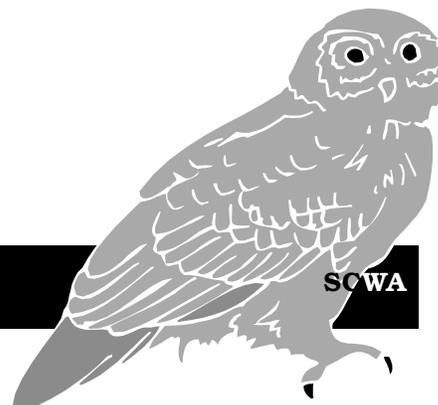


Southern California Writers Association Writers News

Volume 3, Number 12

December 2004



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December 18
Brian Alan Lane,
MFA, JD
author, screenwriter,
educator

Breathing Life into Characters

Learn how to create believable characters from scratch. Find out how to make your characters more authentic.



President's Message

Here it is the Holiday Season again, and I cannot resist sharing with you a truly touching holiday story—one of which you probably aren't even aware. Back in the first half of the 20th Century, Hollywood often had a glut of films that simply could not be shown nor distributed due to the sheer numbers of films being made, and the limited availability of theaters. Many of these movies were simply trashed without ever seeing the screen. Hollywood wives (the real ones, not the TV variety) often got together and viewed these movies one last time before they were relegated to the slush pile.

One day, however, these ladies saw a film that caught their eyes. And Mrs. Darryl F. Zanuck just happened to be present. She went home and suggested to her husband that he take a second look at this particular film that was about to be thrown away.

Know what that film was?

"Miracle on 34th Street"!

How, we ask ourselves, could that possibly have happened? How could one of the most inspirational movies of all time almost got thrown away without seeing the light of day? And how is it that so many truly great works of art get relegated so easily to the slush pile? Why is it so difficult for our "experts" to recognize genius?

Well—maybe it's more likely than you think.

Just for fun, let's take a second and analyze "Miracle on 34th Street" from a critic's or publisher's viewpoint.

Continued on page 2, column 1



December Speaker

Brian Alan Lane, MFA, JD, author, screenwriter and educator, will present *Breathing Life into Characters* at our December 18 meeting.

Lane has written and produced numerous television pilots, series, feature films, and omnimedia shows. His television writing credits include the screenplays *The Girl From Mars* and *Out of Time*, and series episodes for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Blue Thunder*, and *Remington Steele*.

His short stories are published regularly in literary journals worldwide. He is a Contributing

Editor to *Sweet Fancy Moses* — *The quarterly Journal of Fiction* and is the Founding Editor/Publisher of the soon-to-debut creative non-fiction website *Tales Told*.

Lane's day job is Professor of Writing through the College of The Arts, Department of Film and Electronic Arts, at **California State University Long Beach**. His bestselling book, *Cat and Mouse*, was described as "A masterpiece which could have been concocted by Vladimir Nabokov" (*The Boston Book Review*).

Catherine Singer, V.P. Programming

President's Message, cont. from page 1

In our literary training, we as editors and publishers learned the principles of a great story. It has a well-defined focal character, a well-defined obstacle leading to conflict, an escalation of conflict, and finally a resolution.

Okay. So far, so good.

Now—"Miracle on 34th Street".

Who is the focal character? Not so easy, is it?

We immediately think: Kris Kringle. But—does he really have a problem?

You could argue that he believes he's Santa Claus, or that he *is* Santa Claus, and the problem is getting others to accept it.

Good argument, but does it really float? He doesn't really care if people believe he is Santa Claus or not, nor does he care whether he ends up committed to a mental facility.

What about Susan? She isn't allowed to have childhood fantasies. But does it seem to affect her? Not really; she's well adjusted, even if something of a prodigy.

Doris? Her dreams and hopes have been dashed by something in her past that we'd like her to overcome. Yet she is nevertheless highly successful, and will survive quite well, even if in an overly serious way.

No, there is only one real focal character, and that is Fred Gailey. He alone has a specific goal—three, in fact: to save Kris from being committed to a

mental hospital, to help Susan regain the childhood she is missing, and to marry Doris! Fred is the only one willing to make tough decisions to bring his goals about. And though Fred at times seems like a vanilla character, it is nevertheless his actions which drive the plot!

How about the antagonist? Well—the Sawyer character is truly the most sinister of villains, because he is motivated by self-righteousness. But this is a subtle malevolence that many viewers will not catch. Sawyer comes across more as a clown, who would likely inspire piteous laughter, than a fiend who would invoke fear and anger.

Does this sound like a character and plot on which to gamble your fortune?

