



WRITERSTALK

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Monthly Newsletter of the South Bay Writers Club

A Valentine's Day Special

by Bill Baldwin

We are pleased to welcome two distinguished members of the Romance Writers of America to our February meeting: Esther Erman and Janet Miller. They both write in a variety of genres under a variety of names. Romance, sex, family, love, death—the human experience is their scope. We look forward to hearing of their lives and their writing.



Esther Erman

Esther Erman, also known as Mardi Ballou and Meg Bellamy, is the author of twenty-plus titles at Ellora's Cave, Cerridwen, Samhain, and other houses. Writing as Esther, she gathered family stories for a novelized memoir called *Just One: Connecting with a Grandmother's Life*. As Mardi, Esther has concentrated on romance, primarily erotic—contemporary and paranormal. She's currently preparing *Fangly, My Dear*, an anthology of three novellas to be released in print format next autumn, and launching her Meg Bellamy identity, focused on women's fiction and mainstream contemporary romance.

Esther was born in Stuttgart, Germany, shortly after World War II and spent most of her formative years in New Jersey. Growing up in a refugee family with parents who were Holocaust survivors shaped Esther's early life. Her fascination with language probably has deep roots in her frustration at not being able to speak English when she began kindergarten in the Bronx. Deciding to abandon her first language, Yiddish, she immersed herself in English and learned with amazing speed. Learning English was only the beginning of her love of language. She went on to earn a degree in French as well as Language Education. Her doctoral studies included a study of the impact of the Holocaust on the Yiddish language.

Just One, based on her efforts to come to know her maternal grandmother, who'd died before her birth, came out when Esther herself was discovering the joy of being a grandmother.

Janet Miller, sometimes known as Cricket Starr, is the author of more than twenty-one titles at Ellora's Cave, Cerridwen, and New Concepts publishing. These titles include the 2004 PRISM award-winning *Violet Among the Roses*, 2006 EPIE award-winning *All Night Inn*, and two *Romantic Times* Top Picks, *Fangs for the Memories* and *Beloved Enemy*. Janet specializes in paranormal and futuristic romance under her own name and futuristic, fantasy, and paranormal erotic romance under the pen name Cricket Starr.



Janet Miller

Her recent book *A Christmas with Sarah* involves a wealthy Silicon Valley entrepreneur and father (Greg Wilcox) and a Big Sur artist (Molly Anders). How does trust blossom in a relationship? And how do strangers develop into a family?

She's been dreaming up stories for as long as she can remember. While she enjoys writing about love and adventure, much of her work has comic elements.

January Recap

Norman Solomon

by Andrea Galvacs

The first South Bay Writers meeting of 2009 began with President Dave LaRoche welcoming everybody present.

Before and during dinner there were the usual general announcements, those of achievements by some of the writers and the introduction of guests. Raffle Lady Extraordinaire Cathy Bauer was absent, so Rita St. Claire filled in for her. As usual, I didn't win anything. Oh, I didn't buy any tickets, either.

Rita made a special announcement as well. First, she related to us that after writing the first draft of her novel, seven days a week, eight or ten or twelve



Norman Solomon

hours a day, for six weeks, her legs resembled those of an elephant, they had swollen so much. She sought and received the necessary medical attention, solved her problem, and resolved to do everything possible to alert fellow writers to what can be done to avoid problems because of sitting for long periods of time. As a result, *WritersTalk* will publish her column "Well-Being Project."

Bill Baldwin introduced author, syndicated columnist, and activist Norman Solomon, our guest speaker.

Norman believes there are two kinds of memory: our own and the historical. To differentiate between the two it is

Continued on page 14

Continued on page 11

President's Prowling

by Dave LaRoche
President, South Bay Writers

Our Craft Is Where We Find It— I've Discovered Mine in the Scenes

We read. We read because we enjoy it—the transcendence, the adventure, the diversion. As writers, we are advised to use a critical eye—ordinarily interpreted as “study the classics.” *Moby Dick* has been mentioned so often to me, I feel like I need a harpoon. But, I submit, not *all* good writing is found in the literary work of our giants—DeLillo, Atwood, Doctorow, and Ford come to mind, to name several favorites. So consider:



“I went out of the restaurant and back along the beach. The Pacific lumbered in toward me. The swells looked tired as they crested and fell apart . . . gathered themselves and slowly withdrew.” Robert Parker

“He had a full mane of black hair that hid a portion of his forehead and true-black eyes that were usually filled with mirth—but I had seen them when they were honed down to a killing glint.” Walter Mosley.

“It felt good to be lying again. It was as if I had disappeared behind a cloud of black ink like the squid or the cuttlefish.” Walter Mosley again.

I feel it, the ocean on an overcast day, lumbering in to the shore, exhausted and falling apart, or that glint in those eyes that are usually joyful but provoked into killing—scenes from less notable authors than “giants”—no disrespect to Wally or Bob.

Here's what I've come to think is the key—stories with a series of scenes, crammed with vivid description and telling dialog, each with an arrival, some action, and a routing ticket to the next, the *scene*, the critical element. Of course we need plot and a theme—why and what's going to happen from A through to Z. But the scenes are the stones in the stream that make the crossing possible, and we need consider them carefully in order to move on.

I like to stop at each scene for a while, move in, and be a part—these are my characters and they know I bring good. I like to get into their heads to know what they'll do, what they'll say and what they think. I like to *be* them, see their world through their eyes—watch their “waffle irons” work, as E. Kant has described.

When I visit a scene, I might stay the weekend, unpack a bag. I'll roam about and study the situation, gain insight and understanding before touching a key. I find that particular scene improves in dimension, takes on more color and becomes more enticing to my reader. My “lumbering ocean” and “killing glint” of an eye emerge and titillate my muse and we may return for another warming visit.

Reading or writing, I find our craft in the scenes when I occupy them for a time. Although I don't equate myself with Parker or Mosley, and especially not Melville, I admire their work and imagine from their quality, they too have stepped into their scenes for a comfortable visit. WT

Inside

Eight Ways to Break into the Romance Market 4
From Blog to Book 5
Deconstructing a Short Story 6
Accolades 7
Writers' Gigs 8
A Good Walk—Anywhere 8

Speech Recognition Software 9
WOW! Skyline Conference 10
Critique Group Update 10
A Secret Lost 11
A Painful End 11
View from the Board 12
The Journey of a Thousand Miles:
Sympathy for the Devil 13

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Guest Columns

Almost Anything Goes (400 words)

News Items

 (400 words)

Letters to the Editor

 (300 words)

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Creative Works

Short Fiction (1800 words)
Memoir (1200 words)
Poetry (300 words)
Essay (900 words)

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Editor's Perspective

by Dick Amyx
Editor

Across the Street and into the Library



In 1950, Ernest Hemingway's novel *Across the River and into the Trees* was published. It was so awful that it was excoriated by critics, and no less a literary luminary than E.B. White wrote a parody of it called "Across the Street and into the Grill" for the *New Yorker*.

And so there have been Hemingway write-alike contests ever since. The rules for the International Imitation Hemingway Competition read "the writing sample must be no longer than one page, it must mention Harry's Bar & American Grill (Hemingway's favorite Italian watering hole), and it must sound and read like Hemingway while being side-achingly funny."

It's really kind of a cheap shot to poke fun at poor old Papa that way—he was, after all, awarded both Pulitzer and Nobel prizes for his writing—but his writing style is easy to imitate. Hemingway got his start in writing as a reporter, and he carried a journalist's straightforward style into his creative work, a style that's often referred to as "journalese."

But even if Hemingway is easy to imitate, there's still a rub: in order to write like Hemingway, you first have to *read* Hemingway. A lot of Hemingway.

