



WRITERSTALK

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Monthly Newsletter of the South Bay Writers Club

January Speaker Genres Across the Universe?

by Bill Baldwin

Have we become too narrow in the way we look at writing? Perhaps. The way we look at fiction? Perhaps. The way we think of culture? Perhaps.

We usually categorize writing into fiction, nonfiction, memoir, comedy, tragedy, adventure, journalism, romance, mystery, suspense, “high” culture, “popular” culture . . .

But the boundaries are fluid and can be moved and bent and twisted. Consider cartoons and comic books. They can cross boundaries and mix genres—and be fun!



Gerard Jones

Our January speaker, Gerard Jones, is an expert on this topic: author of books such as *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (2004), which won the Eisner Award; *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Superheroes and Make-Believe Violence* (2002); and *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (1993).

This is a writer who thinks outside the box—who sees material in novel ways and finds new techniques to hold the reader's interest. We can all learn from his innovative approach to storytelling.

Jones has written for Marvel Comics and DC Comics, as well as for *Wonder Man*, *The Shadow*, *Pokémon*, and *Batman*.

With Will Jacobs, he co-authored *The Beaver Papers: The Story of the Lost Season* (1983). If you were a member of South Bay Writers during our Steinbeck Centennial (2002) you probably heard a few readings of “The Beaver of Wrath” from that book. And you may later have heard such gems as “The Brothers Cleaver” and “The Beaver Always Rings Twice.” Truly funny stuff. Jones and Jacobs co-authored several other books and contributed to *National Lampoon*.

Jones was born in Montana but grew up in Los Gatos and Gilroy. He currently lives in San Francisco and is a member of the San Francisco Writers' Grotto.

His current project (and forthcoming book) is tentatively entitled *The Undressing of America: How a Bodybuilder, a Swimming Queen and a Magician Created Reality Media*. It is scheduled for release in 2010. In addition, *Men of Tomorrow* is slated to be released as a film.

You won't want to miss Gerard Jones at our January 12 meeting!

This is the novel issue: excerpts start on page 10.

Writecraft: New Beginnings

by Lisa Eckstein

Often, the best way to improve a piece of writing is to remove the beginning.

The first draft of this column opened with a long, forced metaphor about how the calendar year resembles a work of fiction. It wasn't informative, and it wasn't interesting. I used up a lot of effort and space attempting to make the rather unnecessary point that January is as good a time as any to talk about beginnings.

Deleting that initial opening illustrates a more useful point: A finished work rarely starts with the first words written. While some authors insist on choosing the perfect opening line before beginning to write, this sounds like an excuse for procrastination, and I already have more than enough reasons to put off writing. Begin a first draft with anything that gets you going, even if it's as silly as “Okay, I'm writing this story now.” Revision is the time to figure out where the piece should really begin.

The reason most early openings deserve to be deleted or at least severely edited is that when you write anything new, it takes a while to figure out what you're trying to say and how to say it. Maybe you stumble around for a while as you get to know your characters or narrow down your topic. You might realize that the memory you're recording should be introduced by an incident that happened a year earlier, or conversely, that you're providing too much backstory.



Lisa Eckstein
Contributing Editor

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President's Prowling

by Dave LaRoche
President, South Bay Writers

My Only Resolution

This year I resolve only to be me. I resolve at every juncture to do the appropriate thing, whether it's required, desired or serendipitous. Yes! I resolve to be me.

Like most, I've been doing resolutions at the end of every year as far back as my memory reaches. This time, however, it occurred to me that today's resolutions are the very same as last year's resolve, which is very similar to those made years before. They must be good; they're certainly lasting.

There has come a point at which I recognize that I'm doing what I can and am satisfied. There isn't much, or anything, I want to change. Oh, I might adopt a resolution: "pick up dry cleaning on Tuesday"—I often forget that—but as to changing the way I live . . . I'm pretty happy with the way things have evolved.

But it is that time and, for the sake of congeniality, I'll take another look at my list. Let's see: *Exercise*: we won't go into that, far too defeating. *Diet*: the balanced kind, not the one that eliminates. *Community*: I like to give a little here and do a little there when I can. *Finances*: keep this one in balance; neither too much debt nor too few assets; apparently I like the numbers small. *Love*: I like to spread a bit around. Love seems endless but should I run a little low, it seems there's more around the house. *House*: now, what that means is fix it up. Paint here, repair there—put a toilet back in service. Those "house items" never seem to go away, even though I think on them frequently. Oh, and here's the final one, *Writing*: should be on the top, though it doesn't need a resolution. I love to write—I find it fun as well as challenging. Writing keeps my neurons popping, and occasionally it brings a laugh or prompts some thinking. Well, there you are; they're all familiar. If I made another set this year, they'd be identical.

However, I have no qualms with others making them: I resolve to be a better person, father, husband . . . golfer, and watch my driving when speeding from the house, early morning. I resolve to quit shoplifting, to make love with my wife and maybe not the sexy neighbor. I resolve to lose weight, to gain weight, and to curb my interest in downtown frivolity. And I resolve to make my resolutions before the middle of the year—or none at all this time.

Back when I was younger I was diligent and made my resolutions every year—often pages when broke or sadly hung over—but now that I've grown up, I need only to resolve to be me.

Happy New Year, everyone. Thanks for reading, and may all your resolutions become a part of you. WT



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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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Announcements and Advertisements

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Editor's Perspective

by Dick Amyx
Editor

I resolve to split an infinitive never



It's that time again when we're supposed to resolve to be better than we were last year. I don't think I was all that bad last year, and besides, I'm sure you're not interested in a recitation of my flaky promises to myself. Actually, *I'm* not all that interested in my flaky promises to myself, and, in truth, I have to admit that I'm far more resigned to my foibles than resolved to try to change them.

But in the spirit of the season and in keeping with the nature of our club, I could resolve continuously to improve my writing. And to split an infinitive never.

Funny thing about English infinitives, though.

What we might consider modern English is only a little older than the United States; it didn't begin to settle down until after publication of the King James Bible (KJV) in 1611. Being the agglomeration of Anglo-Saxon, French, and German that English is, it was pretty wild and woolly until it got tamed in part as a side effect of publication of the KJV and in part by the direct action of Samuel Johnson.

When the KJV was first published, even the alphabet wasn't a constant thing. In its text, u's and v's are used interchangeably, and the long s (the character that looks kind of like a minuscule f) was used for non-final s's (my favorite example of which is "finfulnefs"). According to Wikipedia, printers played a part in alphabetic variations, too, using "ye" (the y being the Roman version of the Middle English *thorn*) in place of "the" and ã for "an" or "am" when they needed to save space.

Inasmuch as there were no real English dictionaries in 1611, it was pretty much every scribe for himself as far as orthography was concerned. The first three verses of I Corinthians 13 in the 1611 King James looked like this (thank you again, Wikipedia):

1. Though I speake with the tongues of men & of Angels, and haue not charity, I am become as sounding brasse or a tinkling cymbal. 2 And though I haue the gift of prophesie, and vnderstand all mysteries and all knowledge: and though I haue all faith, so that I could remooue mountaines, and haue no charitie, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestowe all my goods to feede the poore, and though I giue my body to bee burned, and haue not charitie, it profiteth me nothing.

I find it particularly interesting that "charity" is spelled two different ways in two verses.

Even though King James authorized his version of the Bible and intended it to be the standard in England, it still had to duke it out with the Bishop's Bible for market share, and a number of revisions were made along the way.

Meanwhile, Samuel Johnson had set about compiling his *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which saw publication in 1755. Although it was not the first English dictionary, it is considered to be the first trustworthy, reliable English dictionary.

The 1769 edition of the KJV brought together an end to theological squabbling associated with it (only six changes have been made since the 1769 edition), the existence of stable English spelling, and general acceptance of that version of the Bible throughout the Protestant world. What that meant was that virtually everybody was reading the same book; when they wrote, they emulated what they had read, and the KJV vocabulary and style became the de facto standard for English.

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Are you a blogger? Take the test.

by *Bill Belew*

I am sold on the idea that a blog is a great way to build a platform for writers—novelists, poets, screenplay writers, and otherwise. But it is not the only way. (Did I really say that?)



Bill Belew
Contributing Editor

There are wikis, forums, static pages, social media networking, and so on.

But I want to ask: Are you a blogger? Do you have what it takes? Is blogging for you?

