I would.

Then I'd finish the next book, query a couple of agents recommended by people I trusted, and offer to change my name. You could also quit at this point, of course – a lot of people do. But if you want to write, then write, by God, and you'll get through this, too. It will make a great convention story a few years down the road when you're sitting on that panel plugging your latest bestseller and wowing the newbies with your rugged determination and fierce courage in the face of hellish setbacks.

• Questions About Worldbuilding

How important is worldbuilding?

How important is your story to you? People hear the word “worldbuilding” and automatically assume that the discussion is going to apply only to people who are

writing science fiction and fantasy – after all, for everyone else, this is the world they're going to be writing in, and it has already been built.

That's not the case. You're worldbuilding when you sketch out a floorplan of the house that your character lives in so that you don't accidentally have her bedroom on the first floor in chapter one and on the second in chapter three. You're worldbuilding when you draw out a little map of the town in which your characters live and name the streets and decide that the corner drugstore is on the corner of Maple and Vine. You are worldbuilding when you decide that the town has two churches, one Presbyterian and one Methodist, and that the Methodists think (as a whole) that the Presbyterians are a bunch of godless heathens and the Presbyterians think the Methodists are a bunch of fanatics.

You're worldbuilding, in other words, when you create some guidelines about the place in which your story takes place or about the people who inhabit the place in order to maintain consistency within the story and add a feeling of verisimilitude to your work. So worldbuilding is essential to anyone who writes.

Where do you come up with names?

I have a stack of baby name books that I sometimes glimpse through. I usually alter spellings or use only portions of those names, but from time to time I'll find one that is just too cool to pass up. I also develop languages for the different peoples in my universes, and build the names using the rules of those languages. I notice names in magazines and on the spines of books, and use altered versions of the names of childhood friends. Sometimes I take a piece of paper and run through the alphabet until a letter strikes my fancy. Then I write it down and start scrambling letters after it in a list until I hit something that I think sounds nice.

I also frequently change the names of characters in the first drafts of books. They don't all gel for me (though I'm usually pretty solid on the main characters) until I send in the final draft.

How do you make maps?

This is something I've been doing since I was about six or seven, and I do it the way some people breathe – naturally and without thinking about it. But I took the process apart eventually because I realized how essential it was to the way I worked, and how useful it could be to anyone who wanted to write. The process is time consuming, but a short version is included in the Workshop section of this book, if you're interested.

It will be worth your while. Or you can visit the website and see the maps, too. http://hollylisle.com/fm/workshops/maps-workshop.html

How do you develop languages?

Again, there is a long answer to this question, but not a short one. If you're interesting in developing your own languages for the books you're writing, I'm developing a lengthy workshop that you can go through. It isn't ready yet, but I hope will be soon.

Do you do a lot of worldbuilding before you start a book?

Oh, man, do I ever. I'm at the very extreme end of the curve on this, but I routinely do hundreds of pages of cultural background, linguistic development, mapping and so on. Linked workshop – http://hollylisle.com/fm/workshops/how-much-do-I-build.html

Can you do worldbuilding that doesn't use knights, elves, dragons and castles?

Yes. And unless you can do something with knights, elves, dragons and castles that hasn't been done a million times, you really should.

• Miscellaneous Questions

Why do you do this page – don't you worry that you're making more competition for yourself?

No. I'm my own competition. If I can write better books, I'll sell better. If I can help you write better books, you'll sell better. But the people who buy your books won't stop buying my books because of you. They'll buy both. I do this page because a couple of idealistic writers (one who has gone on to be phenomenally successful) took me under wing when I was a neophyte and told me how to do things right, and taught me how to avoid making the major mistakes they knew about (though I've still managed to make some pretty impressive mistakes on my own,) and because one of

them told me, “This is the way my help works. You can't pay me back for what I've taught you, any more than I can pay back the mentors who taught me. You can only pay forward.”

This is part of how I am keeping my promise to pay forward. If what I've done here has helped you, then you are the recipient of a chain of mentoring and altruism that extends from me back to Mercedes Lackey, and through her to C.J. Cherryh, and through her to, I think, Marion Zimmer Bradley. It probably goes back further than that.

If I've helped you, you can't pay me back. You can, however, pay forward. When you make it – and you can make it – pick up the torch and use it to help light the way for the young writer who is coming up behind you. That young writer is not your competition. He is the next good book you'll want to read, and the promise that books worth reading will continue to be written after you and I are dust.

Tell him what I'm telling you: Life is short. Love is eternal. All we have to offer to each other that amounts to anything is our love, our time, and our belief that individuals and their dreams matter. Dare to love. Dare to believe. And never give up on your dreams.

• Questions About The FORWARD MOTION Writers’ Page

May I link my site to your web page?

Yes, with one exception. If your page has frames that will surround this page while the reader goes through it, please don't.

Will you link your site to my page?

I'll consider it. Here are my criteria for pages that I recommend to my readers.

You have either exhaustive links on a particular subject or intelligent original content of interest to writers;

You don't charge for page access or require membership for the use of more than fifty percent of your original content;

Your page isn't racist, sexist, or exclusionary (and this includes exclusion by race or sex. I won't recommend a page that is only for women, only for blacks, or only for any other special interest group, and that refuses access to all others); and,

I can look around the site and determine its suitability. I will not recommend anything I haven't seen. This last seems awfully obvious to me, and might to you, but I've had people ask me to recommend their sites or programs who would not let me see them.

