

# Literary Landscapes

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Original short stories, novel excerpts,  
poetry, opinion, educational articles  
and news of the Society authored by:  
*(in alphabetical order)*

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THE GREATER LOS ANGELES  
WRITERS SOCIETY

WRITERS MENTORING WRITERS OF ALL DISCIPLINES

# Literary Landscapes

Vol. 4 No. 2 SUMMER 2015

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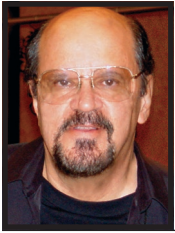
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## When Is It Finished?

Message From The President

By Tony N. Todaro

Every once in a while, I run into a writer who is so anxious for me to read his/her manuscript, that there is drool on the title page. And while I appreciate their enthusiasm, I am torn between my chronic need to read something fabulous and sheer terror that I won't be able to get beyond the first paragraph. I inevitably disaster-check this by asking a simple question:

*Has your work been professionally edited?*

The number of writers surprised at this simple query is not surprising at all. Some profusely pledge that their masterpiece was diligently edited by his or her spouse, an avid reader of the genre in consideration, or certify the work as a self-edited immaculate conception on the first draft. Honest. And I can tell by their zeal and lack of sweat that they genuinely believe that is a normal and proper *modus operandi*.

At that point, I usually take a step or two back like a civilian faced with pepper spray, and ask if anyone else has proofed it, you know, perhaps a professional editor. At least someone experienced in the craft of editing more than the Sunday funny papers.

I'm not trying to dampen anyone's enthusiasm or hurt anyone's feelings. In fact, I barely have the time to write myself -- yes, and edit — let alone be disciplined enough to read the many authors that I admire, or try

to emulate. I just need to assess the potential quality of the prospect's work, and perhaps impress upon them that I'm not the only one who is going to ask that question.

At that point, I tend to mention that I usually don't even send out an email of importance without having someone proof it, because I'm continually amazed at how anyone can misinterpret what I wrote, regardless of what words I chose to deliver the message.

And for a novel I have a more stringent gauntlet. First I write a rough, and then do an edit. Then I give it to a first reader and get their notes. Then I do another draft. At that point, I consider the work solid enough to send to at least two editors, or fellow cohorts, for a broader look. It's like football game commentators: one handles the play-by-play, the other comments on color. In my case, one editor is looking for grammar and punctuation, while the other is focused on character and plot development — or lack of it. When I get both sets of comments back, I run through another draft, and then polish that.

By this point, my significant other begins questioning me like the Pope asking Michelangelo when he will finish the Sistine Chapel. I persevere, because I know when my agent receives it, he's going to read it, and hopefully have good notes to polish it further. And when he sends it to a publisher, should they make a deal, it's going to an in-house editor there. Hopefully one working for more than minimum wage.

Now, if that sounds like a lot of editing, well, that is what works for me. The point is that the editing process on anything you write, whether it's a newsletter or novel, shouldn't

stop until the press starts running. You can quote me on this. And if you are serious about the quality of your writing, whether or not you go through the hell that I do with my editing ritual, you might consider making a similar promise to yourself. It will help you become a better writer and your work will stand a greater chance for success.

You can thank me in the Acknowledgments.



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## Editor's Forum

By Mike Robinson

In my dozen years as a career-minded writer, I've noticed a little curious something-something. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to be fairly general here. Most novelists are familiar with the basic two camps that define themselves as the Literary and the Commercial. In their worst mutual hour, the Literary might see the Commercial as sell-out hacks, the Commercial may see the Literary as pompous navel-gazers. I try to marry the merits of both, as there are many books from both disciplines that I love. And what I've found a little amusing is that, while the Literary camp is more often the one stereotyped as being pretentious, in my personal experience, those slanting Commercial have been the ones to gas-bag more about any number of "Novelistic Ten Commandments" and the "Do's and Don'ts" for WHAT MAKES A GOOD BOOK (see that phrase written in large, Stonehenge-like letters). They are the ones that who tend to bristle haughtily when confronted with unfamiliar territory.

There is no need to explain why this is so, of course. I understand it comes from appealing to salable trends and tastes, which is not a bad thing so long as you are remaining true to your desires as a creative person. My take is, if you feel like you're clocking in at the office, or doing homework to appease someone else, or any faceless multitude, you've lost something of why this job should be done in the first place. No matter what you write, or to what camp you might claim affinity, it should come down to the drive, the need, and, yes, the fun.

# Invisible

By Leslie Ann Moore

**“I’m really going to do it this time.”**

Oh, I know I’ve said it before, but this time...

**“Stop it. You are not.”**

My best friend — Ginnie-with-a-G — gives me the Look. It’s the same one I always give her when she says she’s giving up cigarettes or sex with twenty-year-olds.

“It’s done, in fact. I called my aesthetician and canceled my appointments. As of today, I’m off the Treatment.”

Ginnie stares at me, her plump red lips slightly parted. A gray pill of ash drops from the forgotten cigarette between her fingers and hits the chocolate leather of her sofa.

“It’s not too late, sweetie. Call him back and reinstate your appointments. You can only go a couple of weeks at most before...”

I shake my head. “I’m not going back, Gin.”

Ginnie remembers her cigarette, takes a drag, then stubs it out in the ashtray on the glass table between us. She leans forward and her perfect breasts strain against the thin, red

fabric of her blouse. I’ve always been a bit jealous of Ginnie’s breasts and she knows it, though we don’t let that come between us. We are best friends, after all. She’s always been a little jealous of my ass. We’ve each used our bodies to steal men from one another. It’s always been a cheerful rivalry.

“Carole...sweetie. What’s made you go and do this? It’s...it’s crazy! No one stops the Treatment. Not willingly, anyway.” She lowers her voice, as if she’s afraid her neighbors will hear. “You know what’s going to happen... You’ll become...”

**“Invisible. Yes, I know.”**

Now that I’ve said it, I feel really angry.

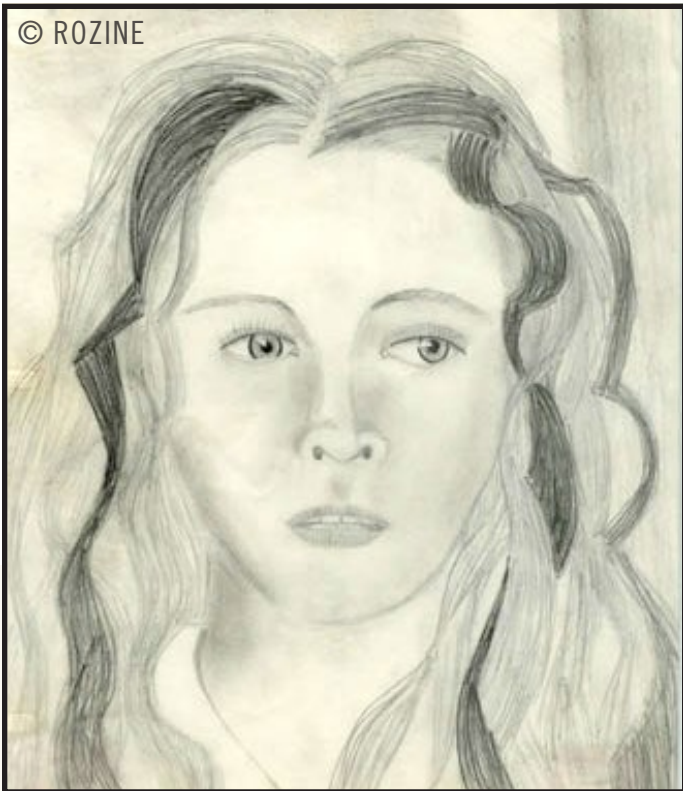
When Ginnie says no one willingly stops the Treatments, she means no woman does. Men, well, men can stop any time they choose, can’t they? They don’t become invisible, not like we do.

That’s why I’m so damned angry. It won’t matter that I have a Ph. D in molecular biology from The Lunar Institute of Technology. It also won’t matter that I speak three languages and can whip up one helluva chocolate soufflé. Once the reversal begins, when I become just an aging woman, no one will look at me anymore. I’ll be there, they just won’t see me.

Ginnie's right. What I'm doing is crazy.

"Gin, you'll stand by me, won't you? I'll really need you, as much as I did back when... it...happened."

My mind shies away from those memories, still too painful, though it's been ten years. I hate that my voice shakes. I want to sound strong, resolute. This is my choice, after all, and I'm prepared to live with the consequences.



Ginnie moves from the sofa and comes to sit beside me. She slips her arms around me and I relax into her embrace. My cheek rests against those oh-so-perfect breasts. She smells like lavender.

"You know I will...We're best friends, Carole." Ginnie stands, lifting me with her.

Taking my hand, she leads me to the large, gilt-framed mirror that dominates the wall behind the sofa.

"Look at yourself, sweetie," Ginnie says. "You're so beautiful. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

We stand in silence, gazing at our reflections—two women, one with shoulder-length mahogany hair, the other sporting a blond bob. Neither of us looks a day over twenty-five.

I'm sixty-two. Ginnie is fifty-nine.

**T**wo weeks and counting.

Yesterday morning, I saw a few strands of silver at my temples. It didn't bother me, not at first; in fact, they looked quite pretty as a contrast to the rest of my dark locks.

But now, as I stare at them, they seem to me like harbingers of things to come, of darker, more unpleasant changes.