Few people nowadays are likely to want their writing to sound like Ernest Hemingway's. But what if you wanted your writing to be comparable to, say, that of Janet Evanovich, David Wroblewski, Toni Morrison, or Richard North Patterson?

One approach might be to steep yourself in your favorite author's writing and then try to make your writing sound just like his or hers, in the same way that art students attempt to copy works of the masters. If that approach led to success, it would probably be more recommended than it is, and I'd be able to write poetry just like Dylan Thomas. I've tried, and I've never been able to do more than three or four words in a row.

The more common advice given to budding writers is simply "Read, read, read!" Read lots of writing, read all kinds of writing, read good stuff. At first, just read. Soak up everything on the page—the plot, the story, the meaning, the characters, the writing, the vocabulary, and the punctuation—like a sponge, without judgment. After some time, you'll be able to develop your critical eye and analyze the writing while you're reading, seeing what's good and asking yourself why it's good and what made it work. As your critical eye improves, you should read a little bad stuff, too, and ask yourself what failed and what made it fail. Learn from other writers' mistakes so that you don't have to make them.

Of course, while you're doing all this reading, you'll be writing, too, and as time goes by, you should see an improvement in your writing, the result of practice as well as everything you've been soaking up while reading. Your narrative will flow more smoothly, your action will become more gripping, and you won't even have to think about where to put commas and quotation marks. Well, okay, maybe you'll have to think about commas. They can be tricky little devils sometimes.

Reading is an essential part of writing, even for well-practiced writers. *Time* magazine recently published an article entitled "What Writers Are Reading." First up on the list is Jane Smiley, Pulitzer Prize winner and keynote speaker at last year's East of Eden conference (*Justine*). That issue is online—take a look and see what Joyce Carol Oates, Janet Evanovich, and the others are reading. Then take a walk across the street and into the library. **WT**

Eight Ways to Break into the Romance Market

by Victoria M. Johnson

Have you always thought that romance writing isn't your thing? Well, think again. Romance novels have evolved so much over the years that several subgenres have emerged. Today's readers can easily find the romance novel subgenre that suits their tastes—and writers can, too.



Victoria M. Johnson
Contributing Editor

According to the Romance Writers of America (RWA) website, approximately 8,090 romance titles were published in 2007, accounting for \$1.375 billion in sales. In fact, one of every five persons who read books in 2007 read a romance novel! Among the 43 RWA recognized romance publishers, Harlequin Enterprises is by far the largest, bringing out 120 titles a month in 29 languages for 107 international markets on six continents.

If you're wondering how to get in on the romance action, consider focusing on one of these popular eight subgenres:

- Inspirational—novels where faith and religion are integral to the story.
- Paranormal—novels may include werewolves, vampires, ghosts, and more.
- Mystery & Suspense—women-in-jeopardy stories.
- Young Adult—books feature teen protagonists, written for readers from 12 to 19 and incorporate all the elements of adult fiction—character, plot, setting, theme, and style.
- Erotica—sexually explicit stories where the character growth occurs through the sexual scenes.
- Historical—historically accurate stories where the setting plays a part of the book.
- Contemporary—novels can be funny, emotionally intense, spicy but not explicit, or sweet traditional romances. They can be as short as

40,000 words, or as long as 80,000 words, depending on the publisher and the line.

- Mainstream Women's Fiction—big novels where the romantic relationship is a significant part of the story.

Know that within the first seven genres listed above there are *category* romance novels, those that are part of a series, which are published monthly by Harlequin, Silhouette, Steeple Hill, and Mills & Boon. And there are *single titles*, those novels that are released as standalones and have a shelf life of longer than one month.

With all these books and series and markets, how does a writer break in?

Author Carol Grace Culver wrote short stories for the confessions magazines and *Woman's World* before she broke into the romance market in 1989 by selling a book about a single dad and a nanny to Silhouette Romance. Since then, more than thirty-three of her romance novels have been published. "I am currently under contract with Harlequin-Mills & Boon; my July 2009 book is called *His Sicilian Bride*, under my pen name Carol Grace. I wrote a series of young adult books for Berkley in trade paperback last year (the first is called *Manderley Prep*) under my name Carol Culver. As Carol Grace, I also wrote a couple of single-title romances for Pocket Books that took place in Greece and Italy."

Historical Romance author Anne Mallory broke in in a different way.

"I entered the RWA Golden Heart contest and became a finalist. My editor read the entry in the finals and contacted me about buying the book!" Mallory writes Regency romances for Avon/HarperCollins, and has published seven books since her debut in 2004. Her upcoming release, *For the Earl's Pleasure*, set in 1822, is due out in July 2009.

Jasmine Haynes, also known as Jennifer Skully, followed yet another path: "I joined Romance Writers of America, attended many craft seminars, and utilized their networking opportunities." As Jasmine Haynes, she writes erotic romance for Berkley. Jennifer Skully's publications are light, humorous, romantic suspense novels published by Harlequin HQN; as JB Skully,

she writes the Max Starr sensual mystery series available from Liquidsilverbooks.com. She's been published for six years and has twenty-one books under her belt. Her next book, *Fair Game*, is a June 2009 Berkley Heat release.

Does the romance genre have too many options? How does a writer choose the subgenre?

Culver has a quick answer: "I pick the genres that are actively acquiring books." But then she explains, "Single titles are longer, more characters, more complex plots, more freedom from rules. Young Adult can be edgy, funny, paranormal, light, lots of freedom there, too. Category romance follows certain rules that are important to follow. In a way, it makes writing them easier."

For Mallory, "Regency historical romance is what I love to read! There is a definite fantasy aspect to historicals. The world is familiar, but just different enough to give the reader more of an escape."

And Haynes says, "My voice is pretty humorous, but I also love having a mystery to solve. So both light mysteries by Jennifer Skully and the grittier Max Starr series came out of discovering my voice. I didn't pick the genres as much as they picked me. I did specifically decide to write erotic romance, though, because I saw that it was a growing market. However, I found that also fit my voice, too. I've always written very sensual books, and erotic romance was an outlet for that without having to figure out who I was going to kill (lol). I have found the more erotica I write, though, the more humor slips in."

It sounds like these writers have found their niche in romance.

"I like writing romance, inserting it into whatever genre I'm working on," Culver says. "I'm writing a mystery now and sure enough, the sleuth has a boyfriend. It just makes life more interesting to have some romance in it."

Mallory adds, "It's been wonderful! I started writing full time and love the work and flexibility."

Haynes's experience is equally positive. "Romance writing has been good to me, but I'm still building my career. I do have freedom to write the stories I want and I do this full time, so I don't have to

From Blog to Book

by Bill Belew

The days of receiving a sizeable advance, going to a secluded space, pounding out a novel, sending it to a publisher, receiving a check, and waiting for the next advance seem to be far behind us.



Bill Belew

Now publishers want an advance from their writers. They want to know who's going to buy your book; whether you have a market, a following, and a history of readers; whether you've written something before and it was read.

As a blogger I can answer all those questions and then some.

I write about goings-on in Asia on one of my blogs. Just a week ago, I wrote about an underwater restaurant that opened in the Maldives. As I write this, some 50,000 people have come to see it. I am writing a series on facts about countries in Asia. I have written a few posts on Afghanistan, Israel, the Gaza Strip, Iran, and more than 20,000 people have come to take a look. There are tools bloggers can use—Sitemeter, Omniture, Google Analytics, and the like—to prove to a prospective publisher that what they write gets read. Publishers want to know. A blogger can show and prove, not just guess.

