

Literary Landscapes

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**THE GREATER LOS ANGELES
WRITERS SOCIETY**

WRITERS MENTORING WRITERS OF ALL DISCIPLINES

Literary Landscapes

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Message From The President

Why You Should Attend (at least) One Writers Conference A Year

By Tony N. Todaro

Some writers are afraid to attend writers conferences. Some because they think they don't need one and won't learn anything new, which is ill-informed; others because they are worried about the cost-to-benefit ratio, which is understandable.

I suggest that every writer needs to attend at least one conference a year. It doesn't have to be big or expensive to have an effect on your career, but it does need to be live and interactive (no online nonsense).

I suggest you attend a conference where you can meet and network with other like-minded authors, hear new presenters with fresh points-of-view, meet editors and get professional critiques of your work, and pitch agents on your finished, polished work. You can't do any of this sitting at home in your sweats.

I try to attend as many conferences and conventions as I have time and budget for – no matter the size – using a philosophy of “I don't know what I don't know.” In fact, I'm going to a conference soon on how to produce better conferences. Really.

Authors should attend to meet other writers from a variety of genres, whether they are traditionally or self-published, have important information about agents, perhaps making a killing selling E-books, have a great social network, are stocked in bookstores, or know how to attend other conferences at lower rates. I also want to learn what events to avoid, and why; what agents and publishers to avoid and why. I'm sure you could add your own items that would help to further your career as a writer. I want to exchange ideas and information, and conferences are the best place to do it.

And when you are there, make the most of your time. Recently, I moderated a panel of literary agents and publishers, then later over dinner, I made a shocking discovery. Not one writer in the audience came up afterwards and asked an agent or publisher for a business card. I was stunned. Here the agents had given up valuable time on a holiday to attend and share their wisdom, and noted that they don't take many submissions, but do attend conferences to meet new talent with polished manuscripts. And no one in the audience took advantage of this unparalleled opportunity. Don't make this mistake.

The rewards of attending writers conferences are endless, providing you are willing to invest the time and money to get out there and network, and learn how to tell your story, polish it, and find a good agent and publisher.



Editor's Forum

By Mike Robinson

“The greatest thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Certainly we all know the almost apocalyptic circumstances under which FDR uttered those words, but he may as well have been addressing the (slightly-more-localized) apocalyptic condition of writers, of all stripes, all levels. Because whether aspiring or accomplished, we all wrestle with, and indulge in, that one vice that hampers our work. It was the reason Twain took seven years to get out Huckleberry Finn. Booze? Drugs? No, though they may be factors. I'm talking about the funny song-and-dance production known as procrastination. For the most part, a writer's procrastination stems from over-intellectualization of the writing process. A fancy way of saying, well, fear.

Fear of what? Of the words having left us. Of not bringing to the page the same fluid genius that birthed our previous works (How did I ever do this before? you might be silently asking). Of our time at the desk -- or Starbucks table -- being wasted or unjustified. A good friend of mine remarked, “Every time I sit down to write, I feel like I re-learn how to do it.”

Happily, these concerns are pretty much baseless, though overcoming their self-created reality requires some diligence. In setting down that first paragraph, you've fractured the fear, though it still feels brittle and obstructive. Keep chipping, however, and it will crumble away, and the words and the visions will stream forth, sweeping you along. Sometimes it's a creek, other times full-on white-water rapids.

Either way, at some point you're bound to pop your head above the surface and remark, “What was I so afraid of?”

And eventually, bobbing along, you'll reach the wide open ocean of the publishing and marketing world. But that's a story for another time.



It seems ironic to say that there is only so much a writer can get out of a text book, but it's true. Writers conferences are a great way to have a truly educational and interactive experience that will inspire and motivate you to create a masterpiece worthy of publication.

Elfkind

Chapter 1 - An Untimely Death Novel Excerpt

By Catherine Cruzan

If Lariel hadn't spent half the night sneaking around the king's personal library, she might have woken in time to dress for the assassins headed her way. As it was, mid-morning sun poured through her windows by the time she finally sat up in bed. Her neck and shoulders complained from hours of hunched reading, so she set a plan to get a rubbing salve from the physicians after she'd had something to eat.

Without warning, her bedroom door opened.

Her tutor strode in, dragging her childhood friend like a cat plucked from an unwanted bath. Talia's pouts were decidedly effective on the men around her, but old Master Grady was categorically immune to protestation.

"Good heavens," he said. "You're not even up yet."

"Tell him, Lariel," said Talia. "Tell him we don't have lessons today. It's Sunday!"

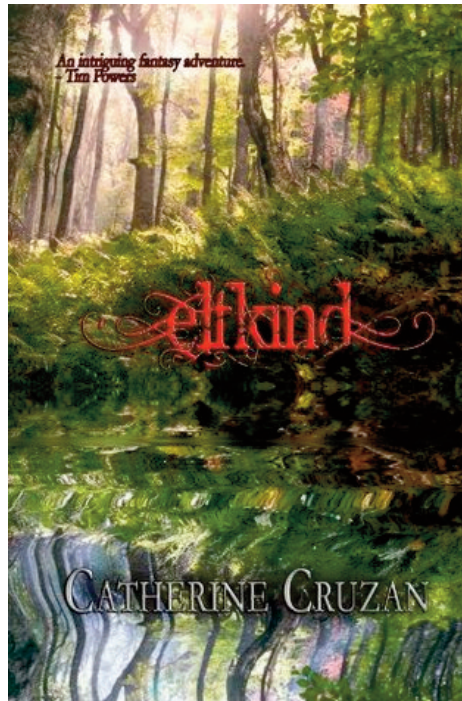
Grady eyed the plunder at the foot of Lariel's bed, with titles ranging from *Mystical Applications of Garden Variety Herbs to Designing Mechanical Release Devices and Ancient Elvin Lore*.

"The king will burn me alive if he sees this mess!"

"Then don't show it to him," said Lariel. She slid from her covers, sending books avalanching to the floor.

"Mistress, please—" said Grady. "Some decorum while you hurry." He emphasized 'hurry' with an earnest grumble.

Lariel wrapped a blanket around her nightdress so the grizzled man wouldn't have something to ogle while



she went to the wardrobe.

The moment her father discovered she'd been taking books again, he would lock them away forever. His determination to separate her from anything adversely influential was directly related to her level of interest in it. If she didn't pretend to loathe riding and archery lessons, he would take them away too.

"It isn't fair," said Talia. "Matthias Ravil was going to take me to Half Moon Lake after church. He brought a whole team of stallions back from Edditay last month, each horse as white as snow and as tall as the city gates. It'll be a marvelous spectacle!"

The gold flowers embroidered on the girl's gown personified her plight.

Without a husband, her sole enterprise was to dote on the Tallen heir. Her father's position at court ensured her an appropriate marriage, but like Lariel, she didn't want to be sold off to the first prune-faced, spindle-legged peacock to thrust a well-endowed purse under her father's nose.

Talia's pouts were decidedly effective on the men around her, but old Master Grady was categorically immune to protestation.

"Tall as the gates, my auntie's hairy chin," said Lariel. She rifled through the wardrobe looking for something remotely appealing.

“Ladies, please,” said Grady. “The king said to hurry.”

Lariel continued, “The only spectacle would be Matthias Ravil leading a team of horses. The man can’t sort out his bucklers from his boot straps, let alone command a carriage.”

Talia folded her arms, enhancing the impact of her low neckline and spiraling black curls. “That’s the spite talking.”

“You know as well as I do Matthias Ravil is a money-grubbing, grasping little weasel. Father told me so just the other day.” She frowned at her selection of dresses which appeared to be as limited as the conversation. “Where’s my white sun-dress—the one that goes with my striped parasol?”

“How should I know?” asked Talia.

“Heavens give me patience—” Grady snatched a blue gown from a hanger then shoved it into Lariel’s hands. “Lieutenant Hammel is waiting.”

“I can’t wear this,” Lariel said, ready to explain the difference between day and evening attire, until it struck her that Lieutenant Hammel never attended the royal family. He was a regiment soldier. “Wait – what?”

Talia mirrored her confusion. “What is this about?”

“Some sort of trouble with that new commander – Bradek something or other.”

“Balteq,” said Lariel.

Her stomach twisted at the mention of Graenid’s family name. She wasn’t ready to be a wife but at least the captain was handsome and sharp-witted, unlike the rest of the sycophants stalking the corridors lately, leering at her every chance they got. If she wasn’t careful, she would end up married to a two-headed toad c roaking poetry between mouthfuls of insects.

“Bradek— Balteq—Bumbling buffoon,” said Grady. “I don’t care which. But may the king spare my head if I don’t get you to the horses.”

Shouts erupted downstairs, and then a woman screamed.

Lariel started for the door.

Grady spun her about. “Quickly now –”

He dragged her across the room with her blanket tangling her feet. She abandoned it halfway to the window rather than let it pull her to her hands and knees. Meanwhile, downstairs in the foyer, something

metal skipped crashing across the floor—an ornamental platter or the perfume bowl warming in the entry, by the sound of it. Its tinny echo ricocheted up the hall in sharp contrast to the boots pattering the staircase.

There had to be at least a dozen men coming.

Grady popped a panel in the window casing to release a lever. A gear cranked over, spooling a length of iron chain into the gardens below. When she saw the rusty handholds interspersing the smaller links, Lariel realized her teacher meant for her to climb down.

“We’re three levels up!” cried Talia.

“Out you go,” Grady said. He heaved Lariel over the sill without waiting to be sure she had hold of one of the links. She sailed free until her weight tugged her shoulders with a sharp twinge. She hid her face in her arms as she slammed against the wall. Her dress wafted away like a fancy blue bird.

“Now you,” said Grady.

“Not on your life!”

Lariel barely had a chance to scramble to the next handhold before Talia’s feet swung past her face. The girl’s scream pierced the sky.

Boots thundered into the bedroom then a deep voice bellowed, “Where is she?”

“Beyond your grasp,” said Grady.

The whip-crack of an open-hand strike was distinct.

“She’s in the tunnels,” growled Grady. “She’ll be halfway to Calladin before noon.”

A soldier stuck his head out the window. “Out here!”

He tried to pull Talia back inside.

Lariel clung to the poor girl’s ankle. “Climb, Talia. Pull him down!”

“I can’t!”

All three of them would fall to their deaths if Talia actually let go. Fortunately, the girl slipped and caught her foot in the link beside Lariel’s nose. The chain swung, scraping them across the wall. Lariel nearly swooned from the effect of the landscape pitching back and forth.

The soldier disappeared back inside.

After a quick shuffle, Master Grady pitched backward out the window, arms flailing, robes flapping on the wind. He landed beside the hedgerow with a dull

thud, perversely twisted and flung out like yesterday's wilted greens.

"Climb!" screamed Lariel.

This time Talia obeyed. They scabbled over each other, fighting for handholds, stepping on fingers and pinching feet, but the soldiers couldn't reach them in their armor. They would have to make their way through the interior of the palace to the side gates.

The drop from the bottom of the chain was farther than Lariel expected and she twisted her ankle upon landing. Fear kept her from shivering in her nightdress as she wriggled her toes in the cold, prickly grass.

She studied her teacher's vacant expression, eyes rolled back, veins blown out and bloodied. If she had eaten breakfast, it would've been all over the lawn.

Talia landed beside her with a pained squeak. She ducked behind Lariel, concertedly avoiding looking at Grady. "No – no – no – no – What now?"

Lariel had no idea where to find her father or Lieutenant Hammel, so she led her friend down manicured rows of autumn foliage to the retaining wall. Only a select few knew about the iron door ensconced in a blanket of vines.

With a final, foreboding clunk, they locked themselves out of the palace grounds. They would have to make their way around to the front gates if they wanted back inside.

Grady had said south, so they ran north along the river, keeping to the trees. At the first sign of a riverboat, they broke from the waterfront to follow more isolated woodland paths. But eventually the paths ran out, choked by trees and opportunistic brush.

Their run slowed to a trot to a brisk walk then ultimately a trudging march. With the colors of the leaves turning, it was like walking through a mammoth fire.

"Where are we going?" Talia said eventually.

Lariel didn't respond. She had nothing to say. She only knew she would fall apart the moment she stopped moving. So she plodded along in stunned silence, unable to shake the image of Grady's ruined face. Her friend began swatting at low-hanging branches and ripping yellow leaves off of trees.

She let the girl's tears pass un-consoled.

By the time the sun hung low in the sky, Lariel's legs ached, and every rock in Tallen-country had taken a bite out of her feet. She prayed they would happen upon

some sort of help before nightfall now that all semblance of Tallen's largest city was behind them. Considering all of their allies were in the south, their present course was regrettable, deadly even, if she didn't come up with a plan soon.

