

The ASJA Monthly

The Official Publication of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, Inc. • Volume 52 • Number 2 • February 2003



Writing for MEN'S HEALTH & FITNESS Magazines

by Scott Hays

Andrew Vachss:
Writer, Warrior, Attorney

Telling Stories

Conference Sneak Peek

An Insider's Look at
Lifetime Magazine

"We Write What You Read"

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The *ASJA Monthly* (ISSN 1541-8928) is published monthly except for a combined July/August issue by the American Society of Journalists and Authors, Inc., 1501 Broadway, Suite 302, New York, NY 10036. Subscriptions are \$120 per year as a benefit of membership (information on membership requirements available upon request). Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing office. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to The *ASJA Monthly*, 1501 Broadway, Suite 302, New York, NY 10036.

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The deadline for submissions to The *ASJA Monthly* is the 20th of each month.
E-mail newsletter@asja.org

Contents

FEATURES

- 6** Voices on Writing
Andrew Vachss
Writer, warrior, attorney
by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

COLUMNS & DEPARTMENTS

- 3** From the President's Desk
4 The Society Page
5 Literary Quiz
8 Writing Well
9 Focus On Erich Hoyt
10 Web Survey Results
11 Conference Sneak Peek
12 Conference Preview
13 Registration Form
14 What's In Store
16 Calendar

WEB SITE

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Cover illustration and design by Dave Mosso
www.spaciousmind.com

ASJA Confidential
FOR MEMBERS ONLY

FEATURES

- C1** Writing for Men's
Fitness and Health
Magazines by Scott Hays

COLUMNS & DEPARTMENTS

- C3** Market Report: *Lifetime*
C4 Letters to the Editor
C5 Day In The Life
C6 Industry News
C9 PayCheck
C11 Letter of the Law
C12 Inside ASJA
Warning List
C13 Prospective Members
New Members
C14 News from the Front
Question of the Month
C15 Registration Form
C16 Q & A

The *ASJA Confidential* is a special section for paid ASJA members only and contains exclusive industry information. We ask that members who receive the Confidential section keep the information contained therein confidential.

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Editors and Publishers, Listen Up

Newspaper readers want good writing

by JIM MORRISON



The other day I came across a study about increasing the readership in newspapers that I'm sure was shocking to publishers who look to hire talent on the cheap. The study said that readers like *well-written stories*.

What's particularly interesting is the implication for freelance writers: the best way for publications, especially newspapers, to bolster their bottom line is to spend more and hire good freelancers. Let me run through a synopsis of the study and then see if you come to the same conclusion.

The study came from The Readership Institute of the Media Management Center at Northwestern University, a school that happens to be one of my alma maters. Their conclusions hit the bulls-eye.

What they looked at were the improvements newspapers could make to motivate people to spend more time reading, and read more sections more often.

Here are the top five "opportunities" to increase readership, in order of effectiveness:

1. Easy-to-read content.
2. Community announcements and stories of ordinary people.
3. Health, home, food, fashion and travel stories.
4. Government, war, politics and international stories.
5. Coverage of natural disasters and accidents.

What I find interesting is that style was paramount. "Unexpectedly, making a newspaper easier to read does not center around design or placement of articles," the study reported. "In fact, when we tested design components such as use of photographs, graphics, color, headers at the top of stories, indexing, placement, jumps and anchoring—none of them were related statistically to ease of reading."

So, by "easy-to-read content," the survey does not mean lists of stupid pet tricks, fancy graphics or more charts and pictures. It means the writing.

"One of the most thought-provoking discoveries from the Impact Study is the importance of writing style," the study concluded. "Feature-style writing is found to increase satisfaction in a variety of topic areas: politics, sports, science, health,

home and food, among them. A higher proportion of feature-style stories also improves overall brand perception, chief among them how 'easy-to-read' the newspaper is."

Newspapers that run more feature-style stories are seen as more honest, fun, neighborly, intelligent, "in the know" and more in touch with the values of readers.

What did the institute describe as "feature-style stories?"

"The writing is more narrative and stories are told with a beginning, middle and end," the study said. "Stories are often told through the characters or using anecdotes to help illustrate the events. They also tend to use more colorful language, are sometimes more playful, and usually engage the reader more than a traditional news story does."

In short, the kind of storytelling so many of us crave to do, but so few outlets purchase.

The conclusion becomes more interesting when you pair it with number three on that list: health, home, food, fashion and travel stories. Freelancers for newspapers typically write those stories. And in recent years, newspapers have drastically slashed their budgets and grabbed all rights for such stories, sending good freelancers looking elsewhere for work. Let's face it: A story for an in-flight magazine these days pays far more, perhaps double, than a story for a top-five metropolitan newspaper. Go down the ladder to a regional paper and you can make five or ten times writing the same story for a magazine.

Newspaper publishers' myopic view of the bottom line has led them to slash budgets for writers in precisely those sections that entice readers to spend more time with their papers.

And if you think that writing a narrative means writing longer, you're wrong. The study pointed to an example of two stories, one a typical pyramid-style AP dispatch, and the other a narrative from *The Chicago Tribune*, written about the same event. Not only did the narrative put the story in context better, it did it in 137 fewer words.

"Beyond increasing satisfaction with particular content areas, feature-style writing also improves positive brand perception," the study noted. "Newspapers that run more feature-style stories are seen as more honest, fun, neighborly, intelligent, 'in the know' and more in touch with the values of readers."

I'm hardly an unbiased observer, but I'll bet the same conclusions apply to the increasing shallow content of magazines.

So, editors and publishers, there you have it. Do you want to increase readership and be seen as more honest and intelligent by your readers? Then hire writers who know how to tell compelling stories, not just researchers who can create yet another list for readers to toss away at the end of the day. Hire pros. And pay us accordingly. That doesn't mean \$150 and no expenses for all rights to a 1,500-word story. It means a dollar a word, more or less, depending on circulation, plus expenses. It will be good for our bottom line. And yours.

Read the entire study at http://readership.org/content/editorial/hp_content.htm

And pass this along to your favorite editor or publisher. [ASJA](#)

Jim Morrison, of Norfolk, Virginia, is president of ASJA.

Submission Guidelines:

Please do not send unsolicited manuscripts to *The ASJA Monthly*. E-mail queries are best. Send to newsletter@asja.org. If you're offering an article for reprint, e-mail the text; no hard copies, please. Digital photos of decent size and resolution are best. And if you need anything returned—photos, book covers—include a SASE.