If a publisher were to ask "Have you

written anything before?" I could show him my archives. I have written more than 10,000 posts at an average of 200 words per post. That comes to about 2,000,000 words. I have done that in the past 30 months, averaging 60,000–70,000 words per month. When the NaNoWriMo people say they have to write 50,000 words in a month, I think to myself, "I wish that's all I had to do." It reminds me of the story of the farm boy who joined the military. During basic training he was up at reveille every morning at 6 a.m. Upon completion of training, his dad called him and asked how things were. He responded "Great, Pop. The best part is we get to sleep in every morning." If a publisher wanted to know if I could write 50,000 words in a month, or in three months, I could show him that I have done it, again and again . . . and again. Bloggers have a history and it's readily available to see.

Do I have a history of readers? For every post I write, I get one comment on average. I might not share this with a publisher, but just between you and me, not all of them are nice comments. Readers take a look and tell me what I said that was good and bad. They even correct mistakes for me when I get a fact wrong. I could tell a publisher how many people came, how often they turned a page, and how many pages they turned. I could even tell what countries my readers came from and what types of topics which readers are most interested in. The things bloggers

work another job. I have worldwide distribution, but that could be improved. No movie deals, though! While we do hear about those overnight sensations, building a writing career takes a long time for most of us."

If you're interested in pursuing this versatile genre, Culver offers this advice: "I'd say an aspiring romance writer has to read and read and read some more. Then get into a class or a critique group for support. It can be such a lonely life, writing, so you need other writers who understand and will help getting over the bad times as well as to share and celebrate the good times."

Mallory agrees, "Write, write, write, and read, read, read! And join RWA.

Look into your local RWA chapter for specific help and camaraderie and the national organization for consolidated publishing information." Haynes concurs, "Join Romance Writers of America and become active with your local chapter. There is a huge support system in addition to so many workshops, online classes, and conferences where you can learn your craft and make the contacts you will need to get published. RWA helped me learn how to write and once I'd done that, they gave me the resources to sell my work."

For more information on each of these authors, visit their fabulous web sites at carolgracebooks.com, annemallory.com, and skullybuzz.com. WT

can know about their readers, eh?

Do I have a following? I can tell a publisher how many people have signed up to receive updates to everything I write. The number is more than 1,000. That's a very small number compared to the 72,000+ who have signed up to receive stuff from the sites of a friend of mine. Still, there have to be 1,000 subscribers before there are 2,000, right? A blogger who knows his tools has the means to answer the question "Who follows your writing?"

I can also tell a publisher how many others have referred to my writing in theirs. In the blog world, that's called *authority*. I have some. Publishers will want to know about it.

Is there a market for a book if I write it? Who's going to buy it? I can answer those questions, too. I am not the only person who writes about the things I do. I am not the only person who has taken subject material similar to what I write and turned it into a book. I can see how well they have done and show a publisher those statistics as well to possibly predict how well my book would do.

Clearly, a blogger can supply the information a prospective publisher wants about the prospects of a potential book. Not only that, but while the blogger is learning these things, he has been busy pounding out material, likely in a secluded place, and if he has done his work well, he will have made some money in the process, an advance of a different kind.

So what about me?

Gee, I Wish I Had Been Drinking at the Time was my first attempt at moving from blog to book. I pitched it to three publishers. Two publishers came back expressing interest, and I chose one. It can be found on Amazon.com. How are sales? About what I expected.

Your blog can become a book, too. But first you have to start blogging. WT

Feb. Find

Fly by, February,
Bye bye debts we carry,
Day-job hello to you.
We write by night till two.
(Both art *and* grind
Are necessary.)

—Pat Bustamante

Deconstructing a Short Story

by Meredy Amyx

All fiction is in some way drawn from life because we have no other model. But autobiographical? Not necessarily. In fact, even the best personal anecdote is going to need some work



Meredy Amyx

before it will make a good short story, and in the process it will lose factuality.

How does personal experience blend with invention to create a story? As an example, here's the process of composition of my 327-word story "Tuna Fish," captioned "A Zen Story," which appeared in the January *WritersTalk*.

It began with one of my own running themes, that of the *last time*: when we do something for the last time, we often don't know it's the last time. This is just one of the notions that lurk in my head. I think such habits of thought, conscious or not, serve as a filter for our perceptions so that we don't constantly have to exhaust ourselves processing everything from scratch.

As so often happens when I am performing a routine task, my mind wanders. This despite years of Zen study and practice from which I should have learned to give myself wholly and mindfully to every action. So it just happened that while I was making tuna fish salad for sandwiches, the habitual thought about last times stopped idling and went into gear.

Because seeing life in narrative terms is part of my practice as a writer, it was a short step from standing in the kitchen with some canned tuna and a glass mixing bowl, getting ready to chop, to thinking about a character who was making tuna fish salad and having a thought about last times. As soon as I turned it into the third person—"Suzie was in the kitchen making tuna fish salad for sandwiches and getting all sad."—it started to become a story.

Here's a hypothesis: maybe one of the things that enable writers to depict life *as seen through their eyes* is an awareness of those lurking notions and how they act as a lens for viewing their

experience.

Once I'd finished making the tuna fish salad, I went to my desk and typed the first line. I knew Suzie was getting all sad because of some thought about last times, and I chose the language "getting all sad" to keep it colloquial and a little bit light. This was not about the depths of true grief, although grief might be beneath it. This was about sad thoughts brought on oneself, almost as a kind of self-indulgence.

Not knowing what came next, I put in a little action about starting to prepare the salad. That led to the idea of taking the character through the steps of making the tuna fish, interspersing them with her thoughts, to keep an anchor in external reality and show that the rest was going on in her head.

I gave her tears and onions at the same time to let the reader know that Suzie was a faintly foolish figure, but that we were not going to laugh unkindly at her.

Why was she sad, and what did it have to do with last times? I made the connection directly: this could be *her* last time at performing some simple act, just as it could be for anyone, anytime. Now I was beginning to see Suzie. She was middle-aged, matronly, and feeling a little sorry for herself. In fact, she was ruminating on her own mortality and pondering all those last times. Here I listed some of the kinds of things that I think about when I get onto this theme, not unaware that it can get a little bit absurd to dwell on it. As a touch of self-deprecating humor, I exaggerated her thoughts, making them slightly maudlin and contrasting them with the practical, matter-of-fact, and (not incidentally) life-sustaining steps of preparing food.

But Suzie is not an idiot. There is a real association with tuna fish that brings up this emotional state. It was easy to think of tying the activity to thoughts of a personal loss. This led to an image of her mother doing something for the last time. The connection made itself: the last thing her mother did was make tuna fish.

This was all made up. My mother died last spring in a hospital, unconscious, of everything-failure, and I have never heard of anyone dying while making tuna fish. But I am still processing my

mother's death, so it comes up in many ways in my everyday life.

Now I added details: Suzie's final sight of her mother at the airport. My mother had not been in San Jose in twenty years, and she never wore sweats of any kind. But an airport is an evocative place for a last glimpse, and a barefoot figure in purple sweats is just comical enough to be poignant.

When son Scott arrives, Suzie is weeping, and not just over the mayonnaise but over the deliberately *lite* mayonnaise, again for the gentle absurdity. I needed a second person to reflect Suzie and reinterpret her thoughts. Suzie is entirely caught up in her imaginary grief by now, and so she blurts what's on her mind. Scott is understanding. He knows the story of her mother's death, and he puts it together at once.

Up to this point the story just seemed to flow naturally from the situation I had created, but now I did not know what to do. I had no conclusion in mind.

That's when I switched sides.

Until then I had been identifying with Suzie, using myself and my own view of things as a starting point and selecting, exaggerating, pulling and pushing a little this way and that to mold a character not quite a caricature but surely a very simplified sketch of a person situated in real space and time on an ordinary day. Now I looked at her through Scott's eyes. And this is when it became a Zen story.

