Perspective on a Passing Friend

-Tanya Grove

Debby Frisch was my good friend and writing buddy. Five years ago I was looking for a critique group that focused on children’s books, so I joined the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators, which is how I met Deb. She and I put out the word and formed Kiddy Lit-ers. Others came and went, but Deb always stuck it out, welcoming new writers and arranging meetings for this ever-changing group.

She talked me into joining CWC, and we attended our first meeting back when it was at Barnes & Noble in Jack London Square. We often carpooled to meetings and recounted our publishing attempts—delighting in each other’s successes and encouraging each other after receiving rejection letters in that roller coaster of hope and disappointment. I read her memoir, and she read my middle-grade novel. We both grew more active in the club, she as the Fifth-Grade Story Contest chair and I as the newsletter editor.

Last June we were on our way to the awards ceremony for our winning fifth graders when she told me she wasn’t feeling well. She had stayed up late making cupcakes for the event after having flown back from New York where she herself was honored at an awards ceremony for her memoir. I thought she had a virus or was suffering from exhaustion. But I found out a few days later that she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

When I visited her in September, she had written a piece for KQED’s show Perspectives, which airs two-minute recordings sent in by listeners. But when she read it aloud, it was closer to three minutes long. She edited it but no longer had the energy to record it. Besides, her medication leeched her focus and gave her speech the quality of molasses. Although Deb was the native New Yorker and I’m from drawling Oklahoma, I’ve always been a quick talker. Here was my chance to help Deb out. She asked me if I could do whatever I could to get it on the air.

After paring a few more words and not stopping to breathe, I got it down to one minute and fifty-eight seconds. I sent a voice memo file to the editor of Perspectives with a plea to air it as soon as possible so that Debby could hear it before she died. He called back and explained apologetically that pieces for Perspectives had to be read by the author—no exceptions. He was sympathetic but couldn’t set a precedent.

Debby was a beloved member of our writing community. I want to honor her the best way I know how—by sharing her last written work with all of you. (See page two.)
In Woody Allen’s hilarious *Take the Money and Run*, police ask the protagonist’s ex-girlfriend whether she had an inkling years earlier that he would become a criminal mastermind. “Are you kidding?” she shoots back in a piercing Brooklynese. “Everybody just thought he was a schlemiel! Go know, right?”

I had my “Go know!” moment in a California hospital room. This one wasn’t funny.

After sporadic episodes of pain starting five or six years ago, radiating from a silver dollar–sized spot on my back under my bra band, I stopped wearing a bra altogether. But this late in the game, the pain didn’t go away. The sad-eyed young surgeon who had just looked at my CT scan explained the cause: cancer of the pancreas.

And for years, I just thought it was my bra.

For at least three years, I had always wanted to take my bra off after dinner, then after lunch too. I stopped wearing bras with underwire. Awfully jiggly, those stretch bras. Blouses I had worn before no longer fit, but I made the sacrifice. I started unlatching one or two hooks after lunch and wearing more jackets and bulky sweaters. Sometimes I would find some awkward way to rehook one hook later in the afternoon, only to take the whole bra off after dinner. Every day I was maligning Maidenform, berating Bali. I was outraged at Olga, with her $60 price tag and her claim that I’d never want to wear another bra again.

My husband heard about it too. On a trip to New York City three years ago, I insisted on spending several hours bra shopping at Bloomingdales, where the lingerie saleswoman is a specialist and the price of special bras runs to three figures. My husband is a pediatrician, but he didn’t look at my issue from a medical point of view any more than I did; he only likes to see my bra when I’m taking it off.

So how is this pain under the bra related to my pancreatic cancer? I feel both pains in the same places. I asked my oncologists whether bra intolerance could be cancer pain in disguise. They said they doubted it.

So what do I want my readers to think about? That small, persistent or recurring pain might not be external but rather something to look into.

Wishing you the best of health.
Guest Column:

The Absolutely Most Important Agent’s Tip for Writers: First Impressions Count

-Andy Ross

Readers of Ask the Agent know I’m suspicious of the seemingly endless stream of publishing tips that you read in writers’ publications, blogs, and workshops. Given my skepticism about this kind of shorthand advice, my tips tend to be framed with a lot of ironic and self-deprecating humor. And I also try to be realistic to the point of blunt. This blog is not for the faint of heart. Those seeking flittery feel-good inspiration will likely be uncomfortable here.

But there is one tip that is as indisputable and immutable as a law of physics. That is: first impressions count. And your first paragraph will be the agent’s first (and possibly) last impression of your work. So it better be better than good.