I've taken a leave of absence from my job as a researcher at the Luna headquarters of C.A.E. Biologics, the pharmaceutical giant whose combination of gene-altering chemicals is known as The Treatment. I want to experience the transformation of my body without the distraction of work and the furtive, pitying looks of my colleagues. I told my boss what I planned to do, of course. I had to. When the changes are complete, I want to go back to work, but if I'm invisible, how can I? I haven't thought that far ahead, but perhaps I should. There are things I can do now, steps I need to take if I'm to go on living.

**“Does anyone really know how the Treatment works? I mean, someone knows... the egghead who figured it out, of course... Do you know?”**

Ginnie has come over to my apartment for drinks. She’s been chain-smoking since she got here, and it’s bothering me. She only chain-smokes when she’s really nervous. She keeps glancing at my hair, which is now shot through with silver.

It’s been three weeks since I stopped the Treatment.

“I work in the animal vaccines division, so, no, I don’t get to know specifically.”

The exact way in which the Treatment works is a closely-guarded secret known to only a very few at the highest level of C.A.E. management.

I slide off my favorite chair, a genuine leather antique lounge that belonged to my father, and move to the bar where I mix us another round of Earthrises.

“What I do know is that it contains chemicals that manipulate the genetic code at the molecular level.” I hand Ginnie the chilled blue cocktail. “Take the twice weekly injections and your body stops aging.”

“Except that it doesn’t, not really.” Ginnie frowns and swirls the drink. The tinkle of ice cubes against the glass sound like little bells. She takes a sip and follows with a drag on her cigarette. “Why can’t the god damned scientists figure out how to fix it? Maybe then, I wouldn’t be looking at replacement surgery.”

For reasons the C.A.E. scientists don’t fully understand, the benefits of the Treatment are largely external. It doesn’t stop bones and internal organs from aging. Last week, Ginnie had her annual physical. Her doctor confirmed what she’s tried to deny for months — her knees are wearing out.

“Gin, can you please slow down with the cigs?”

She exhales a stream of smoke from her nostrils and stubs out the butt in the only ashtray I own. She looks straight at me, and for an instant, I see something that no one should ever have to see in the eyes of a friend.

Disgust.

She looks away and I stifle my tears.

I make a decision.

**“Okay. I’m officially letting you off the hook. Go home, Ginnie.”**

“Carole...”

“Don’t...Gin. Just go.”

Ginnie puts her pack of cigarettes and her lighter in her purse. As she walks to the door, she’s trying not to favor her left knee, but I can see it’s hurting her. She leaves without another word.

My best friend, the woman who saved me from madness during that terrible night ten years ago, has walked away from me now, without a single word of protest. Deep down, I think I always knew it would be like this; still, the reality hurts like hell.

One month and counting.

This morning, I looked in my mirror and noticed the grooves in my forehead have sharpened and I now have deep lines running from the bridge of my nose down to both corners of my mouth. My hair is now silver with a few dark strands, the reverse of what it was only two weeks ago.

It's a little past midday, and as I take the sky bridge that links my apartment building to the shopping arcade next door, I see a group of what looks to be teenagers leaning on the railings. As I draw near, their animated chatter stutters into silence. They fix their eyes on me. One boy hisses, a sharp intake of breath that feels like a knife slicing my skin. They've probably never seen a woman with wrinkles and gray hair before. I look at them and wonder how old they really are.

Why am I doing this? I ask myself this question every day. I've decided today's answer is that I'm disgusted with the idea that we fear death so much, we pretend it isn't real. If we maintain the illusion of youth, we can deny our mortality. Except that, in the end, death comes anyway. The bodies we fight so hard to preserve always betray us by giving up and giving in to the inevitable.

Ginnie left because I reminded her of that.

Last week, I was still very much afraid, but this week...not so much. I've gotten used to the idea of my impending invisibility. In fact, I'm growing quite intrigued by the whole thing. I may even learn to enjoy the solitude it will bring. I've made most of the necessary arrangements to keep myself alive after I vanish.

I'm lucky I have a well-paying position that has allowed me to accumulate some savings. Otherwise, I couldn't have afforded to give up my job. Along with a small trust I inherited from my parents, I should have enough money to see me through.

I enter the bustle of the shopping arcade. A smear of color slides by the corner of my eye. I pause and look over my shoulder. Something slips past me and I turn my head, straining to make out the fuzzy shape as it disappears into the crowd. I shiver as I realize I can see more of the mysterious shapes intermingled in the throng filling the vaulted dome of the arcade. I rub my eyes, hoping to see more clearly, but my vision is getting worse, and the people surrounding me are fading like the images in an antique paper photograph.

I shake off my unease and begin to walk towards the escalators, but my eyes are now sending such bizarre messages to my brain that I have to stop. My heart is racing. The people around me have blended into a swirling river of color and sound. I stand like a rock in the middle of the channel, breaking the flow, stranded, unable to make out any individual face or body. Fighting panic, I turn in place, searching for something, anything, that will make some sense.

Just as I'm about to scream, I feel a hand grasp my elbow.

"Take nice, deep breaths. The disorientation will stop in a little while."

I turn to see a woman, an old woman, standing beside me.

She is the only person who looks aged that I've ever seen, besides myself.

“Come on. Come over here and sit down.” She leads me to a bench along the wall. We sit. I stare at her. She smiles and the lines around her eyes deepen.

“You are brave, coming here so soon. It’s best to stay home until you’ve transitioned completely.”

“Trans...transitioned?” I know what the word means. Why am I pretending I don’t?

“Yes, transitioned...You do understand what’s happening to you?” The other woman, the other old woman, takes my hand. The skin of her fingers and palm are soft, like synth-suede gloves.

“I...I’m not sure. I mean, I assume I’m becoming invisible, but...” I look at the swirl of colors and shapes surrounding us, before finishing my sentence. “I never imagined it’d be quite like this.”

The other woman nodded. “My name is Lucy Dunbar,” she said.

“Carole... Carole Jones.”

“I know.”

Startled, I tear my gaze from the chaos, which is making me dizzy, and focus on Lucy’s face. It is the color of cocoa, with eyes to match. It’s a kind face, a comforting face, the face that would have belonged to a grandmother before the Treatment made grandmothers look like their granddaughters.

“You know me?”

“Yes, Carole.”

I want to ask how, but she keeps talking.

“I was pretty disoriented myself at first. Everyone is. Once you’re fully transitioned, the world will stabilize and you’ll be able to get around just fine.” She reaches into a pocket of her blue overcoat and pulls out a little metal box. She flips open the lid and holds it out to me. “Care for a ginger candy? It helps settle the stomach.” I take a candy and put it in my mouth.

“The disorientation, the blurred vision, the nausea...It’s delayed withdrawal from the Treatment. Oh, and you aren’t becoming invisible...at least not in a physical sense.”

I stare at Lucy. “Then what’s happening to me?”

**“All your questions will be answered very soon. You need to come with me now.”**

Lucy takes my elbow and pulls me with her as she stands. I shake off her hand, suspicion flaring. I don’t know this woman, I don’t know what’s happening to me, and now she wants me to come with her?

“I’m sorry, but this is all too strange. I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me what’s really going on!”

“Stella said you’d be a tough one!” Lucy chuckles and resumes her seat on the bench.

“Who the hell is Stella?” My voice is sharp because I’m afraid, and yet I want to trust this woman.

“She’s the citywide orientation coordinator. She runs the teams that make first contact and bring the new ones like you into the organization.”

I sit beside Lucy and my fear begins to give way to curiosity. “Organization? Are you saying there’s a group of... of people who’ve stopped the Treatment that have formed a... a...”

“Not people, Carole...Women. Like you.”

“Like me? What do you mean?”

“You were chosen, honey!” Lucy takes my hand again and together, we stand.

This time, I don’t pull away.

**“Come with me, now. I’ll take you to Stella. She’ll answer all your questions.”**

Stella is a tall woman who looks about seventy. Her hair is white with a single streak of copper at her left temple. She wears a navy blue robe with a crimson panel running from her left shoulder to the hem. It reminds me of the vestments worn by a priest of the old religion.

“Hello, Carole. Welcome. I’m Stella Anderson.”

I take the proffered hand and shake it.

Lucy has led me to a suite of offices on the thirtieth floor of a building near the shopping arcade. I knew this building was here, but until now, I’ve never been inside it.

The suite is filled with women, all aged, all dressed in blue robes with different colored panels. Some sit at desks and tap on keyboards, the glow of computer monitors accentuating the lines on their faces; others bustle from office to office, clutching PDAs and old-fashioned paper books in their hands. The buzz of conversation mixes with the twitter of phones and the whirl of office machines.

Stella’s office is in the corner. She waves to a pair of padded chairs in front of the gleaming expanse of her desk. The desk is beautiful and looks like real wood. I sit, and Lucy takes the other chair.

“You no doubt have many questions and I will try to answer them all to your satisfaction, Carole, but let me explain some things first.” I nod and Stella continues.

“This is the Office of Orientation and Reassignment. All the newly transitioned are brought here. We provide support, both physical and mental, in the crucial early days, and later, when the individual woman is ready to assume her new role, we provide re-training, if needed, for those seeking a different career, or placement in a new position within the same career for those wishing to remain in their current fields.