Here's a list of 20 questions (shamelessly somewhat pilfered from a blogger who knows a whole lot more than me!) that speak to the qualities of a successful blogger. Once again, my measure of success is whether the income from the blogs pays my mortgage. For you, success might be determined by whether folks show up, read your stuff, and buy your book.

The Test

1. Do you enjoy writing? If you don't enjoy writing, don't blog.
2. Do you have a message? I tell my online students that the reason most people can't write (can't speak, too) is because they don't have anything to say. Do you have something burning inside your bones?
3. Do you want to be the center of attention about your topic? A blog is a good way for people to come find out what you have to say—you, and not somebody else. Are you okay with that? Or do you prefer to be another voice in a crowd? If so, a forum might be better for you.
4. Are you a self starter? It is easy to start a blog. It takes character to keep it going. Nobody is likely to ever tell you, "Okay, better go post something now."
5. Do you have self-discipline? Not only do you need to tell yourself to write, you also need to tell yourself to be consistent, to stay on topic and stay with it for the long haul till your voice catches on. Can you keep yourself motivated?

6. Do you have the time to devote? You get what you pay for in blogging. You put in the time, you get the return for it. Quality breeds success.
7. Are you thick-skinned? Most people say they want feedback. What they are really saying is that they want people to blow smoke up their backside, to tell them they are doing a good job. All feedback is good, but not all feedback is positive.
8. Do you mind being in the public spotlight? Once you hit Publish, it's out there in cyberspace, and people can read it, quote you, blast you, praise you. There is a delete/remove button in blogging, but takebacks are as hard in the virtual world as they are in the real world.
9. Do you know your way around the back of the store, um, blog software? It is not necessary, but if you do, things can go smoother . . . or not. Some people think that if they are tweaking the look of their site, they are doing something. They are, but they are not writing, putting up content, getting read, blogging.
10. Do you have a sense of humor? Life is short, take it easy. Life is short, go gung-ho while the going's good. Be ready to laugh at yourself.
11. Can you balance your ego with a dose of humility? There's a reason why Jesus said, "The meek will inherit the earth." And in another place, Solomon says, "Pride goes before a fall." Can you find the right balance?
12. Do you like to learn? Is blogging about telling readers what you know or what you have learned? Can you still be taught?
13. Do you enjoy reading? To be a good writer, reading is fundamental. Reading a lot doesn't make one a good writer. Writing a lot does that. Don't think because you are surfing the web and reading a lot of stuff about your topic that you are blogging. Blogging is putting fingers to keyboard and hitting Publish at regular intervals. Everything else is everything else.
14. Are you an organized person? I am not, but dang! I wish I were. Emails, comments, reading, writing, networking, handling multiple topics, feeds . . . What was the point I was trying to make? I forget now.
15. Are you a social person? Again, I am not, but I wish I were. Then again, I have folks I work with in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Romania, Israel, Taiwan, Japan, China . . . Okay, well, maybe I am social, at least in the virtual world. If you need to press flesh, there is room for that. Think blog expos and workshops about blogging . . . plug, plug. But being comfortable and enjoying virtual relationships is a plus.
16. Are you a creative person? A blogger doesn't have to be creative, but it helps. If you ask me, everything has to do with everything. I can even tie Michael Jackson to my Christian Worldview site if need be. Being able to relate your topic to what is going on in the world makes for a good—make that very good—way to get readers to come visit your site.
17. Do you have perseverance? It takes time for a blog to catch on. The number one reason why businesses fail is because the business does not stay viable long enough for the idea to catch on. Imagine why blogs fail. The writer doesn't stick to it long enough. I can tell you how long (time) and how much (quantity of posts) and what kind of quality (content) you must write, from my experience, to get folk to your site. Think workshop . . . plug, plug, plug.
18. Are you you? Are you honest, transparent? If you are not being you, who will be you? A blog is your place. Be you and be the best you there is.
19. Are you willing to work hard? Blogging is not hard, it's not easy. It's kind of like learning a language. Wait, that's hard, you say. Well, little kids can learn a language, right? Being a good blogger requires doing relatively easy things over and over again. It's the "over and over" that's hard. It's dealing with the -sistent family (persistent, consistent, insistent) that's hard.
20. Do you know when to stop? This is hard for me. I am stupidly stubborn, don't know when to quit. That's good and bad. Blogging often offers

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Accolades

by Jackie Mutz

We bring in the New Year with promises to eat better, exercise, and swear off eating chocolate in the closet. Often these New Year's resolutions are simply unattainable; we set the bar so high, it is impossible to



Jackie Mutz
Contributing Editor

clear the hurdle. Instead, we find ourselves conveniently forgetting about those "stupid resolutions" and going back to old habits (where's that chocolate?). A few South Bay writers had these successful tidbits to share:

- Bill Belew's blog network total reached 1.4 million page views for November and surpassed 16 million page views overall. His fifth unrelated topic surpassed 1 million views total last month as well. Check out the SBW website on Bill's blogging workshop this month where he gives step-by-step directions on how to add blogging to your writing resume.
- Carolyn Donnell and Steve Wetlesen read their poems at Stone Griffin Gallery's Thursday Gig Art and the Spoken Word event on November 19. Come read your own work on the third Thursday of every month at Stone Griffin Gallery, located at 411 E. Campbell Ave., Campbell.
- Cathy Grant gets two accolades this month: for a flash fiction story titled, "A Christmas Package" published at everydayfiction.com (Dec. 25) and for a short story, "A Good Man," accepted for publication in Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine*. She also had this to say about her NaNoWriMo experience: *I participated in NaNoWriMo, completing 50,182 words by November 30. It was a great experience because it reminded me that when I write a first draft quickly, there's less time for self-censoring and interesting scenes and characters pop up to surprise me, which makes writing entertaining.*
- Audry Lynch's weekend trip to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, in the Mojave Desert, resulted in an article called "Educator Experi-

English for Fun

by Andrea Galvacs

Some people write books, others read them; I read book reviews. This way, if I am invited to a dinner party by the faculty of Stanford University's English or Pop Lit department, I can chime in with a title or two, seeming to be very intelligent and *au courant*.

Now I can mention to anyone who cares about and for the English language, especially professors of creative or any other type of writing, a book that deals with it. A recent *New York Times* book review ran an essay by Jim Holt on *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, by H.W. Fowler, still considered the "bible" of the language by some.

Henry Watson Fowler (1858-1933) went to college and tried to make a living first as a schoolmaster, then as a freelance writer, but he didn't succeed. In 1903, he and his brother Francis wrote a book on how best to use the language called *The King's English*. *Modern English Usage*, published in 1926, was received extremely well and has been revised twice, in 1965 and 1996. The original edition was re-released this year.

According to Holt, the book is not what we call a "dictionary." It does have definitions, but for the most part, it is a collection of essays and a guide for spelling and pronunciation as well as



Andrea Galvacs
Contributing Editor

ences Life in the War Zone." Her article, published in the *Recruiter Journal*, a magazine distributed to Army bases all over the world, is the largest representation of readership of her work to date. And on Monday, December 7, she delivered her Steinbeck PowerPoint presentation to the residents of Channing House in Palo Alto followed by a Christmas luncheon.

- Jackie Mutz (yours truly) just finished teaching a four week Creative Writing workshop at the Santa Clara Senior Center. Had a great bunch of senior writers who have many more stories to share. The next session starts in February, so check out

"masterly elucidations on fine distinctions in meaning, such as that between 'cheerful' and cheery.'" However, Fowler must have been very easygoing, because he allowed for popular rather than grammatically correct usage, conceding and deferring to popular usage as being correct.

I haven't even seen *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, let alone perused it, so my humble opinion is based strictly on Holt's essay. I might read it or consult the entries, but mostly for fun and entertainment. For serious English, I will keep my *Elements of Style*, which is much smaller and easier to handle, and my *Chicago Manual of Style*.

Stanford professors probably don't need either of these two books, so the latter is advice I wouldn't share with them. Not to mention that I'm sure they already know about them and that most likely I will impress them more with my knowledge of this author who has been obscure and neglected by the general population during the last thirteen years. WT

go with the flow,
go against the flow,
open I's matter,
ply the backwaters
mind the moon tide,
tell what you know
what you see in the flow
transpire into rain
and do it all again

—c. seney

www.scae.org if you are interested in attending. All are welcome!

