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A Glimpse of the Literary

by Willa Smith

For some people, there is nothing better than a good story, an informative piece of research or an imaginative journey through a few poems.

Other readers simply enjoy language. For all of

these people, there are writers.

For writers, there is now the Writers Studio.

Organized in 2005 by local educator and writer Scott Foran, the Writers Studio meets on the second Sunday of each month at the Prizery.

Their agenda includes a multitude of issues because each writer is involved for a different reason and with a different background.

"There is such a cross section of writing styles and experience ranging from poetry and literary short stories to novel-length works," said novelist Gene Curtis. "Every single person is just so friendly, helpful and talented. I'm in the right place."

The Writers Studio is open to all, regardless of experience, publication history, writing style or education. The purpose is to share, learn and encourage.

"Presentations from participants at the meeting are not elaborate," said Donna Brauda, who is currently concentrating on the art of journalizing, or collecting bits of information in order to tell a story.

"We're all there to share our attempts at creativity. Short stories, publication of family

poems and stories, author bios, submission letters, local authors, aphorisms, news of writing competitions for profit and recognition are some of the topics that are discussed at the meetings.

"Book discussions include everything from Dave Berry to Shakespeare. We have a lot of fun," said Brauda.

Foran is the individual who got the group off the ground after moving to Halifax from California with his wife, Kimberly.

"I began looking for a writers' group of some kind," Foran said. "I couldn't find one, although I did catch a glimpse of the literary community at public readings that were sponsored by Friends of the Library."

So Foran struck out on his own to make a niche in the area's growing arts community specifically for writers.

"After the Prizery opened, I approached (Executive Director) Chris Jones to see if he would allow a writers' group to meet at the Prizery—he graciously said yes," Foran recalled.

"I started the Writers Studio in September 2005 and we have been meeting once a month ever since.

Foran not only set the plan into motion, he executes it as well, leading meetings, designing and publishing the group's quarterly electronic newsletter and contributing his efforts along with the other writers.

So what about the writers?

Michele Fitch, a busy stay-at-home mother, was looking for something to do outside the home when she took a creative writing class **(continued on page 7)**

A New Direction in Self-Publishing

by Gene Curtis

**Once upon a midnight dreary,
while I pondered weak and weary.
Doting with this very query,
whence I doubted vexed and bleary.**

(Adaptation from "The Raven" by E. A. Poe.)

A few years ago, I undertook the formidable challenge of trying to get my first novel, Chronicles of a Magi: The Seventh Mountain, published by a traditional publishing company. If you happen to be a writer, I don't have to tell you how daunting and heartbreaking this undertaking is. Cinderella stories about writers succeeding in a "big way" are far and few between. Like every new author, I knew from the outset I didn't have a chance at that level of success. I'd be happy if a traditional publisher just decided to take a chance on me. Needless to say, I received the inevitable stack of rejection letters as a result of my efforts. That's something I expected. The thing I didn't expect was to just be ignored. My stack of rejection letters accounted for only about half of the material I sent out. Quite a few literary agents didn't even bother to reply with just a simple form letter. How rude! It is a great story, even if I do say so myself. Everybody I allowed to read it told me he loved it, couldn't put it down, and asked when it was coming out. I begged for negative comments and got very few. I even had the manuscript professionally edited. The editor liked the story, and she didn't know me from Abraham when I first approached her, so I knew she was telling me the truth, plus I was paying her to be critical. She said things like, "I love the way you make the unreal things seem more real than the real things," and, "I love your main character. I can really identify with him."

After this phase of submitting to the major houses and agencies, I started submitting to

small presses. I received virtually the same results, with one exception. The novel made the semifinals in the 2005 Archebooks Novel Writing Contest. I entered that contest because the grand prize was a publishing contract. To me, that result was the equivalent of another rejection, but at least I knew from an "official source" I had a good story.

While waiting to hear back from publishers and agents, I read everything I could find to figure out how I could improve my chances of getting published. Every piece of information I found on traditional publishing said essentially the same thing: you're going to get rejected, but submit, submit, submit... and whatever you do, don't self-publish (only they called it vanity-publishing). Now, I bought into that concept for one simple reason: I had already "vanity-published" once before. That endeavor ended up with a bunch of books I couldn't sell. I had no way to distribute them to book stores, and I didn't have the money to advertise in a bunch of magazines. That experience taught me an expensive lesson. Without marketing and the ability to distribute the books, vanity-publishing is virtually a guaranteed failure. I wholeheartedly agreed with the idea of not self-publishing, since I'd already experienced it. I wasn't about to make that mistake again. No way! No how!