“You were specifically chosen, Carole, from a carefully screened list of candidates. We needed a person of your expertise to

assume more of a leadership position within the corporate structure of C.A.E. Biologics.”

**“Wait, wait, wait!”**

I shake my head. “I don’t get any of this! What do you mean, I was chosen?” I stare at Stella and imagine I see the confused look on my face reflected in her blue eyes.

“Yes, that’s right. Lucy brought you to our attention, and after a period of observation, we decided to bring you over.”

Questions upon questions tumble through my mind. I feel on the verge of panic. I look at Lucy, who smiles at me with that grandmotherly face, and suddenly, my fear disappears. I feel calm and ready to accept whatever these two women tell me, because I really have no choice. I focus again on Stella.

**“Tell me more.”**

Stella folds her long, pale hands on the desk before her. “In nearly all Western cultures, a woman who is past childbearing age becomes virtually invisible to the younger members of society. The phenomenon of aging female invisibility has been described in both scientific and popular literature for over a hundred years. Invisibility and powerlessness are inextricably linked, or so popular wisdom says. We in the Organization are living proof that the popular wisdom is wrong.

“From the earliest days, women who stopped the Treatment, either voluntarily or not, found that after they’d forgone the injections for a few weeks, the people around them began to ignore them, forget they were in a room, forget even that they were alive.

It took longer with family members, but eventually, even close relatives stopped seeing them. It’s not a fault of memory. All who knew you before you Transitioned will still remember you, they just don’t know where you’ve gone, and they don’t really care.”

I can’t help myself. A question rolls out of my mouth. “But how is this possible?”

Lucy takes up the thread. “We’re not exactly sure of the science, but we know the cocktail of chemicals that make up the Treatment alters DNA. It obviously affects the brain in ways no one anticipated when the Treatment was first made available. We don’t know why only women become invisible, but we’re sure it’s linked to how the X chromosome is altered and not the Y. The most interesting and useful thing about the phenomenon is the fact that we aren’t actually invisible. People can see us if we want them to, and even more important, they can hear us. This allows us to do what we do.”

I’m starting to understand, but the concept is so fantastic, I have trouble believing. I really do grasp it all.

“What is it the organization does?”

Stella leans forward.

“We control Luna.”

**“So, it was you who planted the idea in my mind that I had to stop the Treatment?”**

Lucy and I are standing on a balcony, looking out over the city. Above us, a half-Earth shines peacock blue and white amid a

sea of stars. Far below, the masses of natural and artificial young people go about their lives, oblivious to whom and what pulls the levers of their world.

“That’s right. I knew of your work at C.A.E. Biologics from a former colleague of yours. Perhaps you can recall her now? Tamika Wilson?”

A shock of recognition jolts me and memories flood back.

“Tamika disappeared about five years ago, but I didn’t remember that until just now. I thought she’d found another job.”

Lucy laughs. “She was my first assignment. It took me about three months, but I finally got her to stop her Treatments.”

“How does it work? I mean, how do the members of the Organization get people to do what they...what we, want them to do?”

“In the early days, when the Founders were first experimenting with how to do things, the methods were crude, yet surprisingly effective. All it took in most cases was simply whispering a command repeatedly in a subject’s ear. Later on, as more and more tech-savvy women were recruited, various devices were invented and utilized until the Brain Wave Modifier came online about thirty years ago. We’ve used the BWM ever since.”

Lucy pulls an object from her pocket. It looks like a PDA with two stubby antennae protruding from the top. She presses a button on the side of the device and a small screen lights up. She holds out the device for me to see.

“If you were a subject, this screen would show me your brain’s activity. By controlling your brain waves with this device, I can give you audible commands that you will feel compelled to follow. Now, it isn’t as easy as it sounds. There are a lot of people who are by nature difficult to control. They tend to be the very people we most need to control, however, such as high government officials and senior corporate officers. In the case of the Planetary Council, we have four operatives assigned to the President and two to the Vice President. Only some of the district representatives have operatives assigned to them, but these are all men or women in key positions. We really don’t need to cover everyone, of course; in fact, most people go about their lives completely unmonitored.”

Lucy tucks the BWM back in her pocket.

**“Why did you choose me? I’m only a research scientist in the animal vaccines division.”**

The question has been nagging me ever since the meeting with Stella.

“Tamika told us how you fought hard to push forward development on a number of livestock vaccines aimed at helping farmers of poorer, less developed colonies like New Iberia and New Gambia.”

“Yeah, and C.A.E. resisted because there was no profit in any of those projects.” I feel a prickle of anger as I remember my bosses’ dismissive attitudes.

“We need someone like you in the boardroom of C.A.E. We have a very ambitious agenda for the company,” Lucy says.

I lean on the railing of the balcony, feeling a bit overwhelmed. Lucy rubs my shoulder. Her touch is comforting.

“Will I be able to go home to my apartment?” I realize I no longer have to worry about how I’m going to live.

“Of course. As long as you keep up with your lease payments, no one will bother to investigate why the woman who used to live there seems to have vanished. Your neighbors will assume there’s a new tenant. You’ll be surprised at how easy life is. When you next walk through a public space, observe how the other people instinctively know not to bump into you. They can still see you, they just don’t know it on a conscious level. It’s quite fascinating.”

Those long-suppressed memories are trying to worm their way to the front of my consciousness again, awakened by my growing understanding of the implications of the new power I’ve been chosen to wield. For years, I’ve kept them locked away in the deepest recesses of my mind. Do I dare let them out now?

“Lucy...you say the Organization doesn’t monitor or control ordinary people, but what if...what if one of us wants or... or needs to get a particular person to do something for purely personal reasons?”

I’m afraid to look at Lucy, afraid she might see what it is I’m trying to hide.

“Attempting to control any citizen of Luna without the knowledge and permission of the Organization is strictly forbidden, Carole.” Lucy touches my arm and I have to look at her now, or else she’ll suspect my motive for asking.

“All personal vendettas must be put aside once you become one of us. We are the directors and guardians of society. That must take precedence over all else. You do understand?”

“Yes, of course.” I understand too well. “So, what’s the next step?”

“Now I take you over to Personnel and get you officially entered into the system. Then we’ll see about setting up your training. After that, you can go home and rest. Your official orientation starts tomorrow at nine a.m.”

Ten years.

My God, has it really been that long?

I’ve kept the memories of That Night successfully buried for more than six of the ten. Now, they want to come back, but for a very specific reason.

I decide to let them.

I lie on my bed and curl into a tight ball as the pain, so long dormant, washes over. Seized. Held down. Assaulted. Used. Beaten. Discarded.

All the while begging to know why. Why? Why are you doing this to me? I thought you were my friend!

He went to prison, but only for a little while. That’s one of the many useful things a powerful family can do for one of its own. He never once said he was sorry.

Such an important word. If only he’d said it. Maybe then, I wouldn’t have to do this.

I know where he lives.

It's been six months since I joined the Organization. I breezed through my training and now, I'm working my new assignment in the boardroom of C.A.E. Biologics.

There are three of us on the team. I have every expectation of one day becoming team leader.

Every night for the past five weeks, I've gotten off the train three stops before mine so I can walk to his apartment. He moved back in after he got out of prison. Since his family owns the building, it makes sense he'd go back there.

Getting inside is no problem. The standard passkey we're issued as part of our field gear opens most residential and business locks throughout the city, as well as allowing us to bypass all the common security systems. It makes it much easier for us to do our jobs. I arrive about fifteen minutes before he does. I sit on a stool in the kitchen because I can't bear to sit on his couch, and I wait.

The first thing he always does after he comes home is go to the bar and pour himself a drink. He takes it out to his balcony and there he sips, leaning on the railing and gazing into the night. I join him when he's on the balcony, looking at the city, leaning on the railing, high above the street.

Every night for the past five weeks, I've stood beside him on that balcony and I've whispered in his ear. I've told him what he is and what he needs to do. He's been drinking a

lot more recently. Last week, he cried a little. It won't be long now.

Tonight, he comes home late. His steps are clumsy as he heads for the bar. He must have had a few already. This is good, very good. My work is nearly finished. He doesn't bother with a glass; instead, he grabs the half-empty bottle of prime quality Earth-made whiskey and stumbles to the balcony.



I follow him. I watch as he sucks big gulps from the bottle, like the stuff inside is lemonade or water. I can see despair in the slump of his shoulders, in the way he squeezes his eyes shut as he tips back the bottle.

Oh, yes. Tonight, he'll show me he's sorry.

I stand next to him, so very close, yet not touching. After weeks of work, I can now control my body's visceral instinct to recoil in disgust. The pungent smell of whiskey swirls

around us. He drains the bottle and places it ever so carefully on the concrete by his feet. He straightens and clutches the black steel railing with shaking hands.

I whisper in his ear.

I slip through the heavy glass lobby doors and pause a moment to watch. A small crowd has gathered on the sidewalk. The wail of sirens drifts closer. Voices cry out in shock and horror. A car alarm adds its urgent blare to the mix. Above, I see silhouettes of people in windows and on balconies, looking down and pointing.

I move closer to the edge of the crowd, then stop.

No. I don't want to see, not really.

A police car screeches to a halt in the street beside me. Two cops leap out and stride toward me. I remain in place and let them sweep past, both unaware of my presence, and yet neither one touching me.