Those years of study and meditation changed my perceptions. There came a moment when I realized that things in themselves have no meaning at all; the meaning is in my mind. It's a simple idea with profound implications. Scott

Mid-Life Crisis

Were the years wasted?
Dreams never tasted.
Could I have done more,
if focused before?

Caught up in a role
Not hearing my soul
Ignoring my guides,
along for the ride.

Tried writing, but then,
Never had a pen.

—Suzy Paluzzi

Accolades

by Jackie Mutz

January started with a slow “rumbly in my tumbly” to quote Winnie the Pooh’s thoughts of honey. Only this rumbly had to do with the anxiety of sitting at my computer and writing. Sound familiar?



Jackie Mutz
Contributing Editor

There is symbolism in new beginnings. And since 2009 is a signal of change in the world as we know it, why not apply it to our own writing experience? *Make 2009 yours*—a friend’s salutation struck me to the core. How did I want to make a new writing beginning, to start anew in my writing process? For starters, throwing the word *should* out of my vocabulary and replacing it with *can* (note the present tense). The act of sitting down in a chair in front of a computer, curling up on the couch, breathing fresh air outdoors, lying under a tree or at the beach with a notebook and **writing** is the first step. The second step is doing it again—writing with consistency and keeping the rhythm, that hum as your brain whooshes those words onto the page with a creative intensity only a writer can imagine. By the fifth step you are walking and in some cases, running the writer’s path. One step follows another, and so it goes.

I missed this month’s meeting but received these announcements:

- Bill Baldwin became the first guest

here is the voice of Zen wisdom as I understand it.

Scott is loving and kind. He does not tell his mother she is being ridiculous. He is mature enough to know that a glass bowl can contain the death of a parent. He sympathizes and comforts her. But he also wants her to see that she is creating her own experience of grief through the loading she places on the act she is performing. So he asks her to look inside herself for the answer. And then he does not underscore the point but simply does the next thing, in a very practical way.

contributor to Erika Mailman’s blog. Erika is the author of the novel *The Witch’s Trinity*.

- Bill Belew’s blog readership number has reached the 7,500,000 mark. Way to go, Bill!
- Maureen Griswold just had a short story titled *Wordplay* published/posted on the *ken*again* webzine, Winter 2008–2009 edition. Go to www.kenagain.freesevers.com/prose.html to read her story.
- Colin Seymour, author of a memoir and novel, had no clients for his obituary writing business, but has been blogging about boxing on Examiner.com and “making a living.”
- Bob Garfinkle had an astronomy book review published in the February 2009 issue of *Sky and Telescope* magazine, and signed a contract to write two additional book reviews for the same magazine.
- Jacksverse.com, Jack Hasling’s website, has had no requests to be dropped from his email list, a good sign people like what they are reading.
- Marjorie Johnson, as a NaMoWriMo “winner”—more than 50,000 words written in the month of November—was invited to read for 20 minutes from her new novel, *The Jaguar Codex*, on KFJC, the Foothill College radio station. Her novel is about a Mayan woman who finds a priceless treasure, a Mayan codex (fan-folded book), and learns to translate the ancient Mayan glyphs.
- June Smith was rated second on *Facebook’s* “iGo iWrite” Top Ten

Now I had a complete story, and the little red STOP light went on in my head. All that was left was some polishing and tuning. My longer works of fiction take a tremendous amount of rework from first draft to last, but the flash stories are usually done in one sitting, in an hour or two. This was one of those. Nothing like this small incident has ever happened to me or to anyone I know. Nonetheless it is made honestly, composed of pieces of things I have experienced, broken down, selected, and recombined into a tiny story that is wholly fictitious and yet is truth as I know it. WT

- Travel Writers list. Registered members of the site vote on submitted travel stories, which will be published by Facebook.
- Steve Wetlesen has been paid for another WW2 memorial commission . . . a new writing genre for him?

Make 2009 yours. Not just in writing but in other ways as well. As we move into the month of February and beyond, keep up your writing schedule, whatever it is. Each time you reach a milestone on your writing journey, you succeed. Send me your success stories at accolades@southbaywriters.com. Can’t you hear the applause already? WT

The Gift of Maturity

Holidays bring gifts from family
Gifts that go straight to the heart
Like darts on a dart board
Always hitting the mark right in the center
Where we shriek with joy loudly
or with pain usually silently.
The pain is never meant to hurt
It is given in jest or in love
As a way to connect
Even if sometimes awkward.
The gift this year of the exercise elliptical machine
He takes her to the store to try them out
She tries them all, raising her heart rate,
Feeling proud that her new year is starting off
With action, conviction, and focus.
She says, “My thighs feel thinner already.”
He smirks, “You have a big imagination!”
Deflated, her heart sinks, her feelings are hurt,
How dare he be so rude!
But wait . . . The gift of maturity appears.
A switch of perspective, A light bulb moment!
“Why, yes, I do have a big imagination!”
Einstein and other geniuses share the vision:
“Imagination is more important than knowledge.”
She graciously accepts the comment after all.
—Vicki Wynne

Writers' Gigs (A New Feature)

by Lita Kurth

Making a living by writing is a lot like making a living by acting or playing music. Very few are able to do it. As a result, writers are often looking for a gig whether that be teaching, editing, or (gasp!) actual writing. Once you've exhausted craigslist.com, here are some others to try or not, as the case may be:

WritingforDollars.com

This is a free online newsletter provided by the owner of AWOC books (available to buy on the site). The most recent issue included "Eight Ways to Become a Creative Strategist" and "16 Paying Markets—High, Medium, and Low." The second article looks good, but in fact, it's a rather crazy list containing five or six items in each category ranging from very exclusive literary journals (in your dreams!) to Boy Scout magazines and trade journals. Some information is better than nothing, of course. You can always google these names, but no websites, contacts, deadlines or guidelines are given.

The owner also offers Frontiers in Writing conferences, which one of our editors, Carolyn Donnell, attended in 2007 in Amarillo, Texas, and recommends. Barry Eisler was a speaker and there were story contests (one of which Carolyn won).

Caveat Scriptor: a "writing opportunity" to avoid

is blogit.com, a venture that positions itself as practically a charity for writers and assures you that for only \$12.95 per month, you can have a blog (although blogs are free at blogspot.com and many other sites) and somehow they'll guarantee a readership while you write whatever you want. However, the fine print mentions that you'll only get paid any month that you make more than \$5 from readers who subscribe. And readers pay \$9.95 per month to read all [blogit](http://blogit.com) blogs. If they read 50 blogs, including yours, you'll get 1/50th of \$9.95 or *nada* if that comes to less than \$5. In fact, I'm not sure I understand how it works, but whether or not *you* get paid, Shaycom, the owner, gets paid. And a little research reveals a true red alert! Read this site called "Blogit: a

pure, consummate scam." cutewriting.blogspot.com/2008/03/blogit-pure-consummated-scam.html None of the Shaycom blogs are in the public domain, so guess what? "Search engines don't index them." That must make your blog a bit hard to find, huh?

Hmmm, craigslist.com is looking better all the time. They list writing jobs in two places. First choose your city or SF Bay Area and then under *Jobs*, look for *Writing/Editing*. Under *Gigs*, you'll also find *Writing*, which offers some interesting fare: giving a private screenwriting class to a filmmaker, and writing features (if you're a San Francisco-area parent) about family activities for kids in SF. Or if integrity isn't your strong suit, you can ghost write college essays! (That posting was removed and roundly criticized.)