Then, in about 2003, I started noticing the Xerox® commercials appearing on television touting the idea that any author could be published with print-on-demand (POD) technology. What a neat idea. A single book could be printed when it was ordered. There was no need to warehouse large quantities of books. I started researching POD (print-on-demand) with the idea publishers were going to adapt to this new technology with gusto, and, if I acted quickly, I might be able to get in on the ground floor. It made sense that more authors could get published, since all a publisher had to do was keep a file on a computer somewhere and print a book when

it was ordered. Publishers could now afford to publish all of the good stories. Boy, was I in for a surprise.

I found traditional publishers were actively deriding this new technology; titles that were being published with POD technology were way over priced, and the only format available was trade paperback. The titles were priced at \$21.00 and up. Why on earth would anyone pay that much for a paperback book? (I didn't realize it at the time, but I was already routinely buying paperback books for that price and more. These were tech manuals, of course, not fiction novels.) Not to mention, most of the publishers offering print-on-demand were less than reputable.

I gave up on that idea and continued my quest for the more traditional means of getting published. A few months later, I read an article on Christopher Paolini and his book Eragon. He was a lad of fifteen years when he finished his book and was published by his parents. His parents owned a small press. He sold and gave away some of the books at conventions and sold some on the internet. A short while later, an editor from one of the big publishing houses was on vacation and read the book. He loved it, and, not long after that, Christopher Paolini was signed with that big name publisher (Knopf). This was a Cinderella story about an author who had self-published. (Incidentally, Eragon is currently being made into a major motion picture scheduled for release in 2006.)

To POD, or not to POD:

That is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind

To suffer the slings and arrows

Of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of

Troubles, And by opposing end them?

(Adaptation from Hamlet by W. Shakespeare.)

This inspired me again. I started digging into how often self-published authors were being picked up by big name publishers and agents. I was startled by the results. It seemed

that publishers and agents (and not just the big names) routinely monitor self-published titles at the major online bookstores, in particular Amazon.com. Apparently, just about any book title with an ISBN (bar code and number) and availability was listed for sale at online bookstores. It made perfect sense for publishers to monitor the sales ranking of POD titles. Why should they take a chance on an unknown author when the marketplace would tell them if something was saleable? It seemed trade paperback novels were actually selling at what I considered outrageous prices, and POD publishing was becoming the new slush pile, a way to submit to every publisher and agent at the same time. As I saw it, that meant the end of the long, fruitless waits and a chance for some pretty quick feedback on my story.

In the past, the vast majority of publishers required exclusive submissions. That meant the author had to wait at least three months, and sometimes years, before hearing back from a publisher and being able to submit his work elsewhere. (I submitted to one publisher more than a year and a half ago and still haven't heard from them.)

Choosing to POD publish might have seemed like a no-brainer choice, but it wasn't, not for me. There is a stigma associated with self-publishing, at least in my mind, as the term "vanity-publishing" implies. The idea of that stigma started getting pounded into my head from the very moment I started researching what it takes to become a published author. For me, every time I considered I might go the self-publishing route, I could hear Darth Vader's voice in my head telling me, *Don't turn to the POD side*. It took an awful lot of consideration for me to actually make the decision to try it again. I didn't want the failure or the stigma.

I don't do anything without researching it first, so naturally I researched people who had self-published. Mark Twain was one. Tom Clancy could be considered another; he was first published by the Naval Institute Press. Virtually every professor I had in college had self-published. (We had to use the textbooks

they published for their class. Man, it was awful. The teacher not only knew the book backwards and forward, he wrote the blasted thing.) Locally, Faye Tuck was self-published, which surprised me. I didn't learn that fact until I met her. Her book, Yesterday--Gone Forever was just so well done. These people succeeded, and there wasn't any "vanity-published" stigma associated with them. There are many, many success stories just like these, more than I care to count. Evidently I'd swallowed the "vanity-publishing" propaganda, hook, line and sinker. Obviously, I decided to take the plunge.

Oh no! He's one of the POD people!