They say "old habits die hard." To make the resolution to write every day **is** hard (makes that chocolate in the closet look very good). Yet the New Year is symbolic as a time of renewal, a time to make change. So, how about making this an exercise in writing more, whether it is every day, night, or three times a week? Set a goal and make it one you can attain. Keep at it, keep going and let us know how you are doing. Then have that chocolate out in the open as a reward for meeting your writing goal. You deserve it! WT

No Head-On Collisions

by *Meredy Amyx*

My favorite ride at the amusement park when I was a kid was the bumper cars. It wasn't just the thrill of controlling a powered moving vehicle and pretending to drive. It was also the institutionalized recklessness of it—the more slams and bangs and smashes the better. All you had to do was observe one single rule: no head-on collisions.

That's the experience I thought of on my fourth or fifth day of NaNoWriMo, National Novel Writing Month, as I was getting the hang of it last November. As a first-timer, I went into it understanding the concept—write like the blazes for thirty days, turn off your inner editor, don't look back, do whatever it takes to keep making words, and reach or exceed 50,000 words by the end of the month—but having no idea what I was actually going to do. The one rule was simple: keep writing.

I began with a title that came out of nowhere and an opening scene that came from the same nowhere. That's all I had. On November 1st, I sat down and tucked into it.

At 10:30 P.M. on Saturday, November 28th, two days ahead of schedule, I typed "THE END" and screamed "I did it!" I uploaded the whole thing to the website (nanowrimo.org) for word count validation and logged my official count of 52,115 words, making me a certified winner.

In between, I learned a few valuable things:

- Writing recklessly and irresponsibly is fun. I have spent so very much intense, earnest time writing intense, earnest fiction, and there is both pleasure and pain in that. During NaNo month there was pleasure ("Wow! Did I do that?") and pain ("How the heck am I going to keep this up?") too, but it was different—just as different as crashing the bumper cars is from inching home on the freeway at rush hour.
- I can compromise on some things I thought I couldn't. For instance, I thought I ought to have some idea of where I was going and what was

going to happen next. That turned out not to be necessary. I solved it in time, creating shapes out of already established random plot elements in much the same way that one might fling stars into the sky and then invent constellations to fit them. About halfway through, I had an idea of how it was going to end, and by three-quarters of the way through I even figured out who my main character was.

- I found out what I couldn't compromise on. For one thing, I require complete, grammatical sentences. For another, I learned that even writing at speed I can't surrender my sense of realistic detail. I consider authenticity as essential as grammar. I spent a significant portion of my active writing time researching questions so I could go on: what kind of yacht a rich guy would have, how much blood you can safely draw from a ten-year-old kid, what kind of rock is common in New Hampshire, how to obtain exotic animal hides, what kind of assault rifle mercenaries would use, how much a bowl of noodles would have cost in Phnom Penh in 1970. Following the leads of curiosity is part of the entertainment and also leads to more plot ideas.
- There are reservoirs in me that I knew nothing about. I surprised myself again and again with what came forth once I had created a verbal space and had to fill it with something. Things I didn't know I thought, didn't know I felt, didn't know I could imagine or simulate: if I'd been sticking to a plan or a prepared outline (or to writing just what I "know"), I wouldn't have uncovered these hidden resources.

Amidst a quantity of preposterous rubbish, I delivered myself of a few little gems in the rough that might even be worth something, polished up and possibly remounted in another setting. These finds are not like the two or three edible dishes that save you from starving at a disappointing office potluck. Rather, they are like finding a hundred dollar bill in an old purse you were about to throw away: it's rightfully yours, but it still feels like an unexpected windfall because you had no idea it was there.

Accepting the challenge of this sus-

tained writing exercise and thrashing away at it for five to eight hours each day for four straight weeks added up to more excitement than I could have imagined. I just kept rolling, banging, and crashing from here to there, bumping into obstacles and spinning around, screaming a little and laughing a lot, and dodging what came flying at me. In the end I have to say: what a trip! I obeyed the one rule. I didn't actually collide head-on and get thrown off the track. As a reward I'll get to ride again.
WT

Are You Ready for Success?

by *Bill Belew*

How about this for an axiom: If you don't want somebody to do something, don't ask them to do it.

The SBW board asked me to see what I could do to get more folks in the door.

Step 1. I created a meetup page at meetup.com/South-Bay-Writers/

So far (as of this writing), some 33 people have signed up. Running down through the list, I recognize barely a handful of people who have already come to one of our meetings. That means nearly 30 are new, never been around, don't know us from Adam, and just may show up at our next meeting.

That's a good thing, right?

Step 2. Visit the Meetup page and join. Then leave a comment about the nature of the club, what you think and such. The more SBW members who sign up (it's free) and leave a positive comment, the more likely even more people will find the group and come visit.

That's another good thing, right?

I guess the question is . . . are we ready for success? What if we had a party and the house was full?

Help me out here, okay? WT

Jan-Too-Jangly

Jangly nerves, too much celebration, Or is it just excessive libations? New Year "new ears" for loud-sounds pricking; Will somebody quiet that KEYBOARD'S CLICKING?!

—Pat Bustamante

Valley Writers Critique Group

by Carolyn Donnell

The Valley Writers Critique Group started at Marge Johnson's house last summer after California budget woes slashed Santa Clara Adult Ed classes. One member, whose mother lives at the Valley Village Retirement Community on Winchester Boulevard in Santa Clara, negotiated to keep the room that had been used for the adult ed class there available for a weekly meeting as long as residents were allowed to participate. We moved back to Valley Village and continue to meet on Mondays from 2 to 4 p.m. to read and critique each other's work. Our assembly is a combination of members of South Bay Writers, residents of the Valley Village retirement complex, and a few who had met in earlier workshops taught by Edie Matthews.

This is a face-to-face group that meets once a week. Attendees who wish a critique may bring up to eight pages, double-spaced, in enough copies for other members to read. Shorter pieces are usually read first. Group members

critique in turn. Well, sometimes we do talk all at once, but our leader gets us back under control. No emailing ahead of time is done in this group. We strive for a supportive environment and honest feedback, without destructive negativism. We try to encourage each other to continue to write, to improve, and eventually, we all hope, to get published.



Valley Writers Critique Group

Requests for critique of first drafts are more common than more polished documents, although this can vary. The group is not genre-specific. One member, for instance, writes mostly nonfiction and has done many rewrites. Another already has one novel on the market and is working on her second. Others are memoirists, and a few are poets as well. Writing ranges from the aforementioned nonfiction to main-

stream fiction, a thriller, and poetry. A couple of members come mostly to read the work of others and only occasionally bring material of their own. An eclectic bunch, but it seems to work for us. We have had a few members come and go. Newcomers sometimes get nervous because they think that we are more experienced than they are. We try to tell them we were all new once (some of us still are). We didn't scare them all off, though. Emma and Mel are good examples of that. We sometimes even glean new South Bay members from the group. Here's to a good critique group.

The Valley Writers Critique Group includes SBW members Dick Amyx, Sarah Aurich, Carolyn Donnell, Emma Hooker, Mel Moore, Marjorie Johnson, and Bruce Slama.

South Bay Writers has help available for those interested in finding or starting a critique group. You can email Cathy Bauer at networking@southbaywriters.com. Also, the book exchange table at the monthly meetings has a suggestion area where you can request information on critique groups. WT

There's More Than Corn in Iowa

by Richard Burns

"We can be cold as our falling thermometers in December if you ask about our weather in July . . ." Writer, lyricist, and composer Meredith Wilson wrote these catchy words about people in Iowa in his great, high-spirited musical *The Music Man*. Perhaps there's more than a grain of truth in these song lyrics, but it can be like skating on thin ice to simply lump all the people in Iowa as people who care only about snowy football games and the best way of producing corn.

For example, take Professor Brooks Landon, Professor of English and Collegiate Fellow at the University of Iowa. He has created a great series of 24 lessons on exploring the writer's craft, lessons you can watch simply by making a resolution to come to watch

his DVD series with us. It's a part of *The Great Courses* series of DVDs that South Bay Writers has invested in for you, produced by The Teaching Company (teach12.com). Professor Landon's wide-ranging discussion presents many examples of how the great writers have succeeded in expressing to their readers that little extra something.