The Society Page

Member happenings

Sondra Forsyth continues to contribute to "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" in *Ladies' Home Journal*, where she served as executive editor. She is also writing for the new spin-off, "Was This Marriage Saved?" ... **W. Thomas Smith Jr.** recently lectured to a group of combat correspondents at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, S.C. ... **Mary L. Peachin's** book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Sharks* (Alpha), is now in stores ... **Jane**



Sondra Forsyth



Mary L. Peachin

Brooks, author of *Midlife Orphan: Facing Life's Changes Now that Your Parents are Gone* (Berkley, 1999), was the keynote speaker for the 17th Annual Geriatric Forum on Current Concepts in Health and Aging held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania ... **Helene Vorce-Tish's** novel, *Challenging the Forces of Hate*, was published in December by PublishAmerica ... **Jan Friedman** won a Lowell Thomas award for excellence in travel journalism by the Society of American Travel Writers. Her book, *Eccentric America*, was voted "Best Guidebook of 2002" ... **Jen Singer** has launched a new Web site, www.momma-said.net ... **Martha Barnette's** third book on word origins, *Dog Days and Dandelions: A Lively Guide to the Animal Meanings Behind Everyday Words*, was just published by St. Martin's Press ... **Gordon and Janet Groene's** *Camping Digest* has just been published by Krause Publications. Their *Day Trips From Orlando*



Jan Friedman



Gordon and Janet Groene

also came out this month from Globe-Pequot ... **Mary Harmon** won First Place in the Regional Print: Science/Medical Category of the 2001 MS Public Education Award contest. Mary's article, "When The Doctor Suspects MS," ran in *Women's Health Advisor*, a newsletter at Cornell University ... **Norman Schreiber's** short story, "Call Me Wiggins," appears this month in the anthology *Our Sherlock Holmes* (St. Martin's Press, edited by Michael Kurland) ... In December, **Elaine Fante Shimberg** was awarded an honorary doctorate of humanities by the University of South Florida ... **Leslie Laurence** is now a contributing editor at *Ladies' Home Journal*. This past summer she received a Knight/CDC Foundation fellowship called "Boot Camp in Public Health," a 10-day crash course for journalists held at the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention's campus in Atlanta ... **Richard C. Levy** was



Norman Schreiber

profiled on CBS' *The Saturday Early Show*, and interviewed again for *CBS News Sunday Morning*, both triggered by his *Complete Idiot's Guide To Cashing In On Your Inventions* (Alpha). Richard also created two new board games in 2002: *Family Reunion* (USAopoly) and *Route 66* (Endless Games) ... **Sophia Dembling's** book, *The Yankee Chick's Survival Guide to Texas*, (Republic of Texas Press) went into a second printing



Sophia Dembling



Kelly James-Enger

in October, less than a year after its release ... **Charles Harrison's** ninth non-fiction book, *Growing a Global Village*, is out this month. He also has written and co-produced a 35-minute documentary titled *Seabrook Farms Remembered* ... **Kelly James-Enger's** book, *Ready, Aim, Specialize! Create Your Own Writing Specialty and Make More Money* (The Writer Books, 2003), was just released. Kelly also recently sold her first novel, *Did You Get the Vibe?*, to Kensington Books, to be published November, 2003 ... **Carol Weston** spoke about her book, *For Teens Only*, (HarperCollins, 2003) on "The Caroline Rhea Show" (ABC, New York City). Carol's first novel, *The Diary of Melanie Martin* (HarperCollins, 2000) has been published by Mondadori as *Vacanze Italiane* (or *Italian Vacation*) ... In the wake of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, people are rediscovering **Daniel Grotta's** biography *J.R.R. Tolkien; Architect of Middle Earth*, originally published as a trade paperback by Running Press in 1976 and in continuous publication ever since ... A Polish edition of **Lisa and Jonathan Price's**



Daniel Grotta



Lisa & Jonathan Price

book, *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*, has just been issued by Helion Publishers under the Polish title *Profesjonalny serwis WWW* (Professional Web Sites) ... **Linden Gross** continues to write her "Women Doing It Their Way" national bi-monthly column for *Woman's Own* magazine and is also partnering with Oakland, California's Sexual Assault Response Team to develop interactive seminars—an extension of the non-profit organization she founded and still heads, the Stalking Survivors' Sanctuary & Solutions (www.stalkingvictims.com) ... *Forbes ASAP* ranked **Roger Cox's** interactive guide, *Tennis Resorts Online* (www.tennisresortsonline.com), among its "Best of the Web" for Sports Travel, and more recently. *Newsweek* lauded its coverage ... More foreign imprints for **Tina Tessina, Ph.D.** *The Ten Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make After Forty* is



Tina Tessina, Ph.D.

now published in German as *Wenn nicht jetzt, wann dann?* (If not now, when?) and *It Ends With You, Grow Up and Out of*



Michael Bowker

Dysfunction will be released by New Page Books this month ... **Michael Bowker's** expose, *Fatal Deception: Why Asbestos is Still Legal and Still Killing Us* (Rodale Press hardback, Simon & Schuster audio book and soft-back rights) was released in January ... **Gene and Katie Hamilton's** new book, *Internet Connections for Marketing Success* was published by BuilderBooks in January ... **Pat Shapiro's** sixth book, *Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning Son or Daughter*, (with Kevin Jennings, exec. dir. of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) was published in January by Fireside/Simon & Schuster ... **Cathy Crimmins'** *Where Is the Mango Princess*, the 2001 winner of the ASJA Outstanding Book Award (General Nonfiction), will be made into a TNT original movie. Cathy will get an executive producer credit. Shooting will begin sometime in the late spring. **ASJA**

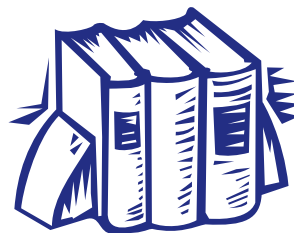
Send items for The Society Page to newsletter@asja.org. Please do not send press releases or long drafts from which your society-conscious editor must excerpt. Rather, send a sentence or two of the same length you see here.



I'm not big on volunteering—as a full-time freelancer I've had to learn to say no to a lot of extracurricular involvements. So why do I write a column for *The ASJA Monthly*? Because I don't think of ASJA as "other." It's MY organization and whatever I give seems to come back to me in at least equal amount. And now that the newsletter's online, having my name out there is one more way to increase visibility.

Susan K. Perry
Los Angeles, CA

Literary



Quiz

by
Harvey Widell

Oh, sure, you know that Mark Twain was really Samuel Clemens. And you might know that O. Henry was the pen name of William Sidney Porter. But did you know that Dorothy Parker and Edna St. Vincent Millay used pen names? See how many of the noms de plume below you're able to match with the writer's real name.

	Pen Name	Real Name
1. ___	Joseph Conrad	A. Kenneth Millar
2. ___	Edgar Box	B. Eric Arthur Blair
3. ___	William C. Walter	C. Dorothy Parker
4. ___	Dr. Seuss	D. Isaac Asimov
5. ___	Constant Reader	E. Agatha Christie
6. ___	A. A. Fair	F. L. Frank Baum
7. ___	Ross Macdonald	G. Erle Stanley Gardner
8. ___	Edith Van Dyne	H. Edna St. Vincent Millay
9. ___	Mary Westmacott	I. Theodor Geisel
10. ___	Nancy Boyd	J. Teodor Korzeniowski
11. ___	George Orwell	K. Hans Christian Andersen
12. ___	Paul French	L. Gore Vidal

ANSWERS:

1-J, 2-L, 3-K, 4-I, 5-C, 6-G, 7-A, 8-F, 9-E, 10-H, 11-B, 12-D

Harvey Widell's writing appears in *Bostonia*, *The Plain Dealer Magazine*, *Newsday*, *The New York Times*, and in dozens of other periodicals.