If your site meets my preliminary criteria, e-mail me at holly@hollylisle.com and I'll look around when I get the chance, and put up a link if I think my readers will enjoy it.

May I copy an article from your web site?

If you simply want to print off a single copy for yourself or a friend, go ahead. Enjoy.

If you would like to copy one of the articles for a newsletter that you mail for free to a limited membership, or to post to a newsgroup, e-mail me at holly@hollylisle.com with details on the article you'd like to copy and I'll tell you what you need to include in order to avoid violating my copyright.

If you would like to copy an article for any print publication that has paid subscribers, e-mail me at holly@hollylisle.com with the details on the article you'd like to print and we'll discuss the price for sale of reprint rights.

No portion of Forward Motion is available for copying to any other web site under any circumstances, except for segments complying to the copyright laws on fair usage for purposes of reviewing this site. I've spent thousands of hours designing the page and creating original content for it, and I wish to maintain exclusive web use of that content. If you believe your readers would find something useful, you are welcome to link to the article in question. Please check your links for validity from time to time – this page changes frequently and links may break.

- **The BIG THREE Questions**

And finally, here they are in order of popularity – the three questions that make up about a third of my mail from this page, twenty-five percent asking the first question

alone. Please, please read the answers. (Addendum for this e-book. People apparently have read this section. I'd say that these questions now only make up about a tenth of my mail. So for everyone who has taken the time to read the FAQs before sending me one of these three question, thank you.)

Can you read something that I wrote?

No. The short answer is that I don't have the time and even if I did, my agent forbids it.

The long answer is that, first, society being what it is today, on Russ's advice I don't look at anything that hasn't already been sold to a publishing house. I have ideas for the next hundred years and have no interest in stealing anyone else's, but if I don't read anything that hasn't already been sold to a publisher, I'll never find myself in a situation where I have to prove that fact in court.

Second, this page has already generated thousands of letters. Roughly 25% of the people who write to me ask me if I'll read their novel, their short story, their poetry, or their background, and tell them how to fix it, and maybe put in a good word with my agent or my publisher for them – and this in spite of the fact that I've noted elsewhere that I don't read manuscripts. If I gave up writing, I could spend every minute of my time doing this, or I could keep writing and give up my family life, but I'm not interested in doing either. I like writing for a living and I love my family.

You don't need to have a writer read your manuscript in order for it to get published. You need to learn to read it with a critical eye, and be willing to change what you see that needs to be fixed. These are essential skills for any professional, and until you've learned them you won't be able to sell. And the only way you can learn them is to work at it. I know this is hard, and hearing it may be disappointing, but there is no easy way to succeed.

Can you hook me up with a publisher or editor or agent?

No. When you've written something publishable, start sending it around. While it's circulating, start work on the next thing. You will eventually find your agent and your editor and your publisher. But again, there's no easy way. You don't need an in – you just need patience and faith and to have written something good.

If I supply the idea, would you collaborate with me on a book?

No. But we can do it the other way if you'd like. Here's an idea. The hero is a guy who wakes up one morning to discover that his wife is gone and there's this little doll lying on her side of the bed. No note, no nothing – just the doll. No sign of a break in, no sign of anything missing except his wife, no sign of violence. He's scared, he can't figure out what has happened . . . and I'm not sure what happens after that.

You take that idea, and spend nine months or a year or whatever working it into a finished novel, and sell it, and when you're done, credit me with coauthor status because I came up with the idea and send me half of your advance and half of your royalties from now until the end of time. Also half of all subrights sales.

Or better yet, don't. You're welcome to the idea – if you use it and sell it, God bless you and I hope you enjoy the money. You don't owe me anything. But now I hope you can see why writers aren't thrilled when someone asks them this question.

Section 5: RECOMMENDED READING

- *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit*

by Lawrence Block

I can give you unbiased reviews of lots of writers, but I can't give you an unbiased review of Lawrence Block. I'm warning you in advance. The man is one of my heroes, and my role-model, and one hell of a writer at everything he turns his hand to. Consider yourself warned, then.

I started reading Lawrence Block back before I realized that books had authors. (At one point in my childhood, I'm pretty sure I thought they were either dictated by gods or grew on trees.) But the public library had a couple of Bernie Rhodenbarr books, and I took them out and read them and thought they were terrific. And took them out again. And again.

And years and years later, I was reading *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit*, and the writer mentioned having written books about Bernie Rhodenbarr. And I thought, "Oh, my God! I've read those! You wrote them?" I started paying closer attention to what Block was saying. And this book helped me get my career off the ground. Block is one of those writers who can both teach and do, and he teaches in such a warm and personable manner that you can't help but like him, and remember what he says, and give his suggestions a try. And when they work, you try a few more.

He's inspirational, funny, honest, helpful ... and probably clean, forthright, and brave, too. And I envy his talent with titles. *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit* is terrific. Read it.

- *The Courage to Write (How Writers Transcend Fear)*

by Ralph Keyes

Henry Holt, ISBN 0-8050-3189-8

A couple of months ago, I wrote an essay on everyday courage and the writer. Not long ago, I found an entire book on the subject, and it is a wondrous book. It has something of relevence to say to anyone who writes, anyone who dreams of writing, anyone who has always promised himself 'someday I'm going to write a book,' – in other words, anyone who might possibly read this review.