(Paraphrase from the 1956 film
Invasion of the Body Snatchers.)

I investigated a bunch of POD publishers and found, in my opinion, there're very few reputable ones worth considering. The ones I did consider were:

Lulu
Virtual Bookworm
Page Free Publishing
Wingspan Press
Diggory Press (UK)
iUniverse

Excerpt from Gene Curtis' Chronicles of a Magi: The Seventh Mountain available through Lulu: www.lulu.com/genecurtis

At the sword fighting competition, it was a laugh to watch the bouts until LeOmi, the spike haired girl, took to the mat. Ralph Lawrence would be her opponent. He had won the last competition.

LeOmi Jones beat Ralph Lawrence easily. Ralph had been loosing weight since he had been at school. Still, he was no match for the swift and agile LeOmi Jones. Several other contestants challenged her and were trounced.

Keith Richards walked up on the mat to challenge her. He didn't look so much like a garden gnome anymore. They squared off. The

I liked and disliked aspects of all of these companies. I decided to go with Lulu. They represented the lowest upfront investment (\$0.00), and I could cancel at any time. I shied away from iUniverse because of their requirement for what I considered an overly high setup fee (up front), and they paid a very low royalty rate. With Lulu I knew exactly what it would cost to produce my novel, and I could set the price at or above that cost. If I chose to just have the book available at Lulu.com, the entire self-publishing process wouldn't cost me a dime. The cost for an upgrade in distribution was reasonable, and I could purchase as many or as few copies of the book as I wanted — at cost.

The only real complaint I had with Lulu was their submission process. It wasn't altogether user friendly. For me, there was a bit of a learning curve, but I must say, thus far Lulu has done an excellent job. The quality of materials and workmanship I received from them was superb.

My novel, Chronicles of a Magi: The Seventh Mountain is currently available at: www.lulu.com/genecurtis in paperback, hardback, large print hardback and e-book. The audio book version should be available soon, and it won't be long before the book is available internationally. ■

instructor said, "Begin!"

LeOmi turned slowly to face her opponent; he was trying to circle her. She held her two-handed riotous with the tip just below her eye level. She stamped her forward foot and feigned a lunge. Keith jumped back a step and realized that her attack was contrived. Keith rushed forward. He was obviously using the Knight's Ruse Attack. This consisted of three or four attempted blows to the head area, forcing the opponent into repetitive motion, followed by starting for a blow to the head, diverting it down to the legs, followed by a spin and blow to the other leg or torso.

Mark counted the blows as they came, one, two, three, four, down, spin... LeOmi was

ready for it. She blocked the first five blows and jumped to avoid the final blow while bringing her riotous down across Keith's right shoulder.

The instructor called, "Hold!" He walked over to LeOmi and raised her arm up. "Winner! LeOmi Jones!"

Slone Voif walked up onto the mat. "I think it's time that I paid you back for that nose bleed you gave me."

LeOmi was a little bit out of breath. She had just won nine straight fights, back to back. "So, you've been practicing falling down and getting up, have you?"

The opponents started to square off. Mark called out, "She's tired. Can she take a break?"

The instructor called back, "That's up to her." He looked at LeOmi.

LeOmi confronted Slone. "I'm okay. Let's do this!"

"Very well... Begin!"

Slone began with a flurry of side blows and reverse blows. LeOmi proved adept at blocking them. Slone stopped and LeOmi advanced with a series of blows that Mark had never seen before. It was obvious that she had been doing some advanced study. Her attack relented and Slone advanced. This back and forth, give and take, lasted for more than five minutes. Slone capitalized on an opportunity and managed to trip LeOmi. Slone jabbed her in the ribs when she lost her balance.

"Hold!" The instructor walked up to Slone and raised his arm. "Winner! Slone Voif."

LeOmi walked off the mat, holding her ribs.

Mark went over to her. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah... I'm fine. It's just a bruise."

"You're the best freshman fighter that I've seen yet. I'm glad that I don't have to fight you. I bet you'd have won if you weren't so tired."

"I am going to win. I'm not going to let him win."

The instructor called, "Are there any

freshmen challengers for Slone Voif?"

"You're too tired to fight him now. At least let him take another challenger, first."

"All right. I guess you're right. I do need to catch my breath."

The instructor called again. "We need a challenger for Slone Voif, current champion."