The angel award goes to Craigslist, the devil award to [blogit](http://blogit.com). WT

Gems of Spring

Every Spring, the Flowers Get More Beautiful—

Pearl white dream, winter's still heart longs

Awakening buds, dazzling colored fronds

Emerald green, ruby red, carnelian throngs

Sapphire-winged birds sing sweeter songs

Every Spring, the Flowers Get More Beautiful.

—Sally A. Milnor

Change Unchained

His head held high

He advances to the podium.

A smile lurks on his lips.

He knows the enormity of the tasks that await him.

Yet he is willing.

He walks alone, with no one at his side.

But he is not alone.

Millions await him

With arms outstretched,

With minds open,

Hoping and praying for a restoration

For change unchained. . . .

—Jill Pipkin

A Good Walk— Anywhere

by Rita St. Claire

All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

To write, we sit.

—WritersTalk, Nov. 2008

Do you have writer's block once in a while? Have you experienced a growth spurt, especially

around the middle or where bottom meets chair? Perhaps your ankles swell after a day's work at the computer while inspired poetry or prose sails through your fingers onto keys

and screen? If any of this sounds like you, it's time to start walking. You already know that exercise can set you on the path to better health, but do you realize that it can spark your creativity as well? Research and testimony support Nietzsche's claim—just google around and you'll find a plethora of articles and studies on exercise and well-being. Medical science has learned that we receive physical and mental goodies by walking most days of the week. Even for only ten minutes each day.

Here's a tip: go on the Internet, to www.walkscore.com. This new site has checked out more than 2,500 neighborhoods in America's forty largest cities. You can enter an address somewhere in the Silicon Valley and get the environs' instant walkability score, along with a map of locations such as parks, coffee shops, theatres, markets, etc.—even fitness centers—the types of things you might want to enjoy during your walk. This is useful whether you're shopping, visiting, or aimlessly roaming. You can check out the neighborhood's walking potential before you're even out the door. Going out of town for a vacation or a writing conference? Use walkscore.com to find a place to walk while you're away from home.

Here's another quote to ponder, by Raymond Inmon. *If you are seeking creative ideas, go out walking. Angels whisper to a man when he goes for a walk.* WT



Rita St. Claire

Speech Recognition Software

by *Suzu Paluzzi*

In January, I made the trip to Macworld Expo in San Francisco and paid \$25 to enter the Exhibit Hall strictly to learn about products that might be of use. My biggest interest was in MacSpeech, speech recognition software for the Macintosh Computer.



Suzu Paluzzi

Consumers are interested in speech recognition software for two primary reasons, it seems. One purpose is for speed. The other is if the writer has physical limitations, which can range from common arthritis and carpal tunnel syndrome to more serious impairment. Speech recognition software converts spoken words to machine-readable input, according to Wikipedia. In other words, the writer either reads the text or dictates it into a microphone, in this case, and the computer writes the content.

MacSpeech Dictate sells for \$199.95 including the microphone-headphone unit. It works with Microsoft Word, Adobe Photoshop, QuarkXPress, and Apple applications iChat, Mail, and Keynote. The system requirements are an Intel Core Duo processor and Mac OS X. Reviews indicate that it is easy to install and does not require training for use. At the core of MacSpeech Dictate is the speech recognition engine: Dragon NaturallySpeaking, according to the specifications.

It is impressive that voice recognition technology exists. However, I was disappointed in the performance of this particular software at Macworld, and my analysis seems to be accurate, after having seen online reviews of the product.

For one thing, when the supplied headset is used for input, the accuracy of the software's conversion of speech to text is different depending on whether the user is reading from printed material or speaking conversationally. In addition, the program cannot always distinguish between correction commands and text. For example, the word

“period” cannot always be distinguished as the punctuation mark rather than content.

In reviews, consensus is that the headphones included in the original package need to be upgraded. Also, it seems to take *more* time to use the device and the software than typing in text because so much editing is needed. Only if one has physical impediments is the use of MacSpeech beneficial. One user compromises and uses the program only when he needs to write more than 300 words. Others suggest that if you are trying out MacSpeech to save time, it is in need of more improvement.

SBW member Diana Richomme bought the PC application Dragon NaturallySpeaking. She says, “It comes with a set of headphones that works OK, but I bought another one because it wasn't very comfortable for hours at a time.” That seems to be a common complaint. I did ask the Macworld representative about a more direct way to download voice notes into the computer, like from a voice recorder, and he said that has been requested quite a bit, so it may be done soon.

Richomme also offers, “You have to slow down a little because your voice can't get too far ahead of the program or it will stop you.” That may depend upon which version of Dragon NaturallySpeaking you use, and also how much memory is on your computer. I must say I did not see any difficulty with the speed of talking on the MacSpeech demonstration.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking also lists at \$199.99 but the newest version 10 is on sale at Amazon.com with a rebate of \$95.49. As Diana Richomme remarks, “Sometimes it's nice just to talk and get the software to correct my spelling.”

MacSpeech offers helpdesk customer support, but the reviews of the service are mixed.

For more information, see store.apple.com/us/product/TR284LL/A or google Dragon NaturallySpeaking and click on the Amazon sale link.

Be sure to check the system requirements before you buy speech recognition software. I've decided to wait for more software improvements before making my purchase. **WT**

I Remember

I remember the boy you must have been
all sweetness and sweat,
blond curls nestled in your neckline,
and later, when you first picked up the
guitar?

when the love affair began . . .
pictures of you playing young and
fresh,
joy registered everywhere,
your body lit with every note you
played.

I remember you as I first saw you,
not quite the young man, but boyish,
not quite filled out, but firm to the
touch,
or so I imagined, even then.
How quick your fingers were, the bass
alive,
an extension of you.

I remember many nights watching you
as you moved with your music,
engrossed and oblivious
to my adoring looks—
I felt full every time
I watched you play.

I remember even now how you were
with me, gentle, soft yet firm,
your touch electric, my body,
no my soul on fire at your nearness . . .
even now I remember and wait,
want and desire ever present for
what it is I remember.
Even now.

—*Jacqueline Mutz*

Call for Poetry Submissions

When the going gets tough... the tough
take a new look at the world around
them.

That's the theme of *The Light in Ordinary Things*, the first volume of the new, biannual Fearless Poetry Series. Submissions are being accepted now through May 30 for this thematic anthology, which will be made available to the public in August via the Fearless Books website and Amazon.com. Poets may submit 1 to 3 poems and/or prose poems about any ordinary thing, place, event, or living being looked at in a new light. The subject matter should be common, but the insights extraordinary.

Complete submission guidelines are online now at fearlessbooks.com/Poetry.htm

WOW! Skyline Conference

by Carolyn Donnell

"Now is our festival; now we are together." Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*



Carolyn Donnell
Contributing Editor

This year's one-day WOW! Conference, celebrating International Women's Day, will be held on March 21. Participants come to Skyline College from all around the Bay Area and beyond and include ages from 11 to 90-something. Last year more than 300 people attended.

WOW! celebrates and honors women's achievements, presenting noted women writers as well as Skyline faculty. The conference gives participants the chance to hear from writers in several genres and attend workshops focusing on varied subjects ranging from writing your life story, writing to heal, screenwriting, poetry and more to hints on finding an agent, getting published, and self-promotion.

Saturday Schedule

- 8:00–8:55 Registration and continental breakfast
- 9:15–10:10 Keynote address followed by a book signing
- Keynote speaker—Julia Whitty, author of *The Fragile Edge*
- 10:30–12:00 Morning workshop
- 12:00–1:00 Lunch (included in the registration fee) in the cafeteria
- 12:40–1:00 Book signing — workshop authors
- 1:00–2:10 Book Talk—the afternoon panel will feature:
 - Nona Caspers, *Heavier Than Air*
 - Micheline Aharonian Marcom, *The Mirror in the Well*
 - Yiyun Li, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*
- 2:10–2:30 Break—Books signing on stage
- 2:30–4:00 Afternoon workshops
- 4:00 p.m. Reception Building 6

Morning Workshops

10:30 am–12:00 p.m.