I turn and walk away, invisible.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Leslie Ann Moore** has been a storyteller since childhood. Her debut novel, *Griffin's Daughter*, the first in the *Griffin's Daughter Trilogy*, won the 2008 IBPA Ben Franklin Award for Best First Fiction. She is a native of Los

Angeles and practices the ancient and beautiful art of belly dancing. Her most recent novel is *A Tangle of Fates*.

## tb bedsheets

By Daniel Hentschel

*bread from the bone  
and wine from the marrow,  
now is the sun-sewn winter of a  
blue-leafed love;  
i am  
a young man dying  
with the Absolute—  
but i will cover the beamed roof, my friend,  
build about the place  
a hammock of threaded x's &  
guild the inward why,  
come to grips with my wound's white hollow  
and grapple my will, able and ambling,  
to till the earth of time  
into a self of shelves and bud and bud a bud  
and breathe —  
unsure  
how to count  
song beyond memory;  
with blood, cirrus lungs  
or the ticktock tuck  
in — yes, yes of all yeses — bread  
from the bone and wine from the marrow.*



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Daniel Hentschel** studied Creative Writing at Georgetown University where he received his degree in English and Philosophy. He established the Georgetown Poetics Society and was a Mount Vernon Poetry

finalist. His first book, *Mendicant Suites*, is available. He is also a short story writer and novelist.

# K is for Keep Writing

By Morgan St. James

If you really want to be a writer, my advice is to train yourself to write every day. It doesn't have to be a chapter of *War and Peace*, but it should be something that keeps the gears nicely oiled. In other words, include elements of creativity, as well as some sort of organization and pay attention to spelling, structure and grammar, regardless of the type of writing you choose that day.

Everyone has his or her own system, and as long as it works for you, it is definitely a system. Some authors feel they must write a prescribed number of words every day, come hell or high water—even if the creeks are rising, they must write. That is their system. Others feel they must write one chapter, one article or write for a certain length of time. Again, all are valid systems if they work.

Remember, environment is conducive to being able to concentrate, create and ultimately accomplish what you set out to do. Chaos is definitely no help. If possible, establishing an area away from other activities in the household is ideal. But that's not always possible, particularly in the midst of a growing family or other distractions. Setting up your laptop in a room where the TV is blaring, and perhaps kids are fighting, isn't going to do the trick unless the piece is about someone living in total turmoil. Even then, it might not work.

A good way to deal with this is to choose your time. Aim for the hours when it's quiet and there aren't constant interruptions for things that require your attention. Years ago, I



tried my hand at a children's book. At the time I had two young children, a busy business and I was attending extension classes several times a week at UCLA. The book became my relaxation time and I wrote or drew the illustrations every day. Generally, I did this work around eleven at night. It never got published, until *LaRue the Llama* was finally self-published as a Kindle book last year, but I haven't promoted it yet. Choosing my time may have been instrumental in my later habit of writing late at night, even if conditions were ideal at other times. As a published writer, creativity always seems stronger for me at night.

**Well, life goes on, so it's important to work out how you can keep writing. Personally, I'm fortunate to have an office where I can close the door when the inspiration hits me.** But, sometimes in all innocence, my husband chooses exactly that time to “visit” me at my desk and open up a discussion about any number of topics. If something like that happens to you, consider if what you're writing can be put on hold. If your answer is “yes,” by all means do so. Never forget that family relations are important. But if you feel the spark of an idea will slip away, unless it's critical to immediately attend to whatever the interruption was, don't be afraid to say, “Wow. That sounds interesting and I'd love to discuss it in detail. Can we just put this on hold for (half an hour, an hour—whatever you think it will take) so I can give it my full attention? I have to finish getting this written right now.”

Most spouses and children understand, because they would rather have your full involvement; plus, you have made them feel that what they need is important to you. That way the wonderful idea, solution, column — you name it—won't become an idea that was great but can't be recalled no matter how hard you try.

Okay, maybe you're not writing a book or story. There are so many outlets for keeping the writing flowing. Have a blog? Post on it at regular intervals. Besides striving to make the posts interesting, check to ensure the writing is tight as though preparing it for publication. Read it, then re-read it. Your blog is a publication, just a different kind, and it's a terrific way to keep in practice. The same

goes for emails. As a writer you should double check spelling, typos, missing words, etc. before hitting send.

Now let's talk about different types of writing patterns. I personally can't commit myself to “x” amount of words every day. What if my ideas dry up? Am I going to fill the pages with fluff just to hit a word count? What does that accomplish? Goals are wonderful tools, but cut yourself some slack. Leave room for adjustment. On the other hand, what if I hit the word count for the day—hey, I hit 3,000 words—and my ideas are still flowing like a gusher? Should I stop at that point because I hit my word count, and save the rest for tomorrow? My vote would be a resounding “no.” What if the same words or fervor are nowhere to be found the next day? If nothing interferes with writing for a longer period of time, I say to go for it.



The same argument can be made for people who force themselves to work for a prescribed length of time. No ideas? Why sit staring at the page? If you walk around, do something else, or call a friend, a brilliant

idea might hit. As in the number of words discussion above, unless your eyes are drooping or you're typing in your sleep, I wouldn't let the clock cut off creativity. But that's me. That's my system. As the trite saying goes, I believe in, "Strike while the iron is hot," and I'm also a consummate workaholic.

Writing is like riding a bicycle or driving a stick-shift car. Sure, you can come back up to speed if you do it enough, but why allow the techniques and ideas to ebb away at all? Just a little time spent each day will pay off in the end. I don't work on my books every single day, but I write columns, scripts for workshops, emails to friends and family, blog when I can and it all generates or polishes techniques and ideas.

*Did this article help jump start your creative juices or at least make you think about it? The Writers Tricks of the Trade ezine publishes semi-monthly on the 15th of the month. Links to the current issue and archived issues are always available at <http://writerstricksofthetrade.blogspot.com>. And, don't forget the Writers Tricks of the Trade show on Blog Talk Radio, the 2nd and 4th Wednesday of the month at 6:00 PST.*



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

For more information about **Morgan St. James**, visit [www.morganstjames-author.com](http://www.morganstjames-author.com) website or the Silver Sisters Mysteries website. Morgan frequently speaks and gives workshops for published and aspiring writers at conferences and events.

[www.MorganStJames-author.com](http://www.MorganStJames-author.com)  
[www.WritersTrickOfTheTrade.blogspot.com](http://www.WritersTrickOfTheTrade.blogspot.com)

## talk of the dead

By Daniel Hentschel

*we do not speak of them —  
in the throat of a buffalo carcass, will  
and yet there is talk.  
a fly, for example, webbed  
dial & dial & dial  
with rotary eyes.  
what can be more useful?  
at love  
hair stuffs a pillow to its brim.  
teeth can be put in a child's rattler.  
the human hide makes a safe umbrella.*



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Daniel Hentschel** studied Creative Writing at Georgetown University where he received his degree in English and Philosophy. He established the Georgetown Poetics Society and was a Mount Vernon Poetry finalist. His first book, *Mendicant Suites*, is available. He is also a short story writer and novelist.



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# Uncle George

By Mary Pease

**M**y Aunt Sylvia always said her husband George was a worthless man. Yet, she had four children with him. Guess he wasn't worthless at everything. George was always looking for a job but could never keep one. Sylvia watched George like a lioness seeking a meal. George knew she was dangerous, but he kept coming back.

One hot summer day, Uncle George entered the kitchen through the squeaking screen door. Mom and Aunt Sylvia were peeling potatoes and steaming up the windows with boiling water. I was lying on the kitchen floor, sweating and looking for a cool spot with my cousins. It was too hot to move or talk, so everyone looked towards the sound of the squeaking door. George walked in a few steps, stopped and waited for Aunt Sylvia to acknowledge he was home from job hunting.

You could tell he had no good news as he stared at the floor. His fleeting glances up at the boiling pots let you know he was hungry.

Finally my Aunt turned around with a potato in one hand and a knife in the other. "George," she said, "did you get a job?"

"No. No," he answered softly as he timidly looked up at her. "I looked everywhere, a-walkin', ya know, and decided I needed to come home to eat. I 'uz gettin' real thirsty and

hungry." His eyes dropped back down toward the floor and he shuffled his feet a little.

"George!" She yelled. "If you don't work you don't eat. You were not to come home without a job!"

As my Aunt's voice got louder, the tension in the room was building. Every sweaty child stuck to the floor was starting to slither out of the danger zone. You could feel a major storm was about to hit. Uncle George was ever so slightly moon-walking back toward the screen door.



Then he said in a perky voice,

**"Well, I found work for you and your sister, puttin' up wall-paper, and they're hiring women at the egg factory."**

He smiled like this was good news. He wanted one of those boiled potatoes.

Every child was now near the other exit from the kitchen. We all had a gut feeling Uncle George was going to get it.

Sure enough, as he stood there smiling at her with his good-news look, my Aunt drew back her arm and threw the baseball-size potato, hitting him between the eyes with a loud thud. He didn't see it coming. The impact of the potato made him stumble back towards the door. He turned to run but just as he opened the screen door to go through, the knife sank deep into the calf of his right leg. Howling in pain, he continued out the door and down the street with the knife lodged in his calf.

"Don't come back without a job!" my Aunt yelled out the door. Then she walked over and picked up another potato like nothing happened.

"Son-of-a-bitch," she said. "That worthless bastard has my good parin' knife. Bastard wanted a potato. Guess he got one," she laughed, "and a knife to peel it with."