Talia's voice cracked when she finally spoke again. "Do you think our fathers are okay?"

"Of course they are," Lariel replied more harshly than she'd intended. "They're taking care of business. There's no point in us getting in the way and messing things up for them."

Talia stopped short, primed with fresh tears, her forehead scrunched, her lips trembling.

Lariel threw her arms around the girl, feeling like an absolute skunk. "I'm sorry, Tal. I didn't mean it like that." The girl wormed her nose into Lariel's hair, and she accepted the warm tears against her neck. She was a butterfly's breath away from a hysterical fit herself yet she needed to stay strong for both their sakes. "Hey, look over there."

Her friend followed her gaze. Though they couldn't see the lake from their vantage, water fowl wheeled overhead in the distance. As best as Lariel could tell, they had fully skirted the southern lakeshore. "I'm not Matthias Ravil, but I did get you to lake country today."

Talia wiped her face. "Ha – Hah –"

"We'll figure this out. I promise. We just need to find a place to hide until whatever this is blows over and our fathers can come get us."

"How much farther is that going to be? I'm exhausted."

"At least you're dressed." Lariel stuck out her filthy toes, and they shared a disgusted look and a laugh. "Come on – we need to keep moving."

They scaled the foothills of Clear Creek Bluffs, hoping to reach the battlements of the bridges before dark. It would be treacherous going otherwise, evading the cold and potential hungry predators. In the morning they could seek out a town or a farmstead.

The higher they climbed however, the more distinctly Lariel heard the bray of pursuers rising behind them. "They brought the dogs," she shouted, charging up the sloping ground with new fervor, fighting a slick carpet of leaves. Her friend struggled to keep up despite her boots and warm dress.

A horn sounded in the distance.

Then Talia tripped, falling on her knees. “Just go without me. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Stupid girl!” Lariel hoisted her up and dragged her on. “Their horses can’t climb this mess.”

They fell into the momentum of each other’s stride the way they did when they were children, jumping gnarled roots, ducking branches, using the stronger ones to pull themselves along until the bark stung their hands.

They were actually gaining ground when Lariel veered too close to a copse of bushes and flushed a flock of birds screeching into the sky.

The horn sounded again.

“Don’t stop!” she hollered when Talia hesitated. Her carelessness just cost them the precious time they needed to reach the ramparts. She followed her friend over the hillcrest then down the other side.

“They’re coming,” Talia huffed.

“Not yet.”

The bridges stood black against the horizon. Lariel sensed the carrion birds circling the towers, seeking food in the brush and along the water’s edge. Their thoughts of hunting blended with her thoughts of escape. The wind rushed them, carrying them aloft, while her breath seared her throat. “You won’t be dining on girl today,” she cried.

Then something snatched her feet, and she fell hard, splayed on the ground.

“Mistress!” cried Talia.

Lariel pushed herself up, ignoring the new cinch in her side. “Keep going!”

She pushed on, pulling Talia toward the low rumble of water. She could smell the moisture in the air, and a fine mist coated her skin. Up ahead, a chasm cut a jagged east-west line across their path.

The bridges were Tallenbrook’s only access to the wilder north this far west of the Taihas. Her father no longer posted sentries at the stronghold, but she didn’t need his soldiers when his books explained how to release the foundation pinions on either side of the canyon. By the time Graenid’s men found another way across, she and Talia would be long gone.

She was flying at a dead run when something snatched her feet again. A mound of roots broke her fall, and pain blazed up her side. She inhaled the mossy musk of soil.

The braying grew intent behind her.

Talia clung to a tree with labored breaths, sweat beading along her bronze hairline.

“Go,” Lariel snarled.

Unseen tendrils snaked around her body, as thick as rope and twice as strong, winding up her arms and legs, rooting her to the ground.

When her friend tried to come back for her, she yelled, “The other way, impudent girl! Don’t stop until you reach Vestige!”

Talia zigzagged away through the trees, picking up speed. Lariel waited to be sure she was lost in the forest before calling, “Rattak, I’ll see you burn for this!”

Her father’s top physician stepped into the open.

“Tut, tut, Mistress, that’s hardly lady-like.” He lifted her chin with his boot, giving her a glimpse of the red and gold runes embroidered along the hem of his long black coat. She wanted to strangle him with their cubic designs. Despite his posturing, she doubted the buffoon knew how to read them.

The Tallenfolk spoke of him stealing the coat from a powerful sorcerer and that reciting its incantation every night gave him eternal life. Others said he used it to summon the dead, but Lariel knew better. The man was a hack with more arrogance than brains, though his tendrils seemed rather effective at the moment. The more she struggled, the tighter they squeezed.

Unseen tendrils snaked around her body, as thick as rope and twice as strong, winding up her arms and legs, rooting her to the ground.”

“Release me now.”

Rattak put a horn to his pudgy mouth and blew a long mournful note followed by two short blasts.

The soldiers adjusted their course.

“You best stop fussing, Mistress, or you’ll spoil that lovely gown.”

Lariel trembled in her thin layer of linen, more from anger than from cold. “Wait till father hears about this, Rat. I can already smell the pyre.” She never understood why her father suffered this snuffling pig, let alone

favored him above the other physicians.

With a pincer grip that nearly wrenched her arm off, Rattak lifted her to her feet.

She growled defiantly to mask the pain.

“My, my, but we are in a temper,” he said.

His smile cracked his face, splitting his bulbous head in two. She thought he might actually swallow her whole as he pulled her close—close enough to count the pockmarks. His tendrils dug into her arms, pinning them to her body, holding her fast.

“There’s still time to strike a bargain,” he said.

Lariel pointedly surveyed his face then began to count.

“One – two – three – four –”

Red circles bloomed on Rattak’s cheeks.

“– five – six – seven –”

“Stop it.”

“– eight – nine – ten –”

“You cursed brat!”

“– eleven – twelve–”

“There’ll be nothing left of you!”

“– thirteen –”

He tossed her on the ground as if she’d sprouted fangs.

Lariel smirked, enjoying the familiar sheen of distress on his forehead. Even a child’s innocence couldn’t protect him. She had always found him contemptible. And she had taunted him this way since before she realized she could read people’s natures at will—like reading a book with her heart—reaching out and taking hold of whatever emotions comprised them. Her father called it intuition but she knew it was more than that. The information came too easily, and it was much too clear.

“That’s the last time you disrespect me,” he said. He crouched beside her, his eyes burning with murder.

“You can’t hurt me,” she said, refusing to betray her fear. “My father –”

“Your father is dead.”

“Liar –”

Broad-shouldered dogs burst through the trees to encircle them in snarling slaver. Lariel could hardly hear Rattak over the clamor, but the sorcerer didn’t seem to

notice the dogs. He was intent on her, pressing so close she had to tip her head to avoid contact. She would have edged away if she could move.

“He wanted to go looking for the Elves, you see. Said we couldn’t be trusted with an amulet stone.” He barked a laugh. “We! Couldn’t be trusted!”

“What are you talking about? What stone?”

He stroked her tangled yellow hair, coiling it around his fingers with a contemplative look. Lariel’s stomach rejected his touch with a sickened lurch.

“Soon,” he said, “you’ll be dead too.”

Armored soldiers appeared then, to shore up her cage of growling dogs with steel. These men weren’t Tallenfolk. She had never seen them before. “I can smell the taint on your soul, Rat,” she said. “It’s as pickled as your breath.”

He pulled her to her feet by the hair. “Last chance to deal with me –”

She glared at him, her scalp straining, her feet barely touching the ground.

“Rattak!” said Graenid.

The conjurer let go of Lariel so quickly she nearly fell back down.

Graenid Balteq strolled through the perimeter of soldiers with her father’s black sword balanced on his shoulder like a parasol. Sweat darkened the strands of brown hair framing his face. His hazel eyes glowed in the twilight, yet it was the amber eyes of the serpent-head pommel that held her transfixed. The black blade practically hummed with energy.

“What did I tell you?” said Graenid.

When Rattak said nothing, Lariel interjected, “That pompous asses always burn first?”

One of the soldiers snorted.

The slimy fool didn’t appear any happier with his new master than he’d been with Lariel’s father, and she welcomed his dilemma; anything she could leverage for her life at this point.

He slipped his hand into his coat pocket, fishing for something. The dogs jumped at him, barking, while some of the soldiers leveled their weapons at him.

Graenid barely shook his head however, and Rattak obediently withdrew an empty hand. With a hunch that might have passed for a bow in this twisted new hierarchy, he slunk around to glower at Lariel over his

master's shoulder.

"I see you've trained a new dog," she said.

Graenid ran a gloved finger down the black blade. "Like it? Your father battled an army of Dwarves to win this prize. All I had to do was kill a king."

Lariel flung herself at him, baring her teeth. Rattak sent new tendrils worming around her neck and cramming into her mouth until her cheeks bulged.

She screamed with rage as she fell.

Graenid caught her by the shoulders. "I don't need you," he said, steadying her back on her feet. "Tallen-country is already mine. Balteq-land has a nice ring, don't you think? Rattak –"

He stepped away so his pet could release the tendrils from Lariel's mouth. She worked her jaw, willing Graenid close enough to lash out again. Her father had trusted him, put him in charge of the Tallen armies, even acquiesced to a daughter's passions for a time, but this man bore no resemblance to the one she thought she might have loved. She didn't understand what happened. Her instincts never lied, not until now anyway.

"The Ivy Throne will spit out your bones," she said.

"No doubt," said Graenid.

He stuck his new sword in the ground so he could remove his gloves, then left it planted like a twisted black sapling when he came back for her. She thought she saw the slightest tremor from the blade, as if it didn't want him to go, but she figured it was the blood pounding her skull.

He took her by the chin the way he used to when he meant to kiss her. The familiar smells were intoxicating – steel, horses and oiled leather.

Lariel looked into his soft expression as if no time had passed between them and this was all some horrible nightmare. Except – she wasn't asleep. She was a hostage on a hillside, cold, bleeding and barefoot in her night-dress. Her father must truly be dead.

Graenid came in for his kiss, and she shrank from him. He wavered a moment, sadness flicking across his face. "I suppose you're expecting a swift flight from pyre," he said finally.

He plucked a leaf from her hair, and she watched him grind it between his fingers with sinking panic. The orange-brown flakes sifted away like a sprinkling of seasoning for the land.

"Is that what you want – to join your father?"

Lariel needed to do something – succumb, negotiate, fight, plead—anything except leave the Tallenfolk to a man who knew nothing about mercy. Yet she stood rooted and shivering, unable to undo what was happening.

"Sergeant," said Graenid.

A tall, bearded soldier hauled Talia into their circle. Her dress was a torn, muddied mess. Her curly hair hung in her face, matted with leaves.

When she saw Lariel she fell to her knees and wailed, "I'm sorry, Mistress! I ran as fast as I could!"

"You're the daughter of a noble house," Lariel said. "Don't give them the satisfaction." She turned to Graenid, unable to conceive of what he might do next. "What do you want?"

She locked her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering.

The usurper army captain king smiled cruelly. "So, the Mistress of the Manor is eager to serve after all."

Graenid's sergeant pulled Talia to her feet then struggled to hold onto the girl while she kicked and slapped.

"Anything," Lariel choked. "Just – Please –"

"Please," Graenid repeated. He was so close his hair tickled her face. "Such forbearance from the would-be queen."

She wanted to claw the satisfied smirk off his face.

"Rattak," he said, "show Queen Lariel what we do to traitors."

"No – Wait –" she pleaded.

Rattak pulled a fistful of gleaming green from his coat. Almost immediately, it began to glow sickly yellow, growing brighter until light glared off his face. Within moments, it submerged everyone in pulsing yellow ichor that made her want to vomit. She tried to hobble to Talia but Graenid dug his fingers into her shoulder.

The dogs cowered and whined.

She'd never seen this kind of magic before, yet she knew it wasn't right. All of her senses objected. Then Rattak pointed at Talia.

"Mistress," the girl cried. "Help me!"

The sergeant held her out by the neck as if she were a sack of vegetables. Then suddenly her friend was

burning with strange, green-yellow flames. They leapt and licked, and ringed her and the sergeant both, until Lariel couldn't see either of their faces.

"Rattak," Lariel shouted. "Stop – Please – Wait!"

The aberrant fire swallowed Talia's cries along with a guttural howl from the sergeant. Then it died as abruptly, leaving only a charred, smoking patch of leaves.

Graenid charged Rattak, shoving him against a tree, "You unskilled moron!"