Andrew Vachss

Writer, warrior, attorney

by BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT

Andrew Vachss is one of the most physically recognizable novelist/attorneys on the planet. From the pages of *Parade*, where he is contributing editor, or his book jackets, there he is: thin, harshly handsome, and unsmiling, wearing a perpetual black patch over his right eye, hurt in a childhood accident. In fact, one wonders whether he ever smiles at all.

He's seen enough to wipe any joviality from his face. From his office on Lexington Avenue, Vachss wages a war against child abuse—through his work as a New York City attorney and through his writing. He defends only children and all of his writing is aimed at exposing the abuses against children.

Just out of school, Vachss (pronounced "Vax") worked as a federal investigator in sexually transmitted diseases and found the trails kept ending with children, filling him "with a rage that still flames today."

He became a case worker in New York City's Department of Welfare, went to Biafra where he witnessed the massive abuse of children, worked as a juvenile probation officer, and says he "just kept trying stuff and not getting back from it what I needed and also not making a contribution I wanted to make."

The turning point came when he was hired to run a maximum security prison for violent youth. He says he finally got it, "the absolute inescapable connection between today's victim and tomorrow's predator and it was at that point I decided to go to law school specifically and solely so I could represent children."

Law degree in hand, he found it impossible to earn a living defending only children, so he split his practice: half were children, the other half was conventional criminal defense. "Shooters, stabbers, the guys who paid the bills." The success of his first novel allowed him to stop practicing criminal defense and represent children

and write.

And he has written it all: dozens upon dozens of articles, comic books, songs, plays, speeches, textbooks, and more than 17 novels which have garnered him fellow-



ships and awards, from the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière to the Raymond Chandler Award. His most recent novel is *Only Child*, published by Knopf.

On my radio show, and later over the phone, Andrew Vachss talked about his work as an attorney and as a writer.

Q: I first became aware of you many years ago through your articles in *Parade*. You're an attorney in private practice specializing in crimes against children and a novelist. Tell me about this.

A: Well, actually, there's no distinction. One's an organic extension of the other. The novels are simply my way of speaking to a bigger jury than I'd ever find in a courthouse.

Q: Your books are difficult because of what you're writing about—crimes against children—yet you bring such reality to these novels.

A: Without what you're calling "reality" infused into the novels, there wouldn't be any novels. The other stuff I engraft is to not only make the material readable but I

hope entertaining enough so that I can get you to swallow the whole meal. But in fact, I never have to look around for inspiration or face a blank computer screen.

Q: You've said you're not trying to entertain so much as to incite anger in your readers.

A: That's my ultimate goal. If I have a goal for the books it's that when you're done, you will be angry, because this is America and people don't act unless they're angry. It takes a lot of work to make Americans angry; we have so many things to be angry about at any one time. I'm at war. There's an enemy. I want to inflict as much damage as I can before I'm done. No one has a knockout punch, when it comes to child abuse. It's a game played financially, emotionally, it's all-consuming, but there's no way to finish it. So if I want a bigger share of your emotions, this is my method and that's the sole goal of the books. However, I acknowledge that unless the book is engaging, unless the book has its own narrative force, I'm never going to get the opportunity to make you angry.

Q: The writing of your current novel, *Only Child*, is wonderfully literary. I'm curious what sort of switch you make between writing fiction and journalism.

A: I don't actually feel there is a switch, except that in a novel you have more space, you have more latitude. The one thing *The New York Times* and *Parade* have in common is a word length limit and restrictions on what words you can use. If you remove those, I don't believe you would see a difference. It is a different process because when you're writing nonfiction, you often have to speak in epigrams. You're space-limited, and you have a deadline, none of which apply to the novel. In nonfiction, you don't have the big canvas to paint on, and you have to make sure the logic chain is perfect. Because what I write about is controversial, I have to make my case and defend my case and anticipate the attacks on my case, all within a very short number of words. That's always on my mind.

Q: What do you believe has more effect on your readers: your novels or your nonfiction?



BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT, editor of *The ASJA Monthly*, is Southern California chapter president. Her show, "Writers on Writing," airs on KUCI-FM in Southern California and on the Web at www.kuci.org.

A: I don't know. Typically, the *Parade* articles have a wider circulation than any book would and the response is proportionate, in terms of numbers. But I think in terms of lasting impact, the books actually seem to do a better job.

Q: As far as one or the other being more enjoyable?

A: (laughter) I really never got to write anything for fun. I got a chance to write a Batman comic and I wrote it about the child sex tourism business. Needless to say, it wasn't a big hit with the Batman fans but I managed to reach a whole bunch of people who wouldn't have read a conventional novel. It doesn't matter who invites me to the party or what kind of music they're playing, I only do this one dance. My original writing was nonfiction and I switched to fiction to gain a wider audience and it's been more successful than my wildest dreams but it's the same material. In my experience, you can write all the nonfiction you want but you won't reach the same jury pool that fiction does.

Q: The writing of your novels and the tone and voice of your journalism are so different.

A: They have to be. If I were having an argument in a poolroom and an argument in a courtroom, I would conduct myself differently and be prepared for very different kinds of objections. So it is with journalism and being a novelist. There are different codes that you have to adhere to do it properly, to do it effectively. I'm able to do that. But it's not the big jump that it appears to be because the foundation to both of them is exactly the same.

Q: What do you see as your role as journalist and as novelist?

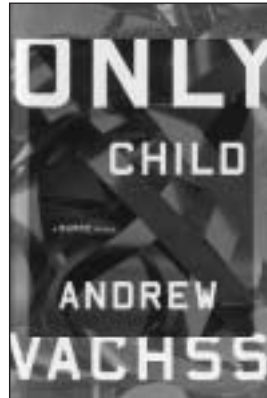
A: It's one and the same. As an attorney, if I represent a child, I am going to have the maximum impact. For the participants, the stakes couldn't be higher. Whereas with the writing, I'm going up against child abuse. When I write a book, the jury is exponentially larger.

Q: You were an attorney for something like 10 years before you started writing or publishing fiction.

A: I was a lawyer for 10 years before I got a book *published*, yes. (laughter) I had the agent everybody dreams of: Victor Chapin. He read a short story I wrote for some tiny literary magazine and told me I was going to be this great novelist. But everything I wrote was universally rejected, every single thing. Always the same letters: what a brilliant writer I was, what a literary gift I had, but the material was so outrageous.

Victor kept saying, "I know you're not going to abandon the reason you write, but can you just tone it down a little bit?" Year after year I would do that. Finally, I wrote a book called *Flood* and Victor called me up and said, "We're rich, we've done it. This is the brass ring, kid," and he died two days later. I looked up at the sky and said, "Thanks a lot," and threw the manuscript in a drawer.