Already, we can see why a publisher might be edgy—particularly since the principal character, Fred, doesn't appear until well into the film.

Additionally, the major conflict of the film—the legal motion to commit Kris to a mental facility—does not come about as a real possibility until it actually happens. Although the foreshadowing of the event is well done, again it is so subtle that we (remember, we have to think as editors) might be concerned that it would fly over the head of the reader.

Start to make a little sense now?

So now, as an editor, you ask: with all this going against it, how could "Miracle on 34th Street" possibly succeed?

One: memorable characters—an

essential to any great story!

Can anyone doubt that the characters are all truly alive—even the minor characters such as Schellhammer, Macy, Gimble, Henry Harper, even the Jack Albertson character in the post office? This is truly a collection of wonderful people we would all love to know—characters that make us want to watch the movie again and again!

Two: these memorable characters worked into a thoroughly believable plot within the context of a comedic story.

Three: the story masterfully utilizes the wonderful juxtaposition of adult logic with childhood fantasy, and the intrinsic and often obscure link between the two, which can be recognized only by true genius.

Four: the climactic scene—who could ever have predicted it!

So as we submit our own works of genius to the editors who reject it over and over, remember that the reason most masterworks are not recognized is that they broke new ground—they did not conform to the general consensus of what makes a great work of art.

The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. --St. Matthew, Chapter 42, Verse 21.

Good luck and good writing!

Roy King, President

Membership Information

Pauline Bent V.P. Membership
atarque1@yahoo.com

Meeting Reservations

Roy King H (760) 955-5027
3kings@urs2.net

2004 Executive Committee

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www.ocwriter.com

SCWA Critique Committee

Open to members of SCWA

Nonfiction & Fiction Roy King 3kings@urs2.net

Roy will take any amount of writing for critique. He prefers to see the entire ms at one time. *Mail* your ms to Roy at 15772 Heatherdale Rd., Victorville, CA 92394.

Poetry Dr. Joyce Wheeler

Joyce will critique up to five poems. Please *mail* your work to Joyce at 3801 Chestnut Avenue, Long Beach, CA 90807.

The Writer's Holiday Tradition: The Whole Empanada

by Pauline Chavez Bent

Empanadas, New Mexico style, is what has kept this family together. Even though my daughters live thousands of miles away—around the first of December we begin what we call the “empanada cha, cha, cha!” We make cryptic phone calls to each other and leave strange messages—sometimes of just two words, like, “How many” Or I’ll pick up the phone and hear Jose Feliciano belting out “Feliz Navidad!” etc., or Bing crooning about something called snow. (What’s that?) Or perhaps just a chuckle and “I’m gonna make mine with moose meat this year, so there!”

Once I called one of our daughters (the southern belle) and told her I would not be making empanadas that Christmas and she said, “Oh, Mom, it will not be Christmas without empanadas.”

The next day there was a message from her husband, pretending to be Elvis, singing “Don’t Be Cruel.”

So what is a mother to do? I have spent more than a few shekels the past 17 years “Fed-Xing her a personal stash (half with walnuts, half with pinions) not to mention enchiladas, tortillas and other goodies—spoiled girl that she is.



This tradition came down to us from our New Mexico abuelas. In the village of Atarque, Christmas was a delightful time for us: Las Posadas, luminaries casting a soft light throughout the village, ocote-scented

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smoke wafting in the air, and plenty of food.

My Dad would butcher a ternera around the middle of the month and we ate more meat in December than the rest of the year. We had chile de ristra con carne, and chiles rellenos dulces and of course, empanadas. A lot of the meat was made into jerky for later use. The bones were used to make delicious soup.



When I established my family I continued the Christmas traditions, sans Posadas; but for the past thirty years it has become a tradition for my husband and me to light a lumanaria at the beach on Christmas Eve. We take an armful of wood and build our luminaria in a fire pit by the pier with Catalina Island in the background. We usually attract some curious onlookers (even surfers), giving me opportunity to talk to people and educate them on the history of New Mexico—my favorite pastime.

My Alaska girl made her first empanadas on her own (without Mom looking over her shoulder) on Thanksgiving Day, 1976. She was scheduled to fly home for the weekend from Spokane, Washington, where she was a freshman at Whitworth College.

All planes were grounded because of bad weather so she got back to the dorm, went shopping for ingredients and made herself a stash. Since then she has made them every Christmas. Her twin sons, now college sophomores also know how to make the tasty little goodies.