The glowing green tumbled from Rattak's hand and the yellow light winked out. The source of the perverse magic turned out to be a long, flat stone. One of its edges curled three times like water spilling over rocks. The other was curved like the bottom of a bowl. A depression along its flat surface was perfectly suited for the stroke of a thumb. It glimmered, deeper green than any emerald.

"That was my best man," said Graenid. "Did I tell you to kill him?"

"N – no, my lord," he said, recoiling into the tree's branches. "It was an accident."

Lariel searched the smoldering leaves for signs of her friend, eager to see Graenid's new pet pay for his treachery.

The rest of the soldiers stared at the burn mark too, shifting their feet as if deciding whether to avenge their companion or flee the hillside.

Graenid kicked the stone at Rattak. "Put that thing away before you burn this whole place to the ground."

The conjurer snatched it up, eyeing Lariel as he dropped it into his pocket.

Graenid watched her now too. She squared her shoulders to him despite an overwhelming urge to fling herself at the smoldering patch and follow Talia into whatever hell they'd condemned her to. He was a fool if he thought he could control his new pet for long. Not when that pet just learned how to burn people into oblivion in an instant.

"He'll burn you all," she said.

Graenid swept in and clamped her throat. Pressure pounded her ears. Still bound by Rattak's tendrils, she couldn't fight the strangulation.

"You look like one of them," he said. "But I would've had you anyway."

She didn't understand the accusation. Blackness pressed her periphery.

Rattak tugged Graenid's arm. "M – my lord. We – I mean – you – need her to secure support."

Graenid cuffed him across the face. "Why does the ruling class presume the rest of us want them to retain their status?"

The conjurer cradled his wounded nose.

Lariel's blood thrummed her ears. Everything had grown quiet, distant. When Graenid finally loosened his grip she slumped against him.

He looked into her eyes with new interest.

"I've got your attention, yes?" She hung there, drawing slow, searing breaths. He was the only thing holding her up. "The dumbest animals understand about options. Yours are clear enough, yes?" He gave her a gruff shake.

"Ah –" she said.

"Yes?"

"I –"

"Come now, Mistress," said Graenid. He looked to his men who snickered at this new game. Rattak anxiously wrung his hands. "It's time to decide where your loyalties lie."

"I –"

"Go on."

She exhaled, "I would rather die than have your hands on me again."

With a final shake, he tossed her to the ground. Then he kicked her in the ribs so hard she heard them crack. She rolled onto her side, rocking with pain, letting the tears slip freely down her face. Graenid plucked the black sword from the ground.

Lariel rolled onto her back to face her father's blade.



About the Author: Catherine Cruzan lives in Southern California. She has a degree in Aerospace Engineering from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; and has studied at UCLA in the Writers Program. She writes character driven Fantasy, Horror and Science Fiction. Her first novel, *ELFKIND*, is now a hit Audiobook.

Peeling the Onion:

The Continuing Mystery of Sherlock Holmes, H.P. Lovecraft, and Twin Peaks

By Daniel Lambert

As far as I know, there are no onions mentioned in the Sherlock Holmes canon. However, there is a connection: Holmes and John Lennon were both British. Lennon wrote a song about a glass onion.

Unraveling a mystery is like peeling the layers from an onion. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's great detective, Sherlock Holmes, reveled in peeling away the layers to get at the truth. In a sense, the stories of pulp fiction author Howard Phillips Lovecraft have much in common with Doyle's stories. In addition, David Lynch and Mark Frost's 1990 television series *Twin Peaks* was a throwback to Doyle and Lovecraft's work.

If you are familiar with Lovecraft's stories and Lynch's television show, you might ask yourself: "What do these supernatural-themed works have to do with Sherlock Holmes? Wasn't Holmes a man of logic? Didn't he say to his friend and companion, Doctor Watson, "Ghosts need not apply?" Yes he did. However, Holmes's denial of the supernatural means he never found evidence to confirm its existence; not that it does not exist. Scientists such as Michio Kaku have suggested that phenomena such as UFOs and ghosts could someday be explained through the discovery of parallel dimensions.

Writers of Sherlockian pastiches have been unable to resist the urge to put Holmes in supernatural circumstances. There is even an anthology of Lovecraftian Holmes stories called *Shadows over Baker Street*. Fred Saberhagen has written a series of novels about Holmes's encounters with Count Dracula. In the Canon itself, we hear references to a giant Sumatran rat and a man who ducked inside a house to retrieve his umbrella, and was never heard from again. There is, of course the story of a fictional root that can induce madness when inhaled. Interestingly, Lovecraft created a fictional book called the Necronomicon that causes insanity in anyone who dares to read it. Let us not forget

that Conan Doyle himself believed in fairies, ectoplasm, and other supernatural phenomena.

As a boy, Lovecraft was a Sherlock Holmes fan. According to Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi (2012), Lovecraft and his young friends formed ". . . the Providence Detective Agency, where they played at being the successors to Sherlock Holmes" (p. 28).

One of Lovecraft's most well-known short stories is *The Call of Cthulhu*, written in 1926. The story is divided into three parts. Each part is written in a realistic style. The story includes names, dates, newspaper clippings, and other evidence that causes the reader to question whether he or she is reading a fictional story or a news report.

The first chapter is "The Horror in Clay". In this chapter, the narrator investigates a bas-relief sculpture made by an artist, depicting a tentacle-sprouting creature called Cthulhu. In chapter two, "The Tale of Inspector Legrasse", a police detective discovers a depraved cult in Louisiana that worships Cthulhu, and retrieves an ancient statuette depicting the creature. In the final chapter, "The Madness from the Sea", the crew of a schooner explores Cthulhu's lair in the South Pacific Ocean, and is nearly wiped out by the creature.

Each week, *Twin Peaks* presented its viewers with the next layer of a continuing mystery. Some mysteries (such as the identity of homecoming queen Laura Palmer's killer) were eventually solved. The answer seemed simple at first: Laura's father, Leland (played by Ray Wise), killed her. However, these mysteries would spawn further questions (such as "who is BOB? Is he an aspect of Leland's personality, or a malignant, demonic entity?") Like an onion with countless layers, *Twin Peaks* continues to intrigue and baffle its fans. In 1992, the release of the film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (the prequel to the series) answered some of the queries generated by the

television show, while creating a plethora of new questions.

Where is the Sherlockian connection? Mark Frost, the co-creator of *Twin Peaks*, wrote two novels (The List of Seven and The Six Messiahs) featuring Arthur Conan Doyle as a character.

Another Sherlockian connection occurs in one of the show's early episodes. Sheriff Harry S. Truman (played by Michael Ontkean) is amazed at the ability of FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper (played by Kyle MacLachlan) to discover clues. Truman tells Cooper: "I'm going to start practicing medicine."

Cooper asks: "Why?"

Truman responds: "Because I'm beginning to feel like Doctor Watson" (Lynch, 2007).

Twin Peaks took a left turn into the *Twilight Zone* at the end of its third episode. In this episode, Agent Cooper falls asleep in the Great Northern Hotel and dreams about the murder victim. Cooper finds himself seated in a Red Room. He is accompanied by Laura (played by Sheryl Lee) and the Little Man from Another Place (played by Michael J. Anderson). The scene goes like this:

An on-screen caption reads TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER. The Little Man looks at Cooper.

LITTLE MAN: Let's rock! I've got good news. That gum you like is going to come back in style.

COOPER looks at Laura.

LITTLE MAN: She's my cousin, but doesn't she look almost exactly like Laura Palmer?

COOPER: But it is Laura Palmer. (TO LAURA) Are you Laura Palmer?

LAURA: I feel like I know her, but sometimes my arms bend back.

LITTLE MAN: She's filled with secrets. Where we're from, the birds sing a pretty song, and there's always music in the air.

The LITTLE MAN begins to dance to swelling jazz music. LAURA walks over to COOPER, kisses him, and whispers in his ear (Lynch, 2007).

Cooper's dream contains many clues that help the FBI agent solve the murder case. Eventually, Cooper comes to realize that his dream may have been an actual visit to the White Lodge. According to the local Native American tribe, the White Lodge is literally the Land of the Dead.

On Sunday, May 5th, 2013, this author attended a screening of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. After the screening, several actors and two writers who worked on the film as well as the series participated in a panel discussion about their experiences with Lynch, the show, and the film.

Writer Robert Engels said there was plenty of footage shot for the film that never made it to the screen. He said one premise of the film is the existence of a portal in the town of Twin Peaks that allows certain entities to come to earth from their planet. Their planet is "a planet of creamed corn." (In the film, creamed corn is also called "garmonbozia": a word meaning "pain and sorrow.") Engels explained that the goal of these entities is to return to their planet. A scene was discussed in which Sheriff Truman would have to drive his truck backwards to return them to their planet.

Engels offered other intriguing tidbits about scenes in the original script that never made it to the big screen. One scene took place during President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration in 1956. Originally, Lynch and Frost planned to film both a prequel and a sequel to *Twin Peaks*.

Each era has its cultural icons. Sherlock Holmes was, to Victorian readers, the epitome of a man who could logically solve the mysteries of this strange world. In the 1920s and 30s, Lovecraft told tales of investigators who solved otherworldly mysteries (or lost their minds trying to do so). Lovecraft was largely ignored during his lifetime, but his work has achieved cult-like status. The same goes for *Twin Peaks*, a show that returned to the mysterious small town week after week, only to be cancelled by ABC in the early nineties in its second season.

Lovecraft and Lynch, in their own strange ways, carried on the tradition of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle, Lovecraft, and Lynch invited their audiences to probe the darkness of our universe. After all, who doesn't like a mystery?



About the Author: Dan Lambert is a writer and educator. His first collection of prose and poetry, *Love and Other Diversions*, is available on Lulu.com. He teaches English at Santa Monica College and East Los Angeles College. His website is dan_lambert.homestead.com.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Dialogue Tags and the Mythical Said Book

By Barry Dale Gilfry

What is a “said book”?

That’s a good question, and it’s important for writers to know the answer.

A “said book” is a mythical book (or list) of verbs that a writer can use in place of the verb to say. To save you from repeating “he said, she said” endlessly throughout the pages of your manuscript, this elusive book provides alternatives so that you can be creative with your dialogue tags and write he proposed, or she interrupted, or they shouted.

But what do professional writers say about this? How far should a writer go with being creative in this area? Isn’t simple dialogue attribution good enough?

Can a character laugh words?

Can words be gasped?

Can you have two dialogue tags in the same sentence?

In this essay, I’ll attempt to answer those silly questions and a few more—and the reason I called these questions silly is this: Before I started researching this subject, I thought I knew the answers outright. Yet according to experts, I was wrong on all three counts.

Let’s consider six more serious questions that inspired me to write this essay in the first place – start with the basics and build from there – and I think we’ll simultaneously come to the answer to those silly questions.

1. What is dialogue?

Simply stated, dialogue is the conversation that takes place between characters. A more precise definition from Wikipedia states that dialogue is “a literary and theatrical form consisting of a written or spoken conversational exchange between two or more people.”

In this discussion of dialogue tags, we’ll expand the definition of dialogue to include thoughts in addition to speech and writing. While characters may not share information with each other through their thoughts (unless they’re telepathic), they do share what they are thinking with the reader, and the writer needs a way to convey this. Further, because many writers like to distinguish between saying and asking, the dialogue tags we’ll consider in this essay will fall into four categories: **saying, asking, writing and thinking.**

In creative writing, dialogue may consist of sentences, clauses and phrases, or just a single word.

2. What is a dialogue tag?

A dialogue tag is a lot like a label on an article of clothing that tells us who manufactured the item and what it’s made of. Dialogue tags allow the writer to tell the reader who spoke, asked, wrote, or thought the dialogue that is represented. By using descriptive verbs, the writer can also convey to the reader how the dialogue was presented.

3. What is the structure of a dialogue tag?

A dialogue tag is a clause – it must contain a subject and a predicate. Here are some examples, with the dialogue tags in red:

“That’s the end of it,” John said.

She asked, “Is there anything more we can do?”

Dialogue tags may also include an adverb...

“That’s it?” he asked loudly.

...and a modifier:

“Stand at attention!” the captain shouted.

While dialogue tags often appear before or after the words they tag, they can also appear in the middle:

“Dialogue attribution,” our teacher said, “is all

about style.”

4. What punctuation do I use to indicate dialogue in my writing?

Quotation marks are usually used to enclose sentences, clauses, phrases and words that require a dialogue tag. However, exceptions exist when we use dialogue tags with writing or with thoughts. We can enclose writing and thoughts within quotation marks, or we can italicize them, or merely present them without modification.