Years later, I was interviewed by a journalist about one of my cases and he



Spectators don't win fights, and the one fighting technique I have never seen fail yet is to just keep getting up. People shouldn't be discouraged because they can go from everybody saying that they would never be published and all of a sudden, it's done.

said what everybody says: "You ought to write a book." I said I did write an explosive-deleted book but it died with my friend and my agent. He asked to look at it and showed it to a friend who showed it to a friend who showed it to a friend and a very small publishing house run by a guy who's infamous in the publishing world, Donald I. Fine, paid me a couple of dollars for the book. After that, it exploded.

Q: You said you struggled "year after year" sending stuff out. How many years?

A: Oh, a dozen years, easily.

Q: What kept you going?

A: Victor Chapin kept me going. If the agent who had sustained me all these years had not done so, I'm sure I would have just given it up. The people who persist are the people who have a need to write that comes from inside them as opposed to someone like me who saw writing as a weapon of war. The truth about writing that nobody wants to say, but everyone knows, is it's not a meritocracy. It's not a question of something you can measure quantitatively, like who can lift the most weight or run the fastest. There are people who have not been pub-

lished who are better writers than those people who have been published.

Q: And yet you have more than a dozen novels and many journalistic pieces and apparently so very much to say.

A: (laughter) Well, actually, I've got this one tune that I can play and I can play it on a lot of different instruments, and I got pretty good at playing it. But the truth is the material I write about will never be in short supply. I only wish there were noth-

ing in my field to write about anymore, but there's no danger of that.

Q: How is it you're so prolific while working as an attorney? Many writers who are far less busy than you have a hard time getting writing done.

A: I think it's more the seamlessness. In other words, if you had to write a novel about being a radio host of a show about writing, that would be a lot easier for you than writing a novel about a comedy of manners. Well, I'm writing about what I do, so the seamlessness makes it a lot easier for me to be prolific.

Q: Earlier you said something about fighting the war through your fiction.

A: It's simply another arrow in the quiver, another grenade, another bomb. It is a weapon. If you're a working class person like I am, how do you reach tons and tons and tons of people? I don't own a newspaper, I don't have a TV show or a radio program. The only way a person like me reaches that giant jury that I'm always conceptualizing in my mind is through writing.

Q: I take it you don't do research because
Continued on page 15

Telling Stories

Connect while staying objective

by LISA COLLIER COOL



I've always loved to tell stories. When I was little, I'd weave elaborate tales about dolls, magic and mysteries. Later, as a journalist, I began telling true stories—about other people's dramatic adventures.

Fact, I've discovered, is often stranger than fiction. As my friend and fellow storyteller and ASJA colleague Melba Newsome says, "Just when I think I've heard it all, I realize I haven't. There's always a new story out there." The relentless hunt for truly amazing dramas—and the thrill of discovering one that other writers have missed—is almost addictive.

Sometimes I feel like a voyeur, greedy for intimate glimpses into other people's private worlds. During an interview, I'm hungry for the vivid details that will make the story come alive for readers, such as having a survivor of the Oklahoma City bombing explain what will stay with her forever is the smell of iron from the blood on the ground; or hearing a Vietnam vet describe 30 years of nightmares about his first "personal kill" of an enemy soldier and its gory aftermath: "I took his hat, with his brains sprayed all over it, and wore it for months, without cleaning it," he said. I feel these people's pain, but in a way, I also feed off it, knowing their horrifying experiences make my stories stronger.

Is writer and literary critic Janet Malcolm right to say that every journalist is a con artist who tricks people out of their secrets for monetary gain? I don't think so, because the people I talk to usually *want* to reveal themselves, often far more than I ever expected.

One woman not only pulled up her shirt to show her scars—even though I hadn't asked to see them—but urged me to touch the pain control mechanism surgically implanted in her back. Another gave me a tour of her two dead sons' former bedroom where their toothbrushes still sat on the rim of the sink, so I could better understand her loss. Many times,

people have cried during interviews, then apologized, as if they were doing something wrong by burdening me with the very story I asked to hear.

Yet there's a fine line between establishing a human connection and losing professional objectivity. You don't want to feel so sorry for your subjects that you fail to ask crucial, emotionally-loaded or even embarrassing questions. Yes, it's awkward to grill a total stranger about how awful her thighs looked after botched liposuction. But unless you do, readers won't fully share her outrage at being victimized by such an incompetent doctor.

And you may even have to resort to the most cliched question of all, as I did the other day. I was talking to a woman who described a 17-hour search for her missing toddler—lost in a vast wilderness full of bears and cougars—as matter-of-factly as if she were recounting the plot of a TV show. Finally, I had to say, "How did you feel during this ordeal?"

When I told a friend, a non-writer, about some of my interviews, she said, "So your job is to listen to sad stories?" Actually, I see my role as trying to *prevent* sad stories, by using people's experiences to warn others of hidden dangers, alert them to new medical advances, or raise awareness of important issues. Frequently those who suffered some sort of tragedy—or near-tragedy that turned out OK in the end—say they find it therapeutic to talk about what happened, or feel the answer to their inner question of "why me?" might be "so others can benefit from the painful lesson I've learned." But whatever their motivation is, ultimately what I offer people I interview is the chance to have their voice heard.

That means I have to figure out how to shape the many twists and turns of their life into a 2,000- or 3,000-word article people will want to read. The key is to find the heart of the story—one sentence that sums up the essence of the drama—and

ruthlessly omit everything that doesn't advance the narrative arc. Or as Stephen King says, "Leave out the boring parts."

Usually, I open with an extremely dramatic moment—the doctor saying the baby might die, for example—then backtrack to the real beginning. As I write, sometimes I have an ending in mind all along; and sometimes the ending comes as a surprise, even to me. But that's what makes storytelling so compelling: discovering how it all turns out. **ASJA**

Lisa Collier Cool is a best-selling author and has won ten journalism awards, including the 1999 National Magazine Award for Consumer Service.



Is This Your Lucky Day?

If you've received a royalty check you weren't expecting or just received news from your agent that your book has been optioned for film, consider sharing your good fortune with writers whose days aren't as good. The Writers Emergency Assistance Fund helps writers who have fallen on hard times. Make your check payable to ASJA Charitable Trust, and note in the corner, "For the Writers Emergency Fund." Your contribution is tax-deductible.



RECEIVE THE ASJA MONTHLY ELECTRONICALLY

If you'd like to read the newsletter two to three weeks earlier, you have two options: the electronic version is available by e-mail and by Web-based download on the same day it goes to the printers—usually by the 15th of the month.

sign up or download at www.asja.org/newspub/newspub.php

Erich Hoyt

A writer can work anywhere

Erich Hoyt has looked down the jaws of killer whales, swum with the dolphins and earned a reputation as the master storyteller of the deep. He does the work he loves and it thrills him. There is the euphoria he feels after many hours, days or weeks of sailing and searching, that moment when he at long last meets with the whales he hoped to find. When he's out in a small boat and an orca swims right up to him and gives him a look full of curiosity and wonder, well, there's nothing quite like it.

