

Galfromdownunder at the 40th Willamette Writer's Conference

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Eugene Register-Guard/WRITE ON : Writers bring stories and dreams to conference

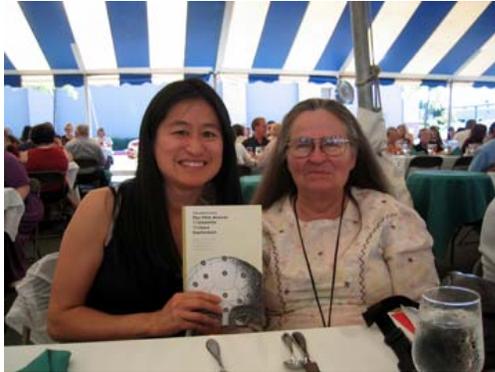
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From Padlocked Diary to Powell's Pick (and other shameless alliterations) The Willamette Writer's Conference 40th Anniversary

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With proponent of avant-garde non-fiction [Dorothy Mack](#) of [Writers On The Edge](#). "You can even use Tarot cards to head up each chapter .. and what about recipe cards?" How about M&M's with a word on each that people can rearrange and eat as the mystery is solved? Go wild!

"A WRITER says things well. A genius, well, says things."

This single statement, issued by the venerable Steve Martin ten years ago from a dark theater stage got me thinking about the first part at least – the genius part might have to wait 'til my next life.

Fast-forward past many anxious moments sweating over a memo as a civil servant in Australia, rearranging 5 lines of copy as a Saatchi & Saatchi adwriter in Ireland, self-editing my first book in Costa Rica leaving 5 typos intact just for kicks (and if you believe that you'll buy my book), and I find myself standing at the registration desk of the 40th annual Willamette Writers Conference in Portland.

Tapping my details into a glowing screen is Bill Johnson, award-winning Portland playwright, whose book 'A Story is a Promise' generously shares what he knows about wowing 'em in front of the velvet curtain. And here he is, ushering newbies like me into the fold.

Forty years! I was dribbling fried rice and scribbling on skirting boards for the meet's opening chapter. Little did I know that my diaper doodlings could later be classified as 'avante-guard non-fiction', according to guest speaker Dorothy Mack of www.writersontheedge.com).

Despite initially baulking at the hefty \$400 for the 3-day event, I was inspired by a fellow Eugene writer, Teri, whose fantasy fiction novel hasn't even coalesced beyond a synopsis. Her drive and enthusiasm, however, could fill volumes; she even has a pen-name picked out.

"Share the hotel room with Liz (aspiring screenwriter) and I, let's jump in and immerse ourselves!"

\$700 later I'm signed up for the Full Monty – three days, 4 nights, banquets and 6 opportunities to pitch to the platoon of literary agents who come from all over the country hoping to discover a new King, Grisham, Rowling ... and if the "star-lit" can hold a tune or captivate a stadium of skeptics, so much the better.

THE PRACTICE PITCH: We arrived early to jump into the free practice pitching session, where a panel of

agents listened with intense patience as we nervously cooed and clucked over our literary hatchlings. One panel was 'kinder' than the other, to its peril – a little gong would have been kinder on all of us, including the quivering, quavering aspirant. Despite some dicey deliveries, our ears picked up on some potential page-turners, all they needed was a little Tender Literary Care ...

THE CONSULTS: Having practiced our shtick in the safety of the practice pitch session, we were ready for the ring of fire. For \$15 participants could book a 10-minute one-on-one with an agent, and in that time hope to snag interest in the project, be it literary or film. Little tables for two were set up in the lobby with the name of the agent on a stalk, over which two bobbing heads bumped in earnest, resembling 99% of restaurants on Valentine's Day. In a separate area group consults, for the same price, allowed up to 8 people to huddle around the agent and vie for pole position. The groups were polite yet competitive in the nicest possible way – everyone got to do "My name is x, my book/screenplay is y, it's a story about z". Everyone seemed to want everyone to succeed – perhaps because we're on the mellow West Coast, we're all writing different things, and despite the reports of a crowded literary marketplace, there seems to be room for every kind of book. After all, there's a reader born every minute, right?