Here are some examples of thought and written dialogue, with the corresponding dialogue tags in red:

“I’ll have to sell more of the white ones,” she thought.

Esther mused, I’m going to swim to Calais.

But, where am I to go? she wondered.

“That’s the last time they’ll see me in Egypt,” Jane wrote in her diary.

He scrawled, Why all the furor over penmanship?

The Lakers suck! he spray-painted on the wall.

Also note that, even if the dialogue ends with a question mark or an exclamation point, the letter that leads the dialogue tag is never capitalized. Why? Because it is part of the same sentence, and we don’t arbitrarily capitalize words in the middle of a sentence.

“Don’t drop the ball again!” the coach shouted.

So, when dialogue ends with a period and we want to add our dialogue tag after it, we change that period to a comma...

“That’s the last of the marmalade.”

“That’s the last of the marmalade,” she said.

...however, when the dialogue ends with a question mark or exclamation point, we leave it and add our dialogue tag, but we do not capitalize the first letter of the tag:

“What was the first thing I taught you?”

“What was the first thing I taught you?” she asked.

5. What is wrong with my protagonist “laughing” her words?

Can our protagonist croak his words (even if he is a talking frog)?

“Believe it or not,” the frog croaked, “I used to be a handsome prince.” (I’ll let you decide.)

Common sense tells us that one might write: “She seems sour,” he hissed, but not: “That gun won’t protect you,” he hissed. If our protagonist is hissing his words, our reader might expect at least a smattering of sibilant sounds in such speech.

How many words can a character gasp? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has one of his characters gasping an entire sentence: “I have been making a fool of myself,” he gasped (*The Adventure of the Engineer’s Thumb*). He’s got characters gasping all over the place. And he’s a famous writer!

But where do you draw the line? Can a person actually laugh words?

Have you ever seen something like this?:

“Come inside,” he smiled.

Generally, verbs that do not convey speech (and smiling is not speaking) cannot be used as dialogue tags. But exceptions exist, and we’ll discuss those.

In his book *On Writing*, Stephen King says there’s nothing wrong with using the basic word “to say” again and again. Like other common words (a, the, it), “to say” tends to disappear as the reader glides right over it repeatedly. However, he also recommends that one should read a novel by Larry McMurtry, who he claims has mastered the art of well-written dialogue. Yet, while McMurtry mostly sticks with “to say”, he uses a variety of verbs to describe speech. Here are a few examples from *Lonesome Dove*:

“...don’t mean the sun won’t rise again,” Augustus assured him.

“Well, I ain’t you,” Dish informed him.

“It’s a clue to how fast he’s failing,” Augustus pointed out.

“That old man can barely cook,” Pea Eye remarked.

“Come see who’s coming,” the Captain said, rather mildly, Dish thought. (Two dialogue tags in one sentence!)

And while McMurtry uses the verb “to whisper” at times, he also writes in another place: “...Augustus said gently.”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was fond of the verb “remark”, and while Dickens never had any of his characters “remarking” anything in *David Copperfield*, he did use a variety of verbs from the “said book”, including answer, ask, cry, exclaim, return, suggest, remonstrate, and even:

“Why, that's the wrong hand, Davy!” laughed the gentleman. (Chapter 2, I Observe).

I guess you really can have your characters laughing their words—if you're as famous a writer as Charles Dickens was.

Also, consider verbs like “to be”, “to come” and “to mouth”. While they do not convey speech, they have been used as dialogue tags, and whether you approve or not, there is just no other way to write these sentences:

“You're not the one I would have chosen,” was his response.

“That's not what I meant to say,” came his reply.

“Don't go down there,” she mouthed, pointing at the basement door.

Every rule has at least one exception. In the English language, so often, exceptions are the rule.

6. What verbs can I use in my dialogue tags?

Ah, we've arrived at the question that forms the very crux of this essay!

To say, to ask, to write and to think will probably be the verbs that you mostly use in your dialogue tags, but consider one of the examples that I gave above:

The Lakers suck! he spray-painted on the wall.

It's not something you'll see every day – spray-painted used as a dialogue-tag verb – but you will run across some exotic verbs in dialogue tags. English is a flexible and fluid language. It changes daily, so why not vary the verbs that we use in our dialogue tags?

This is the subject of heated debates and has fostered several (bickering and sometimes violent) schools of thought:

1. The Simple School (Don't ask. Don't tell.)

Folks in the Simple School would rail if you wrote, “he whispered”. Orthodox members of this group feel that even the verb to ask should be stricken from dialogue tags. In this group, there is no querying, no whispering, no shouting, and no remarking. This group uses the basics: he said, she thought, or they wrote... and that's about it.

2. The Moderate School

Folks in this group use a wider variety of verbs to indicate telling, asking, writing, and thinking. No matter what members of the Simple School might want you to think, most of the great writers of modern

literature have been members of The Moderate School.

Don't be afraid to sail the seven seas; but don't go overboard, like members of the third group:

3. The Flamboyant School

Proponents of this school believe that no verb is too outrageous, and if the verb isn't festive enough, add an adverb! You'll find a lot of amateur writers in this school, hanging out in the hallways and smoking cigarettes when they should be in the classroom learning their lessons.

We've all heard it said that the three most important things in real estate are location, location, location. Regarding verbs in dialogue tags, I would say that the three most important things to consider in their use are common sense, common sense, common sense.

In summary, I see no reason that the writer cannot describe speech. If we can describe how our protagonist walked by using a variety of verbs (skipped, sauntered, shuffled), why should we not be precise in describing how she spoke (whispered, shouted, yelled)? Just don't overdo it. Whereas the words “said” or “asked” seem to disappear with constant use, dialogue tags such as “he pontificated” or “she ejaculated” do stand out like the proverbial sore thumb, and their overuse marks you as an amateur.

And now, as promised, the SAID BOOK. This is a list that I have compiled over a period of years. It contains nearly 450 verbs that can be used in place of to say, to ask, to think, to write.

I don't use most of these, and those that I do use (other than the basics) I use sparingly; I recommend that you make use of this list with the same level of discretion. The majority of these verbs have been culled from reputable sources, used by authors who make a lot more money than I, but that doesn't mean that you should employ them without careful consideration.

Go in good health and use these with common sense.



About the Author: Barry Gilfry is a country boy at heart, having grown up in the woods: Hollywood, Brentwood and Westwood. He is an avid writer and photographer. See www.barrygilfry.com.

Drought

By Katherine Stewart

Maggie Talbot steadied herself against the post of the wide verandah before the morning sun streamed yellow and orange light over the vast horizon. She searched the open landscape, looking for the curve of the earth, and then settled into a wooden chair to bargain with the forces of nature to end the drought. For as long as she could remember, she'd been bargaining with nature, and most of the time, they'd had an uneasy but respectful relationship. Other days, the natural forces were cruel and sometimes took lives thoughtlessly. During her 68 years on the land, Maggie had lost three husbands who had tried to tame the dust and heat. They were all buried in the family cemetery behind the shearing shed, along with her grandparents, parents, and two children who had died at birth.

The long, sour cry of crows warned Maggie that nature was not in a mind to bargain, and as the heat rolled over the dry land, she watched the windmills stand silent without a breeze, leaving the water tanks empty another day. Maggie knew that if she did not find water soon the remaining stock would perish, and she would then lose the property to the bank.

The station manager, Gus, helped Maggie into the truck, and they headed west to check the tanks that stood closest to the homestead. Fifteen kilometers from the first tank, the red earth opened up with deep wounds, wind devils danced over the white bones of dead animals, flies sucked the last moisture out of the eyes of lifeless kangaroos, and the carcasses of wild horses were frozen in the last moment of their struggle. The first three tanks were dry, so they headed toward the fourth where they come across an exhausted mob of sheep collapsed in a dry creek bed. Dozens were already dead and the remainder so weak that they lay silently, with only their bulging eyes pleading to live. Gus and Maggie walked through the carnage, slitting the throats of the dying animals, and letting their blood leach into

the cracked earth. Maggie pulled the brim of her stockman's hat down over her forehead so Gus would not see her tears. The slaughter would have broken her if they hadn't rescued two ewes and one lamb.



At the most western end of the property, Gus and Maggie had just passed a patch of saltbush when they heard the blades of a windmill slowly turning in an invisible breeze. "The tank is full, Missus," Gus yelled. Maggie gathered the lamb in her arms and hurried toward the tank. But before she reached the water, she turned to see a pack of wild dogs racing across the landscape. In a matter of seconds, the dogs slammed into the truck and pulled the two ewes to the ground, shredding their throats and ripping off their hind legs with razor-sharp teeth. Maggie ran toward the ladder of the tank, but two of the dogs nervously circled her, their yellow eyes focused on her and the lamb that she held tight in her arms. Growling, they crouched ready to spring when Gus wrestled the lamb from Maggie's arms and threw it into the open desert. The last thing Maggie remembered was hearing the screams of the lamb and seeing the frenzy of blood and broken bone.

The white, starched sheets irritated Maggie's skin, and the fluorescent green walls of the nursing home agitated her. Gus opened the door, holding a bouquet of flowers.

"Hello Missus. Feelin' better?"

Maggie looked at him with pleading eyes. "Take me home Gus; please take me home."

"No, Missus. Blackfella can't be takin' white woman outta this place." Gus looked at the blue, polished linoleum floor.

After a long silence, Maggie asked, "How's the property?"

"No good, Missus. Still dry." He tried to distract her with small talk, but the intensity of Maggie's desire to go home electrified the room.

"Take me home Gus. Just take me home." She pulled herself out of the bed and fell to her knees. "Please take me home."

Maggie knew that if she did not find water soon the remaining stock would perish, and she would then lose the property to the bank."

Maggie gripped the railing of the wide verandah just before the morning sun streamed over the landscape. She could feel the warmth penetrate her tired body as she bargained with the forces of nature for the last time: "Just lift me over the curve of the earth and let me die where I was born."

Gus buried her behind the shearing shed next to her mother. During the night, a shaft of lightning cracked the sky, and a hard rain fell over the thirsty land.



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. 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 and writing her first novel.

Illuminated Manuscript

By Lisa Marguerite Mora

Cracked face of a clock frozen
into the wrong minute
outside a restless grimy tide washes
through shallow footprints
now they are puddles and the sand crabs
scrabble for sustenance
I could be like them lost in the certainty
the sand and the oxygen and the angry
wayward waves comprise the universe
excoriating wrench and rhythm, yes I could
be lost to the riptide's deadly yank, my limbs my
head lolling, no longer
fighting
it would be easy.
But recently there is this other (me) that can frame
the whole scene and all its visceral misery
within a border of twined flowers as in an illumi-
nated
manuscript
the page laden
between my fingers.
It is but one page.
Where do I suspend disbelief?

No Compromise on Prom Night

By Gloria Shell Mitchell

Toward the end of eleventh grade, my inferiority complex prompted me to make a big blunder. Wanting to look and feel special at Madison High's junior-senior prom, I sent a letter from South Carolina to my sister Lynette in New York requesting a beautiful, one-of-a-kind gown that would make me the belle of the ball.

Two weeks later, I tore open a package from Lynette and pulled out a royal blue floor-length, sleeveless dress. To my surprise, the box also included silver gloves that covered my elbows, a tiara that made me look like a queen, and satin silver pumps and a matching clutch. Nobody would expect me to show up looking eye-popping gorgeous. I giggled at the thought.

The rule for the junior-senior prom was, "No Date, No Admittance." Confident that I would go, I paid my fees, knowing that I had everything for the occasion, except a date.

A teacher, Mrs. Davis, was responsible for playing matchmaker for students who had not chosen their own prom date. And a few days prior to the big event, she called me into her classroom.

At six-thirty, the time Theodore had promised to pick me up, a yellow Mustang that needed a muffler rattled into our dirt driveway."

"I matched you with Theodore because he also lives on Cashmere Road," she said.

"Theodore! He's a goofball."

"Well, goofball or not, he's the most logical choice," she said. "He has already consented to be your date. Either accept him, or you can't attend."

Disappointed, I thought for a moment, then heard myself say, "Oh well, Theodore it is."

"Good!" she said. "It's only for a few hours for one night. You'll get along just fine."

I left her classroom with Theodore on my mind. He lived in a big, new brick house on Cashmere Road. His family drove a white Lincoln Continental. He was tall and slender and had a gap between his two front teeth. That's all I knew about him. I couldn't imagine spending a whole evening with a boy I really didn't know, but I was glad he had been brave enough to accept me as his date without knowing much about me.