- "Freeing Your Life with Words" — Susan Wooldridge
- "When Life Hurts: Writing as a Way

of Healing" — Sharon Bray

- "The World Split Open: Finding Your Poetry's Truths" — Elline Lipkin
- "Your Life as Story (Part 2)" — Tristine Rainer
- "A Primer on Publishing" — Amy Rennert and Pat Walsh
- "From Script to Screen: Writing the Movie of Your Dreams" — Laurel Minter
- "Weaving Fact and Imagination: Using Historical Characters" — James Tipton
- "The Language of Landscape: Poem-Making for Fun and Fulfillment" — Pamela Michael
- "Passionate Attention: The Art and Practice of Writing from Our Every Day" — Katharine Harer

Afternoon Workshops

2:30 –4:00 p.m.

- "Launching Your Writing: Savvy Strategies to Promote Your Work"
- Panelists: Sandy Boucher, Linda Watanabe McFerrin, Calvin Crosby, Susan Bono. Moderator: Kathleen McClung
- "Slow Down, Fast Forward: Working with Narrative Time" — Kathleen de Azevedo
- "High-Tech Storytelling" — Ellen Lee
- "Inspiration Comes from the Most Unexpected Places/This Isn't the Story I Planned to Write" — Wild Writing Women: Jacqueline Harmon Butler, Pamela Michael, Lisa Alpine, Carla King, Cathleen Miller, Suzanne LaFetra
- "What's the Plot? Finding the Heart of Your Play" — Joan Holden
- "The Art of Memoir Writing" — Maureen Murdock
- "Women in Transition: The Power of Writing" — Marcy Alan Craig
- "WOW! Open Poetry Slam" — Meliza Bañales

Attendance at workshop sessions is on a first-come, first-served basis.

It is possible that the Early Bird deadline will be extended beyond January 30 for SBW members. Ask by phone or email before registering.

General by Feb 24 \$85

Student by Feb 24th \$24 (Copy of

Student ID.)

At the door (space available) \$100

Call (650) 738-4324 or visit smccd.net/accounts/skywow/

Skyline College is located in San Bruno at 3300 College Drive

Parking is available in Lot 7. Additional parking and parking for special needs is available in Lot 1.

WOW! is going green this year. The college has pledged this year to "either greatly reduce or eliminate our use of disposable water bottles. Instead, we may use water coolers and biodegradable cups, or we may simply reduce the number of disposable water bottles we use by providing them only at lunch time and in limited quantities." But WOW! needs your help to honor this pledge. Please bring your own, filled, reusable water bottle to the conference!
WT

Critique Group Update

by Cathy Bauer

I had my first meeting with people interested in starting critique groups. Six people attended and we got one group formed with the possibility of a second. Valerie Wong will be hosting a group that will meet on the 2nd and 4th Mondays of the month at 10:00 am. If you are interested, please contact her at valeriewong@juno.com or call 408-873-7070. Preeti Misra has also volunteered to host a group in Sunnyvale. We will have more information on her group later on. David Breithaupt is looking for a writing buddy or buddies who live on the the East Side of the Valley. If you are interested, please contact him at dlbmlb@comcast.net. WT



Critique group planning: around the table from Marjorie Johnson (foreground), Preeti Misra, Cathy Bauer, Valerie Wong, Dina Olsen, who's hiding behind David Breithaupt. Photo: Carolyn Donnell

A Secret Lost

by Karen Sweet

Katherine turned the key in the old wooden chest and pushed up the lid. Her movements became as ragged as the beat of her heart when she heard Uncle Herk's feet pounding up the stairs. She sobbed as she tossed pictures and costume jewelry to the floor. Where was it? Why couldn't she find it?

A thud, followed by a groan, ended in silence in the hall, just as her shaking hands found the carved wood grip. Out of the folds of an old linen table cloth came a derringer. She cuddled the gun, a prohibition relic, in her palm. It had been her mother's; its barrel and history dark with age. She sagged to the floor, her back scraping against the key protruding from the chest's lock. Pain burning her spine, she gasped. Yet, it somehow lent her strength. Just let Uncle Herk breathe his dirty, alcohol-drenched whispers on her now.

Perhaps her mother had suspected this. The gun had been an odd present for a fifteen year old girl. Katherine knew something haunted the woman—the constant flinching, the tight-strung lips, eyes that never met anyone else's. Her mother, a bruised, slow-rotting apple whose drinking finished what an unnamed something had begun.

Trembling, Katherine recognized that she was stronger than her mother. The day her cruel grandfather taunted her once too often, she coolly challenged him. He read the rage in her eyes and backed away. Now, her mother's brother stalked her. When would it end?

From the time she'd been forced to live with her mother's family, Katherine vowed to protect herself. Her mother had submitted, and only dementia relieved her of the dark memories.

Katherine prayed for freedom; Uncle Herk shadowed her soul.

His stumbling hands scratched the door. Threading the trigger with her finger, she leaned forward, pointing the gun. One family secret was about to die.
WT

A Painful End

by Dave LaRoche

I fell on my butt while skiing at Diamond Peak. No, no, not on the slopes but traversing a few feet to The View, a snack shop on the ridge of the mountain—skis off, boots open, clomping forward displaying what I hoped was my best skier's composure. Oh, I may have been intending a little show as the vision of supping with other "black-diamond nuts" had nurtured me through several brutally cold and windy plunges.

Beneath my line of sight—head up, jaw tightened (I assumed angular), eyes steely and to the horizon in a search of life's meaning—The View's wooden deck emerged wet with sun-melted snow, and my boots found its slickness. Suddenly they were in the air in a sort of floundering dance while the rest of me came down hard on my tail—whomp! My entire weight, not incidental, hammering on my poorly cushioned sacrum—ouch! (Karen had always referred to my butt as a "bitt," and while I had paid little heed to this wifely exaggeration, here was proof of her observation and my rump's insufficiency).

Recap, continued from page 1

necessary to realize that we are constantly bombarded by ads that tell us what or how to think. Even though we have a limited capacity to absorb everything, we have a responsibility to retain our own experiences and come to terms with them as well as the historical ones. "So much of our lives is memory," he said, but if we stay in touch with ourselves, the false ones can be cast aside.

What are we left with if we cannot use our own experiences? Editors dictate what is the right memory, the news media teach us what childhood is supposed to be and we believe it. But facts are not always true and don't always reflect the truth of society's feelings or what society wants to see.

Pundits are a good example, as they offer mass media opinions and commentary making reality better by painting a nicer picture. Norman, it

The pain was blinding, except for an extraordinary panorama of glittering lights, which immediately displaced any embarrassment. I thought my lowest lower back was surely broken. I could not move and didn't want to and wondered why I had insisted on this dangerous sport.

An attractive EMT—a fabled snow-lady wearing Gore-tex and a white cross—appeared. With sun-bleached hair, golden tan, and a dazzling blue in her eyes that surely spoke to the purity of the mountains, she had responded to my silent cry. Bestowing a grand smile, which warmed my perspective, she knelt over me—her sympathetic blues brushing mine. And, with kindly voice, she led me through reassuring tests. Did I know my name, where I was from, my age (another ouch) and move this way and that way, did it hurt or did it ache, and soon her lovely hands were exploring my bare, bruised, and badly misused bottom. Now there seemed a reason to continue with skiing—another encounter with those magnificent hands.