Keyes doesn't hide behind writerly terms and the distance of objectivity. He admits that he is afraid to write, and tells the reader what scares him, and I like that about him. I understand it, because writing scares me, too. He'll help you dissect your own fears – from fear of saying what you mean to fear of exposing yourself to strangers to fear of failure to fear of success – and then he'll show you what other writers have done to keep writing, in spite of the fact that they faced the same fears. He'll show you how to stop lying to yourself (“I don't have the time to write,” “I'm blocked,” “I only write for myself,” “Writing doesn't really matter to me anymore, so I've quit,”) and he'll pull out the fears that hide behind these lies and let you see them in broad daylight. Seen in the light, they're still pretty scary, but they become managable.

Best of all, though, he'll show you how to use your fears to write more and better. Not work around them, not conquer them – use them. Make them pay for themselves. Talk about sweet revenge – it's almost as good as writing your nightmares into a novel and getting paid for the things that left you screaming at two o'clock in the morning. (And yes, I've done that. Whole bunches of people have traipsed through some of my worst nightmares and paid for the privilege, and I have gotten revenge on my dreams.)

I only consider a few books essential to every writer, no matter what stage of writing he might be going through: a good dictionary, ***Writing Down the Bones***, ***Word Menu*** by Stephen Glazier, a good visual dictionary, and now this book.

Give yourself ***The Courage to Write***. Give yourself and your writing wings.

- *Writing Down the Bones*

by Natalie Goldberg

Shambala Press, ISBN 0-87773-375-9 – pub date. 1986

If we never forgot what we learned, we could read this book once and never get stuck in the middle of writing again. However, I find that with every new book I start, I forget as much as I remember, and somewhere in the heart of the story, I get lost. I become sure that I've forgotten how to write, or that my story has deserted me, or that it wasn't worth writing in the first place. When that moment arrives (or at least when the moment after it arrives, and I recall that the first rule of survival in any situation is Don't Panic,) I pull out *Writing Down the Bones* and I start reading. I do some of the exercises. I start writing. And before long I've figured out where I took that proverbial left turn in Albuquerque, and I put myself back on track. And I finish my book.

There are other books about writing, and there are other books with exercises for writers, but there are no other books that cut so quickly and cleanly to the heart of what being a writer is, or that ground and center the reader, excise the crap, and put you quickly back to work, sure again (until the next round of panic sets in) that what you're doing is the right thing.

Goldberg has created a combination of chicken soup with garlic, doctor who makes housecalls, and sensible friend and packaged this miracle between covers. Find it, buy it, don't loan it to anyone for any reason. You'll need it again before too long, and even your best friend won't give it back.

- ***Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting***

by Syd Field

Dell Publishing, ISBN 0-440-57647-4 – pub. date 1979, 1982

First off, let me say that not all writing books are for all writers, and this is one of those books that will only appeal to some. It is *not*, however, only appropriate for screenwriters and screenwriting hopefuls. I hold the firm opinion that the smart writer will look outside books aimed only at his specialty if he wants to learn – and if you want to write novels, and if you're having problems with plotting them, this book will give you superb tools you can use to plot your novel.

The key element in *Screenplay* that makes it such a terrific reference is what Field refers to as the paradigm. He can call it a paradigm. You can call it a plot diagram. Either way, if you follow his advice and create one, you'll find that all the stupid, trite, overused, predictable things you were putting into your novel and hating will fall away, leaving you with something that is fresh, and new, and surprising.

You'll need to do a bit of basic arithmetic to change the screenplay paradigm into a novel paradigm. Just remember that the average novel is between four and six-hundred pages in double-spaced typed manuscript form. Figure your plot points (you'll find out what they are in the book) to fit at the appropriate spots in a work of that length instead of in a work that can't go longer than one hundred twenty pages, and you'll be set.

Go ahead and read the whole book. The other sections are interesting, and the whole thing is entertaining and well written. However, the “screenplay paradigm” is a gem that is worth much more than the price of the book on its own – one that has helped me figure out where I was going wrong on two novels now, and that has helped me restructure them so that they worked to my satisfaction, and my publisher's. If the part of writing that drives you craziest is plotting, you owe yourself this book.

- *The Career Novelist*

by Donald Maass

Heinemann Books, ISBN 0-435-08134-9 – pub. date 1996

Written by respected agent Donald Maass, *The Career Novelist* covers in intelligent and thoughtful detail the facts of life for any writer who wants to make it as a professional. In twenty clear-eyed chapters, Maass details everything from when to quit your day job to how to find the right agent to how to keep from sinking your own career ... to how to revive it if you've already made serious mistakes. While geared for the already-published writer, this book should be required reading for the hopeful beginner, too – the things you learn here will, with your own talent and hard work, get you where you want to go faster, better, and without the stupid and painful detours that are otherwise so easy to take.

And what if you are published? After fourteen published books, I discovered this manual and with it the best definitions of scope and scale and sweep I've yet to find. I discovered that I could have avoided a number of mistakes that have cost me both time and effort. I did some hard refiguring on both where I was and where I wanted to

be. Using this book and my own agent's sagacious advice, I made changes that have pointed me in the direction I want to go.

This is *the* essential roadmap for planning your own success.

Section 6: BONUS ARTICLES

My Five Worst Career Mistakes, and How You Can Avoid Them

I've written some very good books. I debuted well – my first novel, ***Fire in the Mist,*** won the Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel and I was a finalist twice for the John W. Campbell award for Best New Writer. My books are consistently rated highly by Amazon.com readers – many of them have five-star ratings. I've had wonderful reviews, I get letters and e-mails regularly that say "I don't read fantasy but I read your stuff," and "I read a lot of fantasy and you're my favorite author," and I've even a really nice note from one of my copyeditors, telling me that she loved working on my book even though she kept getting sucked into the story, because it was a great story.