At dusk, while anticipating Theodore's arrival in his parents' luxury car, I went out on my front porch to check the temperature. What a perfect evening in May. Admiring the full moon above thousands of pine trees, I pretended that the sound of chirping crickets was a musical interlude that would continue to play while he pinned a lovely corsage on my dress. I pranced back and forth practicing ways to show off the shiny, silver pumps beneath my gown. He was going to see a beautiful lady who was all decked out from head to toe. Feeling quite pleased with myself, I went back inside to wait for the right moment to step out and dazzle my date.

At six-thirty, the time Theodore had promised to pick me up, a yellow Mustang that needed a muffler rattled into our dirt driveway. The car made enough noise to wake up the dead. I went to the door.

"What the...?" A Mustang! I gaped at the sight of Theodore getting out of the car. Grabbing my silver clutch, I hurried outside to avoid inviting him into my tiny blockhouse. My six little sisters crowded the front door but stayed inside because I'd dared them to come outside.

Strutting across the yard, Theodore looked like a proud penguin dressed in a black tuxedo and white shirt decorated with a black bow tie. Both his hands were empty. Already annoyed because of the noisy car and no corsage, I had a feeling it was going to be a challenging night. Hadn't he heard the instructions Mrs. Davis gave us?

"You look beautiful," he said, stepping onto the porch.

"Thank you," I said. "You look nice, too. Stand still and let me pin this boutonniere on the buttonhole of your lapel like Mrs. Davis told us." He stood motionless while I inserted the tiny flower. Maybe he left my corsage in the car. Stay calm, Davida.

Blunder number one from goofball, I thought.

"Ouch!" I pricked my finger on my first attempt to pin the flower. Mrs. Davis had warned us not to put on our gloves until after the pinning, just in case we got a bloody prick. She'd thought of everything we needed to know. I tried again and the boutonniere stayed in place.

"There," I said. "It looks perfect!"

"Then let's go," he said. "My older brother Thaddeus is our chauffeur tonight."

"Ooooh," I said, thinking, that was a clever idea.

"Let me escort you like I'm supposed to," he said. He bent his arm and I gently grabbed hold.

Be nice, Davida. He's trying to be a gentleman, just like the teacher said.

Theodore opened the door on the passenger side and pulled up the seat so I could climb into the back of the two-door car.

"Hi," I grunted to his brother as I plopped down.

"Would you move on over?" Theodore said.

Surprised that he didn't plan to walk around to the other side, I slid behind the driver. He acted like Thaddeus was a real chauffeur.

Theodore must have detected my negative attitude because he quickly said, "Oh, I left your corsage at home in the refrigerator."

"That's nice to know," I said.

A few minutes later, Thaddeus pulled into their paved driveway and parked next to the Lincoln. Without saying a word he got out, left the driver's door open,

and went into the house.

"Some chauffeur!" Theodore mumbled. Then he pushed the front seat forward, opened the passenger door and climbed out. I sat wondering what was going on until he showed up on the driver's side and pushed that seat forward.

"Come on inside and meet my parents," he said.

"I can wait in the car while you go get the corsage," I said.

Standing like a model posing for a portrait, I waited forever for Theodore to pin the corsage in place."

"No, I want you to come inside. My mother wants to see your dress."

"Oh, all right." He took my arm as I climbed out of the car and then escorted me through the side door. We walked through the kitchen and entered a huge living room with all white furnishings.

"Surprise!" his mother shouted. We looked in her direction and were greeted with the flash from a Polaroid Land Camera. His father and Thaddeus stood grinning as his mother clicked about ten shots of us.

"Wait!" Theodore hollered. He ran to the refrigerator and returned carrying a clear container with a white flower that I'd never seen before. Printed on the package was the name Orchid. Though disappointed that he didn't get a carnation or a rose like Mrs. Davis had recommended, I was glad that he had remembered the corsage.

Standing still like a model posing for a portrait, I waited forever for Theodore to pin the corsage in place. After a few unsuccessful attempts, I hoped I wouldn't have to yell at him for sticking me with that long pin. Although I was anxious about getting to the Masonic Temple before the doors closed, I pretended to be patient. His family didn't seem worried about the time. They watched him struggle and laughed each time the flower drooped when he removed his hand.

His mother took pictures of every move her son made. Near seven o'clock, she said, "Please allow me to do it."

My nerves stopped standing at attention and relaxed when Theodore sighed, stepped aside and handed her the corsage and the pin. She finished the job with one stick and then leaned back, stared into my eyes and smiled.

“You look simply beautiful,” she said. “My son has great taste.”

Flashes from the camera blinded me as Thaddeus took several shots of his mother standing with me. Theodore and I posed for additional pictures with his father, mother and brother in their beautiful living room. Feeling better with my corsage in place, I smiled and thoroughly enjoyed all the praises lavished upon me. Why couldn't my family be like this one?

“We've got to go now,” Thaddeus said, staring at his watch.

“Here,” his father said, handing him some keys. “Drive the Lincoln.”

I couldn't stop smiling as we headed for the car. Nobody knew how happy I was not to ride in a noisy Mustang to the classy prom.

Thaddeus sat behind the steering wheel while Theodore opened the rear door. The white leather interior invited me to sink down into the cushiony seat, so I got in and made myself comfortable beside the window. This time my date closed the door and then walked around to the other side. I felt a bit uncomfortable when he slid to the middle of the roomy backseat, but relaxed when he started talking to his brother.

“We're off to the prom,” Thaddeus said, putting on a cap with a bib. “Lady and gent, I'm at your service.”

Theodore and Thaddeus joked about their mother's photo shoot and how her excitement had rubbed off on their father. Once in a while I chimed in, but mostly, I listened to them.

“This is a first,” Thaddeus said. “Pops never ever trusted me behind the wheel in this car unless he was in the passenger seat.”

“Yeah,” Theodore said, “I've never seen Moms and Pops so excited. They had more fun helping me get ready than I did. I almost thought they were coming, too.”

Perhaps he's not such a goofball after all. He's just comical. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I'd misjudged him.

As we entered the prom, I was overwhelmed by the Hawaiian decorations hanging from the ceiling and the walls.

“This place looks spectacular!” I said.

“Yeah,” Theodore said, “This is great!”

Handsome gents dressed in tuxedos made a lie out of the expression, “Clothes don't make the man.” Even the most obnoxious boys conducted themselves like sophisticated gentlemen.

Dolled up girls flaunting long gowns glided all over the room like they were in a beauty pageant. Who said, “Too much powder and paint can't make you what you ain't?” Not true. I didn't recognize some classmates I'd known for years.

Mine was the only royal blue gown. A few beauties also flaunted a tiara, but only two others had orchids pinned to their dress. My silver gloves and slippers made me a rare southern belle indeed.

Dolled up girls flaunting long gowns glided all over the room like they were in a beauty pageant. I didn't recognize some classmates I'd known for years.”

A boy seated at a table near the dance floor waved at Theodore while we were standing around absorbing the beautiful setting. Green Onions by Booker T. & the M.G.'s was playing in the background when my date escorted me to a seat next to his friend.

“Man, I'm surprised to see the two of you together,” the boy said.

“Keep on living and you're bound to encounter other surprises,” Theodore said.

Good answer. Theodore was gaining my respect. I appreciated him for not saying that Mrs. Davis matched us. That was our business.

To my surprise, he was a good dancer. I kept him busy on the floor most of the night so we wouldn't have to try talking over loud music. Once or twice, we sat through a song that neither of us liked. We spent that time nibbling on snacks and talking with another couple at our table.

When it was time for couples to take keepsake prom pictures, Theodore whispered, "Will you pay for a picture of the two of us together?"

"What? Of course not," I snapped, feeling insulted. "A boy is supposed to have money on a date."

I got up quickly and left the table while Theodore scrambled to pull out my chair. Reluctantly, I paid the five-dollar sitting fee for a single person and then glanced over at Theodore as I waited in line. He was standing along the roped-off area looking dejected as he watched all the other happy couples pose for pictures by a professional photographer. I was angry with him for not having any money, and I felt deceived by his parents for sending their son to the prom with empty pockets.

"What's wrong?" Theodore asked when I finally returned to our table. I'd deliberately avoided him by allowing couples to jump in line ahead of me.

"Nothing," I lied.

Just then the deejay announced, "And now it's time for the last dance of the evening. Grab that prom date because Ben E. King and the Drifters are coming up next with, Save the Last Dance For Me. Get ready. Get set. One, two, three! Everybody dance!"

"Let's dance," Theodore said, standing up.

"My feet hurt after all that standing in line," I said, without looking at him. I sat down and he pushed my chair beneath me. I was sulking over spending my own money.

He sat back down. We both watched all the other couples dance together.

What a bummer. While I'm making him miserable, I'm spoiling my own fun. "I'm ready to go whenever you are," I said, before the last dance ended.

"Okay. We can head out now. Thaddeus is waiting for us."

On the ride home, we sat on opposite ends of the long back seat. Neither of us said a word, but I had lots of things on my mind. Why had I ended up with a date that had no money? He had a whole year to save for this special night. Lots of students planned to go somewhere else afterwards but we couldn't. Didn't he know he'd need money at the prom? I didn't know, but I brought some just in case. I'm sure I hurt his feelings, but he deserved to suffer for hurting mine.

I wondered what he'd tell his family about our date

and started feeling sorry for my behavior. There was no way I could change what had already happened at the prom. Why had I acted mean at picture time? Everything up to that point had been great. How could I have hurt his feelings after his family had treated me so special?

Thaddeus must have detected the arctic blast in the backseat because he popped in an eight-track cartridge and began singing *The Tracks of My Tears* with Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. I stared at the darkness wishing we could relive the last half of our evening.

When we reached my house, Theodore came around and opened the back door for me and walked me to my front door. Without saying a word, he reached for my gloved hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

Why had I acted mean at picture time? Everything up to that point had been great. How could I have hurt his feelings after his family had treated me so special?"

"Thank you for going to the prom with me," he said.

"Thank you for taking me," I said. "Good night." I went inside as he stood watching me.

"Good night," he said as I closed the door.

Rather than apologize for being selfish, I avoided Theodore for the remaining five weeks of school. The prom was the only thing that we had to talk about and it was over.

One week after we ended our eleventh grade year, Theodore died.

At his funeral, I gasped when I saw a prom picture taken by his mother on the cover of the obituary. A separate page contained other photographs from that night. Poor woman. She would have been delighted to see a picture of her son actually at the prom, but I didn't let it happen.

"The doctors told my wife and me that we could lose our son at any time from a rare blood disease they

discovered when he was twelve,” his father said. “But we never told Theodore. We just let him go on enjoying his life as long as he could.”

“Attending the prom was the highlight of Theodore’s life,” his mother said, holding up another prom picture she’d taken. “He looked so handsome that night. My son was so excited that he left home without his wallet. It was a good thing he wasn’t driving.”

People laughed, but I choked. Her words pricked my heart like needles being pushed into a pincushion. I felt like a killer. Maybe I’d stabbed him to death by chiding him for not having any money that night. How could I have known he’d forgotten his wallet?

After the funeral, I stood on the church grounds and wept.

My best friend, Elaine, came over and put her arms around me.

“Tell me what you’ve been holding back,” she said. “Get it off your chest. You’re crying like you lost your best friend and I know you weren’t that close to him.”

“I feel so bad about Theodore,” I said. “I feel like it’s my fault he died. I behaved badly toward him on prom night. I wish I could have found it in my heart to ask him to forgive me. But I was too proud to admit I was wrong. Now it’s too late.”

“You didn’t kill him,” she said.

“But he was a good person and I wouldn’t let him forget his one mistake. I hate that I’ll never be able to ask him to forgive me for being such a brat on prom night.”

“Yeah, that sucks,” she said. “Would you rather be the one who died?”

“What made you ask that?” I stared into her eyes, wondering how she could joke about something so serious.

“Because you have to learn to forget the things you can’t change,” she said. “He’s dead now and you can’t change it. You’ll make some more mistakes as long as you’re alive. Just try to do better next time.”

“But why did he have to die so young?”

“Didn’t your sister Zenobia die young, too?” she said. “Look around you in this cemetery. Don’t you see graves of all sizes out here?”

“I know. I know. But maybe during our senior year

I could have told him why I got so upset with him. First, I needed time to figure it out myself. I think I felt disrespected. I already had so many scars that bruised my ego. I didn’t know he’d forgotten his wallet. I made a big deal out of his mistake and spoiled my own fun. From now on, I’m going to apologize and ask forgiveness while I have the chance.”