"It doesn't look like anyone is going to challenge him."

"Give it a minute. I can't think of anyone who wants him to win the trophy, except those cohorts of his."

"Last call for a challenger for Slone Voif.

If no one challenges him, he wins the title by default. I'll give it to the count of ten... One..."

LeOmi started to get up. Mark put his hand on her shoulder to stop her. "You can't fight him now. You're still too tired."

"Two..."

"I know, but I'm not going to let him go unchallenged."

"Three..."

"What does it matter if he wins the cup? It doesn't mean anything."

"Four..."

"I'm not going to let that good-for-nothing bully win it, not him or any of his goons."

"Five..."

"Why do you feel so strong about it?"

"Six..."

"It's personal and none of your business. Besides, what would a goodie two shoes like you know about life?"

"Seven..."

"Ouch... What brought that on?"

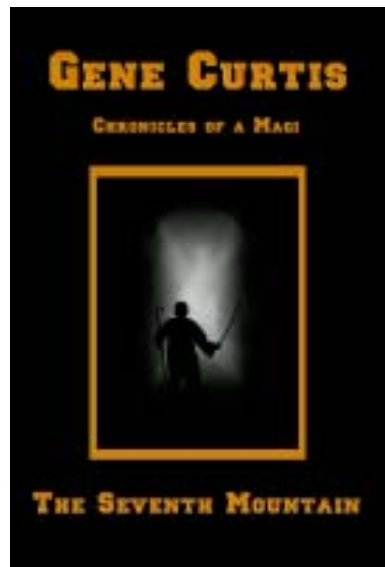
"Eight..."

"Like I said, none of your business. Now, get out of my way. I'm going to fight him."

"Nine..."

"No, you're not." Mark raised his hand. "I'll fight him."

Mark selected a riotous from the rack and stepped onto the mat. Slone walked up to face him. ■



A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Revision

What separates the good writer from the poor writer is not necessarily an innate ability to create or a brilliant mind. It is actually the grueling art of revision. All of the best writers recognize the important role that revision plays, and, although no one enjoys the process, it is acknowledged that, without revision, a piece of writing will lack the ability to perform as it should. It is actually quite unusual for a writer to create something fit for publication in only one draft.

There are a number of points to remember if a successful revision is to occur.

First, it is crucial to always keep the reading audience in mind. While it is possible to make an argument for complete creative autonomy, you will still have to acknowledge the role an audience plays. The only truly solitary writing adventure is the journal or diary, so, if you aren't working in that type of venue, you will have to come to terms with the fact that *someone* will be reading what you are writing. Don't mistakenly think that you are writing in a vacuum--keep that audience in your mind as you work.

It is probably advisable to approach revision in stages. In the first stage, you are merely creating, getting your thoughts down on paper. Don't worry about grammatical issues or fully developing your piece. Don't wait until you can create that one perfect sentence

or paragraph. Focus on completing a draft--you can go back and address those seemingly important issues at a later point. Many writers get bogged down in the details, which makes the task of writing seem enormous and disheartening. Keep your mind on the real task at hand.

After the initial draft is complete, set it aside for a day or two. This cooling period will provide a little distance between the draft and any emotional connection you may have established with it. You can then read through it with a fresh eye and more easily put your-

self in the position of the audience.

Now that you have something to work with, it is time to think about development. How you go about this will depend on the type of work you are producing (essay, poem, short story, novel, play, etc.), and you will, once again, need to keep your target audience in mind. Pay attention to the overall intention of the work--what is it that you are trying to accomplish? This will obviously have an impact on word choice, structure, and literary devices. You can now check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Pay particular attention to the types of mistakes you know you always make.

The final step in the revision process is to share your work with a real test audience. Develop a close circle of friends who will be willing to give you an honest critique. ■



“Half my life is an act of revision.”

--John Irving

(continued from page 1)

and heard about the group.

"I was interested in learning how to become published, said Fitch.

"My grandmother, who was a published children's author, left many children's stories. She died in 1998 and always wanted to have more of her stories published,"

Fitch is also working on a creative nonfiction story of the birth of her two-year-old daughter and gets a lot out of working with the Writers Studio.

"Corrections to my writing have been given in a gentle manner, and I have received positive feedback and helpful suggestions from the group," said Fitch.

