

IN THE BEGINNING

by

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My resurrection as a writer of fiction began when *something* pushed me to attend a writer's conference spawned by the Centennial of the El Paso Public Library. Back in college, I penned a weekly editorial-page column in the *UTEP Prospector* for three years and participated in an invitation-only, senior-level fiction-writing seminar, led by a visiting professor, Jose Antonio Villarreal. His class solidified my decision not to attend law school. Even with that new direction, I didn't create anything new for twenty years, taking the first job I was offered after graduation and later stumbling into life insurance sales.

A couple weeks after the library-sponsored conference, *something* sent me to Waldenbooks. I now know that *something* to have been My Muse. I purchased the *Novel and Short Story* edition of *Writer's Market*. I was all set. Yeah, right.

I avoided the mammoth task of writing a novel for more than three years. An ex-girlfriend from the eighties called my bluff in late 1998. (I had told her when we were dating that I wanted to write "the great American novel.") After a false start in December, I knuckled down in January, 1999. Writing evenings and weekends, I finished the first draft of *A Date Wins* in five months, completed the

second draft (hardly more than a copy edit) in short order, and mailed out the first query letters in July.

Around Easter, midway through the first draft, I made a place for the resources that would guide my bullet's ride to the top of the best-seller lists: I cleared a twelve-by-thirty-inch shelf of life insurance agent sales materials. I parked the latest editions of *Writers Market*, *Merriam-Webster New Collegiate Dictionary*, Jeff Herman's market tome, and several hardback and trade books on the craft of writing and getting published. My library looked good!

How did my library fare? A couple months after I unpacked in Houston, I walked over to my six-foot tall writing-only bookcase (easy: it's only sixteen inches wide) and took inventory. I didn't count those publications that are periodicals like *Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*. I counted, 1, 2, 3 ... 51, 52, 53 pricey hardbacks and trade paperbacks. Can you believe it? In but four years, I had developed an expensive addiction.

Clearly, I was an "All these rejection letters will cease once I've discovered the secret" unpublished novelist. Heck, fifty-three didn't include Strunk & White and similar publications, nor any computer software – nor the books I threw away when I moved eight hundred miles in February, 2003. This insecure servant of his muse needed to join a twelve-step program!

Could I say fifty-plus books did me a commensurate amount of good? I don't think so. Are they essential to my career today? Nope. Am I better off having read them? (You don't seriously think I read them all cover to cover?) No way. I looked through my library earlier today and found that just nine books contained material I still value. And most of their value resides in yellow highlighting and scribbled notes, indexed by bent corners or sticky notes.

Question: suppose I were a Newbie just starting out to write publishable, novel-length fiction today? What would I *purchase, read, and use*, given what I know now? Which books do I believe would give a neophyte, a fiction-mused soul, a firm and productive foundation?

Two titles come to mind immediately, both from storytellers: Stephen King's *On Writing* and Terry Brooks' *Sometimes The Magic Works*. One more trip through my library indicates I need to add a supplementary title: *The Writer's Handbook*, the annual tome from *The Writer Magazine*.

"Wait," you say, "what about Bickham, Burroway, Campbell, Conroy, Goldberg, Maass, Marshall, Stein, Swain, Vogler, Zuckerman, or *The Complete Idiot's Guide*?" And, "Why nothing from *Writer's Digest*, Chuck?" Simple: *On* and *Sometimes* are works penned by prolific story tellers whose book on the writing craft is an aside, a giving back to the art, not their book for this year.

And, if you would, ponder this: I invested a goodly amount of time to research, physically purchase, and read the fifty-three books in my library. How much better a fiction writer would I be today if I'd invested that time in *writing new pages*, in telling stories?

You know, p-r-a-c-t-i-c-e. Practice; practice; practice.

How do I explain my "how-to book" addiction? I have a theory: it's a virus contracted through repeated exposure during sixteen years of formal schooling. The teachers, instructors, and professors placed in front of me, the elders I was told to revere and who demanded my respect infected me. They taught me what *they* had been taught about English and composition. And who taught them? Their gurus were graduates of literature or MFA programs where *thinking* about written words is given much more homage than *writing* those words. I was taught to read

first, think second, and write, well, maybe fourth. Weren't you?

