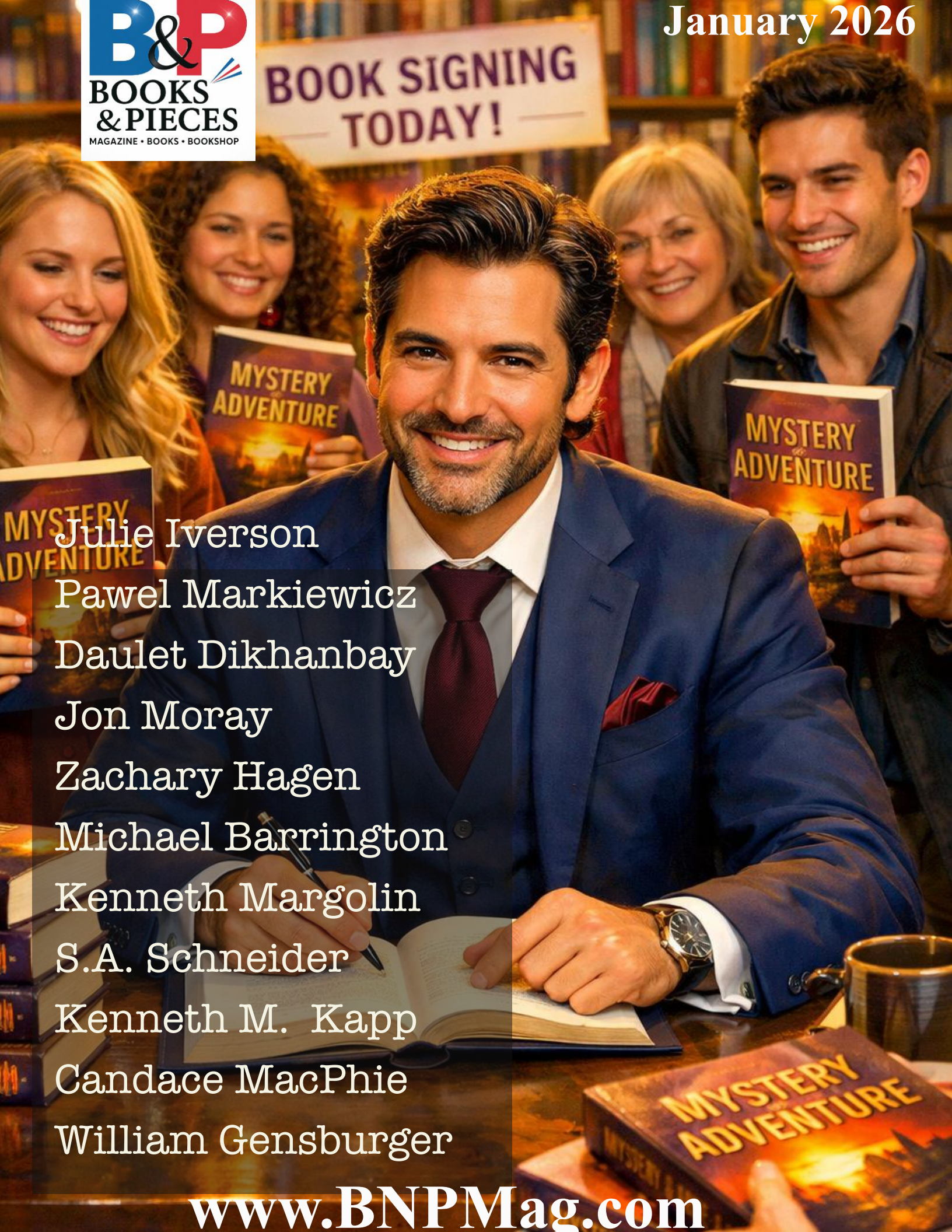


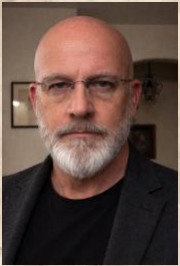
BOOK SIGNING
TODAY!



Julie Iverson
Pawel Markiewicz
Daulet Dikhanbay
Jon Moray
Zachary Hagen
Michael Barrington
Kenneth Margolin
S.A. Schneider
Kenneth M. Kapp
Candace MacPhie
William Gensburger

Happy New Year

FROM THE PUBLISHER

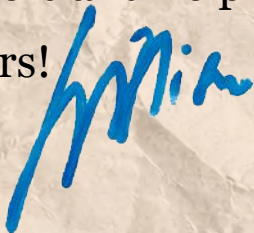


It is hard to believe that we have started a new year. Where does the time go? Last time I checked, 2025 was just starting, filled with promise and hope.

I'd like to thank you for your support of this publication. Featuring new and emerging authors, as well as interviews and articles from established authors, we hope to have made an impact bringing you fresh stories, and also featuring the best in our twice yearly anthology series: Ink Drops: Creative Writings from Global Voices.

Enjoy this issue and, please, share with your friends, family and co-workers and help us grow.

Cheers!



William Gensburger

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Before We Grewed

a story by Julie Iverson

The summer of 1941, for us, our gang of six who, were of the prepubescent ages of ten to twelve, the magical phase of innocence with strong bodies, able to run and play and dedicated to ride our bicycles for miles, predicated with purpose looking forward the vital day's end meet-up at a tree house that belonged was ours. The glorious tree was a four-hundred-year-old oak and there had been more than one big tree in the area from which to choose. On strong, thick branches sat the structure, built from flat platform, taken from discarded wooden shipping containers and a roof assembled from old umbrellas. Not much to some, but it was our palace to take turns telling each story of our day, hour or week, simple sharing. We told glorified narratives with fortified raconteur or, something easy like, spilled milk, don't cry over it. We added drama to what may have otherwise been drab. For citizens who also lived at this mundane yet extreme weather community, countenance depended upon one's own constitution, that is. We six, two girls and four boys including me, loved our home away from home. I am Jesse and I wrote in my journal every day with hope that my future kin will keep my stories alive and make a book of them. Elevation

Mitchell Nebraska is home, located at the pan handle of Nebraska, west of the plains and badlands.