"When it's an individual whale that you know well," says Erich, who vaguely resembles Richard Dreyfuss in *Jaws*, though with a much calmer demeanor, "it can be a very stirring experience. The wind and the sea spray on your skin, and finally you find the whales, especially whales that you've come to know as individuals, and then to be able to see and experience their intimate behavior with each other, to be let in and accepted."

From his home base of North Berwick, Scotland, a seaside town 40 minutes from Edinburgh, Erich occupies himself with a plethora of vocations: author, naturalist, scientific researcher, husband, father, gardener.

An ASJA member for almost 20 years, he has written more than a dozen books, including *Orca: The Whale Called Killer*, in print since 1981; *The Earth Dwellers*, and his latest, *Creatures of the Deep*; all told, they've been translated into 16 languages in 25 countries.

He also has more than 300 articles to his credit that have appeared in *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Sunday Times* (London), *Reader's Digest*, *International Wildlife*, *Defenders*, *Equinox*, *New Scientist* and *Kagaku Asahi*.

In 1985-86, he was Vannevar Bush Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and twice he was a James Thurber Writer-in-Residence. One of his books was named on the New York Public Library "25 Books to Remember" list, and in 2002, he won the ASJA Outstanding Book Award, General Nonfiction.

A US-Canadian dual citizen (born in Ohio and raised in Virginia, Massachusetts, Wisconsin and Ontario), Erich lives with his wife Sarah Wedden, a developmental

biologist and lecturer, and four children, aged 4 to 13. Down time means time with them—to garden, walk on the beach and make music. He's written music for one feature and five documentary films.

When asked about his work, he had this to say:



My writing comes from my passionate curiosity and feeling for the land and the sea, wildlife, plants and people, too. I want to uncover fresh stories about how humans learn about the Earth and how it works (science) and how they feel about it (conservation). I need to be a "pioneer." I must get out into the field, get to know the scientists, to find new things or at least live the story for a time in order to write about it. My books and articles have taken me on expeditions to many countries and seas.

I started my writing career on the back of the first documentary film on wild killer whales, which turned into a seven-year research project. I kept a journal, and my first book, Orca: The Whale Called Killer, grew out of my adventures and discoveries. For more than a decade after that I did journalism, primarily narrative non-fiction articles and books, but also wrote cinema columns, book reviews, travel stories, children's books, film treatments, CD ROMs, museum exhibits, radio plays—a bit of everything.

A turning point came when I became Vannevar Bush Fellow at MIT for a year in 1985-86 and had the chance to interview Nobel prize winners every other week and audit classes including those of Harvard's EO Wilson, later accompanying him on expeditions to the rain forest, which led to two books.

Recently, I have returned to science and conservation, directing a long-term

whale research project in Kamchatka, Russia, writing scientific papers, giving talks and pitching what are in effect strong "query letters" to foundations and individuals. Over the past 2 years, I have raised \$125,000 for the scientific and conservation projects I'm involved in. But I'm still thinking in terms of the stories that will come from this work—the next book, article, film idea.

I love working in different media and milieu in what amounts to several separate careers, yet it's all essentially freelancing. My dream was always to have an independent life and to try as many things as possible without working for someone else. My only 9-5 job was a summer job once as a teenager and I hated someone owning my time. In the 1970s and early '80s, when I wrote more than I sold, I kept my overhead low to protect my freedom. I worked hard to learn different kinds of writing, to make myself an expert in several areas, and resolved to take the time always to do the best job possible.

I waited to have a family. I now have 4 kids (aged 4 to 13) and a big mortgage and some years are better than others, but I find that my various projects and areas of interest help sustain each other, creatively and financially. If one area isn't paying well or working out for whatever reason, I turn to something else. I always want to have something in my back pocket—preferably an ace.

I live in a small town on the sea in Scotland for the clear, clean air and the sense of perspective. I can live and work anywhere. I enjoyed New England and Vancouver Island where I lived for many years but I needed to get outside North America to think clearly. Now that I've lived here for 12 years, I've become attached to whatever clarity I've managed to acquire. Don't think I can move back. But fortunately, with e-mail and the Internet it seems less and less necessary to be anywhere in particular except where you want to be.

*What's the best part? Telling a story that hasn't been told before about some new bit of science, when you're getting the words right and the scenes really start to come alive—that, and being out in the field, the salt air in your lungs, and the possibility of some great adventure. **ASJA***

Thanks to the nearly 100 people who responded to our survey about how members use the ASJA Web site. The results are guiding the re-design efforts now underway. Early this year, we'll have a new look, revised navigation and a few new features—all thanks to your help. Here's what you told us and how it's influencing our thinking about the new site.

Monthly Visits Most Common

The largest group of users (37 percent) visits the site once or twice a month. But a significant group (31 percent) visits one or more times a week and 29 percent of responders visited "once every few months." As a result, we've started adding new content to the site every week. "Revolving Door" gives industry updates and news tidbits, and "Five Minutes With" features interviews with interesting publishing personalities every month.

Members vs. Public Content

About 52 percent of members who responded visit only the Member's site while 33 percent visit both public and members' areas of the site. Fourteen percent of responders do not use the Member's-only section of the Web site at all, but only visit the public section. We'll be putting different content on the public and member's site, so you don't see the same text in both places.

Most Useful Pages

We asked users to rank 13 sections of the site on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being "most valuable" and 5 "least valuable." We'll use this information to help decide which items should remain on the menu bar, and in what order they should appear.

Most Valuable

These areas averaged a rating of 1-2.2 (most value or very high value), with 63-81 percent of respondents giving the page a 1 or a 2.

- Paycheck Report
- Resources
- Writer's Referral Service (this also ranks as one of the most visited pages in the Web log)
- Market Monitor (this was surprising, since this information appears in the newsletter)

Medium Value

These rated 2.2-2.7 on average. 45-60 percent of respondents gave these a 1-2

ranking.

- Member Benefits
- Contract Watch
- Successful Queries
- Newsletter Content
- Discussion
- Position Papers

Less Valuable

These rated a 3.2 or higher (less value, least value), with 38-51 percent rating these pages either a 4 or 5 (least valuable), while 29-35 percent still gave them a 1-2 ranking.

- Calendar
- Newsletter PDF

More Than Half of Members Connect at High Speeds


Some 53 percent of members who responded connect to the site using DSL, cable modem or T1. An additional 25 percent connect at 56K. 5 percent connect at 28.8, and 16 percent don't know their connection speed.

For about 37 percent of users, the site loads within 3 seconds, but 20 percent have to wait from 3-6 seconds. About 13 percent wait longer than 7 seconds, and 13 percent don't know their wait time.

Strong Feelings, Big Split on Wait Time

Our membership is cleanly split between those who don't mind waiting and those who don't want a longer wait. 40 percent of users (perhaps those users with the 3 second wait time?) don't mind waiting longer—but 41 percent said they would strongly object. Graphics that boost wait time more than a few seconds would likely cause strong objections from this portion of members. Thus, we're hoping to find a simple, but elegant, design that won't weigh down the page with a lot of graphic bells and whistles—but will add some interest to the page.

