



September 18, 2014

## Why I Attend Writing Conferences

by Susan Okaty

**I** have neither had a book published nor even written one. I did write 50,000 words two Novembers ago for the NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writers' Month) challenge. I felt like a writer that month, getting up every morning with a writing goal in mind, outlining and mind mapping with beautiful colored pencils on an unlined tablet of high-quality drawing paper. Yes, I really felt like a writer—until at the end of the month I read what I had written. Pure schlock. But, hey—50,000 words of schlock. That's impressive!

I used to dream about the day when I would retire and have all the time in the world to write. Actually, the scenario was more like I would win the lottery, and we would buy a gorgeous glass house on a windswept cliff overlooking the sea on Cape Cod. I would sit on the terrace with a steaming cup of Earl Grey, my writing notebook on my lap, watching the billowing waves crash on the rocks below as the storm clouds rolled in, the ideas flooding my brain too fast for my pen to capture. I have been retired for nearly six years now. I have produced nothing. Zilch. Zippo. Except those 50,000 words of schlock, of course.



Still, I have attended the HRW conferences every year since their inception. Why do I continue to go if I'm not writing? You may think that the people who attend writing conferences are all published authors or people who have WIPs (Works in Progress), people who want to pitch their ideas or have their work critiqued. At the very least, people who write every day or nearly every day and expect that someday all their hard work will pay off. Those people do make up the bulk of people who attend conferences. But I suspect more people like me attend than you would think. People who used to harbor romantic dreams of writing and picture their names in print, a movie contract in the wings. People who haven't picked up a pen in months or years except to stick a note on a Christmas card or in a lunchbox. People who like to listen to tips from experts and be around real writers with the hope that maybe someday these tips will pan out and some psychic energy from those real writers will rub off, and that smoldering writing spark will burst into flame again. It could happen. Maybe this year...

## HRW Keeps Growing

Hampton Roads Writers welcomes the following new members who have joined since June:

Vanessa Campbell  
Mary Ann Carr  
Karen Tatum  
Emily Baine  
Janice Scott  
Brande McCleese  
Tom Stroup  
Angela Stroup  
Lucie-Gabrielle Jolicoeur-Rosseau  
Karen Pearson  
Nancy Barrood  
Keith Hamilton  
Crystal Coombes  
Lois Allen  
Sylvia Liu  
Vanessa Jones  
Randi Sachs  
Gillian Spencer  
Joan Barnes  
Dr. Helene Uhlfelder  
Daniel Ford  
Andrew Wiggin  
Audrey Hodges  
Shirley Nesbit Sellers  
Robert Young  
Susan Stuhlman  
Jane Birch



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each sale, our group earns a 4-6.5% referral fee. The more products sold through a referral from the HRW page, the higher the percentage referral we receive. You pay no more going through our site than you would if you went directly to [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Look for the Amazon link on our HRW home page and start shopping today. Don't forget to tell your friends and family about our link to Amazon!

## Misunderstood Marks

by Linda Carol Cobb

“Let’s eat Grandma. Let’s eat, Grandma.

Commas save lives.”

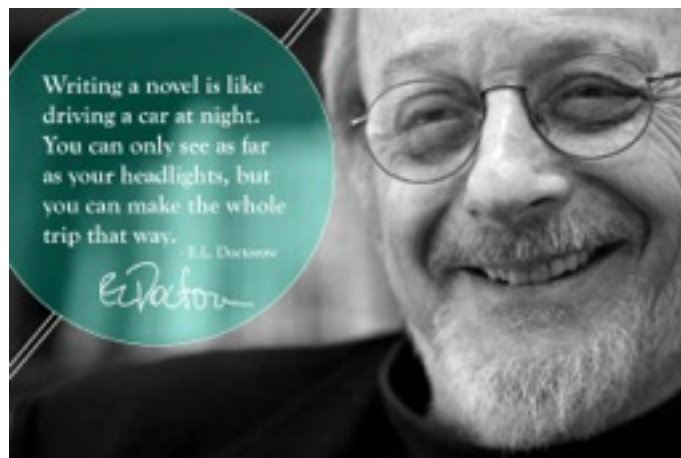
You may have seen this on signs or T-shirts. Commas might not save lives, but they sure help clarify written work. Can you imagine reading anything with no punctuation marks? It would be like driving with no traffic signs or lights—chaos.

When writing, some misinformed people stick commas in willy-nilly or leave them out entirely. Because they’re so little, punctuation marks don’t get the respect they deserve. They help us navigate written work. Without them, misunderstandings would abound. Commas equal clarity.

I’ve heard amateur writers say, “Oh, I don’t worry about all that stuff. I’ll let the editor deal with it when I get published.” But I’ve heard professional editors say, “If the first paragraph has punctuation or grammatical mistakes, I pitch the manuscript in the trash can.”