Every child was so quiet leaving the kitchen you could hear the buzzing of the flies.



*Summer is here, which, while perhaps meaning quantitatively little in terms of Los Angeles weather (though it does tend to grow slightly colder, at least in this first stretch), for us at Literary Landscapes the season means a significant change: the christening of our talented new production artist, Lynnette Rozine Prock. Welcome aboard!*



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Mary Pease** lives in Los Angeles, California. She is currently working on a memoir of short stories called "Laughter in The Attic." The theme is finding sanity in dysfunction and a safe place to laugh.



#### **ABOUT THE DESIGNER:**

**Rozine** is an author & commercial artist focused on transformation and growth by developing self-awareness and mindfulness. Her four books can be found on Amazon, or her website: [www.MyDreamsMatter.com](http://www.MyDreamsMatter.com)

# The Calling Card

By Eric J. Guignard

The calling card was black as midnight, and the message written across its face shimmered fire-gold. Letters and runes bowed together presenting a line of script which, when read, caused Old Man Popp to tremble.

*Sorry I missed you.  
Will try back later.  
G. Reaper*

The card measured only a few inches long and half that in height. Popp might have overlooked it entirely as he came home that afternoon, but the faint smell of brimstone caused him to search for its source. At first he thought he'd left the coffee maker on again and the java was burning, but then he found the card on the kitchen table, leaning against a half-drunk bottle of gin.

This was the third card Popp had found on his table in the past month. He thought the first card was a joke. The second one caused him concern. And now number three...

"What do you want me to do, make an appointment?" Popp called out to the room. "I'm not going to sit here and wait for you, that's for sure."

He crinkled the card up and flicked it in the trash. Some guys just have poor timin', he thought, and lit a cigar.

Two days later, Popp came home late at night. He had spent the afternoon playing golf and drinking beer. This time, however, he was not alone when the card was discovered.

Sharon saw it first and shrieked. She worked at the local tavern as a cocktail waitress; she was a bit weathered and a bit used up, but Popp's favorite date to keep him company. The card smoldered faintly in the dim light and, for a moment, she thought it was meant for her.

Popp just shook his head at the now-familiar sight of fire-gold script. "That bum. How many times is he going to let himself into my house? He may as well move in and help with the rent."

**"Honey, you got a date with death,"** Sharon said.

"Yeah, but first I got a date with you!" He swatted her on the tush, and Sharon shrieked again, which turned into giggles.

Over the next month, Popp collected four more of G. Reaper's calling cards. If it was time to pass from this mortal world, he decided he was ready. Popp had lived a good life and, truth be told, still did, even at his advanced age. He made the most of every opportunity and partook in all of life's sweet delights. Unlike

most folks he knew, he never suffered the lingering effects of regret. He wondered at the marvels of the afterlife and wished the ghostly visitor would get it over with; this routine with death was like a bad debt collector who calls repeatedly to leave the same message on voice mail: time to pay up, time to pay up.



© ROZINE

Finally, one night the head of G. Reaper popped from the air in a cloud of sulfur and smoke, as if leaning casually through a window. Its skeletal face emanated chill—ivory white—and was cloaked under a cowl of darkness. It motioned to Popp with one bony finger.

**“Psst, hey, you got a moment?”**

“I’m on your schedule,” Popp replied, perplexed.

“I’ve been trying to get ahold of you. I’m beginning to think you’re evading me.”

“I thought you were omnipresent. Can’t you find me whenever you want?”

“I’m not God, I’m just an employee. I’ve got rules to follow. You’re supposed to die at home so this is the only place I can meet you. Every time I come by though, you’re out somewhere else.”

“You got me now. Guess this is it, huh?”

“No, no, I’m too busy at present. I’ve got appointments booked all night. I just wanted to see if I could schedule something with you. It’s getting a little ridiculous, this back-and-forth business.”

“You’re telling me,” Popp said. He cocked a white eyebrow at the harbinger of doom. He certainly was not enthused to follow this bonehead into the yawning gates of eternity.

“How does tomorrow night sound, say ten-thirty?” the Reaper asked.

“How about next decade?”

“A real wise guy, aren’t ya? I’ll be back tomorrow night at ten-thirty. You’ve been warned.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve been warned. Doctors have been warning me for twenty years. Keep drinkin’, they said, the Reaper will come for you. Keep smokin’, they said, Death is watching. Well, we all gotta go sometime. May as well enjoy it while we can.”

“You’ve got one more day to enjoy, and then those doctors can say they’re right. Your choices have caught up with you.”

**“So, what will do me in?”**

“You’ll know soon enough,” the Reaper said and withdrew into its cloud of sulfur and smoke. A bitter, burnt scent remained like charred coal soaking in hog fat.

Popp shook his head. “My last day on Earth, and he stinks up the house.”

He lit a cigar and called Sharon, then swung open the doors on his liquor cabinet, telephoned his buddies, and lived those remaining hours as a carnal savage.

Ten-thirty arrived quicker than hoped and brought with it a billowing cloud of sulfur and smoke. The Grim Reaper stepped into Popp’s living room wrapped in a gossamer black frock and holding a hickory scythe mounted by a blade of fire. It reminded Popp of his childhood, hunting through the Ozarks in the middle of night holding a flaming torch in search of quarry.

Popp tried to remain composed and slowly stood to meet his fate. On the kitchen table lay his will and final wishes. He finished a glass of bourbon and set it next to his effects, wondering if he had time for a chaser.

The Reaper spoke, booming, as if announcing candidates for an election. “It is time for your departure. You, Old Man Pott, are hereby —”

“Eh? You mean Popp?”

“It’s just a courtesy to refer to you in familiarity. Makes the passing more comfortable. I know that’s not your full name.”

**“I haven’t been called anything else in the past few decades.”**

“Popp, Pott, whatever. John Ezekiel Pott. The time has come —”

“Who’s John Ezekiel Pott?”

The Reaper’s skull twitched, as if its bones were pliable, and one brow rose in agitation. “You! You’re John Ezekiel Pott. Don’t get cagey with me.”

Popp’s eyes squinted, and he looked deep into the Reaper’s orbital sockets. “Is there anything inside that death head of yours? A brain, maybe?”

“C’mon, you’re Old Man Pott... aren’t you?”

“No. Like I said, it’s Popp.”

“You’re telling me you’re not John Ezekiel Pott, also known as Old Man Pott?”

“My birth name is John William Popp.”

“Uh... Does Pott live around here?”

“How should I know!”

The Reaper fidgeted and opened its nebulous jaws to speak, then shut them with a snap. It looked around Popp’s room and ran its fingers along the razor edge of the burning scythe.

Popp watched it and clenched his fists in exasperation. “You bumbler!” he shouted. “All this time you’ve been harassing me? I outta whack you upside the head.”

“Don’t even think about it. You don’t know what I can do.”

“Like kill me?”

Death’s pale skull turned crimson. “I’ll be back. Just you wait.”

“Yeah, yeah, tell it to Pott.”

The Reaper pulled its black cowl further over its face and departed, head bowed, through the portal of sulfur and smoke.

Popp signed. He got to have his chaser after all. He poured another glass of bourbon and dialed numbers on the phone.

“Hey, doll, I’ve got a new lease on life. Want to come over and celebrate?”

Two months later Popp walked into his house, snapping fingers and whistling a tune played from the local dance social. There had been dice, drinks, good music, and plenty of widows who were still easy on the eyes. He’d gotten the numbers for two of them, one of whom even retained natural color in her hair.

Inside, though, he stopped and smelled the air. The now-familiar scent of roasting coal floated by, a hazel miasma that caused him to gag. The Grim Reaper, who had its back to him, suddenly turned as if caught doing something unexpectedly. Its scythe burst into flame.

“Oh, wasn’t expecting you,” it said.

“I do live here,” Popp replied.

“I meant, I didn’t think I’d catch you on the first try. I was just leaving a card. Figured you’d be out again, boozing and womanizing at all hours.”

“It was a slow night.”

“Well, apparently, there’s been some sort of mix-up,” the Reaper said.

“You don’t say.”

**“You were supposed to die twenty years ago.”**

“Hm. Don’t feel like I’ve been dead for twenty years.” Popp crossed his arms.

“Yes, well, eh... apparently I took the wrong man back then.”

“So you bumbled again.”

“It’s not easy what I do. The population is skyrocketing. Every day, there’s more and more people to deal with. You try escorting the souls of over six thousand dead every hour, and see if you don’t mix someone up once in a while.”

“So what do we do now?”

“It’s time to come with me.”

**“I don’t get an advance appointment this time?”**

The Reaper shook its head. “Sorry, you’re a special case now.”

“What does that mean?”

“Consider it a customer service issue. You were headed downstairs.”

Popp’s eyes widened in dismay. He never

believed there was actually eternal judgment of souls. He glanced down and imagined he could see through the linoleum floor far below to a flickering world of red-and-black. He realized the bitter sulfur smell that trailed the Grim Reaper must be a residual scent carried along from the charred souls of the damned, like barbecuing in front of an open grill. After doing that, you can't help but smell like charcoal for the rest of the day.

"You said that last part in the past tense," Popp whispered.

"You've been leading a pretty hedonistic life: gluttony, blasphemy, promiscuity."

Popp imagined the burning sulfur smell growing stronger.