Larger Resolution

The current site is designed for a low resolution—640 x 480. But our survey indicates that only 3 percent of our users are now set at that low resolution, and 26 percent of our responders are set at 800x600, and 24 percent at 1024 x 768, giving us a larger canvas for our design. We'll design for 800 x 600. This lets us fit more content *and* more white space on the page without making anything smaller (we promise not to shrink the font size—if anything, we'll make some things larger.) 

Christine Larson is ASJA's Web editor.

WHY JOIN ASJA?

Only ASJA members get these exclusive benefits:

The ASJA Monthly Confidential Section offers exclusive, inside information on the writing business.

PayCheck reports in which members share confidential information on their fee rates and experiences with publishers and editors. Inside information on the writing industry for members only.

ASJA's Writer Referral Service gives ASJA members exclusive access to job and project leads. One assignment here could pay your dues for the next 20 years.

Exclusive, Members-Only Workshops and Seminars at the Annual ASJA Members-Only All Day Meeting as well as discounts for the Annual ASJA Writers Conference. Meet leading writers, editors, publishers and media experts to explore current markets and trends in books, magazines and other media.

Confidential Members-Only Sections of the ASJA Web site.

Private Online Discussion Forums to share news, ask questions and get answers from fellow professional writers.

Partnership Benefits to ASJA members in conjunction with:

- Profnet
- iUniverse.com
- Writers Marketplace
- Allworth Press
- Access to group health insurance
- A professional press card
- Magazine subscriptions (including *Publishers Weekly*) at deep discounts
- Discount rates at all ASJA-sponsored conferences and meetings
- Eligibility for ASJA's annual awards for nonfiction books and journalism
- Authors Registry Membership, facilitating royalty payments for database and electronic reprints
- Discounts on products and services from Alamo car rentals to AlphaSmart laptops

E-mail execdir@asja.org for more information.



For seven years, since first joining this organization, I've taken the bus in from Pennsylvania every year to attend the ASJA annual shindig. The trip is always a highlight of my Spring, right up there with watching the lilies bloom. I cherish the opportunity to hobnob with colleagues, chat up editors old and new, and garner good advice to improve my writing and help make a good buck. And, of course, I look forward to getting my fix of black-and-white cookies that can only be had in NYC. This year, I'm happy to not only have my bus ticket, but, as Grand Pooh-Bah of this year's Conference Committee, to have played a hand in shaping the Big Event. I can tell you—in all objectivity!—that you don't want to miss this one. Really.

Mark these dates: *Saturday, May 3 and Sunday, May 4, 2003.*

As in many past years, we have a terrific keynoter: Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. We also have dozens of dynamo panelists, including some Pulitzer-Prize winning authors, several of the nation's most respected agents, and editors from publishing houses such as Simon & Schuster and Time Warner, and periodicals such as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Discover*. Throughout the event, you'll be able to attend panels on a smorgasbord of topics covering both the craft of writing and the art of running a profitable writing business.

You'll also be invited to share in a delicious luncheon (honest, no rubber chicken), visit the Barnes & Noble Bookfair, and attend a twilight reception with a drawing for special gifts. If you wish, you may also participate in mentoring sessions, where rookie journalists can receive invaluable one-on-one coaching from seasoned pros. (ASJA members, be a mentor and receive a healthy discount to the Conference.)

Old-timers should know that this year's affair will bring a number of exciting innovations ...

Morning registration with complimentary beverages *and* nibbles.

A wake-up session featuring Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute who, on piano, will discuss rhythm, structure, tone, and creating writing that "sounds" good.

Longer breaks between sessions to allow for more meeting and greeting and exchanging business cards—not to mention less harried trips to the powder room.

Longer panels and workshops permitting a greater variety of speakers, more in-depth discussions, and an opportunity for more relaxed Q & A.

Sessions never before seen at any ASJA conference, such as *Exotic Stories*, *Exotic Lands: Going Into the Field to Get the Tale*.

The Idea Marketplace, where you'll be able to glean hot story ideas from dozens of potential sources, including businesses, nonprofits, and governmental agencies.

Mentoring sessions will be conducted on Saturday as well as Sunday morning.

Clear signs designating what's going on where will help you to navigate your way through the Hyatt labyrinth.

See the ASJA Web site for a listing of all the panels and a handy registration form. A more complete listing of the panels—with juicy descriptions of both the Saturday sessions and the Sunday intensive workshops—will soon arrive in your mailbox. If you don't want to wait, you can get the lowdown right now at www.asja.org/wc/wc.php. If you're a member and you'd like to sign up online (quickly and easily!), go to www.asja.org/wc/memreg.php, or www.asja.org/wc/pubreg.php if you're not.

See you in New York! 

Russell Wild is Grand Pooh-Bah of the 2003 ASJA Writers Conference.

KNOWLEDGE is POWER

If you or your writing group has questions regarding contracts in this post-Tasini world, ASJA's Contracts Committee has answers. The Committee has assembled a crack team of knowledgeable members throughout the country willing and able to address your group on contract matters large and small.

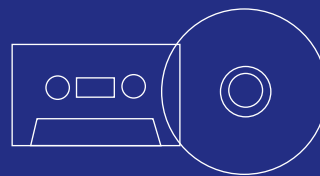
Addressing challenges like work made for hire, indemnity clauses, making unfair contracts palatable, and negotiating strategies, we can give you the kind of nitty-gritty, timely information you need to protect your rights and improve your bottom line.

for more information,
e-mail contracts@asja.org

A Good Writer Is Hard to Find...

...unless you use ASJA's Writer Referral Service. It's the fastest route to more than 1,000 of the world's best writers. Contact ASJA at (212) 398-1934 or e-mail writers@asja.org.

Writers Conference Tapes/CDs Available



If you missed the conference last April, or missed panels you wanted to attend, don't despair. You can order recordings on audio cassette tape or CD (yes!) by calling (888) 522-5023 or log onto www.nrstaping.com/asja/asja2002.htm. ASJA members, log onto www.asja.org/members/wc/wcaudio.php.

Here are a few snippets of what you'll find at this year's writers conference.

Smarter Surfing: Better Use of Your Web Time

Back by popular demand at the 2003 ASJA conference is the "Smarter Surfing" workshop run by Columbia University Professor Sreenath Sreenivasan. Sree is an engaging personality, and his workshops—which he has given many times to newspaper reporters and professionals who rely on the Internet for research—are known for being fast-paced, fun and, most of all, informative.

While the workshop won't help you find everything you want to find on the Internet—though that's part of what Sree does—you'll learn how to become more productive by saving time in finding the Web's best information and most useful tools. You'll learn how to get what you need—sometimes even if you didn't know you needed it—thus spending less time, not more, on the Web.

Exotic Stories, Exotic Lands: Going Into the Field to Get the Story.