Nebraska countryside of thick sod grassland was famed of stories from pioneers, "O Pioneers!" was one from the author Willa Cather. Going on about that sod was serious business with roots so thick and robust it could be cut into large bricks for building housing. They said bugs and snakes could still

honker through it, not rattlers, just common garters.

Every natural resource was needed from digging the water-well, latrine, to sturdy, wooden corral fencing.

Women spun their own knitting wool from the sheered sheep. Mother nature is a generous wonderment. The night sky of the western night lights-up with glorious. Lightning storms are existential streaks of light, sometimes the shape of a wandering river or constellations such as Leo, Cancer or Aquarius, intense and radiant in beauty. The light strikes to the sky provide awe from astonishment during the evening shows. In no way can China create fireworks the likes of a western Nebraska lightning storms. And, the thunder, way better than the tale of bowling balls in the heavens. Kaboom!

There is a simple measure of time between lightning strikes and thunder to calculate a storm coming. At each five second count, the storm is about a mile off. When seeking shelter, you do not try to hide under the cover of trees, lest you want to be struck by lightning, don't do it, friend. Makes one think that Zeus was real. Elevation

The town itself was intersected by two main

highways, north to south and east to west. 1899 was the official founder's date and there are larger communities within reach, travelers affected the comings and goings of many folks for the area, in general. 1902 marked the date for when the city incorporated. Population growth at Mitchell has always been slow and slim, about one thousand people registered on the census. Arranged in each of the four quadrants are schoolhouses for children grade one through eight to attend and graduate from. The gang of six lived close and all went to the same school. We could see one another's residences and talk with wig-wag flags, simple words such as, T-R-E-E meant go to tree house now. Houses appeared to be scattered here and there facing different directions, straight, cata-corner or catawampus but, with defined paths somehow asserted toward the main intersections. Simple dirt roads had been carved, first, by horse and buggy or wagons, mostly for supplies. Model T ford automobiles had done their share of dents on the roads, not on a muddy day, no way. We had our special paths for bicycles and old Mrs. Barber gave permission for us to escort our bikes gently through her grass lawn and through her garden gate as long as special consideration was given for her roses. Mrs. Barber also has a bird bath, and we are not to frighten her little birdies. We agreed to the arrangement. Elevation

The whole of Scottsbluff County had benefited

during the 1930's from the Civilian Conservation Core from President Roosevelt with the planting of red cedar trees, preventing erosion, gifting a breadth of beautiful color to the landscape. With their random dates of the builds, the village holds a kind congruence unto itself, creating a village. The highway roads have always been nice and wide for Mitchell. Solid brick buildings were built throughout the business district. The Methodist Church is a stand-out as a large handsome structure and home to large congregations of three hundred or more also, it has a good steeple for the bell tower. Stretching way back behind it are add-on Sunday school rooms and a large common space for coffees and socials, wedding receptions and funerals, naturally. The town contains wooden buildings, businesses all tracked together in a row, connected, each section sharing a wall. The roofs are flat and the whole strip of them have boardwalks and porch over-hangs, roofing their front walks for pedestrians, helping folks on rain or snow days. The shops consisted of the dry goods store, apothecary or druggist, butcher and town barber, naming a few. The jail structure and Sheriff, always off to the sides, and another strip holds café, bakery and a tavern. There was another big building for card players, poker is the game and there are whisky and other spirits served there, where ladies never go. There is also a cinema for the moving pictures. Many houses have indoor plumbing that is, since the

roaring twenties and a lot of them have outhouses out back and a hand pump in the kitchen. Those would have a copper bathtub in the corner of the kitchen, ready and set for someone to brew the water kettle on the stove top. Don't lose the baby in the bath water, so they said. Elevation

Mitchell, at this diary writing, 1941 was privileged to have two doctors in town, in part and thanks to the railroads for coming through and the Great Sugar Company making sweet granules from sugar beets. They make the black strap molasses, the blackest and thickest, too. The big sugar beets came to strong retention twenty years before Jesse's journal came into being, so the 1920's arrived with the strength in owner-growers for the sugar processing plant and factory. That right there was and is a beautiful combination and add up to the American dream. The beets prefer a sandy soil where they will not drown. The growers are responsible for all that, and more. The weeding is essential and bug control, too. After harvest, they have to manage the big beet piles when the beets get stacked up. Knowing that, from beginning to end, the farmer has a stake in the process giving them responsibility to see it through. It goes without saying, the sugar economy rescued many an area from the great depression from 1929 forward, even further into the twentieth century. Everyone needs some sugar, as in, put some sugar on it. The government holds sugar contracts for military

in the food. Cool drinks and candy bars traverse the world over with beet sugar in them. This story goes on and on but, looking at the terrain from olden days helps to tell the tale. Elevation

The earth was of a completely different geography millions of years ago after the defrost following the ice age. Ancient peoples crossing the straight path over from Asia chasing the hunt. The hunted mammoths did not last, and people changed as well. There are fossils in western Nebraska. The hunter gatherers remained in what we know is New Mexico and other tribes followed the animals. People still talk about the bison, the buffalo that were over-killed in Nebraska, Wyoming and the Dakotas. They come back little by little. The sandy, rocky land surrounding Mitchell Nebraska and the Scottsbluff monument are of big hills or small mountains; however, you want to say it, were just right for the indigenous travelers. Chimney Rock has always been a landmark for natives and then the foreigners driving on the Oregon trail. All this activity pretty much maintained the census of permanent people to be the opposite of over-crowded. Relocating native American Indians began in the 1830s and another legal act moved more Indian population to reservations in 1851. Legally defined portions of land are what was referred to when we say Indian reservations. Understanding the nomadic people, hunter gatherers, is to be reminded they were living



their lives more than fifteen thousand years before Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492. We gang of six discuss the injuns, with no disrespect and wonder why that had to move, such as the Oglala Sioux and Lakota. With the gold in the Black Hills up in the Dakota's, they went and had to move again! Who was it said that was all right? Elevation