And yet I've had to struggle to make it in writing. I'm still struggling, nearly ten years into my career. Why?

I made five big, avoidable mistakes when I was just getting started. I didn't have anyone to tell me not to make them, I didn't know any better, and as a result I'm having to seriously consider working under a pseudonym, something I swore when I started that I would never do.

I didn't have anyone to tell me not to make these mistakes, but you have me. It's hard writing about them now – I cannot look at what I've done and think about what I could have done without feelings of deep regret. Please listen. What I have to say here can save your career from sinking before it even starts.

MISTAKE NUMBER ONE – I did not find a publisher who published my genre well.

I submitted ***Fire in the Mist*** to only one publisher, and I chose that publisher not because of careful consideration of that publisher's list, and not because that publisher had shown a consistent pattern of creating bestsellers in my chosen genre, but because I had already signed a contract to do a collaboration with a published friend at that house, and I saw that as an "in" that would get my solo novel read more quickly. Bad, bad reason to chose a business partner.

The book sold, and I didn't give my decision a second thought. Who can think with an editor on the phone saying, "We want to buy your book?"

So my fantasy novel was accepted in a publishing house that routinely creates bestsellers and best-selling authors in SF, but that has never created a fantasy bestseller or in-house best-selling fantasy author. This was a bad sign, but I didn't know it. The publisher loves SF, but considers fantasy a weak-minded step-sister – he's a nice guy and great to work with, but he put together his fantasy line to fill in a perceived hole in his list, not because he loved fantasy. I didn't know that, either, but if I had been less naïve and less impetuous, I could have figured it out.

So my books didn't matter to my publisher. He had a financial stake in them, but no personal stake. Unlike the SF novels that he loved and wanted to see succeed, my books were simply product that he needed to fill out his monthly list. He didn't respect them, he didn't respect what I did, and so he didn't fight for them the way he fought for his SF line.

So how can you avoid making this mistake?

Do your research. Look at the books published in your genre by the various publishers you're considering. Which of these books have sold well? Which are labeled bestsellers, indicating that the publisher can successfully bring a book to the attention of the bookbuying public? Which are stocked well by chains, indicating that the publisher can successfully negotiate the hellish computerized chain ordering system? Which are on the shelves with other books by the same author, indicating that the publisher can keep his writers in print and support their backlists?

Only submit your book to those houses that have already proven they'll be able to support it. Don't be an experiment in an expanding list, don't be a shelf-filler at a house that prefers books of other sorts, don't be "the next big star" in a house full of one-book wonders and three-book sinkers.

MISTAKE NUMBER TWO – I wrote collaborations instead of focusing on my own work.

I was sitting at the dinner table at a nice restaurant with my publisher, and he said to me, "Next, I'd really like to see a collaboration from you."

I said, "I did one collaboration, but that was it. It was a lot of work for less money than what I can make on my own, and I don't want to do that again. I want to do another Arhel novel."

He looked hurt. "At this publishing house, we like our writers to be team players. We've found that collaborations help introduce new readers to a writers' work, and we would like to get your name out there."

I didn't want to be labeled "not a team player." I was young and dumb and I trusted that my publisher would want the same thing from my career that I did, and that he wouldn't make suggestions that would actively hurt me.

I was wrong. In almost every instance, a collaboration is a way for a publisher to get a book with a big name author on the cover without paying the big name author's price. The publisher gets some young, dumb, eager writer who wants to be a team player and he offers that writer and the big name author a sum of money that is less than the big name gets, but may be equal to or more than what the newbie gets. The big writer takes half to two thirds of the money, the newbie writes the book. There are variations on this theme, and I've tried most of them, and in only one instance has a collaboration earned out for me. I've done eight. If I'd done twenty, only one would have earned out for me, and that one earned out because the other writer is that rare exception in the field – someone whose name can sell a collaboration. If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't touch collaborations. Not even the ones I had fun writing, not even the ones that introduced me to some great collaborators, not even the one that still nets me a couple hundred bucks in royalties every six months. The biggest thing collaborations have done for me is hurt my overall sales average, and anything that hurts the salability of your solo work is a bad thing.

What can you do to avoid this mistake?

Easy. Don't do collaborations. Writing isn't a team sport, and you are not a team player. You are a writer, and you're in business to create your own customers. You're opening a store, you're inviting people in to buy, and they are going to be

looking for your products. They are not looking for your products diluted with the products of strangers. They want what you have to offer, and if you remember that, you'll keep yourself out of trouble.

MISTAKE NUMBER THREE – I broke a successful series at publisher request.

I had my career mapped out before I sold the first book. I was going to write an open-ended series of stand-alone novels set in the world of Arhel, the magical land in which I set my first novel. I had sketchy outlines for about fifteen books. I would have had a lot of fun doing them.

I sold the first book and it did surprisingly well, winning me an award, getting me nominated for a couple of others, hitting the Locus Bestseller list for two months running (something of a feat for a first novel by a previously unpublished writer with no background in something like short fiction.) And it sold well on the stands, requiring a second printing in relatively short order. I sold the second book in the series, and it was a bit of a sophomore slump, but it was still a strong story. On the strength of the sales of the first book and the completion of the second book on time and in acceptable form, my publisher offered me a three-book contract.

And I said, "Fantastic. What do you want to see?"

And he said, "Anything but another Arhel novel."

And I said, "Oh. Okay, I guess. I have some ideas for other books."