How do you humanize a potentially dry, technical story? Go into the bush with your subject. From archeology to art histo-

ry, the best of these stories tell ripping good yarns about interesting people doing unusual things, sometimes in faraway places. At the same time, these tales inform the reader about little-known aspects of the world we live in. Writing about specialized topics for a general-interest audience has allowed our panelists to dive in the Indian Ocean with biologists tagging the world's largest sharks, float down Italy's Po River, and trek into the Galapagos Islands.

Confirmed panelists include Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jonathan Weiner; *Scientific American* editor Carol Ezzell; *Discover* editor and *The New Yorker* staff writer Burkhard Bilger; and Erla Zwingle, former *National Geographic* editor and now contributing writer for the magazine. ASJA member and former Australia correspondent Dan Drollette will moderate the panel and toss in some of the things he learned while working 14 time zones from his editors' offices.

This panel will explore how these writers did it and what the assigning editors look for in a query. It will touch upon how to get started, get paid, deal with interpreters, avoid cultural missteps—and keep from becoming shark food.

Think Like a Kid: Keys to Writing and Publishing for Children and Teens

Kids can be the toughest and most rewarding audience you'll ever love. This panel brings together three ASJA writers who specialize in writing for children and young adults, and adds to the mix a children's book agent, and the executive editor of a children's publishing company. Panel topics will include getting started, what's selling, pay ranges and the future of children's publishing. We'll discuss fiction and nonfiction, as well as magazine articles.

Moderator Andrea Warren is the author of five nonfiction history books for young readers, including *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy's True Story*. Carol Weston is longtime advice columnist "Dear Carol" in *Girls Life* magazine, and the author of the bestselling *Girltalk: All the Stuff Your Sister Never Told You*, and the Melanie Martin fiction series. Vicki Cobb has written 80 titles, most on the subject of science, including *Science Experiments You Can Eat*. At Holiday House, executive editor Mary Cash helps publish 60 books a year for children and young adults. Agent Jodi Reamer represents a variety of fiction and nonfiction writers for children and teens. **ASJA**



Visit ASJA on the Web:
www.asja.org

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Be sure to let us know.
Please mail, fax or email your
new info to the ASJA office...
...and NOT to your non-postal newsletter editor.

QUERY PROJECT

Strengthen your query writing skills by reading query letters that landed assignments. ASJA member Pamela Kramer has collected successful queries and they're now on the Web site at www.asja.org/members/qp/qp.php.

If you have a successful query to contribute, send it to queries@asja.org. You can choose whether to include your name and the editor's name. It would be helpful to include information about how established, if at all, you were with the magazine when you netted the assignment.

Remember, like PayCheck, the Query Project will only succeed if ASJA members contribute.



The 2003 ASJA
Writers Conference
will be held May 2-
4 at the Grand
Hyatt Hotel
in New York City.

Visit www.asja.org
for up-to-the-
minute information.

Non-Member Registration Form

2003 ASJA Writers Conference

May 3-4, 2003 • Grand Hyatt Hotel • New York City

Non-Members use this form or register online at www.asja.org/wc/pubreg.php

Registrant's Name (please type or print) _____

Address _____ City _____

State/Province _____ Zip/Postal Code _____ Daytime Phone () _____

E-mail _____ How did you hear about this event? _____

Please check here if you require special accommodations to fully participate and please attach a written description of your needs

Sign me up for (check all that apply):

	Early Bird (before 4/11)	Regular (4/11 or later)	At the Door*
<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday, May 3 ASJA Writers Conference	\$195	\$215	\$230 _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday Mentoring Session	\$ 30	\$ 30	n/a _____

At my mentoring session, I need advice on _____

* As space is limited, on-site registration may be closed

Sunday, May 4 Workshops I will attend**

	Early Bird	Regular	At the Door
9am to Noon (choose one)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Book Proposals That Sell	\$75	\$80	\$85 _____
<input type="checkbox"/> The Personal Touch: Essays & Op-Ed Writing	\$75	\$80	\$85 _____
1:00pm - 4:00pm (choose one)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Writing Successful Magazine Queries	\$75	\$80	\$85 _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Memoirs: Capitalizing on Your Life Stories	\$75	\$80	\$85 _____

** You must be registered for Saturday in order to attend Sunday sessions

Total _____

Method of Payment:

- Check (please enclose)
- Visa Master Card American Express

Cardholder Name:

Credit Card #:

Expiration Date:

Authorized Signature:

To assist us with planning, please put a check next to the panels you think you might be interested in attending. You're not committed to attending any panel you've checked, and you may still attend any panel you wish. Full descriptions can be found at www.asja.org/wc/2003/2003sat.php.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 01 Book Smarts | <input type="checkbox"/> 11 Join the Club |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 02 Think Like a Kid | <input type="checkbox"/> 12 Moving from Nonfiction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 03 Fit, Trim & Sexy | <input type="checkbox"/> 13 Chat Your Way |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 04 You Don't Need an MBA | <input type="checkbox"/> 14 Breaking the Ice |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 05 Exotic Stories | <input type="checkbox"/> 15 It Happened to Me |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 06 Tales from the Heart | <input type="checkbox"/> 16 Open Sesame |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 07 Publishing Your First Book | <input type="checkbox"/> 17 Big Time |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 08 Home Sweet Home | <input type="checkbox"/> 18 The 15% Solution |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 09 Manna From Heaven | <input type="checkbox"/> 19 Smarter Surfing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10 Duets | <input type="checkbox"/> 20 Writing that Works |

Mail completed form to: ASJA • 1501 Broadway, Suite 302 • New York, NY, 10036 or fax to (212) 768-7414

Reservation and Refund Policy: Only paid reservations are guaranteed. Cancellations before April 11, 2003, are eligible for full refunds. Thereafter, \$65 of the fee is nonrefundable. No refunds will be given for cancellations received after 12:00pm EDT on Friday, May 2, 2003.

Your Own Personal Butler

A cornucopia of PDAs and software

by KATHRYN LANCE

When I first heard the term Personal Digital Assistant, I pictured a little butler six inches high filing and buffing my fingernails for me.

In fact, a PDA is a tiny, fully functional computer that you can hold in your hand. Last summer I bought a Palm 500, one of several PDAs made by Palm, a pioneer in the field. (Popular PDAs are also made by Casio, Handspring, HP, Sony, Toshiba, and others. Most make use of Palm OS, though several use Microsoft's Pocket PC operating system.)

These little computers may be the ultimate organizing tool. My new Palm allows me to easily carry around all my "stuff"—including calendar, contact info, outlines, lists, and even documents. All of this information fits easily into one compartment of my fanny pack. (My Palm, a typical product, is less than 1/2 inch thick and measures 3 inches by 4 1/4 inches.) Companion desktop software (for either Windows or Macintosh) makes it a snap to enter large amounts of data, then to synchronize with the Palm. Frankly, I can't imagine how I did without it.

I still haven't figured out how to surf the Web or receive e-mail on it, despite the best efforts of my local computer geek. I don't use it to read e-books, or for spreadsheets or Power Point presentations, though those are possible too; in fact, with the addition of a fold-up attachable keyboard, a PDA can do almost everything your laptop can do, in a fraction of the space. Some PDAs even do double-duty as cell phones.