The TeePee or tipi is a grand design of portable housing. From picture books anyone can see that the nomadic village of tents looked a lot like small towns, just as Mitchell used to be with the catawampus layout of houses. Back to the tents, they were constructed of up to fifteen bison skins for the large ones, and long sturdy sticks for the frame, usually pine wood. The poles were grounded first, forming a tripod, three or, four for a quad. The bison skins were stretched and pegged to fit, and holes or gaps were patched from the inside. At the peak of the tipi was a smoke hole that drew the smoke up and outward as the people inside gathered around the fire or slumbered with the fire right there in the middle. These homes were for multiple families, somehow, they all got along. They stayed warm in the worst of winters and cool in the summers, rolling up the

whole house when came time to move. Elevation
The weather in the western panhandle of Nebraska has always been a force to be reckoned with. Some said Mother Nature takes no survivors but, that in untrue as the natives proved it could be done, survival of the fittest. The most bitter of cold with winds and blowing snow was the winter of 1899 for Mitchell with -47°-Brrrr! There were animal skins, fur traders went out and about in all kinds of remote places while Indian territory had been pretty much closed to settlers until land acts were governed and the transcontinental railroads met up. There was train track for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroads. Before progress was made, Mitchell saw Fort Mitchell, named for General Robert B. Mitchell as a prominent place around 1850, strictly Indian Territory and white settlers forbidden. Fortune seekers rode through during the California gold rush of 1848. Mitchell Pass remains as a physical gap through the natural bluffs at Scottsbluff County, named Devil's pass by the pioneers following the Oregon trail. The Fort had been high up with guarded, wooden sentry tower and low from sod structures cut of earthy brick-sod, grass-dirt-blocks

were built as sleeping shelter or, shade from the scorching summer sun. None of it was meant to last long, the Fort. By 1910 the town came nicely into place with traditional wood houses, some partially red-brick and much concrete had been laid for foundations. Bungalow structures and two-story prairie style homes from the architect Frank Lloyd Wright were built to last. Jesse's diary would one day be displayed at a historical society museum house after the old days passed into modern times.

Elevation

William Frederick Cody, Buffalo Bill from Cody Wyoming, a couple-three hours north of Mitchell depending on how fast you go. As a child, he was Willie and known to have lived with parents and siblings at a number of places where, Colorado provided for his fearlessness and outdoorsmanship. Both the railroad and Army used his scouting talent and gave him the name Buffalo Bill. Following a grandiose assignment as guide to a Grand Duke from Russia on hunt, William Cody developed his show, a great arena show, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, known to America and Europe. He was the most famous bison hunter and showman from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The show included Annie Oakley, markswoman who had also trained military troops in shooting. There was an opera singer in the show and many authentic, native tribes, re-enactors and former soldiers, trick riders and ghost dancers.

Elevation

In 1894, the Wild West show traveling in Brooklyn, New York was filmed by Mr. Thomas Edison with a moving camera, a kinetograph, made moving pictures of the ghost dancing Indians, for real. The natives were filmed by Edison at Orange, New Jersey. The ghost dancers were adorned in their usual costumes, the attire worn at Buffalo Bill's arena show meaning; bare chest, adorned feathered head piece and leather apron style indigenous britches called a loin cloth. The gang of six agreed to say britches when talking about Indian garments so as not to sound like some sort of meat cover. To the viewer, the black and white flicker of filming revealed nearly naked dancers, bare chest, arms and thighs in fullness as the ghost dancer stance was somewhat hunched at the torso while lifting the knees and upper legs. Their skin, even in black and white picture was of a unique tanned color. Historically, redskin description was spoken by the tribes to delineate away from white man or African. Red skin also defined scalping. In later times, redskin meant a derogative nature. Wild Westing had reawakened an interest in what most easterners viewed as the vanishing Indian race. Unfortunately, the white man's peculiarity for the new spiritualism, parlor room antics to arise communication with the dead, mistook the ancient ghost dance as a form of something dangerous that may be better explained by

anthropologists who, recognize in authenticity, the ghost dance for ritual was for the camaraderie of tribal members only. Did they see their ancestors? Maybe. Did they conjure rain for crops? Probably not. The Indian conflict and hardships on the reservation back in the day, made them labeled as lazy by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The ghost dance was deemed illegal. Elevation

During the winter of 1941 at an upper-class Frank Lloyd Wright home in Mitchell Nebraska, an eleven-year-old boy named Jesse, the diary writer and overseer of the neighborhood grand tree house, was given a command by his twenty-five-year-old step-sister;

“Tonight, little brother, you will begin to learn the game of chess.”

The chess board has squares for each military unit, black and white. There are sixteen troops for each color adding up the royalty, bishops, knights, rooks and eight pawns. Each piece has rules, just like the army and the King and Queen are allowed to capture.

The board is a bloodless battlefield. White always moves first and on this night, the night of Mary’s challenge. Jesse moved his first pawn. Jesse and Mary engaged, “Let’s move warriors and learn the how and why after.” They began:

White pawn C3, black pawn D5, white pawn E3, black pawn F6, white pawn D3, black pawn D5.

8

“Goodnight, little brother, we will go again tomorrow.”

In reply, “Goodnight, Mary.” Elevation.



Julie Iverson wrote educational courses when working as an ophthalmic technician.

Retiring to the Land of Enchantment, New Mexico gave cause for more writing. Books & Pieces magazine, Cosmic Quest Anthology, Book of Matches and Quasar Review are magazines that have published Julie's stories.