Come join us on the second and fourth Thursday evenings at 7:30 p.m. in a spacious, comfortable room at The Westmont, 1675 Scott Blvd, Santa Clara, near Scott and El Camino Real, and be intrigued. The next class, Lesson 5, is January 14. It's free. What could be easier? You might learn something toward publishing your great novel or best-selling nonfiction book. Anyway, I'm not going to pass up a free course given by the Director of the University of Iowa Literature Program. Maybe that's just the Californian in me! But as Meredith Wilson wrote at the end of that up-beat song, "You really ought to give Iowa . . . a try." WT

"So You Want to Write a Book"

Workshop Sponsored by the Sacramento Branch of CWC

February 6, 2010
8:30 a.m.-4:00 p.m.
Radisson Hotel
500 Leisure Lane, Sacramento 95815

Internationally known writing teacher Nora Profit, owner of The Writing Loft, a school for writers, and the author of more than 50 books, says "anyone can learn to write and write well." The California Writers Club Sacramento Branch will host Ms. Profit on Saturday, February 6, 2010, for a day-long "idea to agent" workshop to put aspiring writers on a winning track.

The "So You Want to Write a Book" workshop is available to a limited number of attendees on a first-come, first-served basis, so early enrollment is encouraged.

Details and registration:
sacramento-writers.org/

January Workshop

Saturday, January 23, 8:30 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
Lookout Inn, 605 Macara Ave., Sunnyvale (at the Sunnyvale Golf Course)

Bill Belew Blogging as a Platform for Publishing and Promoting Your Writing

A content-rich workshop that explores blogging as a platform for publishing and promoting your work.

This workshop will explain in practical ways—by the numbers and with real-world examples—how to create and maintain a successful blog.

Learn the four key elements to a successful blog, where success is defined as

1. Being able to answer these questions with confidence: “Who would be interested in your book?” or “What’s the market for your book?”
2. Having several thousand (tens of thousands) come to your site daily.
3. Having several thousand people subscribe to read anything you write.
4. Knowing the average age, sex ratio, salary, and continent where your readers live.

According to a recent Stanford workshop on publishing, “Over the past few years, a sea change has occurred within the publishing community. **Power has shifted from publishers to authors.** Today’s top authors also know not only how to write but also how to establish and maintain their voice in the marketplace of ideas.”

Participants who put into practice the lessons learned in this workshop can realistically expect to have 1000+ visitors (viewers) of their book ads at their websites within one year.



Early Bird Special—Register before January 3, 2010:

CWC members \$35; nonmembers \$45

After January 3 or at the door: CWC members \$45; nonmembers \$60

Students (24 and younger) \$35 with student ID

Registration fee includes continental breakfast and lunch

NOTE: cancellation in full, less \$5, before Jan. 16. Requests to dalaroche@comcast.net. No refunds after the 16th (hardship exceptions may apply).

Register online at southbaywriters.com

or clip and mail this coupon (or a copy of it) to

SBW Blogging

PO Box 3254

Santa Clara, CA 95055

Make check payable to South Bay Writers

Name _____

Street address _____

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Early Bird Special
Before Jan. 3, 2010
CWC Members \$35
Nonmembers \$45

Regular Registration
After Jan. 3 or at the door
CWC Members \$45
Nonmembers \$60

Student Registration
24 or younger, with ID
\$25



The gathering room gathers a crowd of writers. *Photo: Carolyn Donnell*

On December 8, South Bay Writers gathered at the home of Betty Auchard for the annual Holiday Bash. Betty has graciously offered her home for the Bash for at least the past four years—exactly how long she’s been doing it, nobody can remember.

But Betty has decided that she’s ready to be a guest at the holiday parties. Huge thanks to Betty for her hospitality. Her generosity to SBW will not soon be forgotten.



Hostess Betty Auchard listens closely as Emma Hooker reads her poem about the joys of life at age 91.



The kitchen table is always popular. Against the wall: Jill Pipkin, Suzette Gamero, and Edie Matthews. Foreground, Marjorie Johnson. At the right end, Meredy Amyx talks with Lisa Eckstein. *Photo: Carolyn Donnell*



Claire Mullen, Victoria M. Johnson, and Molly Westmoreland chat on a living room sofa. *Photo: Carolyn Donnell*



Bill Baldwin emcees Christmas carols and the gift exchange. *Photo: Carolyn Donnell*



Cathy Bauer can’t wait to see what she drew in the gift exchange.

Jaguar Princess

by Marjorie Johnson

After the archaeology conference in Mérida, Pesh expected to return to life as usual in rural Yucatán. Under the ficus tree whose roots hugged the stones in King B'alam's living room, she rubbed her silver turtle pendant between her forefinger and her thumb and dropped it beneath her T-shirt, Chanlajun Pesh transforming into Maya princess Yaxuun B'alam Pex. She ran toward home, carrying new clothes in the shopping bag with Plaza Las Américas written on the side in red letters.

In front of grandmother's house, red bougainvillea grew as tall as the roof. The door stood open. She rushed up the steps to tell Chiich the heady news from the conference—her scholarship to university, shopping and riding a moving staircase—but the small house was empty. Pex couldn't find her, not in the house, not in the yard.

Yaxuun playing hide and seek with Grandma—in the cornfield, behind the wheelbarrow. Running closer, she yelled, “*Kaxtik!* Kash-teek. Found you!”

Grandma didn't move. “Chiich! Chee-eech!” Pex put her head on Grandma's chest. No heartbeat. Her eyes stared straight up.

“*Kimen.* Kee-mehn,” she screamed in agony. Dead. Her beloved Grandma Chiich was dead. *Kimen!*

Pex rocked back and forth, sobbing and keening, wailing and weeping.

After her tears slowed, Pex found a rug, wrapped her grandmother in it and dragged her to the house, moved Chiich up one step at a time. Her dead body felt heavy. Following ancient custom, Pex wrapped her in a linen shroud and put maize gruel and a precious bead into her mouth, her house now a dead place where no one could live.

Pex moved her own clothing and books outside and put them into the wheelbarrow. She took the cooking utensils: she had fourteen summers, old enough to marry. Looking at the tortilla griddle brought new tears. Who would tell her the old stories?

There was no one else, no one to tell about her grandmother's death. They had lived alone, Chiich afraid that the Spaniards would return to kill Maya royalty, to kill her. Their neighbors on either side had died, leaving empty houses with decayed thatch roofs, three dead houses in a row.

Pex collected dried cornstalks from the field and tied them into bundles. In the house, she fashioned a bed from cornstalks and poured all the cooking oil onto it and moved Grandma to a flat spot atop the pile. Outside, she lit cornstalk bundles one by one: nine torches, three torches pitched onto each roof. When the dry and rotted thatch blazed up, Pex ran into the house with a firebrand and ignited the funeral pyre.

Outside by the cooking fire, Pex sat cross-legged. She smeared her cheeks with ashes and made the sign of the cross on her forehead. She dropped copal incense onto the flames, cut her thumb with the obsidian bloodletting knife, sprinkled royal blood over the fire. She swayed from side to side and hummed the funeral dirge, “H-m-m-m-m-m . . . o-o-o-o-o . . . h-m-m-m-m-m,” prayers to the gods of the underworld.

Pex burned Grandma's house down, burned the neighbor's house down, burned all three houses down. Flames lit up the night sky. She watched until only embers remained, the rabbit-in-the-moon her only company, the bougainvillea a naked skeleton like her life without Chiich.

Pex cleaned herself and her clothing in the bathing-place with cold water that made her skin tingle. Naked, she cooked maize gruel, all she would eat this day of mourning. Tomorrow she would sweep Chiich's ashes into the burial pit.

Pex would carry her dear Chiich in her heart forever. WT

Shedding Cats

by Luanne Oleas

Synopsis: A Silicon Valley tech writer's life is in a rut. She works too much, writes a short story every night, and does the Director of Engineering every Tuesday after his Taiwan phone meeting. She thinks she can change her life by giving away her cats, but the real shakeup comes after a workplace shooting.

Chapter Six—Friday

Fridays were always the weirdest at work. Sheila always thought that if something was going to go wrong, it would be on Friday. Sheila and Leticia, the self-righteous head of HR, were on lunch break from the company-mandated “Cultural Workshop.” They both headed down to the women's bathroom in the elevator together.

“Oh, shit,” Leticia said when the car jolted to a stop between floors.