When I started working with fiction, I found that I usually could decide by the end of the first paragraph if a writer had talent. I was a little ashamed of this, so I asked around with other agents and editors. They agreed. This is not to say that I can tell by the end of the first paragraph whether a book is publishable. If the first paragraph makes me fall in love, I’ll keep reading until that first blush of romance disappears. It usually does at some point. Sometimes in the second paragraph. Sometimes on page 100. Only rarely do I find myself reading the last line at 3 in the morning, crying like a baby. But when that happens, it makes everything all worthwhile.

First impressions with an agent are no different than anything else in life. If you were going for an interview at Knopf, you probably wouldn’t show up wearing a NASCAR t-shirt and a John Deere hat. (Unless, you were looking for a job as an editor of a new imprint on ironic detachment.) If your first paragraph is characterized by clunky style, pretentious and flowery figures of speech, clichés, literary throat clearing, descriptions of the weather, clumsy efforts to shoehorn backstory into the narrative, or other stylistic bads, it’s going to take a lot of brilliant writing to dispel that first impression. And chances are, editors and agents aren’t going to afford you that much more time.

This may seem harsh and unforgiving, but here’s my advice. Make that first paragraph sparkling and brilliant. And after that, make the second paragraph sparkling and brilliant. For more, go to http://andyrossagency.wordpress.com/.

HOW WRITING CLUBS MENTOR

You hear stories about discouraged young writers who sought out—or blundered into—beloved Pulitzer- or Peabody-Prize winners and struck up friendships that became lifelong mentoring bonds. If you’ve hit upon that as your personal strategy for literary conquest, I wish you well.

But, in general, short of tracking down and dazzling Doris Kearns Goodwin or Stephen Colbert, what’s an aspiring but unpublished talent to do? Quick answer: Go to where creative spirits congregate.

Quick corollary: Writers’ clubs afford these opportunities on a regular basis. CWC branch public-relations chairs might consider doing a press release on the subject, as well as including this type of information in any branch press release.

For example, many members are established writers, and even when not best-selling authors, they have useful advice, experiences, and possibly contacts to share. Members who haven’t reached the ranks of stardom might nonetheless provide support, encouragement, friendly critiquing, a role in one of their projects or a collaboration partner. Associating with writers who actively journal, research, interview, hammer out drafts and the like inspires you to pursue writing every day of your life. After a few months of meetings and publications, there is no way to not glean nuggets of sound instruction. What you observe at writers’ clubs about the craft and business of writing helps you get a foot in the door.

Incidentally, High Desert’s Davida Siwisa James did just such a story for the Victorville Daily Press. It was huge and made us all look good. See it at http://epaper.vvdailypress.com/Repository/getFiles.asp?Style=OliveXLib:LowLevelEntityToSaveGIFMSIE DAILYPRESSABType=text/html &Locale=english-skin-custom&Path=VDP/2013/08/03&ChunkNum=-1&ID=Ar02300&PageLabel=D1

Congratulations to High Desert! Good luck, and sail on, Donna McCrohan Rosenthal, PR director, pr@calwriters.org
Plaiting Fog

Plaiting fog is my factory job, recruited against my will—and I even have to breathe the stuff.

Dragonflies watch, perched on pond scum. No judgment here in the natural world; sense or nonsense, my work means nothing to them.

Left over center, right over center, then left again, add another strand, on and on, I never stop. I’m doing my part, alone—honest labor, it is said.

Down in the muck, I’m surrounded by fog, working away. Call it what you will: dense fog, trick fog, incompatible fog—no end to its variety.

Collect the stuff, pull and gather, straighten and separate. Focus. Take another strand, weave and plait, try it out: coax, threaten, plead, rework, undo, start again.

Keeping up a fine tradition, advancing the whole, making my mark. Everyone appreciates a little personal brilliance—plaiting to save my life.

But: straight time only, no insurance, no security, no time out, no time off. I can’t even skulk away unseen—no holidays, ever.

Right over center, left over center, something new, perhaps. Ad infinitum. Tedious, to be sure, but plenty of room for imagination.

So much work to do—weaving opacity from the ephemeral, the manufacture of meaning. I’m hoping to make…real dragon wings.

– J.L. Berry

The Soft Night Train

A freight train made of pillows rushes through the night.

Wind whistles through the ticking, stripes whirl in the darkness.

Thus, a force of love is brought to the sleepyheads in the countryside.

Hard love becomes soft, overnight.