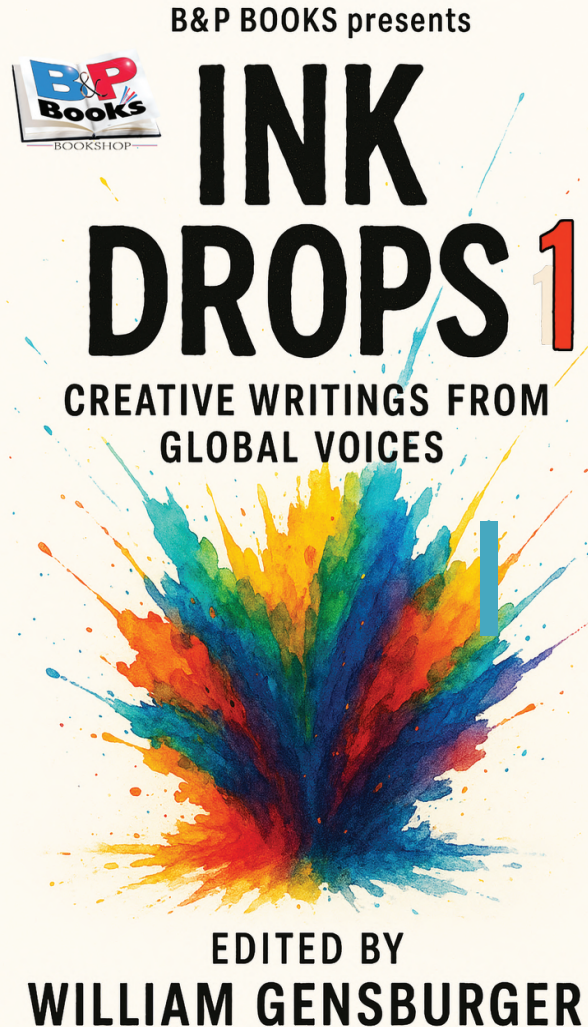
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She-pirate and the Tavern

A poem by Pawel Markiewicz

It's a late and warm autumn.

**The wind gathered leaves up on the roof
of the marvelous tavern.**

The seagulls heralded a memory – an initiation.

**The old pensioner-captain drank the intoxicant,
like the ambrosia of the life.**

**The female pirate Mary mentioned
her own stories – the primeval myth:**

Icarus desired a dazzle of stars.

Daedalus wanted to become forever lost.

The flight was an absolute rapture.

**Icarus! Be with me
as a ghost in the tavern of
the shine, the glory and the rebuke!**

Don't mourn the dreamy Daedalus!

**His body was abducted by mermaids
of the sea and mysterious depths.**

**Icarus! Survive this night,
when the Morningstar has to precede
the fall of shooting stars,
here and there!**

Drunk on the emotions, full of eudemonia,

**perhaps a tender melancholy,
the woman pirate remembers the storm**

of the century:

The ship! Don't rock again!

**You were close to me
and so romantic.
May the starlit, starry,
moonlit, moony melancholy
of night embrace hearts
of guests of this missing
tavern!
Forever and for eternity,
the pirates will find
their destiny,
in harbours of hope, harbors full of
taverns,
which are decorated with flowers.
The woman pirate is crying
because of the parting
with the beloved parrot
in times of fulfillment of
the enchantment-bewitchment.
Her tear is not man-like,
It has the color of the gold,
such the sun during the storm.
Mary longs for the pearl's seeking,
in the sea full of memoirs of Daedalus,
of the hero of amusing and musing tenderness.
The sempiternity will be true.**



Paweł Markiewicz was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems.

Heatwave

A story by Daulet Dikhanbay

Sometimes the universe speaks in numbers.

Sometimes it speaks in heat.

That afternoon, it spoke in both — and demanded witness.

The sun slid low — deliberate — plating the city in molten bronze.

Edges softened; colors steepened.

The heat wasn't just heat.

It ripened into presence — warm, tactile — clinging to skin like gauze, like a dream refusing to fade.

Zhaniya moved unhurried, as though wading amber.

Suspended. Held.

Not evening — not yet.

Daylight insisted.

She passed windows and strangers blurred like mirages.

The asphalt sweated.

Heat-waves braided the air, warping buildings — like memories arriving too late.

Then she felt it — a thirst.

Not of the mouth.

A wanting not for water alone, but for something the body remembers after language forgets.

A roadside shop leaned into shade, promising cold, still artesian water — the kind that doesn't just touch the tongue but rinses the quiet ache beneath it.

She stepped inside.

A shiver.

The air was charged — a storm waiting for permission.

Voices clashed ahead — sharp, ragged.

Not an argument.

A cry flung at a world going deaf.

She moved toward the sound.

“Call the police — now! I'll call them too!”

“Go ahead!”

“Yes — call! Thieves, cheating honest people out of every last coin!”

“You're holding everyone up!”

“You — robbing us blind! No shame at all!”

The noise swelled like a breaking wave, ricocheting off jars and tins.

Even the walls seemed to stiffen.

Two women stood at the center.

The cashier — young; stubborn chin; a fire-red bandana.

A small tattoo curled at her neck
— half-symbol, half-warning.

Opposite — an elderly woman,
maybe seventy. Her face carried more
seasons than years.

Behind enormous magnified
lenses — the kind children once used to
burn leaves — her eyes seethed with
righteous heat.

Behind them — a line.

Eight people, maybe more.

Shuffling. Sighing.

Phones glowing in their hands
like tiny, indifferent suns.

Everyone watched. No one
intervened.

The shop had become a small
theater; silence held the tickets.

On the counter, the groceries
rested in solemn precision.

Every bag weighed exactly 987
grams: peas, lentils, buckwheat, rice,
pearl barley — and one lone loaf of rye.

Bright packaging screamed —
poverty wearing a mask that never fit.

“The label says 233 — you’re
charging 377!”

Her voice trembled — not from
fear, but from outrage caged for too
long, like thunder locked behind
shutters.

“I’ve explained this a hundred
times,” the cashier replied — cold,

crystalline.

“Prices change daily. We can’t
update that fast. They sprout like weeds
after rain.”

“Where’s your manager?”

“If I hadn’t checked, you’d pocket
the difference!”

“The senior manager isn’t
available.”

The words snapped like thread.

“This isn’t the first time! Last
week — sugar. Now — peas. You think
we don’t see? Don’t mistake silence for
submission — or kindness for
weakness.”

A voice from the line:

“Come on — some of us have
lives.”

“If you have a complaint,” the
cashier exhaled, pointing toward a
faded QR code, “leave a review.”

“I did.”