That was the wrong answer. The right answer would have been, "I'm willing to open up new areas in Arhel. I'm willing to introduce new characters in Arhel. But I'm not willing to leave Arhel."

It usually takes at least five books to get a successful series established. I didn't know this. Authors who want to work in a series that they've established need to have five books on the shelves in that series before they start breaking out into unrelated books. They need to establish their reader base. I didn't know this either. You don't break a series that's starting strong after two books in order to write outside your series universe . . . and I didn't know this, either. I eventually wrote book three of that series, but it had been too long between books one and two, and the third book got lost.

I was young and dumb. Now I'm not. I have a series currently in progress with a new publisher. The series was strong enough that it sold to England and Germany,

too. The first two books debuted at #1 on the Locus Bestseller list (a SF/Fantasy genre list.) Both have sold in decent numbers, both have been wonderfully reviewed. The third is finished, and it's the best book of the three. (Not yet in print as I write this, but completed and in the typesetting stage.) So, after three books, my editor wanted to buy another book from me. But she wanted to see something else – because she wanted to "rest" the series. This time I refused. I sold the fourth book in the series, and am writing it now. Will doing more books in this series allow it to find its audience and allow me to establish a solid foothold in the genre? I don't know. But this time I intend to find out.

How do you avoid this mistake?

If you're planning on writing a series, stick to your plan. Don't "rest" your series, don't alternate with non-series books, don't wander around outside of the concept of the series itself. Stick to your world, stick to your characters . . . and stick to your guns.

If the first and second books tank, you're going to have to write something else. No one is going to buy books in a series that is doing poorly. But if you get rolling well out of the starting gate, keep yourself in the race.

MISTAKE NUMBER FOUR – I over-committed, accepting too many contracts of the wrong types.

Depending on the hole you dig yourself into, this can be a tough mistake to avoid. I was short on money – I'd quit my day job too early in my career, I was the sole support for my little family, and the offer of additional contracts for collaborative work seemed like a godsend – extra money for less work than I would have to do on solo novels.

(And you're thinking, But she said collaborations are more work than solo novels. You're right. They are. But I didn't know that at the time.)

At the very worst, I think I owed my publisher seven books. They were contracted. I'd already been paid my portion of the advance, and had spent the money to live on. I couldn't afford to buy my way out of those contracts. I was writing for poverty money, and I couldn't move to another house that might pay me better because I was obligated to my current publisher, and I couldn't live on what I was making, and no more money would come in until I finished the contracted books.

I wrote my way out of most of my obligations, but it was hard, hard going. I eventually managed to pay back my portion of the advance money for a collaborative trilogy when it became clear that my collaborator had no intention of ever fulfilling his part of the contracts and that if they were to get written, I would have to do them as solo novels – but still get paid for collaborations that would be sold as collaborations and that would sink like collaborations.

I moved on to another publisher, abandoning a backlist of books I love.

How can you avoid this mistake?

If you owe the book you're writing plus two more, you're in as deep as you need to get. Don't accept another contract or another advance, no matter how much you need the money or how tempting it is. Wait. Finish what you owe. When you're down to one book owed but unfinished, you can start thinking about selling something else.

MISTAKE NUMBER FIVE – I mistook business relationships for friendships, and acted accordingly.

My publisher took me out to dinner. Called me up from time to time to chat about the state of publishing. My editor and I went to a Ren Faire together and had various breakfasts and lunches together, and had a great time discussing my books when I sent them in. We played practical jokes on each other. I had fun.

So I thought my publisher, my editor and I were friends. I made business decisions based on a sense of personal loyalty, trusted that my friends would not suggest courses of action that would be bad for my overall career . . . and I got burned.

How do you avoid this mistake?

When you sell your book to a professional publisher, you are selling a commodity to a business, and you are a businessperson dealing with a corporation, and you will forget this truth at your own peril. No matter how friendly everyone is when your work is selling well, remember that you and your books are commodities, subject to market fluctuations, and that when your books' popularity is down, yours will be to.

Have fun, enjoy the companionship and camaraderie you may develop with the people who buy your books . . . but remember your bottom line. I guarantee you they

will. If you do this, you won't get your feelings hurt, you won't make decisions based on a loyalty that does not run in two direction, and you will be more aware of what is being done with your work and how it affects you.

And here's a freebie, for what it's worth.

MISTAKE NUMBER SIX – I quit my day job too soon.

I tell you this because its true, not because I think it will make any difference in your decision-making when your own opportunity to quit the day job comes. I should have been making as much money from royalty income as I was from my day job. I'm still not making that much money from royalties – if I were to follow my own advice, I'd still be working full time and writing on the side.

And, frankly, I would quit too soon again, even under the same circumstances, and even though I know how hard things have been, how hard they are, how hard they may be in the future. If I wouldn't take my own advice on this, why should you?

Well, it's good advice. It's the truth.

But I'd rather be writing and poor than nursing and secure. Because the fact is, in spite of the mistakes I've made, I'm still doing the thing I love. I'm still getting paid for it. I still love getting up and going to work in the morning, sitting at the keyboard and creating new worlds and new people and new magic. If I were just in it for the bucks, I would have been long gone by now.

I'm in it for love. I'm here for the long haul – one way or another, under my own name or under a pseudonym, I'm going to be writing books.

When you get up before your alarm clock goes off most mornings because you're excited about what you're doing, you're doing the right thing with your life. I am. I have no doubts about that.

I hope you don't either.