Wish-for-love is delivered as freight.

The Conductor leads this overture as he might Debussy or Strauss.

The moon set, the sun rises, the train disappears.

The pillowed freight train does not operate in daylight.

– Dirk Wales

Seedling

A-h-h-h, to be a writer, one of artful prose,
Not one labeled by editors, “She’s one of those.”
To be tagged, “one of finely crafted hand,”
Deftly tackling subjects, taking a stand
Finding funny in the mundane,
Balancing essays, stories, ignoring the inane,
Accepting honest criticism, needed, well-meant,
While silently harboring disgruntlement.

To be a crafter of poetry, with merit,
Sitting quietly, listening, learning to ferret,
Gibberish, doggerel, every type of weed,
Words vying for attention, hunting a need.
Letting self wander to foreign places,
Trying on shoes, masks, faces.

Yes, to be a poet of merit, a gifted writer of prose,
To be labeled by others, “A-h-h-h, she’s one of those.”

– Maddy Thompson
Volunteer Corner
- Madelen Lontiong

Awards and recognition are ways to be acknowledged for service, and such was the case on July 21st when, at the Holiday Inn Express in Oakland, a ceremony was held for those receiving the Jack London Service Award. The welcome statement at this summer’s 40th Anniversary of the Jack London Awards ceremony included, in part, “The Jack London Service Award and the Ina Coolbrith Award, which honor service at the state level, are considered the highest honors bestowed upon a member by the CWC.”

Linda Brown, our nominee for this year’s award, was the Berkeley Branch recipient, and deservedly so. In the five years since Linda joined our branch, she has jumped in and become an active member, giving of herself and her time for the benefit of the club and its members. Linda has served as branch publicity chair, Central Board representative and as branch president, helping to expand our use of technology. Her previous business experience in marketing, public affairs and economic development prepared her well for these roles. Linda’s interest in and involvement with Joaquin Miller Park continues, and has shed light on our branch connection with the park, especially that of early CWC members.

We salute Linda Brown and thank her for her many hours of service to our branch. She joins a list of those volunteers who went “above and beyond” the call. Her efforts have helped each of us.

An interesting footnote to the award ceremony this year is that all of those recognized were women!
Member News

Berkeley Branch members are encouraged to send us writing-related news. Please write “Member News” in the subject line and send to Anne at writefox@aol.com no later than the 15th of the month.

Alon Shalev’s novel, Ashbar, third epic fantasy novel in the Wycaan Master series, was published for release this month by Toumoline Books. More info about e-books and tree books at http://www.alonshalev.com/

Kristen Caven is the featured Bay Area Boomer in The East Bay Monthly for October. For online viewing, go to www.themonthly.com/ Print version also available.


Risa keeps us up to date here: http://www.berkeleyside.com/2013/09/17/read-all-about-it-tribune-tavern-a-hit/ Yes, Tribune Tavern, new on the East Bay scene for hobnobbing and happy tippling in a history-laden building.

JoAnn Smith Ainsworth’s historical western romance, Polite Enemies, was published as e-book and trade paperback on September 1, 2013, by Whiskey Creek Press. See www.joannsmithainsworth.com.

Anne Fox’s flash fiction, “The Bedroom Mirror,” appears in You, Me & a Bit of We, A Celebration of Writing in First and Second Person, published in August by British publisher Chuffed Buff Books.

Tanya Grove has been accepted by PlayGround, a Berkeley theater company of actors, directors, and writers who create and perform short plays every month from October to March at the Berkeley Rep Theater. (See Tidbits, p.7, for more information.)

Therese Pipe will include her photography in the El Cerrito Art Association’s Annual Art Show, opening October 4, 7-9 pm at the El Cerrito Community Center. (Details, ecartassociation@gmail.com)

Therese continues to work on a subcommittee for the coming exhibit, “The Heart of Berkeley: The Historic McGee-Spaulding District,” which opens at the Berkeley History Center on October 13, 2-4 pm. (Details, info@berkeleyhistoricalsociety.org)

In Memoriam:

Deborah Frisch, spirited CWC-BB Fifth-Grade Story Chair and facilitator of the Kiddie Lit-ers critique group, died in September. She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer shortly after the awards ceremony for the Fifth-Grade Story contest this past June.