“Are we stuck?” Sheila asked, looking around the elevator as

if there was some escape hatch she had never noticed before.

“How does this work?” Leticia asked, and pushed the red emergency button right away. It made Sheila think. That's why she was in upper management and Sheila wasn't. Sheila would have waited a few minutes for the elevator to start before pushing that button.

A light started flashing above the words “Help is on the way if this light is flashing.”

“I hope this doesn't take long,” Leticia said. “I gotta pee.”

“Me, too,” Sheila said with a giggle, wishing she had not waited for the noon break to go to the bathroom. “I shouldn't have had that extra cup of coffee.”

“Don't even mention it, girl,” Leticia said, almost sounding like a regular human being, instead of the annoying bitch she had always thought Leticia was. Leticia turned to Sheila and smiled. “I'll tell you. If we are in here much longer, we are going to have to learn to tread water.”

Continued on page 16

The Extent of the Damage

by Lisa Eckstein

March 27, 1963

I woke first in the motel outside Grand Canyon National Park and watched Bonnie and the twins sleep. We would be in California in just a few more hours. Our new life could begin. I felt like I was releasing a breath I'd been holding for two months, since the day of the blizzard.

I stroked Bonnie's hip. She pressed herself closer and turned her face to me without opening her eyes. I kissed her. She was so beautiful. She was everything I needed.

She remembered where we were and looked back at the children in the next bed. She laughed softly. "How do they do that?"

We'd put them to bed in the normal configuration, but they'd turned 90 degrees in their sleep. Ace's arms were spread wide, claiming far more than half the space, and his bare feet were braced against the wall. Kitty lay across the bottom of the bed with one arm extended toward us, her hand hanging off the edge.

"They're amazing, aren't they?" I whispered. I'd told Bonnie that the drive west would be educational, far more than two weeks of kindergarten, but I'd still been surprised by how much the kids absorbed. They would be just fine starting at a new school in the middle of the term. I couldn't have waited

until June to have my family with me in our new home.

I kissed Bonnie again. Everything would be different in California. Everything would be the way it was supposed to be.

"Yuck." Kitty was watching us. "I'm right here, you know." She sat up and shoved Ace. "Wake up and stop punching me."

He was in motion almost instantly, running to look out the window. "Dad, can we go back and look at the canyon one more time before we go?"

Pride surged through me. "I don't think we have time, buddy. Don't you want to hurry up and get to San Jose so we can see our new house?"

Bonnie helped the children dress and took them to order breakfast, leaving me to reload the car. "Enjoy a few minutes of peace and quiet," she told me, but I knew I wouldn't. I preferred not to be alone with my thoughts.

That day back in Pittsburgh, snow had already started falling when I received the envelope with a memo that said only "4:30." I hadn't expected to hear from Francine for at least another week, since we'd met just two nights before, and simply seeing her handwriting made me smile.

As the afternoon continued, the snow came down harder, and some of the men around me started talking about leaving early to avoid getting stuck at work. The real exodus began

Continued on page 15

I Live on the Moon

by Pat Bustamante

Moldavite/Chapter One

[opening sentences]

"I wake up with the green stone in my hand. Wait, I am not awake. How can I be. I have just been told that as a Christian I am eligible to go live on this other planet . . ."

[Edd is the main character, a 50 year old bum waking from his sleep in the mud. The novel is about homeless people.]

[From later descriptions: "Tiger Eye, the stone that softens Stubbornness"]

The three main camping areas are any place along Crow Creek, the CalTrans shrubbery next to freeway overpasses, and some overgrown neglected fields close to the railroad tracks.

Nobody takes a census of these people, so hard to guess: about a hundred, scattered over those areas. The population wanes and grows, depending who is picked up for "vacation in the county jail" or who moves on to better pickings, or who crashes and burns in their attempt to "stay out of the life."

"Why don't we just get the authorities to set up tents on the Mohave Desert . . . these people are breaking the law and it

must be stopped."

"Pursuit of happiness" is a strange phrase, but seems to encompass ways of living that appear weird to other people. In totalitarian regimes concentration camps are accepted: this country's one attempt at it during World War II, with people of Japanese descent, did not go so well.

Likewise the "reservation" system for Native Americans has had its flaws. The hardcore homeless have no specific "tribal affiliations" or distinct racial features. Having no visible means of support is not on the books as being illegal (so far). Lose your job, go to concentration camp? This does not sound like "the American way." It still comes up for discussion, however.

The "hygiene situation" out there is deplorable. The temptation for petty theft is extremely high. Violence and addictions go hand-in-hand. Trespassing on the property of others is unavoidable with this group. They don't pay taxes. Which makes them parasitic. A cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine nailed the situation: see those lillies in that field? They toil not. Fire them!

Historically, human groups have always had people who would not, or could not, contribute to the social network where they live. It would take extreme measures to totally eradicate such behavior.

The only alternative would be to find some value to it. But what? WT

Rivers

by Chuck Peradotto

Chapter 1

The newborn boy lay in the mud as icy water seeped around his tiny rapidly cooling body. He was naked, wedged between the collapsed and rotting logs of the old shack, pushed there by his dying mother's last effort. Next to the shriveled woman he laid, already turning blue, still attached to her corpse by the umbilical cord. His own heart barely beating, the boy did not even have the strength left to cry.

The day before looking for shelter from the raging storm, the mother, heavy with child, disoriented and scared had pulled herself across the dank clearing and squeezed between the moldy timbers. During the long, black, freezing night she had

given birth alone. She screamed unheard into the howling wind while trying to burrow under the logs away from the bitter rain that penetrated every open seam and joint.

Taut skin stretched over the woman's protruding ribs, white bony hands at the end of thin arms gripped a filthy shawl pulling it tighter around her frail shoulders. She gently fingered the polished shell necklace hanging from her throat. Her legs had weakened to the point that one had shattered when she slipped while jumping across rocks over a rushing stream and she had been forced to crawl the last few hundred yards to the dilapidated cabin.

Starvation had drained her to the point where giving birth had sucked the last remaining life out of her.

The feeble dawn brought only a little temporary light and no warmth. The sun burrowed deeply back into the black clouds

Continued on page 16

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

Lady of the House

by Marilyn Smales

When she first saw Tom his face was gray. His startled blue eyes stared ahead. Behind his bed monitors blipped and zinged in three rows. Green plastic tubing supplied oxygen from the tank by the bed. Flat yellowish bags of fluid dripped through intravenous needles into the veins of his hand.

Gone were his fun-loving eyes and easy grin. "Veins hurt. Medication. Too much."

She clasped his free hand to her cheek. "I love you. The kids send their love."

Five days later, a corpsman on one side and Cathy on the other, Tom slept away the endless hours of the home flight to Seattle. On the hour she watched the corpsman tally pressure and pulse and write in a notebook. She worried when he flicked the IV and counted the drops.

"He's doing very well."

She smiled back and tucked the blankets around Tom. She stroked his hand and worried about another heart attack in flight. "What about smaller attacks?"

"Like aftershocks, you mean?"

"Yes." A pattern of smaller attacks was common, the doctor told her.

"I think he's come through all of that now."

At the hospital in Bremerton she urged Tom to get more rest.

"I feel better sitting up in the chair. If I lie down they only wake me up. They find something to stick me with."

A month later he came home. She was nervous on the two-hour drive up island to home and swung into every turnout to check on him.

Tom found the house. Renovating it became her passion. She thought they would be a real family again and live like normal people. He would be home now and that was why he

wanted to buy the house. She did not realize he planned to stay longer than twenty years in the Navy.

"Life makes sense at sea," he said. "One last time. I promise. Then we'll watch the sunsets and grow old here. I'll get us some rocking chairs."

And she laughed. What else could she do? He felt young at sea.

The logging trucks stacked up ahead as she neared the bridge. Wisps of fog layered the narrow pass where the two islands fit like pieces of a jigsaw and the roar of the sea echoed below.

Rain misted the windshield. She slowed to approach the winding road leading down to the house.

"It's good to be home," Tom said.

"You woke up the minute I turned into the driveway." She watched him walk along one side of the yard and stop.

"Time for a nap."

"It's become my occupation."

In the house the heavy paneled door closed behind them. She reached up to kiss him. "I think first to bed. Then mother's best chicken soup made just for you."

"Her best soup?"