Ten Keys to Designing A Series Character You Can Live With (Forever)

Series sell. They acquire an audience that keeps coming back for more. They make their authors money – the majority of fiction writers who survive on their writing income write series.

But the same strong world and strong concept and strong characters that draw in the readers can start to feel like a trap to the writer. You're stuck with your world. However you made it, that's the way it's going to be. You're stuck with your concept. That's the tie that binds your characters to your world.

But you can do something with your series characters – and it won't be Arthur Conan Doyle's solution: throwing Sherlock Holmes off a cliff. You can't kill them. You need them.

So, from the very first book, make them people you can live with for the long haul.

How? Here are ten keys to creating a series character you can live with. Use some of them or all of them to make sure you have enough room in your series to breathe.

- **Give your character plenty of room for change and growth.**

Start your character when he's young and relatively innocent. He'll accumulate scars even faster than you will – let him have a mostly clean slate on which to accumulate them. You'll find exceptions to this rule on the shelves – series characters who debuted as older men or women. But these old characters – both Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot come to mind – don't age or change. They're set pieces who go about the business of resolving their stories, but they never surprise. If you've read one Miss Marple mystery, you've pretty much read them all. (And I've pretty much read

them all, and the Hercule Poirot books, too.) Agatha Christie seemed content enough writing characters who never changed . . . but I can't think of anyone now who's doing that successfully.

Two writers whose characters started young and grew come immediately to mind, though. The first is Robert B. Parker, who created and still writes the enduring character Spenser. We first met Spenser as a brash young man with some polish as a boxer and a knack for getting himself into ugly situations. He's now pushing the high end of middle age, with the creaking joints and heavy past of someone who has truly lived his life. He's a marvelous character, and I imagine Robert B. Parker still enjoys sitting down and writing Spenser novels . . . because Spenser can, and frequently does, surprise you.

The second writer who has done something wonderful with a series character is Lawrence Block. Block writes a couple of different series, and his light Bernie Rhodenbarr mysteries are a blast . . . but his dark Matt Scudder mysteries are brilliant. We first meet Matt Scudder as a heavy-drinking ex-cop who accidentally shot and killed a kid while on duty, and who abandoned his family for a lot of sad reasons. Over the course of many books, we watch Scudder grow up, come to terms with the mistakes he's made in his life, quit drinking, find real love, and become someone you want to know. He's always someone you care about. And he solves a mean mystery, too.

No matter what genre you want to write in (or even if you want to write mainstream), and no matter whether you're male or female, you owe it to yourself and to your writing to read these books. The Spenser novels and the Matt Scudder novels have something to teach you.

- **Give your character some endearing qualities that make you want to visit with him or her again and again.**

Make your character idealistic. Give him a soft spot for kids or dogs. Give her a passion for chocolate, or for rescuing the down-and-out. Create for him or her a sheer joy in living that transcends the mire into which you are eventually going to throw this poor shmuck. You have to like spending time with this person – over the years, you're going to be giving him or her as much of your time as you give to a spouse, and more than you give to a best friend. Make sure you share some common loves.

- **Give your character serious problems that he or she can't resolve in one book, or even ten.**

Spenser deals with the mob and crime in Boston. Neither the mob nor Boston criminals are going anywhere anytime soon. Spenser could live forever and still not

run out of enemies to fight. Matt Scudder is dealing with New York's criminals. Same story.

In a fantasy series, you'll have the rival wizards' college, or the nightmare creatures that live just over the border, or the poisoned magic that pours down from the North Pole every winter. In a western series, you'll have the Civil War or the marauding Indians or the encroaching Whites or the ever-present bandits (depending on how historically accurate or politically correct you want to be). In a mainstream series set against the backdrop of World War I, you have World War I.

In each instance, you have built into your universe a problem that is bigger than your hero – bigger than any hundred heroes that you could throw against it, or any thousand.

Racial or territorial rivalries make good base problems, as do religious differences, long-running wars, areas of great poverty butted up against areas of great wealth, class struggles, historical enmity (a la the Montagues and Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet,*) and so on. Make sure your series character has one of these base problems to supply him with a long series of struggles, and you with a long series of books.

- **Give him or her several real, deep character flaws.**

With Matt Scudder, it was the drinking for a long time. With Spenser, it's a blend of bull-headedness and an impetuous streak, combined with delusions of immortality.

Your character can't be perfect or you're going to start hating him. We all hate the perfect somewhere deep inside. He can't be a god. He has to be a human, and complex, real humans have complex, real flaws.

- **Give your character a few friends as interesting as he is, and as deep.**

I admit to wanting to kill Susan Silverman, Spenser's long-time girlfriend/lover/live-in companion. She is such a shallow bitch. I want to see him find a real woman, and I know he never will, and that's sad. Spenser's other main friend, Hawk, however, always interests me. He's always deeper than he seems, always knows more than you think he does, always surprises. Hawk is a *great* series character.

When you're developing your own series, give as much thought to the people your main character hangs out with and struggles with as you do to him. Don't just give them a hair color, and eye color, and an interesting twitch or two that they exhibit under pressure. Make them real.

- **Give your character an interesting line of work, something that you won't mind knowing as well as you know your own.**

Whatever your character does is going to become your second job, with luck for a whole lot of years. If you don't give a damn about police work, you'd better not make your main character a cop. If you aren't interested in the military, don't make her a soldier. If you hate horses, avoid both the racetrack and the cavalry.

Give this some real thought. As much thought as you put into becoming a writer.

. . . Maybe more.