“But he was a good person and I wouldn’t let him forget his one mistake. I hate that I’ll never be able to ask him to forgive me for being such a brat on prom night.”

“Good for you,” she said. “You got anything you need to ask me to forgive you for?”

“I can’t think of anything right now,” I said, laughing as I scratched my head.

It felt good to dump the junk I’d carried inside. Elaine had helped me just by listening. She had a knack for getting me to look at myself, or a situation, differently. She was right. I would make some more mistakes in this life. So, instead of beating myself up over things I cannot change, I decided to learn the art of compromise.



About the Author: Gloria Shell Mitchell, educator and minister, was a finalist in Dan Poynter’s 2011 Global eBook Awards. *Letting Go of SCARS*, Book 4 in “The Garbage Man’s Daughter” Series, depicts brokenness from a teen’s perspective.

The Man Who Went West

By Carson Standifer

Lomrick stared through the rusted link fence that bordered the complex. The siroccos had picked up again, hurling dust through the red wastes beyond. The slice in the fence clinked in the wind. It had taken years to break each link, crouching between patrols with a rock and aching fingers. Now it was finally done.

“I’m leaving,” he told them suddenly. “I must.”

The boys and girls huddled behind him. Handpin with her red twists of hair and Leech with his piggly nose; Harlow and Grumbit and a slew of others. They had no names but those which he’d chosen for them, silly things from tales he’d read as a boy. The complex guards called each child by an alpha-numeric code. The code was plain enough to read, burnt above their ankle, but they liked the names he’d given them and used them amongst themselves. They’d been born in The Palace, knew nothing beyond the propaganda that played its cycling loop each moonrise.

**YOU’RE THE LAST. THE WAR IS BEING
FOUGHT FOR YOU! YOU’RE SAFE HERE!**

Handpin looked up, her lips trembling. “You’ll die. Everyone knows. If the worms don’t get you, the sand raptors will. We’re safe here. We’re the last. Why can’t y’stay with us? With me?” She was oldest of the Palace children, near seventeen and ripe with curves.

Lomrick was old enough to be her grandfather, and yet other parts of his body didn’t seem to mind. He looked into her eyes—like sapphires, he’d told her under the glowlamp in the shed, with eyes like that, child, I could rule the world—and felt the rivets of his determination start to buckle. “Aye, I want to stay. You know that. But I must look. I have to see.”

“What’s to see but destruction?” Leech growled, a pugnacious lad that tried to fight anyone who challenged Lomrick’s word. “We’re the last.”

“But we aren’t, my children.” Lomrick dropped his gaze. It seemed now that all their praise was undeserved, the yuletide gifts and sand sculptures, the cards they made for his Womb Day. He’d done what he could to keep his lost culture alive, disguising it so the guards and sentry-bots would mistake them for child’s games. In twenty eight years only one had seen through this farce ... and the poor fool was rotting beneath the sand-glass in an unmarked grave.

The children were silent, their expressions of judgment melting into uncertainty as they watched him sway on the heels of his tar-patched boots. It was Handpin who spoke. “What are you saying, Lommie?”

Lomrick snapped his face up and nearly growled. She never called him Lommie outside the shed. She caught herself. “Lomrick, I mean.”

The others were still too off balance to notice—at least, he hoped. As he turned back to the gate and laced his fingers through the links, the children rushed toward him, screaming.

“Don’t worry.” He pushed them back. “The voltage is disarmed. I filched some wire from the graveyard. Bots don’t stink like humans. A dinner spoon becomes a shovel in shallow earth.” He gestured to a breaker box soldered to one of the gate-posts, where red hot wire was tied into a loop. “The circuits are rerouted.”

Small Grumbit squinted his eyes, which saw poorly in darkness. “I wish I could do magic.”

“Not magic, lad. Science.” The word was a curse of the highest order, could have you bound and thrown into the sunbox for a two days without gruel or water.

“Y’shouldn’t speak so loud, Lom,” Grumbit looked over his shoulder. “The bots —”

“— Aren’t coming. I sabotaged the east barricade.

Should keep them plenty busy.”

“That’s the opposite wall, right?” asked Leech, his eyes eager for approval. “Where the dawn comes?”

“Aye.” Lomrick had taught them navigation, astrology, math, myths, and all that he could remember. “And what’s to my right?”

Leech was still thinking when Harlow grunted and said, “North.” The black-haired runt pointed the opposite direction. “Which makes that south.”

“Good. All good.” He looked at them, his children, the only things of meaning left. He knew he must tell, yet feared their ability to conceal it. No doubt they would be questioned. If one of them was weak or foolish enough to spy friendliness in the dead eyes of a patrolman, it would be their doom. And his. Best to remember that.

Lomrick turned back to the gate, stared up and far and with his whole heart. There was no moon. Stars struggled beneath gray sheets of pollution. Would that his conscience could be so muddled...

He considered pulling the steel links apart, just dipping his head beyond the perimeter and running with the supplies on his back. But doing so would uproot the love in them he had worked so hard to nurture. In a world isolated from its past religions, he had somehow become their God. And what was a God’s purpose but to impart wisdom and inspire hope of greater things.

He looked them up and down, angry with himself. “Come with me to the graveyard. And be quick about it.”

The siroccos shifted and for a moment he could hear the eastern sirens, where he’d triggered the alarms. He spoke as they followed around the corrugated bunkers. “The War is not ongoing. It swept America thirty years ago.”

“America?” asked Harlow.

“Don’t interrupt!” It came out fiercer than he would have liked, but the distraction would not hold forever. Sooner or later, the bots would come in droves. “America was the name of this land we occupy, though its borders were vast. Thousands of miles stretched in each direction. Across the ocean were islands. 62 states comprised the nation, and all shared the common ground of freedom.

“I’ve told you of freedom, though not directly. To do so would have been dangerous for us both. Imagine a world without cages. Without armed guards. A world where you could choose when you went to bed or what you ate. There were rules, of course there were, but only those that protected the citizens from doing harm to themselves or each other. Each man and woman had the right to marry who they pleased; each

child the same opportunity to educate himself and rise to the highest seat, if only he worked for it.”

Lomrick halted at the next bend and suddenly flattened against the wall. He turned with a finger pressed to

his lips. The children did the same, trembling as a mechanical droning evinced itself against the wind. It buzzed, leaping from roof to roof on chromium spider legs, shining its search lamps through the walkways. The tick-tick-tick of its legs against the corrugated steel made Lomrick’s skin crawl. And then, mercifully, it faded into the wind.

Jogging now, he whispered: “I was born before the brain-drain. The war was being waged for years before the public thought to care. In the end, most of them didn’t. They were too bewitched by the poisons of technology, the lottery shows, the death matches, the com-pads and god-chips that filled their minds with such lucid fantasies that after a time they could no longer dream for themselves. The very thing whose



advent had been forged to liberate society became its strongest shackle.

“When they digitized the books, the world thought it a convenience. That many of the great works of philosophy and religion did not survive this process went unnoticed. Curriculums were pared down to the barest scraps. The world became intolerable, child-like. Blood and sex and fame were distilled into a single dish and dumped into the pig-trough of society. The old men died, and young Pop-addicts rose to take their place. Suspicion supplanted kindness. The tribe of Man isolated into a thousand warring fragments. And this they did from the private tower of their com-screens. They weaved entire worlds from a keypad, stopped living, stopped caring. They grew paler and fatter and less inclined. Only when a public execution was being held did they pull themselves from the darkness to attend. And the executions, themselves...”

Lomrick felt the tear slide down his cheek. “Ah, but we’ve arrived.”

The children said nothing, only looked at barren humps of hard pack that marched into infinity. Planks of black composite served as epitaphs, each stamped with an alpha-numeric code. But some were slightly different. Small paintings or etchings or chalk symbols were to be found among the anonymous dead.

“See there,” Lomrick said, twenty feet into the first row. “That was Bolton, the philosopher. The drawn scales there, that means justice. It was his great obsession. And there, the stripe of red blue and yellow. Those are known as Primary Colors. Erik Karse was an artist of great repute before they sentenced him to die here. His paintings sold in Europe for fifty-thousand pounds. There’s the quill of Alan Demarsch, a German-American poet. Ah, but you don’t know what a quill is, do you? A feather, children. It’s how they wrote for centuries, by dipping the hollowed point in ink.” He went through them all, the scientists and sculptors and musicians and elocutionists, the writers and barristers that had not approved of their country’s new direction, the soldiers and revolutionists and net-knights, who had tried to collapse the system from within as from without. “Even mechanics,” he said, rubbing one epitaph that had been scrawled with a crude wrench.

“What’s a mechanic?” Handpin spoke softly, not wanting to interrupt.

“Someone who works on machines.”

Her eyes went wide. “But you do that.”

He smiled. “I was an airplane mechanic before the government disbanded its military. But that tale is for another day. Come quickly now. See me off. The sirens are starting to die.”

At the gate he embraced each of them, saving Handpin for last. The smoothness of her skin was a siren song. When it brushed against him he felt his legs sink into the hardpack, felt his bones coil like ivy and long to hold her. When he found the strength to pull away he saw that she was crying.

She lifted a finger to his eye and it came back wet. “Remember me?” she whispered.

“Have no doubt of that, child. I’ll live to rue this day. If I live at all.” And then he was through the gate,

She saw lights and the flying bots and the spider-sniffers lined along the distant roofs with their steel legs raised for attack.”

onto the sandglass and canyon crags that fostered no life save plants with barbs and poison. At the top of a rise he looked back, saw them still standing by the gate.

But by the time he lifted his hand the wind shifted and The Palace was swallowed by red.

It was four winters past when the sirens wailed, drawing the children from bed. Though, they weren’t children any longer. Handpin was twenty and one, doing all she could to teach what little Lomrick had left behind. Making a poor job of it, she knew. But the effort brought a trailing sweetness, breathed life into the fading memories of nights spent under the glowlamp of the shed.

She heard voices in the darkness around her, elbows being exchanged, Grumbit and Harlow and Leech and Dondon and a slew of others that had been transferred from other Palaces in a drugged and dreamless state.

“Quiet!” she told them, edging up to the window.

She saw lights and the flying bots and the spider-sniffers lined along the distant roofs with their steel legs raised for attack. Something flashed outside the gate,

brighter than a thousand lightning bolts. It punched into the sky on a pillar of blue and a fwump sailed through the air, throwing her back against the others in a spray of plastic and glass.

She rolled on her back, groaning. There were small cuts on her arms and neck. She felt the snaking blood pulsing with her heartbeat. "Are you okay? Is everyone okay?"

"I'd be better without your arse on my lungs!" Harlow pushed her off with a shove.

"What was it?" Leech added. "What was all that light?"

"I don't know." She looked at them uncertainly and picked herself up. Her legs were trembling and a word went sailing across her heart.

WAR...

Lomrick had spoken of the war before his leaving. Perhaps he was wrong and it was still being fought. Perhaps they weren't the last, after all, and what remained outside the Palace borders had suddenly turned their sights to them. What purpose they could have, she didn't know. But man's cruelty was beyond explanation. She had seen enough of it between her own small tribe of rabble-rousers to imagine how it might grow and fester in older, less-tempered hearts. "Just stay down. Hide. I'll go to see what's happened."

She listened closely for the concussive thump of compression rifles or the screech of winder-bombs... but there was only wind.

"You can't go out past curfew," Grumbit warned, taller and skinnier and still squinting in the darkness. "They'll throw you in the sunbox."

"Our window just exploded, I'm bleeding, and if any guard has a problem with me poking my head out to make sure everyone isn't dead, I'll tell him where he can stick his high opinion!"

They were shocked to silence. But when Leech began to giggle it infected the rest of them.

"Now stay put." She walked to the doors, started to disengage the hydraulic lock the way Lomrick had shown her ... and gasped when the bolt dropped open.

"It's broken." She looked back at them. "The lock is broken." She tried the lights. "The lights, the locks, all of it."

Handpin felt the fear then more than ever. Why disable the defenses unless the prisoners themselves no longer served a purpose? She listened closely for the concussive thump of compression rifles or the screech of winder-bombs ... but there was only wind. She threw the great iron slat and marched into the dusty aisle with her arms crossed over her chest.

The desert was freezing. The heat lamps that usually lined the streets for the night guards were cold and gray. The pole-lights along the gate were all black, some of them still spitting sparks. She was in darkness but for distant flashes. "Hello?"

The wind swallowed her voice.

"HELLO? I've been hurt! What's going on?"

A hooded shape separated from the barrack wall and made its way into the aisle. It limped, she saw, and held a rifle in its hands.