If I submit a story for possible publication, I want it to be as clean and correct as possible. If your work matters to you, why wouldn’t you take the extra time to polish it? Punctuation marks are governed by a set of specific rules. If you don’t know the rules, pick up a grammar book and learn them. Then you won’t have to worry about submitting sloppy work that will end up in the trash.

Punctuation marks are our friends. Get to know them.



# Traveling Pen Series

These 2.5-hour workshop sessions on different aspects of writing are \$10 for HRW members and \$20 for non-members. All workshops are held at the Virginia Beach Tidewater Community College campus in the Blackwater Building, Room CW-134. Check out this next one, and check back on the [HRW website](#) soon to see our offerings for the spring.

**Saturday, October 25, 2014, 9:30 a.m. - noon (check-in at 9:15): Designing, Building and Managing Your Own Author Website: You've written an entire book; don't let building a little website scare you!** Presented by **Nora Firestone**, journalist and PR pro. Building and running your own website can save time and money and facilitate endless creative marketing and publicity opportunities. This workshop will shed light on the essentials of domain registration, site design principles and goals, do-it-yourself site-building platforms, search-engine optimization and more, for a relaxed, better understanding of the various components involved and how to easily and successfully pull them together to work for you. Be excited, not intimidated. It's just another art with cool new tools!

# Show and Grow Your Prose with Professional Critique

Take advantage of this last opportunity of the year to read ten minutes of your prose (short story, memoir, or novel chapter only) in front of a very accepting audience of your peers, followed by a brief professional critique by our guest critiquer and by the moderator (usually Luran Strait, founder and president of HRW), all without removing even a penny from your pocket. Even if you don't want to read a piece, sitting in the audience and listening to the critique can help you with your own writing. We have only time for six or seven readings per session, so go to our website for detailed information on how to share your work. Registration is required for those who wish to read, and as you will see on our webpage, you will need to format and email us your submission in time for us to prepare it for the session. Readers will be chosen on a first come, first served basis.

Here is the schedule for the final session of 2014, held at Meyera Oberndorf Central Library in Virginia Beach from 9:15 to noon.

**October 11, 2014:** Author and educator **Dr. Bill Ruehlmann** will offer the professional critique.

## PEARLS BEFORE SWINE



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# Interview with Ginger Marcinkowski



HRW congratulates board member Ginger Marcinkowski on the publication of her latest book, *The Button Legacy: Emily's Inheritance*. In a recent interview, Ginger gave these insights into writing this book in particular and writing in general:

My writing dream had been to write short stories and magazine articles, but when I started my M.F.A. one of my instructors told me that there is a story inside every writer that *has* to be told. He said that once that story was written, the writer would be free to write anything he or she wanted to. I found that to be true as I began writing my first novel, *Run, River Currents*. When

that was completed, it was so easy for me to keep writing longer pieces. *The Button Legacy: Emily's Inheritance* then became a labor of love. I was inspired to write this story as a way to honor the influence my godly grandfather had on my life and the way God uses even the simplest things—like a button—to convey His word to others.

The idea of the button box comes from a real experience. Years ago, especially during World War II, people had to be frugal. They saved everything, and my grandparents were no different. Each piece of worn-out fabric was utilized to make quilts, every button saved for another use.

My grandparents' button box was a tin box which depicted a pasture scene, although the colors are now faded. When I was young, I remember it sitting high on an old oak hutch in the corner of their kitchen. When Gram or Gramp would bring it down, it was like a treasure hunt. The lid would open and hundreds of buttons, all various sizes and shapes, were there for us to explore. In my mind, I still see my grandfather's face light up when I'd pull a button out and ask about it. Who knew how many lessons of grace would come from the stories told of those buttons?

I write women's fiction which just happens to contain Christian faith, but my works can be read by anyone, as they are not preachy, just clean. I fictionalize truth, and truth is sometimes ugly as well as tender. The Christian market often does not like works that may be too real or have graphic situations. On the other hand, the secular market often does not like to hear God mentioned. The challenge to getting my first book published was finding a publisher who liked the writing, not the subject matter. I found that in Booktrope Publishing, a rising star in the world of Indie publishing. They accepted my work as good writing and then created a Christian imprint called Vox Dei to allow me and other edgy Christian authors to publish in the genre we love.

Although I had written various things throughout my life, I never really believed I had the talent to be a writer. It was a self-esteem issue. When the company I worked for required all staff to do some form of continuing education, I decided to get my Master's Degree in Creative Writing. I looked at it as a honing of my writing skills for my job, not as a full-time career. I was 53 years old and had already come through four careers in my life. I guess I really never intended to follow this dream. The dream just followed me!