I remember the twins as two-year-olds clutching an empanada in each hot little hand—and they didn’t share! That was the year when they were living in Emmett, Idaho, and the Christmas when their dad got into the “empanada-making” act. He said to me, “We’ve gotta keep the tradition going.” My granddaughter could care less about empanadas—where, oh where did we go wrong?

My son, the surfer, has pitched in to help since he was fourteen, and has perfected a recipe of his own—actually I like his filling better than mine.

My husband helps in many ways, especially making sure that I have plenty of Presidente brandy for sipping as I “roll merrily along.” And he is sure to be the first one to sample la primera empanada as it comes off the skillet. Feliz Navidad and all that good stuff!

Pauline Chavez Bent is a member of the Southern California Writers Association. She was born in Atarque, New Mexico, and is the author of Atarque: Now All is Silent, self-published in 1993. She is a member of the New Mexico Genealogical Society. She lives in Huntington Beach and is a frequent contributor to the New Mexico Genealogist.



November Highlights

“Why not me?” is what writers should ask themselves about getting published,” says Barbara DeMarco-Barrett, instead of holding onto negative programming. By using this inner directive, today she is an author, educator, radio show host, editor of the **ASJA Monthly** for the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and president of its California chapter.

To seduce the Muse, DeMarco-Barrett says to put yourself in a chair, set a timer, and freewrite with no periods for, say, fifteen minutes until the timer goes off. She wishes an inventor would make a chair with a seat belt so aspiring writers could strap themselves in. If they get up [out of the chair] early, an alarm would go off. Since *Muse* is also a verb, this technique pushes us “into the flow” and eventually into a daily writing habit. Otherwise, we operate as someone who thinks, “I’ll start exercising when I get in shape.”

A small kitchen timer can create deadlines from temptations.

A small kitchen timer can create deadlines from temptations. For instance, she times email with the formula of “one hour write, email—five minutes.”

Join or organize a writing group and have the facilitator keep out negative persons. Ask bookstores, such as the Aliso Viejo Barnes and Noble, about writing groups or try Google for on-line critique ones. Commit to your group what you are bringing the next week. Pay attention to the consensus of your critique group. If you cannot find a group, have a writing buddy to help the seat belt process.

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Write whenever you have a few moments. Once, after watching her son’s soccer practice, she wrote a news column, due the next day, on a shopping bag she found in the car while waiting.

For freewriting, DeMarco-Barrett uses prompts such as a grab-bag full of words, vintage postcards, and free association. “Write as if no one will ever read what you wrote—or as if your family will never see it.” Write what you are obsessed about or what you do well. If you are funny, then let humor into your writing. “Play to your strength.”

If your goal is to get published, “take yourself seriously.” If your work will need research, she suggests writing out as much as possible beforehand and then doing the research.

To sell a novel, a writer needs first to have published stories.

To sell a novel, a writer needs first to have published stories. For a nonfiction book, he/she needs to be established in his field as a “public presence.” Eight years ago, DeMarco-Barrett’s first book about writing was rejected. “Who is she?” editors and marketers had asked. She needed a platform.

Since then, DeMarco-Barrett started her radio show “Writers on Writing” (KUCI 88.9 FM, Thursdays at 5 PM and web cast at www.kuci.org) where she interviews authors. She also began teaching “The Inner Game of Writing” at UC Irvine while continuing to publish shorter pieces.

DeMarco-Barrett “hates networking” but knows “it’s necessary” to meet those in the writing community. “It doesn’t work if too mercenary.” Gain a presence in on-line

communities, she encourages, by going to sites of your nonfiction specialty. She also suggests www.readerville.com and Gotham Writers’ Workshop.

To make a difference with that how-to book when publishers were saying “the writing bookshelf is crowded,” DeMarco-Barrett hired a freelance editor to review the field. Although the editor saw the need for another book on inspiration, she concluded that no books focused on time. Thus, DeMarco-Barrett refocused her book on where and how busy people find time to write and incorporated comments from 105 authors from her radio program and techniques she uses in teaching.

This time her writing book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman’s Guide to Igniting the Writer Within*, provoked an on-line bidding war by five publishers. **Harcourt** offered the most. Paperbacks are more profitable than hardbacks. Recently published, *Pen on Fire* spent a week in October on the *Los Angeles Times* bestseller list for nonfiction.

Self-publishing takes an enormous amount of personal time to market, which DeMarco-Barrett did not have. Also, reviewers tend not to review self-published books. However, self-publishers such as with print-on-demand lets you print books as needed. “Have a good cover!” Barbara advises.