Of course, I got better, and after weeks of therapy had passed, I experienced only a little loneliness now and then.
WT

seems, is adept at differentiating between what memory is and what we are told it should be, and believes that "all I need to know I learned when I skipped school."

Susan Sontag said, "All memory is unique and dies with the individual." Norman agrees, adding that progress has been made in literature by women's voices. We want to hear their powerful message as long as it can be enforced as true memory. If memory has degrees of falsity it controls the past; being true, it controls the future.

According to some pundits, technology will bring democracy, but Norman says this is false. "No technology will bring democracy, we will have to do that ourselves," he explains.

Two of Norman's books—*War Made Easy* and *Made Love, Got War*—were available for purchase following the meeting. WT

View from the Board

by Dave LaRoche

May I begin this “View” with an announcement: your board of directors is pleased and proud to be serving your club, an enthusiastic, engaged, and integrated group. We find it gratifying to work on your behalf.

Now, within the board are individuals who work pretty hard at building and promoting and before I go on with the “View,” I’d like to mention them.

First there is Dick Amyx, managing editor, who, with his team, puts out our newsletter every month, and is responsible for our anthology (out to you this month).

Richard Burns, our treasurer, keeps track of the gold, organizes and submits our quarterly reports, collects dues, workshop and dinner fees, integrates receivables from myriad places, and pays out to our purveyors of service.

Marjorie Johnson manages our membership and, with a light touch, encourages those new to the rolls and resolves related problems for our more seasoned hands. She maintains a roster and updates the Central Board.

Bill Baldwin, our VP, is responsible for programs, may be lauded for success, and never blamed for a flop, though in memory there have been few. Bill selects and schedules presenters, arranges their attendance and honoraria, writes up their intros for *WritersTalk* and sees to their comfort at meetings.

Secretary Rita St. Claire records our activities and publishes minutes (important to nonprofits), runs her “powder puff” action-item list, and keeps us all on our toes with a unique and commanding perspective.

Ro Davis offers refreshing candor at board meetings and maintains our website (which speaks for itself). She participates fully in other activities such as production assistant for the anthology and her popular pre-East of Eden workshop: *Getting the Most From a Conference*.

Cathy Bauer supports all things in their time and is currently running hospitality and networking. To go even slightly into Cathy’s willingness and work

would take pages. Let’s just say that she has been and remains a mainstay in this rig, holding taut in both storm and calm.

Edie Matthews is synonymous with “South Bay,” and while her current interest is PR and publicity, she is the grease on our SBW gears. With her experience and reach into the “artisan community” she helps keep our ship sailing and even-keeled (to continue the metaphor) and let’s not forget her EOE Conference—run beautifully.

Kudos to these folks—we laud their efforts and applaud their accomplishments with sincere appreciation.

Our first board meeting of this year was held on January 7 and began at 7 p.m. President Dave noted:

- Member and author Rick Brost is seriously ill.
- Congratulations to the board for the good work in the past year.
- Corbett workshop, coming along with 25 signed at that time.
- Nominations solicited for the Matthews-Baldwin Service Award to be offered in February.

Previous meeting minutes were corrected and approved.

VP Bill announced upcoming presenters as follows: Norman Solomon in January, Esther Erman and Janet Miller, romance writers, in February. March will bring Ellen Sussman, author, and in April, agent April Eberhardt may speak. Michelle Richmond is May’s speaker and, down the line, others are tentatively planned.

Secretary Rita gave details on her upcoming “Writers Well-Being Program”—designed to counteract the sedentary nature of writing—approved at the previous meeting.

Treasurer Rich reported excruciating efforts on preparing Q2 reports for the Central Board, increasing PayPal activity for both the Corbett workshop and our anthology, and stability of the treasury with adequate funds for the programs envisioned for this year. Rich’s report was approved.

Central Board Rep Dave reported that a CB motion to suspend the SFV Branch from the CWC (eliminating their nonprofit status, insurance coverage,

and disallowing the use of the CWC name and logo) has been made and seconded. This action is due to reported irregularities with membership and dues, and the subsequent related fallout. During the suspension, should it pass, CB efforts are planned to rectify the situation. Our board voted to exercise a “no” vote on the motion.

Marilyn Fahey will stand in for Dave at the next CB meeting, scheduled for Jan 25.

Membership at SBW has raced past the 200 mark. PR for meetings and workshop exceeds thirty mailings to various media, and seven open mic readings at Santana Row, four at Almaden, entertained listeners and honed readers’ skills—the number down due to holidays.

Press run for the 16-page January *WritersTalk* was 238, with 223 mailed for a total cost of \$257.66. Preorders for the anthology have topped 71.

A website service agreement for the calendar year 2009 has been completed.

A Young Writers Conference, approved in the previous meeting, moves along with two venues in mind—a community center on the west side of San Jose the likely choice. Volunteer presenters are requested from the membership; contact Marilyn Fahey or Jamie Miller.

No new business items were presented and the meeting adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Any member wishing a copy of minutes (from any meeting) may contact Dave LaRoche. WT

San Francisco Writers Conference Announces an Expanded Poetry Track for 2009

The 6th San Francisco Writers Conference, to be held at the Mark Hopkins Hotel this February 13–15, 2009, has announced an expanded poetry track befitting a writers conference in a city known for extraordinary poets and poetry.

The poetry track will include sessions on craft and becoming a successful poet. Attendees will meet editors who work with poets and they can participate in readings and open mics.

Full information: sfwriters.org

The Journey of a Thousand Miles: Sympathy for the Devil

by Lita Kurth

For Christmas I received (by request—the best way to get books I like!) Greg Sarris's wonderful book *Grand Avenue*, a novel about modern-day Native Americans living in Santa Rosa. It's one of those books that never sanctifies its protagonists—who do harmful and stupid things at times—yet always harbors sympathy and treats their experiences as significant. I found myself rooting for the bumbler, the loser, the character caving in to weakness, and asking myself, "How did the writer keep me allied with this character?" To be both truthful and compassionate is one of the great difficulties of dramatic writing.



Lita Kurth
Contributing Editor

Some writers (and film makers) settle for a work that is ninety percent compassion and ten percent truth; the good guys are heroic beyond parallel. If they have a flaw, it's some cute little thing that's also construable as a virtue, like wearing old ripped clothes. The result is a too-sweet candy that we eat anyway if the good guys are our flavor. It allows us to join forces with the saints without sacrificing more than fifty cents (for a used book) or seven bucks (for a matinee). But those books and movies tend to be labeled "politically correct" (if liberal) or "rightwing propaganda" (if conservative). Worse, they may be plain hokey and forgettable. Bob Mondello, an NPR reviewer, complained that several recent Nazi-related films suffered from "protagonists who aren't very interesting . . ." (www.npr.org)

But I understand writers who don't want to be mistaken for fascist sympathizers or racists and who worry that if they tell the whole truth, readers will balk at the imaginative leap into an unfamiliar race, class, or culture, and instead stand outside, judging and condemning. Then the vista that writers had hoped to unveil becomes a peep show instead.

Other writers don't worry about that. They take a much more hardboiled though equally unsatisfying (to me,

anyway) approach. Rather than "warts and all," they give us warts alone. At the end of such a book, not infrequently a memoir, I find myself distanced from the characters, shaking my head and saying, "Wow, are these people f—ed up. I'm glad I don't know them." Though fascinating in a gory way, some of Dorothy Allison's stories and *Running with Scissors*, for example, left me with such an impression.* It's a cliché of writing, of course, that characters should have flaws, even tragic flaws, but what makes us see a flaw as tragic rather than pathological?