It was then she saw the bots and spider-sniffers collapsed along the ground and roofs and gates, some of them twitching, others shooting fire from between their joints

Handpin searched for a rock and picked it up, shaking it above her head. "Don't you come near me! I'm mean, stranger! Go on your way! Leave me be! Might be you've come for a piece, and leave with one missing!"

And then the shape began to laugh, a deep, gravelly sound like pebbles sliding down a cliff. "Might be I've come for a look, child. And forgiveness."

And she knew then. She knew and dropped the stone and ran to him, screaming her tears, screaming his name. She had not known such joy could displace the terror she'd felt mere moments before. The shift made her drunk. But his arms were strong and thick and he kept the balance for both of them.

"Come out, lads!" Lomrick called to the open door. "Come out and say hello!"

They sat in the bunker under the lights. Lomrick had fixed the breakers. Not all of them, but enough. "The pulse cooked their hardware, but it wasn't a full charge," he'd told them. "The frequencies were set to target bio-wiring. The electrical breakers got hit, but we've enough fuses to make it through. What doesn't

work, I'll fix. I brought tools, supplies. Food enough for each of us. Soil, seeds, UV cells. The other Palaces have been destroyed, so don't expect reinforcements. I've seen to that."

"Bet you brought a spaceship, too," Handpin had jibed.

"Of sorts. A cargo racer, not very big, but resistant to radar and built for deserts such as this."

"And where are we going?"

His face was grave. "Nowhere. We're staying here."

And now the lights were shining and the children that were no longer children were asleep. Lomrick's black beard was shot through with gray, but to Handpin he had never looked so handsome. "Did you dream of me while you were gone?"

"Even with my eyes open." He kissed her forehead. "I was so worried they'd harm you."

"They tried, but we stood together ... like you taught us. They wouldn't do their chores. The entire camp sat down in the sun until they pulled me from the sunbox. Some of them even died." She was still sad about that. "I still feel like I'm dreaming. I love you, Lommie."

"And I, you."

After the love they were quiet for a time, Handpin trailing his chest with her fingers, and Lomrick trailing her buttocks with his. She pressed her cheek to his chest to hear his heartbeat. It had a warrior's rhythm, like the fierce gallop of a Lion. She knew of lions, though she'd never seen one. Her thoughts spun on in this way until she whispered, "Why did you come back? Not just for me. Surely not for me. Or else why would we stay here?"

Lomrick grunted. She felt him shift beneath her, and it was not until the tremble ran through him that she realized he was weeping. It wasn't pathetic, like she'd imagined boy's tears to be. There was strength in it, as a king might weep over his fallen son. She cradled his chin. "What is it, love?"

"The world," he whispered. "The world."

"What of it?"

"It's no longer there. It took me near two weeks to make it to a city, and another to scale its gates."

"They had gates?"

"Aye. Like the palace. Though made of stone and steel and mounted with gun turrets. Once I got inside ..." A tear slipped into his beard. "I couldn't find my way. Everything was identical. The houses, the people. Their faces were different, but their attire, their gait as they conveyed themselves, the way the spoke. It was flat, without inflection. And they were so pale. Vampires. Holed up in crypts comprised of the same four rooms, the same couches and beds. The same colors."

"I don't understand," Handpin whispered. "I'm sorry, but..."

"They were the same!" he all but screamed. "All of them. There is no war, because there's no individual desire. They've bred it out of us. I stayed among them, shaved my beard, tried to walk their causeways and arcades. Can you imagine a store with the same four items? Every store is like that. They eat an infused paste three times a day. They wake and exercise and go to work, then return to plug their god-chips into the hive. Personality has become a private exploration. They voice no sovereign thought. When the fashion changes, all the clothes are burned, and each man in his turn wears the new style like a puppet next to his neighbor.

"They wave and smile, certainly, but they're soul-less. They want nothing but that which they believe they should want. What's acceptable to want. Don't you understand?"

It was plain from his face that her look of confusion disappointed him. "You did not grow up outside, as I did. It felt like I was attending a funeral."

"A funeral?"

"The funeral of Man."

"That sounds awful. Was their music?"

"No music. No art. No expression." He squeezed her tightly. "We've become a race without imagination."



About the Author: Born in Spanaway, Washington to an alcoholic poet and a determined optimist, Carson Standifer is a speculative fiction novelist, short story writer and musician. He is a recipient of the 2010 Writer's Digest Editor's Choice Award for Genre Fiction.

10 Tips to Get Started for Self-Published Authors

By Beth Barany

So you want to be a self-published author! Great!

As an indie author or independent author, you have now entered the realm of great power and great responsibility.

Experienced indie authors may just want to browse through this list to see where they can strengthen their skill set or where they need more help. If you're just starting your journey as a self-published author, I recommend you read the entire list.

As an indie author of nine titles, a mix of fiction and nonfiction, and as one who has shepherded more than thirty other books to publication, I've been around the block a few times. And the block keeps changing. That's one of the things that make this journey so exciting.

So here goes! And be prepared to be flexible, creative, and bold.

#1: Write a good book

Some would say even a great book. But quality is so subjective and depends on your readership. In some cases, good books are all that's required to serve your audience. In other cases, you do need to write a great book. Know the difference and get help. That means, either hire an editor, have excellent, kind and discerning critique partners, or get beta readers. Or do all three. In our household of two working writers, we do all three.

#2: Educate yourself on how self-publishing works

There are great free step-by-step guides on the Internet. Read a few or a bunch. Get to know how this game works because it is always changing. You can publish a PDF on your site and be self-published. You can also upload your novel to every online retailer out there, like Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo,

Smashwords, and iTunes, and yes, you will be published. Learn who can distribute your e-book for you: *Smashwords* and *Draft2Digital*, currently, and learn the pluses and minuses of each for your situation. And learn what your print on demand options are: CreateSpace and LightningSource.com, to name the two big players.

There are great free step-by-step guides on the Internet. Read a few or a bunch. Get to know how this game works because it is always changing.”

#3: Know your audience and their expectations

If you write nonfiction for your business, your needs are very different than someone who writes memoir. Novelists each have different kinds of audiences. It's important to know your audience expectations so you can think through the next tips.

#5: Design a Great Cover

In my opinion, this does have to be great. A reader won't care if you're an indie author. All they want is a great read. Your cover signals that. So have a cover designed that reflects your audience's expectations. Study other books in your genre so that you see what the trends are and what works for you and what doesn't. Hire a cover designer if you can't design your own. Set your budget and know that you can spend anything from \$100 to \$4000. Designers can be found on sites like *elance.com*, *99designs.com*, or as close as your local art school or writing community.

#6: Join a writer community

If you have your eye on publishing, join a group

that has authors already published. It's great to always have people in the group who know more than you and have more experience, especially if you're an experienced indie author. We're always learning in this business, both our craft and the nuts and bolts of getting published. The most successful authors I know are always experimenting. When I hear what they're doing, it challenges me to try new things, too. Also, it's a fallacy to think that just because you don't have a publisher, you're all on your own. All the successful authors I know have built a team around them to handle the things they can't or don't want to. In your writer community, you can find critique partners, cover designers, layout experts, e-book conversion experts, marketing geniuses, and cheer leaders. We indie authors need all of these. Your community is a great place to start as to where to find the resources you need and what may be your next step.

#7: Start your book marketing planning and execute on it as soon as you can

Book marketing is often the biggest hurdle for self-published authors. You've spent all this time writing. Now you need to switch gears and face the world and tell them about your book. Start as soon as you start writing, if you can. Share with your current supporters, friends, fans, and social media sphere that you're writing a book, and share tidbits if you're comfortable with that, or images of your writing desk if you're not. Drop hints throughout the process, so that people can get excited for you. This is also a great time to start testing out your content. Some writers even use blogging as an avenue to write the content for their book. I've seen this both for nonfiction and fiction writers.

#8: Start a list of fans and supporters

A list is golden. At the beginning, use a spreadsheet or your email contact database. As soon as you can, use an email service like ConstantContact.com or Mailchimp.com or Getresponse.com. I use the later. I only share news when I have a new book published or a special sale. No need to write often. Readers just want to know where to get your book. Use your blog or social media for more frequent communication, if that's what you want. Our main goal as authors is to build a loyal fan base who will buy our books and spread the news for us. That is the way to build a successful career. If you're just planning on publishing only one book, you'll still need to compile a list of everyone you can tell about your book.

#9: Get an online home

Whether it's a blog or static site, or even a Facebook Fan page, have a place where readers and fans can find you and follow what you're doing. You can be as open or as closed as you want to interaction, but at least have a way for people to follow you and your journey. When the time comes, you'll want to tell them about your new book for sale, and they'll want to buy it and spread the news.

In our research, we've found that most writers start to get successful around their third book in a series or their fifth book, if they're writing books that aren't connected."

#10: Write Your Next book and keep promoting your previous ones

If you're looking to build a career as a writer, keep writing. Careers build over time with many books. In our research, we've found that most writers start to get successful around their third book in a series or their fifth book, if they're writing books that aren't connected. If you're writing just one book, then rest on your laurels and celebrate that you have published a book.

Your list of tips may differ. I may not have included everything. Share your tips in the comments. Together we can be successful independent authors and achieve our dream of reaching our audience and delivering to them the wonderful thing they're searching for.

Never before in history have artists been able to so easily deliver their art directly to their audience. Us authors are no exception. It's so gratifying to see our royalties roll in every month from all our vendors. I'm spurred on by every sale and every smile of a happy reader. I enjoy the journey, really an adventure, as much as the destination. I wish you the same and much success in your self-publishing adventure.



About the Author: Based in Oakland, California, Beth Barany is an award-winning novelist, creativity coach for writers, and book production shepherd. She offers a complimentary consultation to authors curious about getting support from her. More about Beth and her products and services at <http://www.BethBarany.com>.

“What the Hell is That?”

Writing Contemporary Horror Fiction

By Mike Robinson

A friend of mine tells the story of when he was ten years old and lying in bed. He was having trouble sleeping, and so tossed and turned well into the deep redevye hour, that time when, regardless of location, the primal country of our ancestors seems most palpable. As he finally started to drift off, he felt a tug on the sheet, then heard a voice (“Gruff,” he explains, “like a grown man”) whisper harshly into his ear, “Scoot over!”

Sleep never came that night, and, whether ghostly or imagined, the cold-fingered memory still grips his spine.

Or take my younger years. One Christmas Eve, after watching the George C. Scott version of *A Christmas Carol*, I sat in bed, wide awake. I’m sure I was joined by millions of others my age, but it wasn’t the anticipation of presents keeping me up. It was the damn Ghost of Christmas Future, who I expected any moment to come drifting down the hallway to my room. I wanted to close my eyes, but was too afraid I wouldn’t see him coming, and so would snap awake to a tall robed figure looming bedside, pointing its long skeletal index finger at me.

It’s difficult for me to believe that one can write truly effective horror -- horror that feels organic, new and authentic -- without some variation of this wonderful “fright gene”. And while many kids get

scared, I’d venture to guess it’s a minority that actually craves such experiences, and would as an adult classify them as “wonderful”. They’re frightening at the same time they’re uplifting, texturing the world in rich, noble insanity. I still have them, too, to some degree. They’re baked into the cake. For whatever reason, my brain

works often in perverse entertainment to unnerve itself, like when I lie awake in the dark, on my side, and think, “I’m alone right now. What would happen if I felt a light tap on my shoulder?”

This gusto for goose-bumps, this knack for nightmare, is, I believe, a formative and fundamental part of writing good horror fiction, fiction that is born of an innate, ongoing process, and not just relegated to Halloween. Such a mindset also encourages originality, because for you the tropes and stock creatures and boardroom frights have come and gone, and you’re out scouring murkier fathoms.

By no means am I insinuating that horror writers belong to some exclusive club that asks potential members to list their childhood terrors for approval. I’m merely saying it helps incalculably if that hungry fascination, both celebrated and unsettling, runs in your DNA.

Take a novelist acquaintance of mine. For years she wrote romance and erotic fiction. Successfully, I



might add. But one day she became interested in trying horror “because it always sells.” I was skeptical – I thought she should no more write horror than I should romance. But hey, I’m open-minded (truly I am), so my reply never went beyond a nod and some words of wooden encouragement.

Her result, while well-written and passable, was largely what I expected: a paint-by-numbers retread of typical genre fare. She didn’t have it in her blood, nor had she sopped up enough of the genre to know what was overrun and what awaited better exploration. Her approach was artificial, mechanical (not helped by the dollar signs in her eyes). I’d seen such things as hers, and had yawned past them. And yet, decades-old work by the greats, which I’ve read and re-read, continue to chill. Stephen King said horror must regularly renew itself, or die. H.P. Lovecraft, Richard Matheson and Clive Barker are some of last century’s revitalizing visionaries. Who’s holding the defibrillators this century? Why not you?