A bitter laugh.

“Got an email — ‘Thank you for
your feedback...’

Smoke.

Nothing but smoke.”

Murmurs sharpened.

The air tightened — violin strings
near breaking.

This wasn’t about a mislabeled
price.

It was about fairness.

Dignity.

Being seen in a world shrinking its gaze.

Something tugged inside Zhaniya — memory slipping through the cracks:

Her grandmother counting money twice, then a third time.

Refusing to turn on the fan in August heat to spare the meter — palm-leaf fanning, breath steady.

That summer tasted like warm water and patience — flowers growing in the chest; grief deeper still.

The body remembers.

The cashier paged a manager who would not come.

Her hands hovered above the keys; her gaze evaporated into the blank screen.

The old woman clutched her wallet — a lifeline.

Enough.

Zhaniya stepped forward.

“Forgive me,” she said softly. “I worked in telecom for years. Maybe I can help.”

The cashier looked up — tired, non-expecting.

But the old woman’s eyes flickered — hope, small but stubborn, struggling to keep its flame.

“Before I try,” Zhaniya continued, gentle, “may I ask one thing?”

The line went still.

Even the refrigerator hum drew

inward.

“Allow me to pay for your groceries.”

No flourish.

Just warmth — oxygen in a room starved of it.

“You... mean it?” the old woman whispered.

The cashier’s voice softened:

“Payment method? Cash? Card?”

“QR.”

Tap.

Soft ping.

Done.

A tiny victory against a tired world.

Zhaniya packed the groceries herself — careful, tender — as if to say:

You matter.

Even here.

Even now.

“You know,” she said lightly, “you could install small digital shelf displays. Prices update automatically. Less chaos. Fewer fights.”

The printer sighed.

The receipt slid out like a weary tongue.

“Sorry for the trouble,” the cashier murmured.

“Have a good day.”

They were nearly out when the cashier called — fierce again:

“For your information — prices rise because of inflationary pressure from global markets! Trends, restrictions,

fertilizer shortages — and yes, sanctions!”

Zhaniya froze — not offended, but impressed.

“And don’t think you’re the smartest one in the room,” the cashier added, turning away.

A ripple of laughter passed through the store — surprised, harmlessly human.

Somewhere, a child counted:

one, one, two, three, five...

until his mother hushed him.

Zhaniya nodded — not in defeat, but in recognition.

Outside, the old woman paused.

Her eyes warm.

She thanked Zhaniya — not with spectacle, but with the kind of sincerity that shakes the ribs.

Then she embraced her, whispered a blessing, and dissolved into the amber crowd.

Two lives parted like ripples after a passing hand — quiet, tender, inevitable.

Above them, autumn light spilled mellow gold.

It touched not only skin, but thought — those silent travelers walking beside us, whispering truths too soft to catch.

Her thirst eased — not for water alone, but for proof that the world could still choose mercy.

Later, holding the receipt, she noticed the numbers again:

233 → 377 → 610

Fibonacci, unfolding.

As if the universe still whispered in patterns — until someone interrupted the sequence in the only direction that matters:

toward care.



Daulet is a writer of short fiction and reflective prose, originally from Kazakhstan and now working primarily in English.

His stories blend tactile everyday detail with quiet threads of magical realism, exploring solitude, resilience, and the hidden lives of ordinary people.

The Lap of the Honest One

a story by Jon Moray

"Are you sure this scavenger hunt is worth it?" Hal asked of his best friend Bill.

"She's the one. I knew the first day I met her at the Pre-Law conference two months ago. We've been communicating online ever since, and now she has presented a test to prove my love," Bill proclaimed, with dreamy eyes.

"On the lap of the honest one, you will find a note. Retrieve it, and you'll get my vote," Bill read the clue aloud.

Hal's face wrinkled in thought. "Didn't you say her dad was a political figure in Washington D.C.?"

Bill grunted his assent. "She also knows I am an avid rock climber," Bill added. The two exchanged beaming smiles, confident they have ascertained the location of the note.

"Well, my friend, It looks like we are taking a road trip," Hal cheered, all too eager to be a party to this amorous riddle.

The two scavenger hunters drove all day and night from Orange County, Florida en route to the Nation's Capitol, with the plan to arrive before twilight to avoid the detection of climbing a national landmark.

They parked near the structure and mimicked joggers, encroaching on the memorial. They entered through tall, fluted Doric columns and eyed the seated marble statue. Low black post and chain links served as a barrier.

"Remember to keep your voice low so as not to attract attention," Bill whispered to Hal as he stepped towards his climbing challenge.

Bill drew deep breaths, with perspiration beading his forehead as he stepped over the barrier. The statue loomed larger with each step forward as its shadow engulfed him. The marble pedestal was ten feet tall with a lower base that he used as leverage to reach the top. Two small steps at the top of the pedestal had Bill staring up eye to eye with the bearded leader flanked by the slain president's legs. He leapfrogged up between the legs when he saw an envelope resting on the lap near the right hip. Bill crawled over toward the object and straddled himself on the right leg as he reached for the envelope.

An officer arrived and called up to Bill, but he was numb to anything audible as he slowly took the note out of the envelope. He wiped the sweat from his brow and squinted his eyes to peruse the note in the low lit area.

It read: Dear Bill, you have won my heart with this loving gesture that

proves you would do anything for me. Your honest nature attracted me to you. Now, for the really hard part. I have set up a lunch date with you and my congressman dad to meet and get to know each other. He will be most impressed by your courageous feat, especially since it was achieved at the memorial honoring his favorite president. Tell the officer, "Honesty is the best policy," and you will not be detained. I love you, Jane.



Jon Moray has been writing short stories for over a decade and his work has appeared in many online and print markets. When not working and being a devoted family man, he enjoys sports, music, the ocean, and SCI-FI/Fantasy media. Read more of his work at moraywrites.com.