Let's consider some books that avoid both hazards. *Grand Avenue* is one. Yes, we witness dysfunction, but the camera shows us more than one photo. A woman who paints crosses on her walls with pink fingernail polish "to keep poison away," and says, "I must kill Frances. . . . She's full of poison" also provides a refuge for her niece, making her three healthy meals a day, and struggling to keep her demons at bay. Though "The Magic Pony" is not a long chapter, it shows us the long view, a history of mistakes, self-knowledge, expiation, suffering, and attempts to cope that make the character Faye and her difficulties poignant rather than disgusting, her life complex and sad rather than revolting.

Is there a way writers can encourage readers to have this response? I wonder if part of the method for creating this effect is the simplicity and concreteness of the language Sarris employs. He describes Grandma Zelda's apartment plainly, what happens there, what the young narrator thinks, yet doesn't opine or lead the reader on a leash. This is how things are, he seems to say. Maybe that approach promotes acceptance in the reader too.

Another writer who is brilliant at describing the mystery and wonder of characters who are often violent, unfair, and plain crazy is Gorky. His description of his grandmother pulls no punches and yet draws us closer: "She was a fat, round woman with a large head, enormous eyes, and a funny, puffy nose. All black and soft, she was terribly fascinating." Again, great

simplicity. He also puts a lot of dialogue on the page without guiding or commenting:

A few days after mother's funeral, Grandfather said, "Alexei, you're not a medal. You're only hanging round my neck. You must go out into the world."

And so I went out into the world.

That is how volume one of *My Childhood* ends—utterly without self-pity and equally without literary revenge. The grandfather is not as sympathetic as the grandmother, but, despite some monstrous actions, he is not a monster.

Can sympathy for characters be concocted and rendered on the page if one doesn't feel it? I don't think so. Maybe part of the writer's journey involves traveling to the limits of our compassion. The reward is an unforgettable character. WT

* Other readers may find the same characters sympathetic, of course.

scent of eucalyptus
trail dust and warm cedar oils
jogger scuffles by

—Jamie Miller

Garibaldi

Swimming oranges,
oceanic tangerines
ripening amidst
the gently undulating
kelp forests,
as though
a species of fish
were an elevated form of
fluidic realm
forbidden fruit.

To Avalon,
enchanted capital and only city
of the Channel Islands.

—Stephen C. Wetlesen

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Directory of Experts

Do you have specialized knowledge that might help a writer bring authentic detail to a scene? If you are willing to share your expertise, send a message to networking@southbaywriters.com or to the club post office box. We will add your listing to our directory of experts.

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How I make myself happy

Observing the beauty of the world
And knowing that one day
surely

I will die

I see three choices:

Heaven or hell

Nothing

Something else

I pick number three.

—*Reed Stevens*

Valentine's, continued from page 1

Recently she has created an alter ego for her more sensual writing, which is published at Ellora's Cave, the premier erotic romance publisher.

In addition to writing, Janet works as a software engineer for a major company in California.

Don't miss this Valentine's Day Special on Tuesday, February 10, at 6:00 p.m. at the Lookout Inn. WT

CWC

Around the Bay

These are the published meeting times and locations for the CWC branches in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. If you're thinking about attending one of their meetings, be sure to check the website first for details.

Berkeley: Meetings are held from 10 a.m. to noon on the third Saturday of each month, except for July and August. Unless otherwise noted, our meetings are held at Barnes & Noble bookstore, in Jack London Square, Event Loft, Oakland.

berkeleywritersclub.org

San Francisco/Peninsula: Meets on the third Saturday of each month from 10 a.m. to noon at the Belmont Library, 1110 Alameda De Las Pulgas, Belmont. sfpeninsulawriters.com

Central Coast: Meets on the third Tuesday of each month except December at the Casa Munras Hotel, 700 Munras Avenue, Monterey. The dinner hour begins at 5:30 p.m. and the program begins at 7 p.m. centralcoastwriters.org

Mount Diablo: Meets the second Saturday of each month, except July and August, at 11:30 a.m. at the Hungry Hunter Restaurant, 3201 Mount Diablo Boulevard, Lafayette (corner of Pleasant Hill Road and Highway 24). mtdiablowriters.org

Tri-Valley: Meets the third Saturday of each month, except July and August, at 11:30 a.m. at the Oasis Grille, 780 Main Street, Pleasanton. trivalleywriters.com

Sacramento: Meets at 11:00 a.m. the third Saturday of every month, except July and August, at Luau Garden Chinese Buffet, 1890 Arden Way, Sacramento 95815. sacramento-writers.org

Marin: Meets on the fourth Sunday of every month at 2 p.m. at Book Passage in Corte Madera. cwcmarinwriters.com

Redwood: Meetings are held on the first Sunday of the month (except for holiday weekends), from 3-5 p.m. at the Star Restaurant, 8501 Gravenstein Hwy, corner of Old Redwood Hwy and Hwy 116, in Cotati. redwoodwriters.org

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6 7:30p Open Mic Barnes & Noble Almaden Plaza, San Jose	7
8	9	10 6p Monthly Dinner Meeting Lookout Inn, Sunnyvale Esther Erman and Janet Miller	11	12	13 7:30p Open Mic Borders Books Santana Row, San Jose	14 10:30A Editors' Powwow
15 <i>WritersTalk</i> deadline	16	17	18	19 7p Open Mic Barnes & Noble 3900 Mowry, Fremont	20 7:30p Open Mic Barnes & Noble Pruneyard, Campbell	21
22	23	24	25	26	27 7:30p Open Mic Borders Books Sunnyvale	28
<i>February 2009</i>						
		Tuesday, Mar. 10 Ellen Sussman				Future Flashes

Stay Informed!

Sign up for the SBW Email List to receive meeting and event announcements.

www.southbaywriters.com

South Bay Writers Open Mic

Read from your own work, from your favorite authors, or just come to listen. See calendar for schedule.

Contact Bill Baldwin
(408) 730-9622 or email
wabaldwin@aol.com

For Fremont Open Mic contact
Jeannine Vegh
ladyjatbay@sbcglobal.net

or

Bob Garfinkle
ragarf@earthlink.net

SBW Poets

The San Jose Poetry Center is turning its eyes toward SBW with an interest in showcasing our poets at its monthly readings. PCSJ's host and member of South Bay Writers Linda Lappin is making a personal request. Are you a poet? Would you like to read your work? If your answer is yes, contact Linda by email at captainlappin@netzero.net and have a look at PCSJ's website, www.pcsj.org

SBW Writers' Forum

Events
Conferences
Contests
Networking
Resources
SBW Author Events
and News at

southbaywriters.com

San Jose Poetry Slam (Est. 1998)

8:00 p.m., \$6.00

First Tuesday: Open Mic with music by Rebelskamp

Second and Fourth Tuesdays: Poetry Slam with music by Jay Rush

Third Tuesday: Head-to-Head Poetry Bouts with special guests.

At The Britannia Arms
173 W Santa Clara
Downtown San Jose
www.sanjosepoetryslam.com

Poetry Center San Jose Readings

First Gallery downtown
Willow Glen Books

Cosponsored by the
Creative Writing Department at
San José State University

Free admission.

See www.pcsj.org for featured guests and details.



California Writers Club
South Bay Branch
P.O. Box 3254
Santa Clara, CA 95055
www.southbaywriters.com

MAIL TO

Address Correction Requested

Next Monthly Meeting
Tuesday, February 10, 6:00 p.m.

Lookout Inn
605 Macara Avenue, Sunnyvale
At the Sunnyvale Golf Course

A Valentine's Special
Romance Writers
Esther Erman and Janet Miller
See front cover for details.

February Release!

Who Are Our Friends?
South Bay Writers Anthology

Order copies online at
southbaywriters.com
or purchase at meetings
beginning in March.