We’ve all heard the mantra that the heart of horror is fear of the unknown. Increasingly, however, that truism is more acknowledged than executed. Since the 1980s publishing bust, when oversaturation proved the genre’s downfall, horror has limped on, like a transient ambling down the road, pitied by faces watching from curtains of snug homes. Dark Fantasy took it in, as has Paranormal. YA has sucked up some of it. It’s been broken down and mixed in with other genres. This is partly why we’ve seen the resurgence of tropes like vampires, werewolves and zombies, all of which hardly represent “the unknown”, not any longer. They’re well known, and so, in this author’s opinion, not very scary.

Some of the best inspiration for those looking to break this rut can be found not necessarily in mainstream books but in the thousands of utterly bizarre reports posted every day in archives and message boards of websites catered towards strange phenomena. Even documentary-style TV shows like Paranormal Witness can offer up good fodder. Whether you believe these people or not, it’s for sure that nothing can be as weird as reality. And I don’t just mean Victorian-garbed girls fading into thin air, or Sasquatch strutting through the brush. Consider the following example of a man who, while living in the jungles of Hawaii, was invited to dinner by a neighboring couple, Tom and Anne, whom he’d always considered nice, but odd. He goes on to explain:

“One night... I was over at their house as usual and was sitting at the table having some food and conversation. I was eating, looking down at my plate. Tom and Ann were saying something. All of a sudden, like a switch went off, they stopped talking in mid sentence. I looked up from my plate, across the table at Tom and Ann next to him and I saw them there, as if frozen in time. Their mouths wide open with their eyes and their mouths completely black. And I don’t mean normal black. I mean a deep, empty black. Blacker than any black you’ve ever seen your life. Almost like another dimensional black. Their mouths as black as their eyes.

We’ve all heard the mantra that the heart of horror is fear of the unknown. Increasingly, however, that truism is more acknowledged than executed.”

You could feel the black (if that makes any sense).

I was immediately struck with a sense of fear. As I stood up and looked at them, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I wasn’t high, I wasn’t drinking, I was just seeing something that I couldn’t understand. I contemplated running through that dark jungle full of fear to get home. Then everything returned to normal, like a light switch turned back on, as if nothing happened at all.”

There’s another report in England of a couple encountering, early in the morning, what they called a “stickman”, a flat, silhouetted humanoid they compared to the logo on the door of a men’s public restroom. It’d been “lolly-hopping”, was their term, until it stopped, realizing they could see it.

Those are just two of an infinite number of examples. I bring these up not to revel in weirdness but to suggest how deep and dark those unexplored fathoms can be. So grab a flashlight! And of course, while I tend towards the supernatural, or extraordinary, keep in mind horror does not have to be physically inexplicable, though it does involve something inexplicable, like the who or why of the creepy (and very earthly) home invaders in the underrated film *The Strangers*.

Most really good horror fiction also, for me, is like a solar system. In the center pulses the

Central Big Idea or Image, which nourishes the smaller ones orbiting it. Of course, this can be seen in other genres (notably theme-layered literary fiction), but I feel it's particularly significant with horror. It's usually the image or idea that starts the juices flowing, that spools out the rest of the story. It's the image that, when successfully realized, will survive in your readers' minds (and dreams) long after the closing passage. Think of *The Shining*, for instance, and you think of a murderous father pursuing his wife and son.

My forthcoming horror novel *The Prince of Earth* began with the image of a young woman injured and alone atop a misty mountain in the middle of the Scottish Highlands, where she is plagued by a malevolent force. To me, it was a powerful aesthetic vision, and the progenitor of all else that came after it. And this image wasn't attached to any specific idea. Oftentimes, the idea, or ideas, is built into the image, and it's your job to decode them and discover them, unearthing the morbid delights in that visual package.

I'm not a big outliner. I realize this is subjective, and in all fairness I have been known to what I call "micro-outline" a certain section or chapter I'm having trouble with. Every writer should do what they feel works for them. But when it comes to horror, a genre that relies on suspense, surprise, underlying trepidation of what's around the corner, I'm mildly suspicious of outlining. If you as the author are the first to take the journey of your story, unsure yourself what lurks out there (or within), that shows in the result. It gives the book a heartbeat, a greater sense of intrigue, doubt and wonder. If the tale is more or less composed as a "Fill in the Blanks with Scare A, B, C", or a connect-the-dots exercise, it tends to dilute the reading experience.

And, of course, if your Big Image proves too big for an outline, it may just break its cage, maul your mind and tell you other ways of doing things. And wouldn't that also be a wonderful experience?



About the Author: Mike Robinson is an award-winning novelist and short-story writer, and the managing editor of *Literary Landscapes*. He has published six books, the most recent of which is *Too Much Dark Matter, Too Little Gray: A Collection of Weird Fiction*. See more of his work at www.mikerobinson-author.com.

Conduit

By Lisa Marguerite Mora

Sometimes they are sodden,
the matches I would strike on the flint of my mind
every day impatient
I wait for the flame quick bright to heat the cold
of my thoughts and the chilled condensation
within the chambers of my heart. I strike. I strike.
Biting my lip, my shoulder pressed against a wall.
It takes effort. It takes will to press
pen to paper fingers to keys,
to trust what my heart murmurs, the words
that whisper in the back of my head,
my throat tight because I cannot speak
all that would come
This is what I do
conduit for an illumination
I can neither house nor conjure.
Conduit alone – I am nothing
without the flame nothing
without the bolt of lightning



About the Author: Lisa Marguerite Mora is a novelist, prize winning poet, and story editor. She conducts workshops and offers editing services at www.barringtoneditorial.com. Work published or forthcoming includes *Rattle*, *ONTHEBUS*, *Literary Mama*, *Blue Mountain Arts*, *Public Poetry Series*, *Cultural Weekly*, and *Rebelle Society*.

Finding Your Niche

THERE IS NOTHING SWEETER TO A WRITER THAN WHEN “THE GREAT IDEA” HITS

By Morgan St. James

Sometimes the great idea is a hard one to convert to a complete novel because it's too limited or difficult to rein in. Maybe there is too much to include for a single novel.

Have you ever heard someone describe their work in progress as being a romantic, sci-fi mystery with historical roots, humor, steamy sex and—oh yes, they've thought about introducing some vampires? They also need to figure out how to still use the sex but qualify it for the young adult market as well as appealing to the adult market and last, but not least, they're toying with the idea of bringing in a psychic and a few rock stars. Wow. All of that in one novel? This might sound exaggerated, but I've heard descriptions strangely like that.

And, of course, this author with the multi-genre idea knows it will be a best seller because it is bound to hit everything readers are buying.

Time to take a deep breath

It's time to remember that as the author you are the one in charge. You orchestrate the ideas, they shouldn't control you. Of course it's tempting to throw in a little of this and a little of that, but the result could easily be a mish-mash that no one wants to touch, including potential readers if it ever gets published.

It reminds me of the period of time I was an interior designer. I'd been hired to design a small muffin shop that would seat a maximum of twenty people. The owner had seen Wolfgang Puck's Granita restaurant in Malibu California with a seating capacity of most likely over two-hundred. Unfortunately, he wanted to include almost every detail he'd seen in Granita in his little shop, which was impossible and unpractical. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the “throw everything on the wall” approach wouldn't work.

It is just as risky to try this as a writer because you only have so much space to work with, say 70,000 to 90,000 words plus or minus on the average, and you need to keep the reader's interest.

Time to take a deep breath and develop a clear story line. Plot a novel, novella or short story using that Great Idea, but use your head in the way you should when you decide upon the genre or sub-genre. Sometimes, even though it seemed wonderful you just can't make it work. If you play around with it and come up with zip, put it on the shelf and go on to the next idea.

What next?

It is natural to be influenced by books you see racking up the big sales. That's what people are buying, isn't it? Maybe when considering the Great Idea you think, well I write romance but maybe it should take place on the planet Zenobia. That sounds intergalactic and it could be a space-travel fantasy romance. Fantasies are big sellers now, so it would attract more readers. At that point, you should ask yourself this question.

Do I have a feeling for writing compelling fantasy and conjuring all of the cultures, environments, inventions, characters, new languages and more in a way that will make my novel appeal to fantasy aficionados?

Not everyone is skilled in this genre or imaginative in the way that results in a must-read fantasy. The same principle applies to many other genres, as well. How about the wannabe mystery writer who writes scenes that are so predictable the reader knows exactly what will happen? Clearly, creating a page-turning mystery isn't his or her thing.

In a nutshell, it probably isn't a good practice to take your amazing inspiration for a story and turn it into something in a genre you have no talent for executing.

What's my niche?

As writers, there are things we are drawn to and really shine at. Working within those parameters it's not hard to figure out what kind of stories you should be writing. For me one niche is mystery novels. I love working out the twists and turns and working in red herrings and

clues along the way. I currently have ten novels and one single author anthology in publication, but I also love writing short stories.

Short stories are generally a bit harder to sell, but you can look for magazines and anthologies accepting queries. I love the instant gratification of writing a short story, although in many ways they are not only harder to sell but harder to write than a novel. You must stay on point and write tight, restricted to only a limited number of words. Some of my ideas were best suited to short stories and others to novels, so I do have multiple short stories published in anthologies. Regardless of the genre, determine how your idea is best presented – novel, novella or short story, then picture it almost like a mental movie and develop it in that direction.

The niche might also involve choosing which point of view to use. For some plots and genres the logical choice is omniscient or third person. For others it is first person. Some authors prefer to write in present tense, others in past tense. Sometimes it's a combination.

I'd finished a pair of novels in present tense and was practically knocked off my feet when the publisher said, "I love them but we don't publish anything written in present tense." I suppose I could have shopped them around, but instead rewrote the novels in past tense which actually suits the stories better, and they were published.

Don't try to be what you're not.

I wish I could write vampires, fantasy and young adult novels, as they all sell very well, but it's simply not my thing. Discover where your passion is, then figure out how to develop your idea in that genre. The same idea can turn into many different things depending upon how it's handled. I go into more detail about handling the same story line in different ways in Chapter 10 of *Writers' Tricks of the Trade: 39 Things You Need to Know About the ABCs of Writing Fiction*. When you work in a style and genre you love, it shows. Many people, like me, can work in multiple formats. Whatever you choose make sure you're not forcing yourself into a mold to make it more commercial.



About the Author: Morgan St. James is the author of eleven novels with more due for release in 2015, over 600 articles about the craft and business of writing, and is a speaker and columnist. Her *Writers' Tricks of the Trade* brand includes the book, *Writers' Tricks of the Trade: 39 Things You Need to Know About the ABCs of Writing Fiction*, the *Writers' Tricks of the Trade* bi-monthly ezine, and the new *Writers' Tricks of the Trade* show on Blog Talk Radio. For more information visit www.morganstjames-author.com.

New From GLAWS Authors!

A Tangle of Fates is the exciting new take on a beloved fairy tale from sci-fi/fantasy author and GLAWS V.P., **Leslie Ann Moore**.

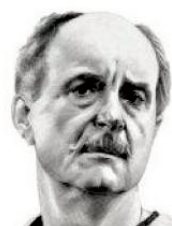


Best-selling fantasy author Emma Bull says: "*A Tangle of Fates mixes planetary romance with a fairy-tale subtext, and serves it up with an in-*



triguing background of reimagined technology and religion. The result is delicious!"

A Tangle of Fates is available now from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and direct from Muse Harbor Publishing (e-version only)



TWO is the new novel by **Karl Alexander**. His previous novels have been made into movies, including the bestselling "Time After Time," a Warner Bros. film starring Malcolm McDowell and Mary Steenburgen.

Learn more at: <http://www.karlalexander.net>

As the publishing world evolves, chefs, restaurants and food industry leaders are changing the way they approach publishing. Gone are the days when landing a deal with an established publisher was the only way to get your voice,



your recipes, in print. Instead of fighting for an increasingly hard-to-get publishing deal or having to go it completely Do-It-Yourself, cookbook authors can turn to **Amy Reiley** at Life of Reiley Independent. Whether an author is ready to self publish but need someone to show them the ropes or simply needs a good recipe editor, marketing plan or conversion to an eBook, Life of Reiley offers a solution based in a decade of work in a fast-evolving publishing market. Details, including a list of services and information about the publishing team can be found on the Life of Reiley website at <http://www.lifeofreiley.com/wp/life-reiley-independent-self-publishing-solutions>