She steadied Tom with an arm around his waist and steered him toward the bedroom. She folded aside the satin comforter and smoothed fresh sheets all the while sensing that in some way it was different between them now. She first felt this way in the hospital but brushed it off. Now in this room she realized it was not the same.

"I'll make some tea." She turned to Tom but he was already asleep. She tucked the blankets around him and thought, I suppose I would be different, too, had it been me.

In the kitchen she plugged in the kettle and reached for the box of Earl Grey. The last of the afternoon sun warmed her face and arms. It was late in the year.

For three days she watched Tom sleep. She lay awake at night and listened to his breathing, knowing he was in no pain and that she was beside him should he need her. WT

The Last of James Ponder

by *Meredy Amyx*

While crowds of inebriated Russians ambled through a light snowfall in Red Square, awaiting the burst of pyrotechnics marking the start of the year, a solitary American hunkered over his whiskey in a bar known as Chornoy Borody, "Blackbeard's," in a part of town that was not on any tourist route. Few but locals would find their way past the overflowing garbage cans to the entrance of the bar in the alley between dark, looming tenements. As the fireworks exploded over the fabled onion domes of the city, casting a million sparkling reflections into the Moscow River, the lanky foreigner in the large white hat lurched to his feet and staggered out to the alley to take a piss.

He'd planned to stay sober tonight, New Year's and all, but it just didn't happen.

After three weeks without a break, he had been set free to enjoy his last evening in the city. The tall Texan did not share the boss's appetite for luxurious settings, costly liquor, and diamond-draped women. Give him a bottle of Jack Daniel's and some shit-kickin' music, and he could even do without the women.

The little gals, though. The ones with their taut bodies and their filly limbs and their unformed faces, their loose hair and their soft pink lips, the ones with the tender buds just pooching out under their shirts, and maybe even a bit of dirt still under their fingernails. Give him one of those, just to look at, maybe to set a little on his knee, and you could keep all your worldly dames. A tasty morsel of pure female still

wrapped in a juvenile package. Man, he was just an admirer. He didn't have to own one as long as he could borrow a peek from time to time.

The alley was cold as the devil, even sheltered from the wind. A dusting of snow filtered down between the roofs, haloing the neon Cyrillic characters on the peak of a neighboring hotel. The Texan realized that he did not feel much like exposing anything that was precious to him to the bite of a Russian winter's night.

He was about to retreat into the bar and line up inside for a turn at the squalid water closet he had visited some six or seven shots ago when, against the opposite wall of the alley, he caught a glimpse of a precious part that someone else didn't mind exposing to the frozen air. A small figure in a hooded white fur jacket knelt before a man who was wearing a sheepskin coat and winter hat with ear flaps and standing ready for her attention.

Another man's proclivities were of no interest to the whiskey drinker, but the small profile in front of him caught the eye of the unintentional voyeur. As the kneeling figure lifted her head to the business, her white fur hood fell back, revealing an aura of fine silvery hair—and the angelic face of a child.

Quick as a striking rattler, without pausing to form an intent, the Texan covered the few paces between him and the other man. He jerked the girl to her feet and pushed the man against the wall. Shouting in Russian, the man came at the American with both fists bunched but stopped dead at the sight of the Glock pistol in the hand of the man in the white hat. The tall man dragged her, shrieking and protesting in an alien tongue, out of the alley and onto the cobblestones of an obscure working-class neighborhood where dogs barked all night long. **WT**

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

Dead of Winter

by *Karen Sweet*

Chapter One

I watch carriages arrive from my hiding place. This room beneath the bailey's crenellated tower has been my lookout since I was little. It overlooks our bridge and the Great Gate. Everyone who comes to my castle passes by this window.

No Elders here to scold, none to tell me to primp myself for the arriving suitors, and none to threaten to take my books or my sword. I am alone, for the first time in days. I hunger to see the arriving nobles and wealthy landowners of the federated countries. Pretend allies mixed in with a few friends. I can hardly stomach what I see in the stone courtyard below. The Blight comes to Nasr. How can we not be tainted by it?

Carriages, no longer shining and elegant, struggle over the bridge and unload their passengers in a monotonous stream. Polished leather and gleaming brass fittings are gone. Instead, obscene gray-green lumps molder on them and the leather roofs, dripping down the sides of the horse drawn coaches.

Shivering jelly masses slime royal standards.

The slumped shouldered drivers whip the sluggish animals pulling ruined coaches. The horses, even the famed Huzmok House of Veldt team, are maimed. I think of my beautiful mare with her glossy gold coat and I have to look away.

Midnight, the proud giant leading Veldt's team, strains to hold his massive head high. His neck muscles ripple with the effort. His mane stained a leaking greenish black, his back right hoof misshapen. His teammates stretch hard to pull the heavy carriage, greasy mold covering eyes, dripping from ears. I cringe at their limping gait. As much as I fear Lord Veldt, his horses do not deserve this agony.

I cannot turn away from the courtyard horror. My mind confused as a jumble of puzzle pieces. Today, I see the Blight's death hold on the other countries. I see now why I am to be sold to the strongest man. Whatever keeps my Nasr free from the Blight is a priceless magic, to be owned and used.

I wish my father could help me understand what to do. He cannot. The pale skeleton lying in the king's chamber is not really my father. It is his ghost, barely breathing. Soon, he will be no more. I rub my face. Tears itch.

Continued on page 16

The Urban Carnivore

by *Bill Brisko*

The instant I left the toilet I knew we were in trouble. It hung on the midnight air like a dark, noxious fume. Activity at the rest stop had dropped to near zero. Not even the thumping of tire chains from the passing cars accompanied us through the muffled silence of the falling snow. The streetlights from high overhead cast the cold, milky glow of ruin over the barren landscape around me. Cautiously, I moved towards the Jeep.

Glancing over at the cab I noticed the Commander AWOL

from his post in the passenger's seat. At first I thought he might have frozen solid and slid down onto the floor with the beer and whiskey bottles. But when I peered through the window I could see that he had vanished, and the tailgate and back glass were left totally open. Just behind the truck on the icy asphalt burned a small fire of what *appeared* to be rags, set ablaze with some help from the emergency gas can. What the hell was *this*? Did *he* do this? Glancing around feverishly, I tried to locate him, but there wasn't a clue to where he'd gone off to. I felt the cold chill of dread creeping up my spine just as I heard him scream behind me in his best Sandinista voice:

Continued on page 16

EXCERPT FROM A 2009 NANOWRIMO NOVEL

Deeper Colors

by *Carolyn Donnell*

The Art Lesson

The short, gray-haired priest lifted his white-sleeved arm and pointed toward the town below. "Périgueux. Le magnifique. The beautiful."

Geneviève looked through the openings at the top of the bell tower at the rear of the St. Front Cathedral. "Yes, Père Michel, it is certainly that." Her eyes feasted on the town below. The town looked different from the cathedral tower: narrow cobblestone streets bordered by tall buildings covered by tiled roofs of varying colors. The cacophony of street vendors below muted to nonexistence from this height.

Bells rang in a nearby spire. "Please pardon me, my dear. What I wanted to tell you was that if you can make it here in the hour before sundown, I will be in the area. Except on the Sabbath of course. And sometimes, just after sunrise might be possible as well. Find me and I will let you come up here to paint. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Now for a quick lesson."

"But Father, I don't have my paints."

"Not a lesson in painting. A lesson in seeing."

"In seeing?" She turned away from the view and looked at the priest.

"Yes. First you have to be able to see before you can render the scene faithfully. Amazing how many artists don't understand that."

"But Father, there's nothing wrong with my eyes."

"Not your outer eyes. Your inner eyes."

"Inner eyes?" Geneviève wrinkled her forehead.

"Look at that cathedral over there, for instance. Look at the right side of the main building. What do you see?"

"Stone?"

"What about the light? Look at the right side of that area, then at the left. See the difference?"

Geneviève moved back to the balcony wall. "One side is lighter than the other."

"What else?"

"Light, dark."

"And?"

"And? Sunlight and shadows."

"Shadows—yes that's right. And what else? Look at the shadows."

Geneviève pouted and shook her head.

"What do they look like?" the priest prompted.

"They look like shadows." She sighed. "No, wait. That shadow," she pointed to the shade under the far spire. "It looks like a chair. A straight-backed chair with a solid bottom, and the one over there is like a bird's head."