- **Make sure your character's principle locale interests you.**

What goes for work goes twice for locale. You're going to need something fairly big – a whole town that you've developed with tremendous depth will do, but a city is better. A county or small country would be better yet. An entire planet will give you the most latitude, and the most opportunity to avoid boredom. You need to set up any globetrotting tendencies from the start, though.

- **Give your character a deep, fascinating history.**

There's nothing like a checkered past for giving the writer an opportunity to introduce lost loves in distress, illegitimate children in need, old enemies gone but never forgotten, and little skills that come in handy in a pinch. Establish at least the bones of your character's past in your first book, and mine that past faithfully and deeply for real gems in future books.

- **Give your character at least one really good, long-term enemy – someone who will stay to the background and survive for years. Someone your hero <u>needs</u> somehow.**

Ideally, this will be some sort of enemy he's made in the past, one who has the goods on him in some way, or who has something he needs, or who has access to special skills he can't acquire in any other way. This enemy won't be the villain of your individual books, but will be a shadowy presence, threatening from the distance.

- **Give your character a theme.**

Spenser is the slightly battered white knight, rescuing the helpless. Matt Scudder is the fierce and wounded avenger of the unjustly dead. Your character needs to have a reason for going on, a reason for doing what he or she does long after any normal person would throw up hands and say, "Enough, already. I'm getting a job at the Quickie Mart." This reason, this compelling urge forward in the face of insurmountable odds, is your character's theme . . . and may well be one of your own.

Ten keys. Ten ways of opening a door to more space in a series, more room to work and move around. Ten pointers toward longevity. Here's my key-ring. I hope I'll see you on the shelves. For a long, long time.

How to Make Every Story Better Than the Last

Plenty of writers get to a publishable level of writing, and their books become all the same, and more of the same. "If what I'm writing now is selling, why change anything?" they ask, and it's all to easy to look at their financial success and say, "Yes, why?" They're coasting, spinning their wheels and not going anywhere – yet because their books keep selling, they have no financial impetus to keep pushing themselves or making their work better.

And you're saying, "I should have such a problem."

But if there's no challenge in your work, why bother getting out of bed in the morning? If you've already done the best thing you're ever going to do, what do you have to live for? If you aren't changing . . . you're dead.

I stop buying books by writers who haven't learned anything new in the last five years. If they haven't gotten anything new out of their lives to put into their books, I might as well re-read the last book they wrote that mattered to them.

I want to read better books. And I want to write better books. And this is the way I challenge myself to make each of my books better than the one before. Maybe you'll find something here that will keep you fresh and help you love your writing long after those who never wanted to change have stagnated, or fossilized.

- **Take planned risks.**

If you've always written in first person, force yourself to write a book in third person. If you've always kept your distance from your characters, force yourself to write one story locked tightly inside your main character's skull, able to use only that character's senses and knowledge. Write something from the point of view of someone completely unlike you – someone you don't understand and don't think you ever could understand. Write a story from the point of view of a dog . . . and not a cutsie anthropomorphic dog, either, who thinks human thoughts. Write from inside a real dog, who doesn't think in words and who is driven by inhuman desires and guided by inhuman senses. Stretch the boundaries of who you are – stretch the boundaries of what you know and have allowed yourself to experience.

- **Scare yourself.**

If you follow my first suggestion, you are going to hit places where you cannot figure out how to write a scene. It will be too deep, too emotional, or too personal for you to want to tackle it, and you'll be tempted to take the easy way out – to skip that scene or to write around it. Don't give in to temptation. Now is the time to strip yourself naked and walk off the cliff. There's water at the bottom, and you'll discover that flying naked through the air can feel pretty good, and that you're a hell of a lot better swimmer than you could have imagined. But the only way you're going to discover that is if you jump.

Dare to explore the places that scare you. Those are the ones that have your best writing hidden inside of them.

- **Allow the unexpected to happen.**

Characters sometimes grab the bit between their teeth and take off in directions you didn't expect – and if you aren't a horseman, this image doesn't convey much of raw power or raw terror to you, so I'm going to give you a story from my personal experience. I was thirteen. I had a horse – my parents got him for me from one of those kids' camps that has horses over the summer and looks for places to board them over the winter. He was mine for a season, and while he was mine, I loved him dearly.

He and I went out riding on a bitterly cold Ohio afternoon, when the sky was a frozen white blue and the glare on the patchy snow shot like lasers into my eyes. He was skittish, my mind was on the way the breath curled from his nostrils and the busy twitching of his ears, and when two pheasants blasted out of a snow bank on the dirt

side road we were travelling along, neither of us was prepared. He grabbed the bit in his teeth, preventing me from slowing him down or stopping him by sawing on the reins, and took off at a bucking gallop down the dirt road. He didn't stop until he hit a paved road . . . and the only reason he stopped then was because his hooves went out from under him and he went down and I jumped off fast enough to save myself from being crushed or breaking a leg. But I landed on my left knee and still have a hell of a scar from it. I was scared to death. We got off the highway with the help of a lady who lived on that corner out in the country and who had apparently seen us. We didn't get run over.

But I found out what it's like to be on the back of a thousand pounds of racing, kicking, panicking animal with no way to steer and no idea of what is going to happen next. It's a shitty feeling.

But it makes a great story.

And you're in this for the story, not for how good you feel while you write it. When your character grabs the bit in his teeth, give him his head. Let him run. Trust him not to get the two of you killed. Maybe you'll end up someplace grand, and if you don't, at least you'll have had one hell of a ride.