If you don't yet have a PDA, I urge you to check them out. My Palm, the black-and-white 500, cost only \$325, and you can buy many other excellent ones for even less. Some come with a full-color screen, much easier on middle-aged eyes. There are tons of add-on programs for everything from learning languages to playing games. Memory cards are used for extra storage of programs and data. For

the latest in what's available, as well as reviews of most current PDAs, check out PDA Buzz at www.pdabuzz.com. If you already have a PDA, here are some cool programs that make these little gizmos even more useful.



Palm m505



Bonsai

Documents to Go. This popular program allows you to download Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files into your PDA for viewing or editing. Since I don't use a keyboard with my Palm, the editing I do is minimal, but I've found this program helpful on occasion when I've had a piece of writing I needed to think about or refer to while on the go. I also use it to keep my nature journal, which I try to add to each day. Documents are updated automatically when you synchronize. Many PDAs come with Documents to Go bundled in; or you can buy it for \$49.95 at www.dataviz.com/ppa.

Datebk5. If you only get one add-on program for your PDA, consider Datebk, which greatly improves the built-in calendar functions. Among the many, many things it does, Datebk allows you to enter floating items, which carry over from day to day until they are done, and to assign icons to events so you can see them at a glance (an especially useful feature for color PDAs).

There is, unfortunately, no companion desktop software, but Datebk is so good that doesn't really matter. A helpful listserv (Datebk4@yahoogroups.com) is frequented by C.E.S. Dewar, creator of Datebk, who answers questions and considers requests for new features. Download Datebk5 for a 30-day free trial

or order it for \$24.95 from www.pimlicosoftware.com/. For me, an added plus is that all proceeds from sales of Datebk go to wildlife conservation.

Bonsai is an outlining program from Natara, which also makes the very popular DayNotez journal software. Bonsai generates outlines in three formats: outline, to do, and tasks, allowing you to quickly and easily develop projects, articles, or whatever. That's the theory, anyway. I personally find it too cumbersome to create anything more complicated than lists, for which it works a lot better than the built in list software that came with the Palm.

Drawbacks are that there is no companion desktop version and that the Adobe-format manual is somewhat hard to use, but overall I find Bonsai a bargain at \$24.95. Or try it free for 30 days. Download at www.natara.com.

The Net contains a cornucopia of freeware and inexpensive shareware programs for PDAs. I will continue to report on those I find particularly useful—or check them out yourself. Trying new programs is part of the fun of owning a PDA! **ASJA**

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KATHRYN LANCE, a member of ASJA since 1979, is the author of more than fifty books of nonfiction and fiction.

it's all right there in front of you every day, but what about plot and story?

A: As far as the process is concerned, I do the reverse of what most people do. I write the entire book in my head, so if you saw me working you would say, "My god, he's writing so fast," when in fact, all I'm doing at that point is transcribing. I'm done when I sit down at the keyboard.

Q: How long might you dwell on a story?

A: The only honest answer is *constantly*. I'm working on something all the time, every day of my life. I'm never removed from it. It's just a question of extracting what I need to make a particular book. I never try to get it all in—it's impossible. What I need is a theme to drive the book. I'm more of a journalist than I am a writer. If you gave me an assignment and said, here's a million dollars, write a romance, I'd probably have to give you your money back. I only know how to do the one thing. And I don't work like most writers do, anyway. I don't take advances. I've been with the same publisher for 15, 18 years. When I'm done with a book, I give it to the boss and I say, do you want it? He says yes and they publish it. I get a contract when the book's in galleys.

Q: Writing has been a vehicle, a very useable, practical vehicle for you, as opposed to, again, getting back to the word: entertaining.

A: For me, it's been a superb vehicle, beyond my wildest dreams. But if it were not entertaining in some way, I'm not a fool. I understand my career depends on my last book. Nobody gives you bouquets in this business for winning literary awards. You have to move units. If the books were not, at least at some level, perceived as entertaining, they would not have succeeded.

Q: When you were first writing, sending your stuff out, were you worried about being controversial?

A: There was no question of being worried about it. My first unpublished novel was rejected by everybody. That book ended with a deeply disturbed and disaffected young man walking into a high school with a duffel bag full of weapons making an attempt to kill everybody in the place and then killing himself. I wrote that 25 years ago. It's way past controversial. To me, controversial means there's an argument. No offense, but it was only book reviewers saying that. It wasn't cops and it wasn't criminals, it wasn't perpetra-

tors and it wasn't victims, it wasn't whores and it wasn't nuns. It was just book reviewers.

Q: Have there been books that changed your life?

A: When I was a small child, I read *Scottsboro Boy* by Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad, books that galvanized me, and I remember to this day, *Cell 2455, Death Row* by Caryl Chessman, having a profound impact on me. At that age, I read exclusively nonfiction.

Q: What's your opinion of the state of journalism today?

A: There are lots of superb journalists running around, but there's a sloppiness in journalism. Journalists decide what they're going to say and look around for a statistic to support what they're saying. There are right-wing and left-wing journalists. I have problems with both. I don't think journalism should be about bias; it should only be about truth. Anything else should be labeled something else. I wrote a series about this, what happens when journalism dies. If people don't have a place to go for the truth, then hell's out of the bag. There's a lot of piety in political journalism and it doesn't feel truthful to me. I'm a fan of journalism. It's probably the high art, as far as I'm concerned, more than music, sculpture. And when it's done right, it's a tool for change. In fact, to my mind, journalism is *the* tool for progressive change all over the world. When there isn't a free press and an honest press, there really isn't a chance for a just society, an equitable one. It's no accident that every time there's a revolution, they take over the radio station.

Q: Last words?

A: What I said about writing not being a meritocracy is absolutely true, but it's also true that spectators don't win fights, and the one fighting technique I have never seen fail yet, is to just keep getting up. People shouldn't be discouraged because they can go from everybody saying that they would never be published and all of a sudden, it's all done. You never know. You're just punching a wall, punching a wall, your hands are bloody and broken, and then all of a sudden the wall's done, not from any one punch but from the accumulated weight of all the punches. This is not a business for people who give up easily. **ASJA**

For more information about Andrew Vachss, visit www.andrewvachss.com.

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1. If you don't do it, who will?

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Calendar

Calendar events are open to the public.

2003 ASJA Writers Conference

Keynote Speaker :

Barbara Ehrenreich



Author of

Nickel and Dimed:

On (Not) Getting By In America

Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* was named a *New York Times Book Review* "Notable Book, 2001"; a *Los Angeles Times* "Best Book, 2001"; and a *Business Week* "Best Business Book, 2001." Her experience as a journalist is also stellar: since 1990 she has been a contributing writer for *Time Magazine*, is contributing editor for *Harper's Magazine*, and has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, *Ms.*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Social Policy* and *Mirabella*. For a conference preview and to receive e-mail updates, visit www.asja.org/wc/2003/2003prev.php.

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