"So, a shadow has a shape." Père Michel smiled. She was a quick learner, this one. Always had been. Ever since the day he found her lying at the back entrance of the Cathedral porch wrapped in linen over a sheer white cotton mull slip dress. He had taken her in, found a place for her at the convent orphanage and watched over her ever since.

"You're right," she exclaimed. Her voice rose in pitch. "I never noticed that before."

"Oh, you noticed. It shows in your sketches."

"But I never saw." She turned to him and laughed. "Am I seeing now?"

"It's a start," he replied. "Open your eyes wider and you will see that every scene is made up of shapes." He took her hand and spread out her fingers. "See your hand, palm, fingers, fingernails; shapes within shapes. That's one part."

"One part? There's more?"

"Oh yes, definitely more."

"What? What? I want to know."

"The sun is setting. The vesper bells have probably finished ringing downstairs. You think on this lesson for a while. See more everywhere and practice transferring that sight to your sketches. We will talk about the second part later. We must go now. We've been up here too long." WT

Writecraft: New Beginnings

Continued from page 1

Or the voice of the narrator that you inhabit so well by chapter 5 might sound a little too much like yourself in chapters 1 and 2. These are all problems that can be fixed when you revise.

When you give your beginning another look, remember that its main function is to hook the reader. Elizabeth George says in *Write Away*, “You have to think about creating an opening that either *possesses* or *promises* excitement, intrigue, or high interest for the reader.” The first sentences and paragraphs should convey that something worthwhile will follow. You probably know what captures your attention when you read. Do you like learning about the conflict immediately? Do you want to be drawn in by unusual characters or gorgeous description? You might prefer stories that open in the middle of an action sequence or that start prior to the moment of change. I get excited by a beginning that leaves me wondering what’s going on.

There is no single best type of opening, but a beginning should be appropriate for what follows. The authors of *Deepening Fiction* explain: “The opening of a story teaches readers how to interpret what is to come. . . . Readers assume that the beginning is making implicit promises about the kind of characters and experiences the story is going to offer.” It’s risky to jar your audience with a start that doesn’t match the tone of the rest of the work or a first chapter about characters who are never heard from again. Take care to choose an opening that’s right for what you’re writing.

Since beginnings perform a crucial role, they deserve extra scrutiny during revision. They also tend to be among the parts of our own writing that are easiest to get attached to and hardest to imagine changing. Try to be honest with yourself about whether you’d be engaged as a reader of your opening. Listen to the feedback of your critique partners. Consider whether your work might be better served by starting with a different scene, image, anecdote, or fact. Make sure you’ve given your readers a reason to continue.

In revising one of my novels, I started

the story one chapter later with each new draft. I kept cutting away the first chapter because my manuscript had a common problem: there were too many pages of nothing happening. I wanted to establish the main character’s situation before her world changed—a worthy goal for the first pages of a novel—but a little goes a long way when writing about someone’s daily routine. I had to trust that readers are perceptive enough to generalize from a limited amount of information and only so patient when it comes to reading about even an interesting character who doesn’t do anything.

How Not to Write a Novel offers some good advice: “Surprisingly often, twenty pages of text can be replaced by a single paragraph of exposition or interior monologue” and “While it is your job to know a great deal about your characters, it is seldom necessary to share it all with the reader, and by ‘seldom,’ we mean ‘never.’” Avoid cramming beginnings with backstory and explanation that would be better woven in later or omitted entirely.

The more I think about my slow-starting manuscript, the more I realize that the story still isn’t opening in the right place. It’s a new year, and I think it’s time for another new beginning.

Read on:

- *Write Away: One Novelist’s Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life* by Elizabeth George covers elements of the writing craft and process. See chapter 7, “The Start: Decisions, Decisions.”
- *Deepening Fiction: A Practical Guide for Intermediate and Advanced Writers* by Sarah Stone and Ron Nyren includes a detailed textbook on fiction writing and an anthology of short stories. See chapter 10, “Revision: Beginnings, Middles, and Endings.”
- *How Not to Write a Novel: 200 Classic Mistakes and How to Avoid Them—A Misstep-by-Misstep Guide* by Howard Mittelmark and Sandra Newman instructs with humor and wonderfully painful examples of what not to do. See chapter 1, “Beginnings and Setups.” WT



Are you a blogger?

Continued from page 4

immediate returns. Publish something, and people come. Publish more, and more come. More . . . more . . . A blogger has to know when to turn off the machine, go into the house, spend time with family and other real people. If not, blogging can become addictive. I know.

How’d you do? Are you a blogger? Or have I scared you away? If you are blogger material, I’ll see you at the workshop on January 23rd (see registration form on page 8)! WT

If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn’t brood. I’d type a little faster.

—Isaac Asimov

The Extent of the Damage

Continued from page 11

when the department head came out of his office with his coat on and announced, “Well, fellows, I don’t know about you, but I’d hate to spend the night here.”

It didn’t seem likely that Francine would make the rendezvous. She came to work with her husband, and he was a big cheese in his own division, so they’d probably gone home. But I hated the thought of standing her up if it happened she was still in the building.

I didn’t have to worry about anyone seeing me as I entered our usual supply closet. I’d become so committed to the idea that Francine wouldn’t be there, I nearly gasped when I saw her. “I thought you’d be long home by now.”

“Gary wanted to stay until we talked.”

My mind was stubbornly slow to understand her words and the expression on her face.

“He knows. He followed us the other night.” Francine began to shudder with tears. “I’m sorry, Douglas. I’m so sorry.”

I held her, numb. We’d been caught. I’d never been caught before. WT

Shedding Cats

Continued from page 10

"I hear you," Sheila said, laughing again. "Oh, don't make me laugh. It only makes it worse." And that only made Sheila laugh more, which made Leticia laugh more.

"Oh, oh," Leticia said, now gasping for air between words. "They better hurry." Gasp, gasp. "Oh they are going to have a big ol' mess."

"Stop," Sheila said, laughing, holding her stomach, and crossing her legs as tears came to her eyes. "Don't say any more."

"Oh, why don't they put toilets in these things," Leticia said, laughing and trying to stop.

"Maybe we should talk to HR," Sheila said, laughing harder and crying so much she had to wipe her tears on the back of her hand. At that moment, the elevator started moving again, and they both busted up. It stopped and the doors opened on the second floor.

"Race you," Leticia said, bolting out the opening doors like a track star in high heels.

It was such a relief to not be stuck in the elevator, it made the rest of Sheila's day seem less stressful. The Cultural Training, which consisted of telling people to communicate—even if they had to make a mistake—was probably adapted from the manager's training. However, it surprised Sheila that managers had to be told to communicate for several days, while underlings were supposed to pick it up in eight hours. Well, seven and a half, since Leticia let them go early.

Sheila was back at her desk, about to lock up and go home for the night, when she heard a man's voice shouting the next aisle over.

"There's been a shooting in the building," the voice said, and Sheila stopped what she was doing and looked up. She was up on her tiptoes, as if getting her ears closer to the top of the cube would help her hear better.

"No one is leaving," the excited man's voice continued, and Sheila started to feel goose bumps rise on her arms.

"Two people, maybe three have been shot on the first floor." WT

Rivers

Continued from page 12

that billowed in from the east as an even more massive storm front built.

The tiny premature child had only a few scant hours to live.

Darkness started to fall again, like the endless ebony of a cave deep underground. The storm broke anew and the maelstrom quickly gained strength. The winds and rain were joined by huge shattering explosions of thunder and violent, jagged bolts of lightning. A second dawn would not come for the boy without help.

Chapter 2

Over two thousand miles away to the west in the ancient redwood forest that hugs the rugged coast of the vast Pacific Ocean the enormous she-grizzly shook her head then roared, bellowing into the storm. Thunder and lightning arrived at the same time and the shattering din echoed up and down the slopes of the steep, wooded canyon.

The bear already had the reputation as a man killer. First were two loggers that stopped for supper after downing a tree. Then she surprised a lone prospector following his dream of gold on the coast side. Men from the camps had hunted her to no avail. There would be more mayhem to come.

The sow lay in a remote den of rock and immense fallen redwoods, completely hidden by brush. The monstrous bear barely awoke from hibernation to give birth to her cub. It was tiny, less than 12 ounces and blind at first. The male cub was hairless, black as coal except for one pure white ear. But it had the potential of being a gigantic and powerful beast capable of creating far reaching terror.