Madolyn Hayne wants to be a humorous article writer and is working on her first magazine piece.

"I have wanted to do some actual writing for a long, long time," Hayne said. "I am 68 years old. If not now, when? I can't be a fledgling writer forever!"

Hayne previously wrote press releases for local organizations and had a small column in a newspaper, but was looking for something new when she joined the group.

"We have such a nice group of people—all ages, all backgrounds and very compatible. We have such a common interest, it's easy to make friends," Hayne said.

Gene Curtis was over the initial hump of writing his piece. He had a manuscript and was in the process of submitting his novel to publishers and agents. When that didn't go as well as he had hoped, he started looking for resources and found the Writers Studio.

"The amount of talent in this community is simply mind-blowing. I don't mean just the writers either. I mean musicians, artists, actors and you name it, it's here," said Curtis, who retired here from Portsmouth eight years ago after an extensive search for just the right place.

"I looked long and hard all over before I decided my home would be in Halifax County. I have continuously found examples that verify that I made the absolute right decision."

Curtis' novel, The Seventh Mountain, has

b e e n
published and
has begun to
b u i l d
momentum
and collect
p o s i t i v e
reviews.

Like its members, the Writers Studio has a bright future. Foran is looking forward to growing in

membership as well as resources.

"I am looking forward to a larger number in the future—I know there are writers out there who would be interested, but I don't think enough people know we exist. I want to open the door for all writers, regardless of age, ability or previous publishing experience," Foran said.

Future projects include a print version of the quarterly newsletter and a literary magazine or anthology of local writers.

"All of this will take a little time and money, but I am encouraged by the interest demonstrated by members of the community thus far," said Foran.

The Writers Studio meets on the second Sunday of each month in the Prizery from 4-6 p.m. and more information can be had by emailing the group at inkwrit@yahoo.com. ■



Writing as a Performance

Try thinking of your writing as a performance--you are up on a stage, in front of an audience, and your goal is to entertain. You are the performer, and your reader is the audience.



If you are going to follow this analogy, you have to realize that your task, as a performer, is to elicit a reaction from your audience and to keep the audience in their seats.

You have to be conscious of your audience--if you don't keep them in mind, then they might just walk out on you--which results in performance failure. The audience wants to be entertained--wants to laugh, to cry, to rage, to applaud--but, you have to give them something to work with. You have to take them to the place where they can react to your performance.

In order to accomplish this, you must, first of all, take an active interest in your own performance. An apathetic approach is certainly not going to entertain. An apathetic performer makes for an uninterested audience. If you can develop interest on your part, it will become contagious--the audience will be willing to follow.

You must also remember that appearance matters--make sure you use the appropriate format and make sure that your finished product is tidy and professional. You show the audience how much you care about your performance by how you display your talents. If you don't take it seriously, neither will your audience.

Thirdly, be sure that your performance is clear and understandable--you don't want your audience to be confused, wondering what it is you were intending. An uncertain audience is a disconnected audience. Don't expect them to just figure it out. That is not the audience's job--it is yours. If there is a jump in logic, make sure you lead your audience through the process. Often, what seems

perfectly clear to you may not be to the audience, and if there is even the slightest chance of confusion, you may rest assured that someone will be caught by it.

While you are writing, remind yourself that there are only a few forms of writing that are not meant to be seen and appreciated by others, so you must always be conscious of the performance aspect of writing. This means that you must remember that there is an audience and that you must keep their needs and interests in mind. Don't make the audience feel cheated because you were lazy, careless, or distracted--you are a craftsman, a master performer, and you must make the audience's admission ticket worthwhile.

A writer must always be willing to give up some of his own autonomy in the interests of the audience. Some choices need to be made with the reader in mind. If you neglect your reader, it is very likely that he will slip out the back of the auditorium without waiting for you to finish, and he may

very well tell other people not to see your show. Once again, this would be a complete performance disaster. Keep these words by Kurt Vonnegut in mind: "Find a subject you care about and which in your heart you feel others should care about. It is the genuine caring, and not your games with language, which

will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style." ■

"It is the genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling."

Announcements & Events



The Writers Studio meets on the second Sunday of each month in the CCI Conference Room at the

Prizery, South Boston, VA, from 4-6 pm. This is open to all writers, regardless of experience or publishing history.