So, what's the cure? What medicine did I take? In September, 2002, I attended twelve hours of workshops over two days given by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (aka Kris Nelscott) and her husband, Dean Wesley Smith. They prescribed "a short-story-a-week." So, every week for eighteen months I chased a rabbit. Each story was *new* practice. I practiced scene, practiced setting, practiced dialogue, practiced character, practiced genre, practiced ending, practiced hero, practiced heroine, practiced villain, practiced minor characters.

Enough of me. Let's get back to my Newbie book choices. They're listed in the order I think Newbie should read them.

Terry Brooks, *Sometimes the Magic Works*. What, Chuck, are you nuts? Has *magic* got hold of your brain? This is a 2003 publication. It hasn't weathered the test of time.

Phooey. I've read so many books on writing (well, parts of so many), I'm eminently qualified to give a writer/reader's opinion. Mr. Brooks, you will find, takes the same path Mr. King did in *On Writing*. First Terry puts me at ease with several chapters of memoir, *then* he tells me what I need to know. He uses his own story to open me up so that I will listen to what he has to say when he lists things I might not like or that look like too much like work. (By the way, the subtitle of his work is *Lessons from a Writing Life*.)

"But, Chuck, why Terry Brooks first?" Answer: his book is easier for Newbie. Brooks lays out, in simple terms without tons of rationale or digression, a dozen chapters on craft, including one on outlining. I groaned through the first draft of *A Date Wins*. If it weren't for my starved muse's repeatedly pulling me out of the ditch beside the winding road, I'd never have typed "The End." I want

Newbie to have it better, to waste fewer precious hours, to spend less money in the taverns. Reading Mr. Brooks just before writing and, again, while penning the first novel gives Newbie an easy path to steer.

After “The End,” is keyed but before sending out query letters, Newbie should read *On Writing* while his novel simmers. The unpublished novelist will again enjoy the memoir, falling right into Stephen King’s trap, then understand and gobble up Mr. King’s in-depth instruction. Stephen’s words would validate the creativity Newbie had shown by finishing the first draft, then his “Toolbox” and “Furthermore” sections would help Newbie edit his pile of hen scratch, his first draft. “Throw out those parts that aren’t the story, Mr. Newbie.”

“On Writing,” Mr. King’s third segment, would get Newbie closer to his Muse, enabling his discovery of the *real story* hidden inside the first draft. Newbie would also learn how to enrich characters and quickly pen missing scenes.

I read *On Writing* when it first came out in October, 2000. Mr. King energized my attitude and put me back on the road. Although he didn’t give me a prize for the short story I sent him, he plucked me out of rejection’s ditch and got me writing again.

Okay, Newbie’s rewrite is complete. You figure I’m going to send Newbie to *The Writer’s Handbook* to choose the literary agents and publishers to query? Nope. Are you aware that *The Writer’s* annual tome contains, each year, some of the best short articles on craft, professional basics and development, plus ideas and inspiration? Yup, two-hundred fifty pages in the 2003 edition. The book is a bit pricey at thirty dollars, you might say, just to have the articles. Well, I bet Newbie could spend a hundred dollars on magazine subscriptions and not find as many quality articles. (In the 2003 edition is a reprint of Elmore Leonard’s “10 Rules for

Success and Happiness Writing Fiction.” There’s more valid and useful direction in his three pages than between the cardboard covers of most writing books I’ve purchased.) Newbie should read an article a week until finished, every year.

Now I said I didn’t purchase *The Writer’s Handbook* for query addresses so you’re probably thinking Newbie would be a bit thin in the resources department. Well, gosh, you’ve overlooked Newbie’s memberships in local and national writers’ organizations.

I trust reading this piece will be as helpful for Newbie as writing it has been. It’s clear I need to re-read *On Writing*. (*I did!*)

Are you’re wondering what I am going to do with all my “extra” books? Thinking of dropping by with your hand out? Well, gosh, I have these festering packrat genes.... Happy new pages!

THE END