The cub started to suckle its now sleeping mother. The young bear would not be helpless for long. It would take advantage of every drop of nourishment to increase its size and strength and started to grow.

Chapter 3

The blacksmith and his wife had lost the trail the night before as the hurricane engulfed them. They remembered the old squatter's cabin just inland from the Red River and roughly headed in what they thought was that direction. WT

Dead of Winter

Continued from page 13

I look down again, as Veldt leaves his carriage. His huge chest and wide neck easy to recognize, even at this distance. He pivots and cuffs his fat ambassador, Arf, who has accidentally stepped on his long cloak. The rotund little man falls to the ground. Then Veldt lurches up the steps, leaning on his walking stick. His odd spindle legs are no match for his giant body.

Midnight moves his team away. I hope my stable boys can repair his wracked hoof. Can our cold-hearted god at least give a miracle to a poor horse?

The next carriage pulls up with the blind queen who rules Romus. A childless widow, babies dead at birth, husband and eyesight lost to the Blight. Danala's graceful form sits tall as her litter moves into my castle. I wonder if I can meet her, alone.

"Here you are, Princess. Come now. The Elders request your preparation for the tea." Fate, my nanny, grabs my hand and squeezes it slightly.

"I have not seen enough." I squeeze her warm hand back. And, look into her mud brown eyes. My nanny hardly stands to my waist, and I am not a tall girl. Wrinkles upon wrinkles cover her face. She is a green gnome, the green of new spring grass.

"Come, I have your bath ready." She pats my hip and leaves.

She knows I will come. I never disobey.

I peek one last time. Everyone wants to celebrate my sixteenth birthday. All, that is, except me. To become the Crown Princess spells my death. Time to get ready for tea. WT

The Urban Carnivore

Continued from page 14

"FORRR THEEE PEEEOOPLE!"

Spinning around ascetically, I stood face-to-ass with the most depraved sight I have ever witnessed on a federal highway: There stood the Commander, wearing his blue nylon jacket and Navy ball cap, butt naked from the waist down. He wasn't even wearing any shoes, for Christ's sake! His bare ass beamed like a brilliant, white beacon

over the bleak, achromatic landscape. Looking back at the pile of clothes burning behind the Jeep, I finally realized: Jesus, what the hell is he going to wear now?

His timing was perfect. For he had just pulled back the bolt on the evil, black, machine gun and, pointing it at the half-buried and abandoned Japanese car in the snow, pulled the trigger.

“BRAT-A-TAT-A-TAT-A-TAT...”

The tenor of the barrage was overwhelming, even monstrous; an endless string of small, violent explosions against the disturbing calm of the frigid night air. The car erupted in a hail-storm of radiant sparks and exploding glass; its glossy, continuous body growing increasingly foul from all the newly erupting holes. Then a small fireball spewed out from underneath the car, the remnant of what was left in the gas tank, and finally went dark. It was totally obvious I needed to get that gun off him at all costs. But the threat of the bullets held me firm to the cover of the Jeep. He quickly finished off one clip of ammo and slapped in the second.

“Locked and loaded,” he yelled, as he continued his work on the car.

The constant torrent of nasty, little slugs was enough to dissuade anyone from closing in on him too quickly. But the situation was careening violently out of control and needed to be fixed *fast*. It would be one thing if a station wagon full of kids were to cruise in to use the can and witness this display, quite another thing if it was a CHP cruiser. Figuring my best chance was to muscle the gun off of him, I started a slow trot toward him, hoping to grab it at the exact moment he ran out of ammo. But the Commander was far too crafty and sensed the jig was up. The instant he ran out of bullets he turned around and jabbed me in the groin with the butt of the rifle. Immediately, I dropped to my knees in pain, lurching forward in an attempt to grab one of his ankles. But, moving quickly, he evaded my hands and kicked me in the head with his frozen clubfoot, taking off across the frozen tundra like some twisted, rabid animal. There was no way of stopping him now.

Staggering to my feet, I knew I had to grab hold of the situation quickly.

Running around to the other side of the toilet, I figured I'd head him off at the pass, so to speak. Just as I turned the corner, he spotted me and came to a halt in a small, dimly lit clearing. Holding the AR-15 like a banjo, he taunted me with a pelting of gibberish that sounded like Karl Rove on acid, flipping me the bird with his free hand. Then, laughing perversely, he wiggled his short little dick at me and ran off like some Yeti into the dark, dismal woods. We were doomed!

Jesus, this would not do! Here was a senior command officer in the Navy running around like a gelded steer at a freezing cold rest stop wearing nothing but a jacket and a grin after pumping 60 rounds of nasty little bullets into an abandoned car and lighting his shoes, shorts and anything else below the belt on fire in the middle of the parking lot. That was it, there was no doubting it now—he had finally flipped out! The pineal gland had proven way too much for him, and he only took half! When the cops finally caught up to us, ugly questions would be beaten out of us, and only lying answers would be given. It meant a sure-fire court-martial and possible execution for the Commander—and time in the federal pen for us both. If we were lucky, someone would offer us the black capsule before the long walk to the gallows.

Quickly, I ran down the list of available options. There was only one. . .

I would have to kill him. wT

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Editor's Perspective

Continued from page 3

Now, as far as infinitives are concerned, just as English had no standard spelling during the early part of the eighteenth century, neither did it have a standard grammar. The first grammar book was probably Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*—prescriptive, to be sure—published in 1762. Because English had no history of written grammars, that first book was heavily modeled on Latin grammars—and it's not possible to split a one-word Latin infinitive.

The truth is that I used to be quite rigorous about not splitting infinitives, and if I had been the scriptwriter for *Star Trek*, the mission of the *Enterprise* would have been “boldly to go where no man has gone before.” Or maybe “to go boldly . . .” In either case, my version would not have secured a place in history or grammar books.

Meredy finally persuaded me to accept the idea that it doesn't make sense to adhere rigidly to a meaningless Latin standard, and contemporary grammatical thought seems to be that there's no real reason not to separate the particle and the verb. So, more truthfully, I should resolve to sometimes split an infinitive. Boldly. wT



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WRITERSTALK Challenge

What Is It?

Twice a year, in February and August, awards are given to contributors to *WritersTalk*. You need take no special steps to enter this competition; if your piece in one of the designated genres is published in *WritersTalk*, you are a contestant in the Challenge.*

Genres

Fiction
Memoir
Essay
Poetry

Judging Periods

January 16 through July 15
July 16 through January 15

Prizes

One winner will be selected from each of the eligible genres. Each winner will be awarded a cash prize of \$40.

Judging

Judging will be done by *WritersTalk* contributing editors and other Club members whom the contributing editors may ask to assist.

* Eligibility for the *WritersTalk* Challenge is limited to members of the South Bay Branch of the California Writers Club; judges may not judge in any category in which they have an entry.

CWC Around the Bay

These are the published meeting times and locations for the other 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

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

Fremont: Meets (except in July, December, and on holiday weekends) from 2-4 p.m. on the fourth Saturday of the month at Mountain Mikes Pizza, 35760 Fremont Blvd., in the Brookvale Shopping Center, one block south of Decoto Road in Fremont. Contact: Bob Garfinkle ragarf@earthlink.net or (510) 489-4779

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

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

Redwood: Meetings are held on the first Sunday of the month (except for holiday weekends), from 3-5 p.m. at Copperfield's Books, 2316 Montgomery Dr., Santa Rosa.
redwoodwriters.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

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

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	
JANUARY 2010						1	2
3	4	5	6 7P Board Meeting LaRoche residence	7	8 7:30P Open Mic Borders Books Santana Row, San Jose	9 11A Editors' Powwow	
10	11 6P Regular Dinner Meeting Lookout Inn Gerard Jones	12	13	14	15 7:30P Open Mic Barnes & Noble Pruneyard, Campbell	16 WritersTalk deadline	
17	18	19	20	21	22 7:30p Open Mic Borders Books Sunnyvale	23 8:30A-2:00P Blogging Workshop Lookout Inn	
24/31	25	26	27	28	31	30	
Future Flashes		February 9 6P Regular Dinner Meeting Michelle Gagnon					

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SBW Poets

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Tuesday, January 12, 6:00 p.m.

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WritersTalk deadline is *always* the 16th of the month preceding the month of issue, and is *always* listed on the calendar inside the back cover.