THE WORKSHOPS: This is the meat'n'potatoes of the conference, or the tofu'n'kale if you're from Eugene. There were so many interesting-sounding sessions that it took a session to decide what to choose and what to lose.

How to Write a Sex Scene by Jenny Shortridge was a must. As someone who's written nothing more titillating than '[The shepherd] turned out to be not-so-sheepish after a not-so-wee Dram', I was ready to hear how one dances around the C and F words, or indeed, arranges those well-used designations to maximum and non-cliche effect.

As it turned out, we learned of the merits of the 'no-sex' scene, which can create a more compelling sense of desire. Since no-one volunteered to get up and read their scene aloud, I offered to read the sauciest segment from my book, about a sexy handshake, no prophylactic necessary. I had one woman come to me panting for more, resulting in a book sale - writing 'nein danke' is sexy!

In one room listeners got guidance on proper story construction and flow, in another room, Dorothy Mack was talking deconstruction and even using odd interesting devices like recipe cards and crossword puzzles to tell a story.

"You can make the footnote the story!" she said.

Technique or gimmick? You decide, the publishers ultimately decide.

Seasoned pros Anne Hawkins and Doris Booth told us the hot trends in publishing for now – chic-lit, hen-lit, lad-lit, latino-lit, Christian-lit and yes, erotica (which they might have thought but did not call clit-lit). "Out" was romance (candle-lit?), horror, historical fiction, business books, statements of personal philosophy (unless your name is Deepak Chopra) and memoirs (unless your name is Hilary Clinton).

"Regardless of what you write, you need a flawless writing style, and a sense of what makes your story relevant in today's market and media," said Anne.

But, they acknowledged that this could all change in the next second.

Eugene journalist and writer Bob Welch warned that it was up to authors to promote their books – these days, the publishers just print them and leave them to cat-fight on the shelf at Borders, Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and yes ... Powell's Portland.

"If I am on public transport, or getting off at an airport, I might just happen to have a copy of American Nightingale under my arm, cover facing out," he said.

Portland TV pro Frank Mungeam bounced about like a game show host, telling us how to get our faces on TV by making sure our story has a hook as compelling as the second coming of Christ, except that Christ might have to be a woman with large breasts and ADD and a solution to the peak oil problem to get past the gatekeeper ... we even had appearances by experts on Self Help writing (resiliency guru Al Siebert) and how to deduct our

collection of 6 Feet Under DVD's without guilt (Scott Rubenstein).

Whew!

THE SPEAKERS: Over lunches in a cavernous tent and dinners in the Hilton Embassy Suites Banquet Hall we were pep-talked by Marc Acito, Craig English, Wendy French and Adam Brooks, all Google-able success stories, the kind that qualifies them to tell us to stop worrying and keep on writing – a bit like Lance telling cyclists to keep pedaling. But pedal they do, and write we must, no matter what our internal and external critics say.

A conference like this makes it seem like our 14-year old heroine with the power to tap into the psyche of garden vegetables, inciting them to rebel against chemical and pesticide companies by causing presidents who ingest them to have unavoidable thoughts of global cooperation and world peace - might just have a chance to flicker to life on the big screen.

To quote Bill Johnson, "I am very well respected in my personal fantasy world."

The Willamette Writers Conference is held in the first week of August each year in Portland. Visit <http://www.willamettewriters.com/>

[Join the Mid-Valley Willamette Writers group](#) (YAHOO group mwww), based in Eugene, Oregon, where you can see photos of the event



[The Handsomest Man in Cuba](#), despite being a self-published tale with zero mainstream distribution in the USA, seems to have found its way to the staff picks shelf at Powell's Portland. What a compliment to any aspiring writer! Thanks Powell's, especially Brian Doerter.