A vibrant, colorful graphic advertisement for 'Books & Pieces'. The top section features the word 'WRITERS!' in large, bold, yellow letters with a blue outline, set against a background of a blue sky with stars and a quill pen. Below this is a red banner with the text 'Books & Pieces offers 3 ways to gain exposure!'. The middle section is divided into three panels: 'Books & Pieces MAGAZINE' showing a stack of magazines, 'B&P BOOKS' showing a stack of books with an open book on top, and 'The B&P BOOKSHOP' showing a storefront with a striped awning and an 'OPEN' sign. The bottom section features a large, glowing open book with a quill pen and a scroll, set against a background of a starry night sky. A red banner at the bottom reads 'OPEN FOR SUBMISSIONS!' and the website 'www.BNPMag.com' is displayed in yellow text.

Five Things I've Learned from Writing a Fantasy Series

by Zachary Hagen

There are a host of things I could write about when describing the process of writing a book or any other large project, but writing in the fantasy genre is a unique experience that has particular lessons to teach. In writing *Eternal Chronicles* I learned valuable lessons through my writing, research, and editing that have shaped my success and growth as a writer. I'm exceedingly proud of the work I've done, so I offer these five lessons that helped me write my own books.

Worlds Require Creation

Each world created for a fantasy novel requires careful crafting and thorough thought. If world-building is sub-par, the story will make less sense since a firm foundation and presence of place is required for the reader to understand what's going on. To young, or aspiring writers, look to Tolkien, Paolini, and filmmakers behind works such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and the blue people *Avatar*. The mastery of world is present in these works. World-building is fun and tedious and is the foundational work of a good fantasy series.

Characters Need to be Real

In order for characters to be compelling, you have to know them well. My cast for *Eternal Chronicles* is real to me. I know them intimately and thoroughly, so writing their stories was easier than if I hadn't taken the time to fully flesh out who these people were and how they would act in the various circumstances they found themselves in.

Villains Should be Evil

Too often modern writers want to write morally gray villains that have capacity for sympathy, but these villains don't drive the fear that a world-ending psychopath needs to. Especially for a fantasy series where the dregs of human imagination can be brought forth, let villains be evil again. Sometimes there is no excuse, and readers deserve to see that evil just exists for its own pleasure sometimes.

Have a Message

Fantasy is uniquely able to tell stories that no one else can tell. You can explore themes and values and ideals that can't be explored in genres that are too familiar to the reader. The fantastic and the strange create a backdrop against which the writer can speak to deeper truths and ideals that transcend time and the momentary opinion of the masses. There are real truths, and we, as artists painting the tapestry of culture with words and stories, should portray truths that extend beyond. Write to entertain and to edify. Write for a dual purpose to be read and to speak to the human soul.

Let Magic Grow

The most unique part of the fantasy genre is the magic system in each new world. Magic has to have

space to breathe, to grow, to be alive. Don't treat it as an afterthought in your fantasy writing. It is the substantive essence that elevates fantasy to new heights mere fiction cannot reach. As you build your magic system, let it fit the place, the characters, and the purpose for your writing. Allow it to grow with you and your characters as you write.

There are many more things that could be said about writing fantasy, but these five things are a great place to start for any aspiring fantasy novelist. Best of luck, and may your pen's plume give wing to grand ideas and adventures that will inspire generations to come.



Zachary Hagen is a Minnesota based fantasy author and editor. He lives there with his wife, Claudia, and their dog, Flynn. When he isn't busy writing his next book or working with an editing client, you can often find him walking around his neighborhood or hiking.

From a young age he was enthralled with the world of story. From the stories his parents read to him from his blue bedtime story books (if you know, you know) to the first two series that he read, The Chronicles of Narnia and A Series of Unfortunate Events, Zachary's tastes continued to develop throughout his years of reading.

The influences for his first series, The Eternal Chronicles, include Christopher Paolini, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and others.

<https://zacharyhagenwrites.com>

I'll Be Seeing You

A story by Michael Barrington

As if in response to his whistle and the waving of his green flag, the locomotive heaved itself back into life. With a blast of steam, its giant wheels suddenly spun, stopped, then grabbed the iron rails and began clawing its way out of the station. Roderick Halford had done it a thousand times, always with the same result. After taking out his pocket watch, he smiled; 7:16 AM.

But this morning his routine changed. After kissing his sleeping and sick wife goodbye, he'd stood at the bedroom door wondering, would this be the last time? How much longer would he have her? Thoughts, emotional pictures of their life together, filled his mind like a kaleidoscope, changing and becoming even more beautiful and surprising by the minute.

As he stood on the platform in his usual spot, three carriages from the caboose, a youngish-looking woman seated against a window momentarily caught his eye. It was a glance. It was returned. She was not a regular. He'd never seen her before. Or so he thought!

One week later, at exactly the same time, on the same train, seated in the same place, he saw her again. She looked at him. For a split second, their eyes locked. Did she smile, or did he imagine it? In any event, it was unsettling. For a man of strict routines, anything out of the ordinary disturbed him.

He couldn't erase her image from his mind. She failed to appear the following week, but did the week after. This time, there was no doubt. A smile of recognition. He nodded back, noting her shoulder-length chestnut, wavy hair, but couldn't make out the color of her eyes. He didn't need to see them. After all their years together, he already knew they were amber. She smiled at him again and raised her white-gloved hand. After blowing his whistle and waving his green flag at the engineer, he took a last look into her carriage again, but she was gone.



“How are you today, my love?” he asked, kissing her gently. Her once wavy chestnut hair, was now reduced to several tiny gray tufts poking out from under her bandana. “You were sleeping soundly when I left this morning.”

“The nurse let herself in and stayed until the caregiver arrived. You must have passed her as you walked up the street. I’ve had a so-so day. I’m so tired I can’t even watch TV. But I’m OK. How about you?”

“Nothing to report. Just the same old same old stuff. But let me get the tea.” After putting water in the kettle, he hung up his cap and uniform jacket and returned as it whistled. He carefully poured the boiling water over the bag of her favorite tea, with the precision and care of a surgeon. Then, he

looked at the wall clock, and checked his pocket watch—five minutes steeping exactly. After helping her sit up, he set down the tray on the bed; small salmon sandwiches cut into triangles, fresh scones, and strawberry jam. He selected one of each for her, offering them on a small plate. Then, the tea, poured carefully into her special china cup. One cube of sugar with just a teaspoon of milk. This was how she liked it.