The Reaper continued. "But in light of the mix-up, management is willing to go easy on you. You're going to wander in purgatory for a few millennia until your fate is decided."

"Millennia?" Popp repeated. He felt the bourbon climbing back up his throat.

"You're lucky at that. You're not being judged on the last twenty years, since you were accidentally forced to live in a world of sin longer than scheduled. You have some good deeds in your earlier years that weigh in your favor, like the love you gave your children and the sacrifice you made for your late wife, Mabel."

Popp's jaw fell open like the trapdoor beneath a man set to hang. "A wife? Children? I've never been married or had any kids."

The Reaper's jaw dropped, following Popp's lead. "Mother of Hannah... but you're

John William Popp!"

"Sure, that's my name, but I'm telling you that ain't my life."

"Born in New York? Moved to the northwest after Mabel died?"



"No! I was born in Oklahoma and, like I said, I've never been married. What's the problem now?"

The Reaper's scythe extinguished, and he stammered as he spoke, more to himself than to Popp. "I, I don't understand... the files said we took the wrong John Wallace Popp twenty

years ago. Husband of Mabel, father of two.”

“You bumbler! You just said John Wallace Popp. Are you looking for John William or John Wallace? You’ve got the names and lives all mixed up.”

“No, no, I assure you this will all get sorted out.” The Reaper reached inside the ethereal shroud that surrounded it and rustled around until it pulled out a large papyrus scroll.

“How many other folks have you taken before their time or sent packing to the wrong afterlife?” Popp asked.

“Our margin of error is infinitesimal, really never happens. Believe me, um, you’re a rare exception.”

The Reaper fumbled with the scroll. “I, eh, just need to double-check something.”

The scroll slipped from its skeletal fingers and unraveled over the floor as Popp looked on.

“Ahem, my mistake.” It bent over to gather up the parchment, and a stack of brimstone-infused calling cards slipped out from the ethereal shroud, scattering across the linoleum in all directions.

“Whoops,” the Reaper mumbled.

Popp saw the familiar message shimmering on the black cards in fire-gold:

*Sorry I missed you.  
Will try back later.  
G. Reaper*

Exasperation overcame him, and he shouted again, “You bumbler!”

“Show some respect,” the Reaper said. “I’m Death!” It stood to face Popp, and its scythe slipped from slippery skeletal fingers that gleamed with nervous perspiration.

The fiery blade dropped and impaled Popp in the chest. His eyes bulged out like a fish flopping on dry banks, and he sank to his knees. The Reaper gasped.

“I’m so sorry! Don’t die yet, I’ll fix this!”

The Reaper pulled its scythe back and the hickory bottom banged against a bottle of bourbon, sending it crashing to the floor.

“Aw, geez,” it muttered.

Popp’s life faded fast. He rolled over onto the floor and chocked out one final word before his spirit set free.

“Bumbler..”

**THE END**



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Eric J. Guignard**’s a writer and editor of dark and speculative fiction, operating from the shadowy outskirts of Los Angeles. He’s won the 2013 Bram Stoker Award and was a finalist for the 2014 International Thriller Writers Award. Outside the realm of fiction, he’s a technical writer and college professor.

Visit Eric at:  
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# Sylva Slasher

By Ace Antonio Hall

Yeah, the whole stinking planet wanted me dead, and they got their wish. I tried to move but couldn't. Not with a broken back. Breathing slow, uneven, I stared into the undead woman's eyes that dripped an ominous glare down onto my helpless body.

Maybe if I hadn't gotten dreamy eyes for this really cute guy (I mean jerk), the weight of the human race wouldn't be sitting on my shoulders. I would've easily given my life so my best friend, Emily, wouldn't die. Too late.

The full moon draped around the undead woman's shadow that climbed up my broken body like ghosts of death. The island soil, thirsty for moisture, welcomed my blood. Terror wrestled me into a stone cold chokehold — I forgot how to scream. The scent of rotten corpses gripped my nostrils. A horde of the walking dead moaned and hovered over me like starved coyotes as the undead woman crept forward on all fours to kill me, again.

I hated that I couldn't tell reality from my nightmares. Maybe, just maybe I spent one too many nights raising the dead. My parents named me Sylva Fleischer, but most people knew me as Sylva Slasher (I'll get to why later). I made a pretty cool living as a necromancer for The Silver Kisses Aerial Ash Scattering Company. We raised zombies for mourners

to say their last goodbyes. A lot of times we did it for police investigations, occasionally for corporate disputes, and then we cremated the deadheads and scattered the remains over Hawaii's beautiful waters. As a matter of fact, some guy from the military base in Honolulu kept leaving messages on my cell phone that he wanted me to raise some dead soldier for a case they were investigating. But I had other plans. Look, I just turned eighteen, so if I wanted to ditch some lame colonel for something way more hella-fun, I would. What? Can't a girl have priorities?

Twilight peeked over my shoulders as I looked for my friends while aboard the Sea Queen — The Ship of a Thousand Corpses — the best freaking zombie-themed cruise in America. Imagine being in one of those magnificent hotels in Las Vegas during spring break: the golden elevators, escalators, walkover bridges, restaurants, and stores, filled with tons of thrill-seeking college kids and adults. You could call the Sea Queen one of the world's best luxury hotels but on water.

A woman hired me to do a raising on the ship. Emily, and her boyfriend, Beckham, or Flip as he liked to be called (Hawaiian-born and Japanese-descended like Em), were going to help me. After I finally got dressed, I saw Emily's wacky picture that she posted on Facebook and her bitchy complaint that she and Flip were waiting on me (I'm always fashionably late) in the bar on the Nightwalker

Deck. Unfortunately, I didn't have a clue where to go. The captain was escorting me up, but some kind of urgent call came in and he dashed out of the elevator speaking radio codes into his walkie-talkie.

One of my all-time fave videos, Sweet Dreams, played on the inside of the elevator doors via a high-tech projector system. I loved that I could watch a music video (albeit, one I've seen a kazillion times) inside the elevator. A volume control knob sat beneath the red emergency button. Marilyn Manson crawled out of the rundown fireplace wearing black boots, a dirty tutu, and a torn bodice that showed off his skeletal bare chest. All right, that's enough. I turned the sound down so I could briefly gather my thoughts for the raising.

The elevator doors eased open. I stepped out, immediately folding my arms and shivering. I wore a black midriff tee shirt, tight leather pants, and some five-and-a-half-inch knee-high Gothic boots. I sighed, berating myself for not wearing a warmer top. The ship's fake fog blanketed the air so I could barely see anything. Already late, I didn't want to waste any more time, so I stopped to ask a person dressed like a zombie nun for directions. She sat on the bench in front of the ship's THEATRE UNDER THE STARS, rocking back and forth. A broken dog leash dangled in her hand. The closer I got, the more I realized her hunched feeble posture.

"Lady, are you okay?" I asked.

She didn't answer but kept rocking. Her abrupt movements made her wimple flap around her neck and chin. I glanced up at the speaker mounted on the wall above us, crept

out by the spooky organ music streaming out into the foggy air.

The lady made a gurgling sound.

**"Miss, hey? Are you okay?"**

Her head lifted slowly. The yellow rays from the moon crept into the shadows under her headdress. I stepped forward slowly, swallowing unease.

A name spilled out of my mouth, slow, whispered. "Malena?"

I remembered admiring the blind woman's seeing eye dog when we embarked the ship. I couldn't resist petting her wolfdog. Emily and Flip were so occupied looking for their tickets that they didn't even see Malena and her dog.

She made another gurgling sound. I took a step back, peering into her cloudy-white eyes.

"Um, okay, I get it," I said. "You were hired by the ship to scare people. Right?"

I swayed a little to the left as the ship went over choppy waters. The blind woman stared past me with a vacant stare, and then her head rolled over to her right shoulder.

"Hey — hey — hey. You're not okay," I said, extending my arm, ready to catch her if she fell off of the bench.

Was she having a seizure?

Malena muttered something. Saliva ran down her mouth and dripped down her chalky white face.

“Are you having a allergic reaction?” I glanced to my right, then left. “Maybe I should get the ship’s doctor.”

Her body started to convulse and she dropped the dog’s leash on the deck’s floor. She moaned, curling up into a ball on the bench.

“Okay — okay — okay, I’m going to get help,” I said, taking a quick step toward the stairs. “But, uh, shoot, I don’t want to leave you alone.”

A sign directly above her read nightwalker deck maze; another, near the elevator lifts, pointed to the bathrooms. Someone had to be coming by, any second. Another gurgling noise came from the blind woman. She coughed and blood spurted out of her mouth. I shielded my eyes with the back of my hand and something wet splattered on my forearm.

“Oh, my God, Malena! You’re, you’re hemorrhaging.”

I wiped her blood off my arms, onto the side of my top and pulled out my iPhone to call 911. No reception.

### **“Somebody, help. Call 911!”**

I heard someone giggling and saw shadows approaching me through the fog. Two Asian girls, maybe in their late teens, dressed in shredded jeans and pink tee shirts passed behind me.

I gestured to them. “Can I use either one of your phones to call 911? This lady is totally sick!”

“Nice try,” one of them said, revealing the braces on her teeth. “But you only try to scare us.”

“No, please, really. Are you getting reception out here? I’m not getting reception.”

They laughed and pointed at the bench. “Maybe she pull your leg,” the same girl said.

I turned around and glared at an empty bench.

Where did she go?