With an ISBN, your book can go on amazon.com. Then you can return to your online networking, announce and sell your book there. At www.bookscan.com, anyone can tell which books have sold, how many and in which countries. Next, go again to the regular publishers and ask, “Are you interested now?” For DeMarco-Barrett, happily the answer was a big yes for *Pen on Fire*.

Continued on page 5, column 1



November, cont. from page 4

In January and February 2005, DeMarco-Barrett will have articles in *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest*. Her suggested reading is *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers* by Betsy Lerner, who "has respect for self-publishers" and *The Shortest Distance Between You and a Published Book* by Susan Page. Also check her website, www.pennonfire.com.

Glenda Rynn

Members may purchase taped copies of this presentation from SCWA Tape Librarian Sharon Walters. Contact Walters at swwaltz@surfside.net.



SCWA News & Announcements

Member Publications

Toni V. Sweeney announces the publication, through PublishAmerica, (www.PublishAmerica.com) her novel *The Rose and the Dragon*. Described as Jane Eyre in outer space, the novel combines **gothic romance** with **science fiction**.

"When Miranda Wilson is hired to care for Dominic Andrus' triplets, it is just like the plot of a Gothic novel: lively young governess, mysterious

employer, three motherless children...but there the resemblance ends. Even when she learns that her boss is an interplanetary criminal, hiding his children on Earth to prevent their abduction, she manages to take it all in stride, until she meets Kit, Dominic's younger brother and realizes he is the man she will love forever."

The Rose and the Dragon is available at amazon.com, Barnesandnoble.com, and PublishAmerica.com.

Toni's short stories, *The Lover in the Lake* and *Dark Lover*, will be published in the anthology *Vintage Wine* in March 2005.

Seminars and Events

2005 Big Bear Writer's Retreat

Mike Foley's popular annual writer's retreat will be held on an Alaskan Cruise, July 3 through 10, 2005.

Holland America will host the event, slashing cruise fees up to 40 percent. Cruise fees are separate from Writer's retreat fees.

Cost for the three workshop sessions is only \$199. Foley's brother, Tom Foley, a popular speaker at past retreats, will co-host the workshops.

For more information, go to Foley's website at www.writers-review.com.

Critique Groups

Katherine Sartori's critique group has an opening. Prospective members should have at least one novel completed. Seating is limited, so contact Kathy at kbsartori@cox.net for more information.

Visit Kathy at her new website and learn more about her novel at www.katherinesartori.com.

SCWA presents...

January 15, 2004

Dr. Rachel Ballon

author and educator

Power Writing: Starting and Finishing Your Books

Join us in January when Dr. Rachel Ballon describes special techniques to help you start...and *finish* your book!

Start the new year with a plan!

Dr. Ballon, a licensed psychotherapist, coaches industry leaders and writers to greater success in their professional lives.

She lives and works in Los Angeles where she works with top writers, producers, directors, and network executives.

Dr. Ballon authored *Writing: A Writer's Guide to Creativity, Craft and Career* and *The Writer's Sourcebook: From Writing Blocks to Writing Blockbusters*.

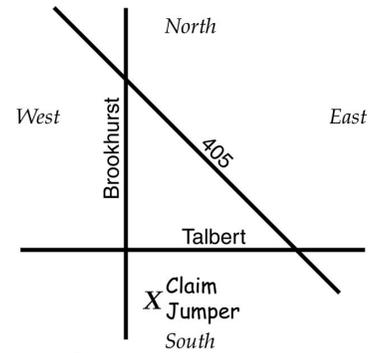


kwanzaa

December 18 Meeting Saturday, December 18, 2004

Claim Jumper Restaurant
Banquet Room Entrance, rear of building
18050 Brookhurst St., Fountain Valley, CA
For directions, call (714) 963-6711.

Brian Alan Lane, MFA, JD
author, screenwriter, educator



Breathing Life into Characters

-  Learn how to create believable characters from scratch.
-  Find out how to make your characters more authentic.

Registration & Networking: 9:30 a.m.
Meeting & Program: 10:00 a.m.
Lunch: 11:30 a.m.
Afternoon Program: 12:15 p.m.
Members & Non-Members: \$20.00

**Walk-ins & Guests
always welcome**

RSVP before December 13: Roy King, 15772 Heatherdale Rd., Victorville, CA 92394. Check must accompany reservations. Make checks payable to SCWA.

RSVP on or after December 13: Roy King *home* (760) 955-5027; *e-mail* 3kings@urs2.net — bring check to door. For more information, go to www.ocwriter.com. ***Be sure to RSVP whenever possible!***

Southern California Writers Association

Writers News

Pamela Rocke, Editor

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23016 Lake Forest Dr., Suite A
Laguna Hills, CA 92653