Among Debby’s many achievements was her memoir, A Mango for the Teacher, a finalist in the Fourteenth Annual International Latino Book Awards. A longtime teacher of English as a Second Language in Mexico, where she established a school, Debby also taught in the East Bay and at San Francisco’s Academy of Art University. Debby developed outstanding teaching and supplemental materials for ESL published by Xicalango Press, including the games ¡Binglés! and ¡Viva la conversación! (see xicalangopress.com)

Mt. Diablo Hosts Publishing Expert

Ron Shoop will present “Confessions of a Bookseller” at the next luncheon meeting of the Mt. Diablo Branch of the California Writers Club (CWC) on Saturday, October 12, 2013, at Zio Fraedo’s Restaurant, 611 Gregory Lane, Pleasant Hill.

Mr. Shoop will speak about his experiences dealing with bookstores and the process of traditional publishing and marketing. He will also discuss some newly published books.

Check-in is from 11:30 a.m. to noon, buffet luncheon from noon to 12:45 p.m., and the program from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. The cost is $20 for CWC members, $25 for guests.

Reservations are required and must be received no later than noon on Wednesday, October 9. Contact Robin Gigoux at ragig@aol.com, or phone 925-933-9670. Expect confirmation only if you e-mail your reservation.
Tidbits

Save the Date for Holiday Luncheon

This year’s holiday luncheon will be upon us sooner than you know. Spenger’s Seafood Grotto will again be doing the honors Saturday, December 14. Look for your evite notice in November’s WA, and do decide to attend.

PlayGround Kicks off 20th Season

Each month, from October through March, PlayGround announces a topic to a pre-selected writers’ pool of Bay Area emerging professional playwrights, inviting the submission of original ten-page plays. The best six of these plays are presented as staged readings before a live audience on the third Monday of the month at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

LitCake Promises to Be a Sweet Event

Come one, come all, and bring your friends and family to our first annual LitCake, the unofficial morning-after LitCrawl celebration. The Berkeley branch is hosting a literary cake contest with fabulous prizes and having food-related readings by members and special guests. If you’re interested in either the contest, the reading or both, go to our website for more details. Even if you’re not a contestant or participant, it will be a fun gathering with entertainment and lots of cake to go around. This celebratory event will be from 2:00 to 4:00 and take the place of our regular meeting at the Oakland Main Library.

Marketplace

Berkeley Branch members are welcome to advertise their writing-related services. Please write “Marketplace” in the subject line and send to Anne at writefox@aol.com no later than the 15th of the month.

Charlotte Cook offers story editing, prepublishing services, and workshops for writers of fiction, creative nonfiction, and screenplays. Also available is office/retreat space for classes and meetings. storyeditor@att.net or charlotte@adaptingsideways.com.

Calling for Submissions!

Write Angles is the Berkeley branch’s newsletter, but it is also a way for members to get published. We’re always looking for book reviews, articles about the publishing industry, and humorous or serious pieces that relate in some way to writing. This fall we’re expanding our submissions to include poetry.

Editor will select pieces based on perceived interest to readership and quality of writing. Please proofread before you submit. Piece may be edited for space. If your piece is accepted, you will be notified in advance. If we receive lots of quality submissions for one month, we might save some for a future issue.

Submissions guidelines for Write Angles:
• send as an attached Word document (doc, not docx)
• must be no longer than 425 words
• submit no later than the 15th of the month
• should be in 12-point type, any easy-to-read font (can be single or double-spaced)
• write “submission” in subject line and send to writeangles@gmail.com

The Berkeley Branch meets on the third Sunday of each month (except July, August, and December) at 2:00 p.m. in the wheelchair-accessible Bradley C. Walters Community Room of the Main Library in Oakland at 125 14th Street. View Map at https://maps.google.com/maps?sa=a&source=embed&hl=en&geocode=&q=125+14th+Street+94612&ie=UTF8&output=embed&panoid=QZUy3yZ2PpI-Z5QJSw6Hg&domain=maps.google.com&ll=37.800951,-122.263881&z=13&iwloc=0&client=firefox-a&srcid=0x21:0x208480673098052576193674608455
Enter on Madison Street. Free street parking is available, and it is a short walk from the Lake Merritt BART station.
Schedule of Events

2pm - 2:30 p.m. Mingling and judging of LitCake Entries
2:30 p.m. California Writers Week presentation & LitCake prizes
2:45 p.m. The Cutting of the Cakes!
3:00 p.m. Delicious Readings by California Writers Club members, special guests, and local celebrity foodies.

To enter our LitCake Contest, bring any dessert with a literary theme. Read complete LitCake Rules here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ESO-O6xHh0vefABZ2gzZ_28U2n6jc0QzFPVG_PXxloO/edit?pli=1