The girls giggled and walked toward the bathroom, shaking their heads.

“What a moron,” the other one said.

“Miss? Miss, where are you?” I called out, a little irritated by those stupid girls who didn’t believe me. I looked toward the bridge then back at the girls. “Where did she go?” They ignored me and went into the bathroom. Seriously?

“Maybe I am a moron,” I said, under my breath. There were a few droplets of blood on the bench, but I couldn’t find a trail showing me which way she went. She could’ve only gone but so many places — the elevator lift, the stairs, across the bridge (which she didn’t because I would have seen her), overboard, or into the Nightwalker Deck Maze.

If that old, blind lady thought I was going to play her game and follow her into the maze, she had another thing coming. Whatever. Time to do this raising and then try to have some fun for a change.

I took one step and the thought of Malena sent a chill creeping down the nape of my neck. Where did she go? Aw, who cares? I shook it off, folded my arms, again, and walked toward a bridge that led to the highest deck on the ship.

Someone screamed. I turned quickly, and blew out a long breath as a wolf man in tattered clothes chased a screaming girl across the bridge and through a door. Music blared from out of the place and I knew that Emily and Flip would be in there. That must be the bar, Lipstick Zombies.

I walked over the bridge, glancing back every few seconds for Malena. The instant I crossed halfway over, I heard the music thumping behind the bar's door. When I saw the neon sign, I got a little excited. Maybe with

a little partying, I thought, I'd feel better and forget about everything that sucked in my life — for a while.

## END OF PART 1



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Ace Antonio Hall** is the author of the novel, *Confessions of Sylva Slasher*. His short stories have been awarded Honorable Mention for the Writers of the Future Awards 2013 and 2014.

He published his short story *Dead Chick Walking* in *Calliope Magazine* Fall 2013. In 2015, Hall has sold his short stories to Weasel Press/*The Haunted Traveler*, *Bride of Chaos/9 Tales*, *Pure Fantasy & Science Fiction, Vol. 4*, *Jitter/Prolific Press*, and *Night to Dawn Magazine #29*.



This photo is an expanded version of the cover image.

# Tornado

By Katherine Stewart

The massive tornado had lifted the farmhouse into the air with such force that the wooden siding was shredded into splinters that rained for miles over the Kansas wheat fields. By the time Margot Blair and her sister June drove into the gravel driveway, all that was left of their family home was the cement block foundation and a scattering of floorboards.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,” June whispered.

“It’s a blessing we moved Dad last week,” Margot said.

Hugging her sister, Margot smelt a hint of lavender and the percolated coffee that June drank nearly every hour to ease the depression that was common to most farm wives.

“Too bad Mom isn’t around to see the house all broken into smithereens. She hated this farm,” June said, as if it were common knowledge.

Margot wiped a tear and looked toward the distant bank of cumulus clouds that crowded the horizon, remembering her father standing in the parched field. She imagined his tall, strong body silhouetted against the hopeless sky, throwing his fist into the air and demanding that it rain. She would have sworn he’d die on the farm, but the years of failed crops broke him, and now he was little more than air, skin and bones lying in a nursing home, disappearing into dementia.

The two women kicked the debris away from the trapdoor and opened the root cellar to the transparent sky. Cautiously moving down the steps, Margot felt the familiar chill of rammed earth creeping up her legs and, adjusting her eyes, saw shards of sunlight from where the iron bathtub had smashed through the floor joists.

“Lord, look at this mess,” June said, shaking her head.

A sea of Mason jars full of winter preserves had shattered on the floor and, in the middle of a stew of peaches, tomatoes and summer squash, Margot spotted a tin box about the size of a milk crate.

“It must have been wedged behind the shelves,” she said.

“I don’t recognize it,” June answered, placing it on the steps and going back to searching for any remnant of their childhood life.

Under the florescent light of June’s kitchen, the two women pried open the lid of the dusty tin box and found a layer of aging birthday cards and letters addressed to their father. Digging deeper, they unearthed newspaper clippings, which Margot carefully spread out on the table.

“That’s Kelly Colson. She babysat us when we were kids.” June smoothed out the folds of the yellowing, brittle paper.

Margot stared at Kelly Colson’s high school photograph just below the headline: “Farm Accident Kills Teen in Brown County,” and out loud, read how the girl had tripped and hit her head on a tractor blade.

“I need a cup of coffee,” June said, rushing to plug in the percolator. “Look what I bought at Farm Mart yesterday.” She held a red coffee cup the size of a cereal bowl in her hands.

Ignoring her sister, Margot laid the newspaper clippings aside and brought out a pile of Polaroid photographs neatly wrapped in tissue paper, but suddenly dropped them like vermin after glimpsing the first yellowing image. Spread across June’s plastic floral tablecloth were photos of Kelly Colson posing naked in a newly plowed field.

“Get this shit out of my house.” June’s screeching only penetrated the silent core of Margot’s shock after the tin box had been thrown into the back seat of her car.

For weeks the tin box sat in Margot’s garage like an uninvited guest. Daily June nagged her sister to burn it, but Margot had a strong need to understand the complexity of her father’s life. She wanted to level the field between loving him and knowing him, no matter how disturbing such a task might be.

The tornado season had ended, and the straight-line winds eased when Margot again opened the tin box. A second glass of red wine steadied her nerves as she laid a diary wrapped

in a tea towel, in her lap. Turning it over in her hands, she noted that it was similar to a birthday present she had received when she was 8 years old. The pink cover was embossed with a drawing of a dancing unicorn surrounded by butterflies, and the pages were edged in gold. The tiny brass lock opened easily to a flurry of cut-out hearts and bows, and on the title page Kelly Colson had carefully printed her name with a warning, “Private diary. Keep out.”

Margot hoped that the diary would speak to her in whimsical tones. But after reading the first few pages about school and boys, Margot began to hear Kelly’s voice and it made her feel unsettled. It was a pouty, defiant voice. A voice that gossiped, manipulated and bragged about watching the farm animals “do it” and how her older brother Frank had a gigantic “dick”. Margot had to remind herself that Kelly was only 15 years old, but by the time she saw her father’s name scribbled on the page she felt palpable hatred for the girl.

*Dear Diary,*

*I went to the Vincent Park Swimming Pool today and saw Mr. Blair with his two little girls. He is so cute, he looks like Bobby Rydell, but taller and a better body. I was wearing my new blue polka-dot bikini and I saw him looking at my boobs and it made me feel good.*

A row of hearts trailed off the page.

*Dear Diary,*

*Mr. Blair gave me a ride home from the store and asked me to babysit his girls sometime. I think he likes me because he kept smiling at me. He is even better looking close up.*

Despite the rising nausea, Margot kept turning the pages.

*Dear Diary,*

*I babysat for Mr. Blair. His wife is nice and the girls are really cute, especially little Margot, she's 3 and June is 8. Mr. Blair drove me home and asked if I had a boyfriend, I said no and asked him if he had a girlfriend and he laughed. He told me to call him Sam. I can hardly wait to see him again.*

*Dear Diary,*

*Sam wants me to babysit again. I just know that he wants to kiss me. Maybe a French kiss like the ones Frank gives me.*

Margot read the entry again and suddenly felt sickened by Kelly's strange world. But the diary had her spellbound, and she kept going, hoping her father would sense the danger.

*Dear Diary,*

*Sam touched me on the leg when he drove me home from babysitting. He asked if I was a virgin. I told him I'd only done it once (I am such a liar). He asked if I liked sex and I told him yes. I could see he was getting hot for me, but we didn't do anything. Next week I go to summer camp. I will miss him, but tomorrow I'll leave him some Polaroid photos that will keep him thinking about me while I am gone.*

Closing her eyes, Margot felt as if the cherished memories of her father were now shaded in great waves of blackness. The texture of his strong, calloused hands that delicately held her as the winds roared past their house,

his awkward voice when reading bedtime stories, the tone of his cursing and laughter, the way he moved when dancing, and the height of his distress when Mother died, had all suddenly lost their truth.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to exhale the tension in her body, but Margot was drowning in a cascade of feelings that painted her father as both a victim and predator. The fact that Kelly Colson was so young had disappeared behind the crudeness of her words, and Margot was starting to believe that her father was simply naïve and farm-ignorant. But she was also worldly enough to know that farm life is raw, desperate, and on the wrong day, fatal.

*Dear Diary,*

*Summer camp is so much fun. Last night I went swimming with some boys and we all took off our bathing suits. We didn't have sex, but that doesn't mean they didn't touch me in all the right places. Tomorrow is the last day of camp and I can hardly wait to see Sam.*

*Dear Diary,*

*I am so happy. Sam gave me a big kiss tonight and felt me up. He said that he wanted to have sex with me but he was married. I told him it would be our secret and he got all sweaty. I could tell he was hard because he was rubbing himself on me like Jimmy Walters. God he is so hot.*

Turning each page Margot found a story of sex and secrecy written in a childlike scribble. Flowers were pressed in pages, gifts were described, and her father's thoughtfulness seeped through the carnage.

*Dear Diary,*

*Sam is so sweet. When we have sex in the field he always brings a blanket. I love him and want to marry him.*

Margot had finished her fourth or fifth glass of wine and felt completely disembodied. The voice in her head was textured with deep despair after realizing that she had no road map or compass that would align her with the proper path of her father's life. She felt completely abandoned by the time she turned to the day of Kelly Colson's death.