# The Stigma of Self Publishing

by Lynn Yvonne Moon

Anyone can self publish, right? All he or she needs is a word processor and an Internet connection. Wait, stop right there!

Whether we self publish or traditional publish, writers will be required to complete much of the work themselves. For example, a traditional publisher will edit and format your manuscript for print. But that is it. Now the author must market and sell the book.

If we self publish, we must do it all unless we hire an indie press to do the work for us. They will mimic a traditional publisher (for a cost), but the author will be required to market and sell his or her novel. So we're back to where we began. We have a novel in print or e-print and no one reading it but our family.

A couple of aspects of book publishing that most self-published authors do not take under consideration are very important. These considerations will either make or break you. It's difficult to get a self-published book in traditional book stores. I currently have three novels in print, but I self-published. In order to get my novels inside Barnes and Noble, I had to sell several thousand copies of each, and that is not easy to do. Independent book stores are a little more understanding, but they still expect those sales.

Now why is that? Let's be honest. There are many self-published authors who do not take the time and energy needed to create a great manuscript. Once a manuscript is complete, traditional publishers take anywhere from six months to a year to go to print because it takes so long to edit the manuscript. Every sentence, every word is critiqued and analyzed.

What many new authors do not realize is the time and cost involved in promoting your book. Yes, there are blogs, and yes, there is the Internet, and yes... yes... yes. But to be realistic, your personal connections will only go so far. You will need to hire a marketing firm to help you sell.

A good advertising campaign will cost an author anywhere from \$1,000 to \$15,000. And that is for round one. A good video book trailer will cost anywhere from \$500 to \$15,000. A website also has a range in price and will depend on many factors. Before we run off to upload our books to Amazon, we need to sit back and create a marketing plan for our new novel. Know the budget and do not stray.

If we really want our book in Barnes and Noble as soon as it's printed, we'll need a traditional publisher. An agent is a plus but not necessary. But a publisher will get our book inside a book catalogue. A book catalogue is where the libraries and major book stores order their books for their shelves.

Don't be discouraged. It is possible, but it will cost the author in both time and money. We need to be dedicated to our work and to our efforts.

# Who Are We?

**O**ur members come from all fields and professions. The only things we all have in common is love of the written word and the desire to get better at our craft and help others along the way. Here are snippets about some of our newest members with more to follow in the next newsletter:

**Vanessa Campbell** is an 8<sup>th</sup> grade honor student and the daughter of a current member, Jaclyn Campbell. She and her mother are attending the conference together.

**Matthew Foster** was a technical writer, by profession. Wanting to improve his skills, he took classes at the Muse in Norfolk and veered into fiction. Science Fiction is his genre of choice because of his background in science. He is working on a sci-fi novel and still taking writing classes. He enjoys participating in the craft and finds it reduces his stress level. He stated with enthusiasm, "Using my creativity brings me great joy in life."

**Mary Ann Carr** was a former president of Chesapeake Bay Writers. As a former teacher and education specialist, Ms Carr began her writing career by penning five books for children that were mysteries for them to solve. After she branched off into the field of gifted education, she wrote a book for teachers detailing how to differentiate instruction. Later on, she wrote short stories and articles for local publication. Ms Carr's next endeavor will be to write a book on mindfulness.

**David Neff** recently finished his first novel (historical fiction based in WWII). He is a full-time history professor at TCC.

**Janice Scott** is an attorney who provides in-home legal services and teaches law through the University of Phoenix, both online and at the local campus. She started her writing career as a child. Poetry was her first endeavor. Keeping journals has been a life-long pursuit. Her main interest is religious non-fiction as expressed in sermons and devotionals, which relate scripture to modern life situations. She developed a large inventory of devotionals she would like to publish in a book. She has also written a collection of plays with a biblical theme for children. Her work has been published in an African-American digest, *American Pulpit*. In the future, she would like to concentrate on fiction.

**Emily Baine** heard of HRW when taking classes at the Muse. Emily began writing poetry in high school. Later she added short stories to her collection. Eventually she would like to publish a book of her poetry. Through her work in advertising, she met the publisher of the local publication, *Tidewater Women*, for which she wrote the following articles: *Women in Astronomy*, *Miss Virginia Pageant*, *Teen Pageant*, *Women & Mentoring*, and *Healthy Eating*.