- **Lose track of time.**

Take the clocks off your desk, turn off your timer, and let yourself fall into the world you created for as long as you can stay there. Writing with one eye on the clock will give you work about as inspired at that which you did when you were in high school and waiting for the last bell to ring.

- **Ask yourself the hard questions about life, and allow yourself to be surprised by your answers.**

Don't always write stories where you're sure of the moral position of each of the characters. Give your folks some dilemmas that you yourself haven't managed to figure out yet. Let them batter out the various positions among themselves. Follow your heart while you write. You'll learn more about yourself than you expect to, and you may find that you're surprised by what you discover.

- **Above all . . . believe.**

Believe that what you are doing matters. It does. Believe that you can reach out with your words and change a live. You can. Believe that you are doing something to make the world you live in a better place for all of us. You are.

Keep writing. Keep believing. And never give up on your dreams.

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The site has far too many links to list, multiple discussion boards, critiquing groups, contests and games, an ongoing Novelists Revision Master Class, daily writing exercises, articles, a newsletter, a mailing list, and more. And everything on the site is free.

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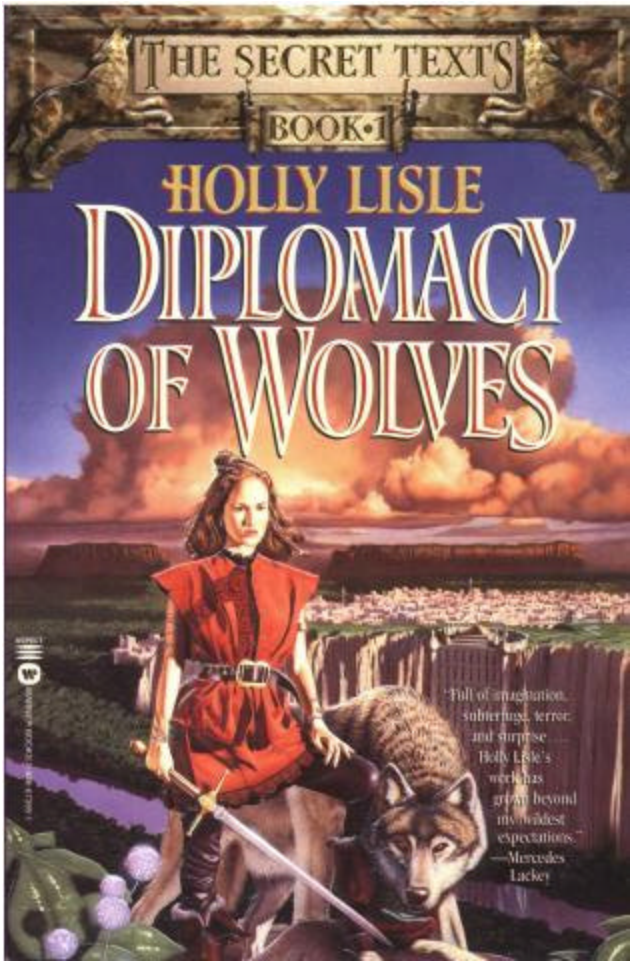

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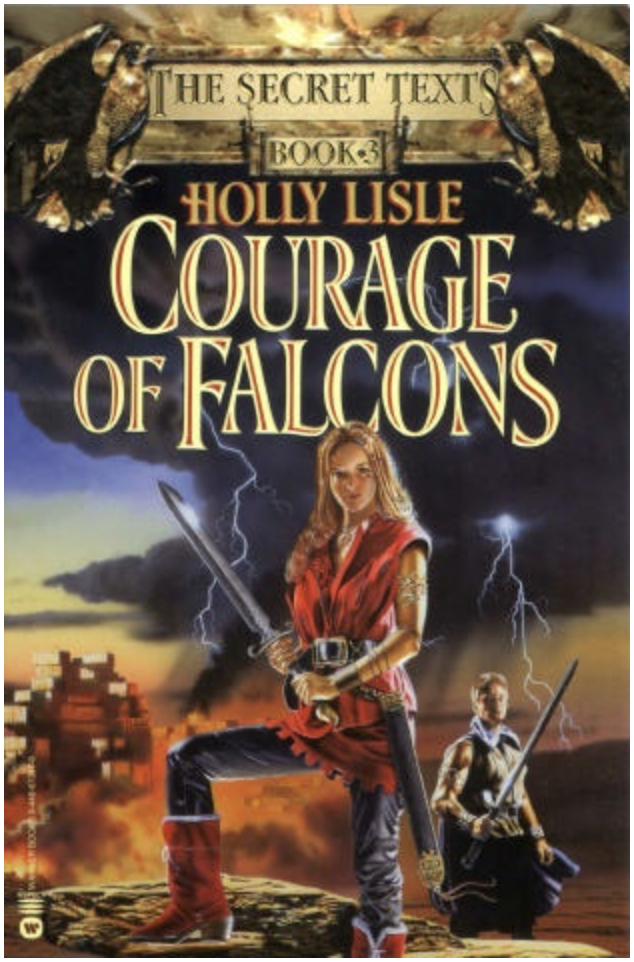

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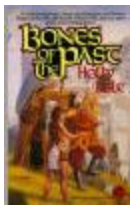

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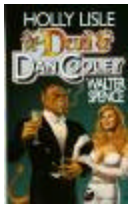

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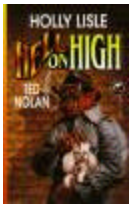

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