*Dear Diary,*

*I am babysitting Sam's kids today. Sam and Ruth drove into Lawrence to look at a new tractor. I have to tell....*

The sentence stopped abruptly and the next page was empty.

Sitting next to her father's hospital bed, Margot heard his short, congested breaths that distracted her from the sour, earthy smell that blanketed his sunken, pale body.

"Dad, it's Margot."

She saw his eyes moving behind the thin skin of his lids, and with a sudden cough he woke and focused on her face.

"Ruth? Is that you?"

"No, it's Margot."

She wiped his lips with a wet cloth and helped him sit up. The dementia had given his

face a serene and sweet expression, as though he were strolling through a beautiful dream.

"I am so glad to see you," her father said, and as he shifted in the bed, Margot saw the remnants of cut muscles that refused to waste away.

"Dad, June and I found a tin box in the root cellar," Margot said, pausing to watch for a reaction, but he looked distracted.

"You remember the tin box in the root cellar?" she continued.

"Never went into the root cellar. Where's your mother?" He looked around the room. "Ask her; she knows all about the root cellar." He pointed to the corner of the room, but when Margot followed his finger, she saw only an empty metal chair.

"Dad, Kelly Colson's diary was in the box. Do you know anything about it?"

Her father became agitated, as if he were searching for an answer. Suddenly he found a thread to a memory, and started shouting at the corner of the room.

"That goddamn diary, that's how you trapped me. I would have gone off, you bitch, but you would have told the police I killed her and you had that diary to prove it. If it weren't for that goddamn diary I would have..." He tried to get out of bed, but gave up when Margot pushed him down.

"Dad, tell me about the accident." Margot could see he was drifting away.

"Ask your sister."

“What?” Margo waited, but the tide of her father’s thoughts had already changed.

“Where’s the newspaper?” he said. “I need the weather forecast.”

**M**argot followed her sister through the kitchen and out the back door insisting that she tell her about Kelly Colson’s death. Desperate to escape, June ran from the porch into the open field, only to collapse under the weight of her sobbing.

“I never told anyone. I promised,” June wailed at the sky, looking for reassurance. Margot crouched in the fallow field and held her sister so tight that she felt fused to June’s grief.

“Can’t we wait until Dad dies?” June said.

“Dad is really dead already... it’s time you told me what happened,” Margot said, and reluctantly, June unleashed the story of how Kelly Colson died.

“I was playing in the tool shed and found the photos.” June spoke as if the words were poison. “She was sitting at the kitchen table writing in that diary, like she always did. I threw the photos at her and called her a bad name. She got mad, chased me into the field, and caught me by the tractor.” June paused to find her bearings. “I was just a little girl, and she said these horrible, nasty things about Dad, so I pushed her... hard.”

Margot quietly rocked her sister under the waking stars and heard all the secrets. How their Mother had found June hiding in

the closet after discovering the photos and diary strewn across the kitchen floor; how her father found Kelly Colson dead beside the tractor blade; the lies to the police; and eventually, how the tin box, safely hidden in the root cellar, became the coal tar that kept their parents’ relationship together.

“Sometimes when I am out in the field I can still hear Dad crying,” June said, finally releasing the burden of Kelly Colson’s death into the night sky.

The sisters took the tin box back to the ruins of their family home and burnt its contents in the yard. The fire quickly consumed the aged paper, but left the brass lock of the diary, which June smashed with a rock.

**T**he wind whipped around Margot’s legs as she walked from her father’s grave. She saw the dark clouds in the distance, and knew that a slight change in temperature would give birth to a tornado. She wondered where it would touch ground, and whose house would next be in its path.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Dr. Katherine Stewart** was born in Los Angeles, but has spent much of her adult life in Sydney. Her career in Australia was devoted to treating young people who struggle with psychosis, and much of her early writing reflects her clinical interest. After recently returning to the United States, she has discovered her love for writing fiction and is now actively involved in writing courses, a critique group, GLAWS & writing her first novel.

# There's Power in the Public Domain

By Art Holcomb

**S**tuck for an idea to develop?

As a writer, I'm constantly looking for new approaches and new ideas to write about. In recent years, there have been a number of books that have been written about characters developed by writers in the past – such as Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and others that are available for any writer today to use and spin off because they are in the Public Domain. My friend Peter Clines wrote a great twisted novel entitled *The Eerie Adventures of the Lycanthrope*. Parodies like *Sense and Sensibilities* and *Zombies* received such critical claims that they have been in development as motion pictures.

Works in the public domain are those whose intellectual property rights have expired, have been forfeited, or are inapplicable. That means that any writer can continue to tell the tales of the characters – by writing prequels or sequels to existing stories, writing adaptations and continuing adventures, or develop entirely new approaches using these characters – without paying for the privilege or worrying about copyright issues. Not only is this a great writing exercise, but it can also be very profitable if you can match your skills with a character the public is still interested in.

Below is just a small list of famous writers and their stories that are in the public domain.

Take a look and see if there's anything that suits your fancy.

## Have fun!

**Horatio Alger:** Novelist famous for his rags-to-riches stories. All of his work is in the public domain. Famous stories include *The Store Boy* and *Ragged Dick*.

**Hans Christian Andersen:** All of this famous Dane's works are in the public domain. Famous stories include *Thumbelina*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and *The Princess and the Pea*.

**Jane Austen:** Well-known novels include *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*.

**Honoré de Balzac:** Famous stories include *The Girl With the Golden Eyes* and *Father Goriot*.

**Charlotte Brontë:** All of her work is in the public domain, including her most famous novel *Jane Eyre*.

**Emily Brontë:** Just like her sister, all of her work is in the public domain. Her only novel is the oft filmed *Wuthering Heights*.

**Frances Hodgson Burnett:** Best known for the children's stories *The Secret Garden* and *A Little Princess*. All of her works are in the public domain.

**Edgar Rice Burroughs:** Creator and author of *Tarzan of the Apes*. Only some of his work is in the public domain, including the original *Tarzan of the Apes* and *At the Earth's Core*. Please check the availability of his other stories before adapting his other works.



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**Lewis Carroll:** Famous mathematician and author whose works include *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through The Looking Glass* and *The Hunting of the Snark*. All of his work is in the public domain.

**James Fenimore Cooper:** His more famous tales include *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*.

**Daniel Defoe:** All of his works are in the public domain. His most well-known stories are *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*.

**Charles Dickens:** All of Dickens's work is in the public domain. Famous stories include *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.

**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle:** Most, but not all, of his works are in the public domain. The later

*Sherlock Holmes* stories may not yet fall under the public domain but all of his stories before 1923 do, including many involving his most famous creation, Sherlock Holmes. Other well-known stories include *The Poison Belt* and *The Lost World*.

**Fyodor Dostoevsky:** All of his works are in the public domain including *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:** All of this German writer's works are in the public domain. His most famous works include *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Faust*.

**Brothers Grimm:** Two German brothers who were famous collectors of fairy tales. Their versions of the famous fairy tales are all in the public domain, including such cherished gems as *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*.

**Nathaniel Hawthorne:** All of his writings are in the public domain, so go ahead and try to make a new version of *The Scarlet Letter* or *The House of the Seven Gables*.

**Homer:** Not Simpson, but the Greek guy who wrote the epic poems, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, both of which are in the public domain.

**James Joyce:** You can adapt some of Joyce's well-known works like *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

**Franz Kafka:** This unique writer has a few stories that have fallen in the public domain. The most famous is *The Metamorphosis*.

**Rudyard Kipling:** Some, but not all, of Kipling's work is in the public domain including *The Jungle Book*.

**Jack London:** All of this great American writer's body of work is in the public domain. His most famous stories include *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*.

**H. P. Lovecraft:** All of this bizarre horror writer's work before 1923 is in the public domain.

**Herman Melville:** All of this author's work is in the public domain. His most famous story is the required reading for high school students: *Moby Dick*.

**Edgar Allan Poe:** Filmmaker Roger Corman has exploited much of Poe's work and you can too. All of this macabre author's work is in the public domain. His more famous works include *The Raven*, *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Black Cat*, *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

**Rudolf Erich Raspe:** All of his works are in the public domain, including his most famous story *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen*.

**William Shakespeare:** Shakespeare's been dead for a long time; hence, all of his work is in the public domain. Try your own take on *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* or *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Mary Shelley:** All of her writing is in the public domain, including *Frankenstein*. Her other famous books include *The Last Man* and *Matilda*.

**Robert Louis Stevenson:** All of this writer's work is in the public domain, including the popular stories *Treasure Island*, *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, *Kidnapped*, and *New Arabian Nights*.

**Bram Stoker:** All of this writer's work is in the public domain including, *Dracula*, *Jewel of the Seven Stars*, *The Lady of the Shroud* and *The Lair of the White Worm*.

**Mark Twain:** All of this great writer's works are in the public domain. His most famous stories are *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

**Jules Verne:** All of this entertaining French writer's work is in the public domain. His most famous works include *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *From the Earth to the Moon*, *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, *The Mysterious Island* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

**H.G. Wells:** Only some of Wells's stories are in the public domain, but they include *The Invisible Man*, *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *The War of the Worlds*.

**Oscar Wilde:** All of this great playwright's work is in the public domain. His most famous stories are *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

**Johann David Wyss:** This writer's most famous story *The Swiss Family Robinson* is in the public domain.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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