They’d met while in the military. He was an airman first class; she was a nurse at RAF Biggin Hill, outside of London. It was love at first sight. A shy and reserved man, he summoned up courage and proposed to her the night they heard Vera Lynn singing at the Jackpot Night Club in Leicester Square. They’d married soon afterwards.

“Let me put the music on for you, my love. I know it takes your mind off the pain.” In the sitting room, he opened the gramophone, pulled out a 45-rpm. recording and placed it on the turntable. It was *their* song.

*“I’ll be seeing you
In all the old familiar places...”*

His heart was breaking, but he was determined she would never know his true feelings. His utter grief at seeing her slowly fading away, his deep sadness knowing that one day she would no longer be there to support—cajole—love him. She would never know that every moment he was away from her, was an agony. He longed to be with her. He was so happy when the 7:16 AM arrived and he could briefly see her. But when it left the station, it left him desolate, searching.

She’d been a nurse at Dulwich Infirmary. He’d secured an office job at the railway. He could type. A steady job, it eventually enabled them to buy a small house, but it was also boring work. She urged him to apply for training as a stationmaster. All available openings were far from London, but they didn’t wish to relocate. He opted for an assistant position, the one he had held for the past twenty-two years.

She was madly in love with him

despite his procrastination, lack of ambition, and his sometimes lack of awareness. But in all their twenty-eight years of marriage, he never missed giving a card and a gift for her birthday, or their wedding anniversary, and he spoiled her at Christmas. He still surprised her by leaving love notes in the refrigerator and under her pillow. They had tried for years, but never had any children.

Mega doses of chemotherapy had done little to extend their time together but seemed rather to further punish her already ravaged body. She refused hospital care. She wanted to die at home. It was at her insistence that he continued to work. “We’ve said our goodbyes. I don’t want you here each day, all day, watching me wither away. Just be here at the end and hold my hand.”

They’d built up a volume of wonderful memories together; it was that she would take with her.

As the train finally stopped, there was the recognition, the smile, the wave. He noticed she looked different this morning, and Roderick realized it was her coat. It was red. His favorite color.

Later, sitting down for a quiet cup of tea, alone in the lunchroom, he pulled out his wallet and stared at her picture. Her face looked lovingly back at him. He loved seeing

her in red, like the day they first kissed. She had taught him everything about sex, about love. She was as extrovert, and he was shy. What if they had met when they were in high school?

His classmates called him The Brick because of his red hair and because he wore thick spectacles. They misread his quiet reserve, shyness, and lack of interest in sports as being stupid. But almost every week, the teacher called on him to read his essay, a short story, to the class. It only served to isolate him further. Except from her.

“I think you write the coolest stuff. Will you read something to me?” And so it began. A relationship he could never have dreamed about. The most outgoing, the most beautiful girl in the class, the one all the boys fought over. With long chestnut, wavy hair, and a classy dresser, she also came from a wealthy family. Her mother’s people owned several hotels; her father was a lieutenant colonel in the army. Behind the bookcases at the far end of the library, she gave him his first kiss.

“Let’s skip class tomorrow. I can get my mother’s car. You’ll just love it. Wait until you see it.”

“But that’s crazy. What if somebody finds out?”

“Are you telling me no?”

“No, no. I’ll do it. Just tell me what to do. Where can we meet?”

She looked gorgeous in her red coat, red heels, red purse, and a white-red polka dot scarf. A whirlwind of a day took them to Brighton Beach. Playing slot machines in the arcade, eating ice cream and making out on the back seat of the car. He’d never been in a sports car before. Never been with anyone who had so much money. His parents could barely afford his school uniform. It frightened him when, on the way home, she reached over and put her hand over his crotch. He squirmed in the seat. His physical reaction scared him. He’d never had a girlfriend. It was almost too much.

“I didn’t tell you, but my parents are away for two days. Let’s go home and I’ll make dinner.”

“Are you sure that’s OK? I mean...”

“You mean what, Rodrick? You don’t enjoy being with me? Or are you afraid of staying out late? Don’t tell me you can’t come up with a good excuse for your parents. Are you still a little boy and have to account for every minute of your life?”

“No, it’s not like that. It’s fine. It’s fine.”

Dinner comprised warming two TV dinners and sharing a quart of Häagen-Dazs.

“You’ve got to try this,” she said, opening a bottle of red wine. “My mother loves it, so it must be good.”

After two glasses, he felt a little strange. He’d never tasted wine before.

“Come and see my room.”

Already struggling physically each time she touched him, he gasped when she suddenly slipped out of her dress and stood before him in her bra and panties. “Come on Roderick, let’s get naked. Let’s have some fun.”

Perspiration ran into his eyes; his glasses fogged up. He was terrified.

“I can’t do this,” he cried in a panic. “I can’t do this; I must go.” And grabbing his blazer, he ran out of the house.

I’ll be seeing you

On every lovely summer day...

The rain came down in torrents as the 7:16 AM arrived. It had been like that since the start of his shift. He sheltered under the platform canopy until the train stopped, and only then went to his spot and waited for the passengers to board. Condensation covered the window on the inside, and rain spattered it on the outside. She wiped it with a tissue. He could barely make out her distorted face. Had she cut her chestnut hair, and what color was her coat? Red, he hoped. Did she wave?

Was there any hand motion at all? Or was he simply daydreaming again? She alone understood him. She alone knew how sensitive he was. It was only with her he felt totally accepted, bag and baggage!

As he looked at her face—thinner now but still hers—he felt the tide of memories rising like a storm neither welcomed nor resisted. He recalled how she would sometimes walk ahead of him, not out of impatience, but as if she were clearing the path, making sure it was safe. He had always followed her—into marriage, into laughter, into the ordinary miracles of their days. She had been the one with courage, who mended quarrels, read instructions, and held their life together with decisive hands. She was the stronger one in the couple. He was terrified of losing her.

