

## Writers Conference for Thirsty Minds with Threadbare Wallets

By Chuck Emerson

The writers conference season is upon us – but what, exactly, is a *writers conference*? Thirty-seven retired hippies sitting in the round at tavern in Eugene, Oregon, mugs of Geritol in hand, debating which literary agents get their clients the best deals? Sixteen romance writers secreted in the Smokey Mountains screening reports on which publishers are buying something other than paranormal fiction? Or eighteen Generation X-ers conducting marathon testing as to which keyboards are fastest and most durable for video gaming – and typing?

Seriously, what do y-o-u think a bona fide writers conference should entail? Hourly craft workshops on a plethora of topics? Thirty editors with checkbooks and pens? Q & A sessions with *New York Times* best selling authors? Hungry literary agent pitch sessions? Twelve step meetings? An open bar?

You'll lay out serious bucks for travel, hotel, conference fee, meal, and the ten novels and craft books you'll just have to have. And you'll dispense not only your hard-earned dollars but also your time, days you could have been writing new pages. That's a big investment.

After six years of attending such gatherings, a Writers Conference means anywhere I can learn something about the craft and business of fiction writing (the job I truly want for the rest of my life) *which does not impoverish my wallet*. Too simple? I assure you, Bull Durham it is not. Please read on.

I backed off my day job to have more time and energy to devote to writing. The subsequent lower standard of living precludes such events as the Maui Writers Conference. Then there's this: can I every judge, know truly in advance what conferences are going to be good or bad – for me? I can't measure quality without

showing up. I, therefore, need to show up often. Then there's unrealized expectations. How many of us have paid big bucks to attend a writers conference figuring to score a home run – and didn't even get up to bat?

I, like many of you, expected New York Publishers to fight over my first manuscript! It had a great, ticking clock plot and funny prose. Two years of rejection letters later, I came to grips with the concept that something was missing from my novel. I need to return to student mode and learn more about what I was trying to do. The agents and editors who did scribble comments on those ugly letters said they liked my sentence-by-sentence writing, so the problem had to be s-t-o-r-y, you know: character, setting, theme, and such.

I'd already purchased enough books on writing from Messrs Barnes and Noble in El Paso to start my own bookstore. Still no contract, no agent. Nada. One day I recalled I learned best, retained more long term, in an auditory environment where *I did not have to act like I was paying attention*. (Any A.D.D. brethren out there?) With note-taking optional and final exams nowhere to be found, writers conferences seemed invented just for me.

Problem: not a single viable writers group in El Paso. I had to travel. The 2001 Southwest Writers Annual Conference was the closest, a four-hour desert drive away in Albuquerque. It was great. Then I went to the Internet, found a bunch of conferences at shawguides.com. Wow. I could search by month, genre, and state. I traveled to San Antonio, Tucson, and Houston. Costs with travel averaged \$500 and each conference was a day shorter than RWA National. Ouch.

I figured the \$500 hickey would ease once I moved to Houston and joined RWA. It did. The three local chapters had craft speakers at most monthly meetings and their half-day workshops were a local drive and way, way under \$100. Hurray.

(I've had the totally awesome experience of absorbing several hours of Sherrilyn Kenyon on the craft and business of writing for \$10!)

Still, I waned m-o-r-e. More input. More data. Different perspectives. I checked out Writers League of Texas in Austin. Annual conference/editor-agent weekend, over \$300. Add the hotel, gas at \$2.50 a gallon, and I'm over my \$500 hickey. No way for another conference a day shorter than RWA National.

Fort Bend Writers Guild had Rick Riordan all day for \$75. Not bad at all. I joined Mystery Writers of America. The Southwest Chapter's annual conference in Houston didn't go over \$125. Okay. Not quite. I wanted still more. For less.

In my search to make my dollar go farther while expanding my mind, I stumbled across science-fiction / fantasy conventions. *Conventions*. CONs. Not conferences? Wait a minute. I'm not a groupie. I've never followed The Grateful Dead or String Cheese Incident around the country. Okay, I'd viewed every episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*, but if the SFF Cons turned out to "happy times," I'd never attend another.

I lived for three days at ApolloCon II in June, 2005, here in Houston. It blew me away. They had sessions, hourly, all day. They didn't call them workshops. They called them panels. What's in a name? Over half those discussions were about character, setting, theme. Published folks on every one. \$25 and gas.

ApolloCon lead me to ArmadilloCon, billed as a literary Con, held every August in Austin. I signed up for the 9:00 to 5:00 Friday writers workshop. For \$35 I received written and verbal critiques from Julie Kenner, four wannabees like me, and a YA author, Mark Williams. The Con cost me another \$30. Wow. And guess what else? There were gods walking around those halls, sitting on those panels, hanging around in party rooms until the wee hours of the mornings: editors.

The majority of Cons are attended by veteran editors and even editorial directors. I once obtained a request for my new manuscript while waiting for an elevator!

And you get to meet folks when they aren't so hassled. Take FenCon in Dalls last September. Jim Butcher, a darling of RT Houston this year was there.. His SciFi Channel series had begun production yet he was very approachable. At his panel, after his very modest and short presentation, I asked him how he got his literary agent and first novel published.

After years of rejection slips, he was introduced to a literary agent by a writer friend at a Con. Jim soon realized she was one of the ones who had rejected him. She eventually asked him what he wrote. "You've already rejected me," he said. "Why would you want to hear it again." Her reply, "I've gotten to know you."

Butcher said the real reason his work sold, though, had more to do with his having already completed three books in his Dresden Files series. After listening to him, I vowed to learn to relax and just keep showing up.

For links to many Cons: [fencon.org/calendar.html](http://fencon.org/calendar.html)

*P.S. Laurell K. Hamilton friends: She's guest of honor at ConestogaCon, Tulsa, July 20-22 (no affiliated writers workshop). [sftulsa.org/conestoga](http://sftulsa.org/conestoga)*