**Brande McCleese** could read a newspaper at four and wrote her first story at six. At the age of twelve, she began composing poetry, which is still her favorite genre. She also writes fiction. Her work has been published in an anthology and a student journal. Brande has taught classes in creative fiction at a university in North Carolina. She earned a master's degree in creative writing and is presently working toward an additional master's in English. Her main writing goal is to express herself from her unique point of view. A recurrent theme in her writing is: *Accept yourself, even if you're different.*

## Who Are We? *(continued)*

**Lucie-Gabrielle Jolicoeur-Rousseau** has a masters in creative writing. Being bi-lingual, she writes in both French and English. Her writing experience has been in both fiction and nonfiction. She composed two satirical fantasy novellas which she wove together into a single novel, and is now working on a third novella. Her two brothers are also writers, and with one she is writing a collection of biographical short stories about her father. Her main focus at the present time is on obtaining a publisher for her novel.

**Nancy Barrood** began writing as a child, penning poems and a children's book. When she became an attorney, she concentrated on legal writing, which included creating motions and briefs. Wanting to improve her skills, she took an online writing course with a professor who encouraged her to further develop her talents. As a mother of a handicapped child, she underwent great challenges in raising her son. The adaptation to his condition required that she re-think her ideas about motherhood. How she re-defined her relationship with her son and with herself helped both of them forge ahead. Nancy would like to put together a collection of stories about other mothers who had to deal with the mental health, drugs or criminal challenges their children presented them.

**Tom Stroup** began writing as a child and continued in college. As an English teacher for 37 years, he also taught writing while continuing to take writing classes. He enjoys the genres of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. In the past, he has written stories, poems, blog entries, and reminiscences. His writing goal for the future includes a novel and perhaps an autobiography.

**Crystal Coombs** began writing when she was young. By fifteen, she completed a children's mystery novel, which her mother typed up and mailed to a publisher. The rejection letter is still in her possession. For a while as an undergraduate, she majored in journalism. She was the editor of her college yearbook and later worked as a technical writer. Her professional life was also spent as an English professor and a college administrator. Attending a writing conference in 2001 motivated her to return to fiction. She subsequently wrote three mystery manuscripts and will soon begin the fourth in the series. Crystal's first mystery is being published by a boutique publisher. She hopes to sell the complete series.

**Karen Pearson** has a degree in librarianship and information management from the University of Denver. She became enthralled with the English language and letter writing from an early age. Discovering a cache of 142 family letters written by various family members in the past served as the inspiration to write a memoir. Karen is also interested in developing her talents as a fiction writer.

*I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much.* — Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird*

## Tips for Avoiding a Negative Book Review

by Lauran Strait

Most novels today offer up a LIKABLE CHARACTER who overcomes ALMOST INSURMOUNTABLE ODDS and BY HIS OR HER OWN EFFORTS achieves a WORTHWHILE GOAL. Readers expect these things from a story, and failure to achieve any of these goals will dissatisfy most of them. Unhappy readers often are all too happy to leave a negative book review on book purchasing sites such as Amazon.com. I have left many such negative reviews as my form of public service announcement to potential book buyers.

Aside from issues like poor editing and/or formatting of a novel, misspelled and/or missing words, and repetitive sentence structures and word choice, I will slam a novel in which:

- The main character is NOT LIKABLE ENOUGH. Readers want to be able to identify with the way in which the protagonist solves his or her problem.
- The odds are NOT INSURMOUNTABLE ENOUGH, or the reader does not believe they are sufficiently insuperable. If the hero/heroine goes out to fight a bear, it must not turn out to be a teeny-tiny bear cub he could put in his pocket and take home for a pet. The reader must have a REAL PROBLEM. A fake problem is also known as a "paper tiger."
- The main character DOES NOT SOLVE HIS PROBLEM BY HIS OWN EFFORTS. The problem is solved FOR the character by his Fairy Godmother, the God in the Machine, or the US Cavalry coming over the hill at the last moment. This deprives the reader of a chance to sweat, struggle, cry over, empathize, suffer with, and otherwise feel the strength of the character as he fights to win out over heavy odds.
- The RESOLUTION is too predictable, too pat, or too contrived based on too many unlikely and/or unbelievable coincidences, or just too downright unbelievable. A subset of this is what is called the "idiot plot"—the plot is kept going only because everybody acts like an idiot. This is the story where all the problems could be solved by asking a simple question such as, "Why were you kissing that man?"; "Because he is my favorite uncle." End of romantic agonies. No need for sleuthing or for doing anything that the average person wouldn't do. This is also the type of story in which the girl does not tell the police what she knows because she jumps to the conclusion that her lover is the murderer.
- The GOAL is not worthwhile enough, or this particular audience does not see it as worthwhile. Now-a-day readers probably aren't willing to weep and suffer over a person who would steal, lie, and cheat to get new cushions for the sofa. It is getting harder and harder for romance writers to convince their mostly-female audience that a woman would suffer all kinds of humiliations for a man because he happens to be rich, handsome, and "romantic." On the other hand, a writer's goal can be just too cosmic: the John Wayne character winning World War II all by himself, or the Captain Kirk character saving the Galaxy single-handed.