He usually timed it perfectly so he would rarely have to wait, and with a bit of luck he would find his favorite seat, upstairs at the back. And tonight as the number ninety-seven bus lurched and splashed its way through the pouring rain, he could see nothing through the closed, condensation-covered windows. With smoking only allowed upstairs, the air thick like a blue fog made his eyes water. Still, there was time for a thirty-minute doze; it had been a long day. And all he could think of was her. But why did the word sister suddenly pop into his

mind? Yes, he admitted with just a brief reflection, she also had filled that role.

“Roddy, it’s all right. I’ll explain things to Mum.” He loved it when she used that name. Only she called him Roddy. He trembled at the thought of what might happen. At how angry Mum might be. He knew the lecture that would follow. It wasn’t just the cost of replacing it that bothered him, although that would be made perfectly clear and result in his weekly pocket money being reduced; he knew there would be a violent verbal tirade.

“You clumsy oaf.” She shrieked. “What will you break next? You are worthless. Wait until your father comes home. I’ll let him deal with you.”

It wasn’t as if it were the best china, that was safely sitting on a shelf in the display cabinet. And the Lord alone knows what would have happened if he had broken one of those. It was her favorite teapot even though it was chipped, and the cover cracked.

His sister, nine years older than him, was his protector. There were nights when he cried himself to sleep and other nights when he just lay awake sobbing. All he wanted to experience was loving arms around him, to feel secure. It was she who tiptoed to his bed, whispered comforting words and reassured him things would be all right. She understood

him better than anybody else. She knew his fears and how insecure he felt.

Tonight, she would calm things down. She looked lovely with her chestnut shoulder-length hair; her face made up, and wearing her new red coat. He’d been with her when Mum bought it three weeks ago. Dad really loved her and was putty in her hands. And even Mum now seemed a little in awe of her, ever since she had graduated college and worked as a nurse at St John’s Hospital. But tonight she had a date.

“I’ll be seeing you

In all the old familiar places...

The nurse was waiting for him when he arrived home. She shouldn’t have been there. He knew before she spoke the news would not be good. “She may not last the night.”

Sticking to his routine, he went into the bedroom. Her eyes opened, and he gently kissed her on the lips and then on her forehead. After putting the kettle on the stove, he hung up his uniform and prepared her tray. She smiled weakly. She didn’t want her tea or her scone.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I love you more than life itself. I love you for all the love you have given me,” and gently squeezed his fingers. As her eyes closed, he continued holding her hand, watching her slow rhythmic breathing, the bed covers

barely moving.

“You have been my life. My everything.” he whispered in a choking voice. “You are the one. You alone rescued me from myself. You made me who I am. Although I desperately wanted one, I never had a girlfriend. I did not know how to respond to a woman. The only woman I really knew was my mother. You were the sister I never had; I was a single child. You gave me my first kiss. I was a naïve twenty-year-old. I was a virgin when we met. You taught me how to love.”

Her eyes half opened as if in response and were looking directly at him. She mouthed, “I love you, darling. You will manage without me.” Then they closed.

Throughout the night, still holding her hand, in his aloneness, he quietly wept and watched as the breath left her body. His silent

tears flowed hour after painful hour, soaking his shirt, his pants, and the bedcover. They flowed until, like a dried-up well, there were no more. Only sorrow, sadness, and emptiness.

His built-in alarm clock told him it was time for work, and instinctively he checked his pocket watch.

“I’m not leaving you,” he whispered. “I know you’ll not be on the train. I’m going to play our song, and I’ll turn up the volume so you can hear it better.”

I'll find you in the morning sun
And when the night is new
I'll be looking at the moon
But I'll be seeing you

Today he would break his routine.



Michael Barrington, an award-winning English author, has produced 13 books, mainly historical and literary fiction, and published more than 60 short stories in the USA and UK.

Take a Priest Like You is a memoir. His most recent novel, No Distance Between Us, is set in colonial Africa. He blogs on his website, www.mbwriter.net.

Cold Caller

a story by Kenneth N. Margolin



The calls started coming one after the other as soon as William turned seventy. Befitting his generation, he had kept his landline. They always addressed him by his first name, "Bill," as if they were old friends. The callers seemed inordinately concerned about his satisfaction with his Medicare. For awhile, he left his phone off the hook, resentful that he should be forced into a landline bomb shelter. At last, William thought to use the robo calls to assuage the bone weary loneliness he felt since his wife, Julia, died five years ago. He tried engaging the callers in conversation - "how is your day going? do you enjoy your work? married? children?" They spoke over him, reading their scripts robotically without pause, as if he did not exist. To them, he did not exist, just another mark in their dreary work days. He decided to cancel his landline when the name, "Carol," appeared on the caller ID screen. The name evoked a vague tug of emotions from long ago that William could not quite place.

He picked up.

"William?" the voice said. "It's Carol Leyton. We were in Mrs. Preston's second grade class together decades ago. I hope you remember me."

Now, the memories came. Tolestone Elementary School. They sat at square brown wooden desks that attached to a metal stand bolted to the floor, with scraped and gouged tops that opened to a well deep enough for pencils, a notebook, and lunches. The students ate lunch at their desks, the smell of peanut butter and the warmish, vaguely sour milk they were given, permeating the classroom. Carol sat to his right. She was small and sturdy with short brown hair and dark eyes. The moment William saw her, he felt his first love. During lunch, he would glance at her with a shy smile and look away. Carol would look at him straight on and giggle before returning to her lunch. Their romance continued this way all through the school year. They never spoke a word to each other, but their classmates knew they were boyfriend and girlfriend.

William reminded Carol of their young love. "Do you remember?" he said.

"Of course I remember," she said. "I've been widowed for ten years. I don't know what made me think of you. I looked you up online and found your phone number and saw that your wife died awhile ago. I told myself that maybe William is as lonely as I, and decided to call you after all these decades."

They talked for an hour as easily as if they had been friends for the last sixty-two years. Carol was smart and funny, something of a philosopher.

"I wonder often," she said, "about how we humans learn to damage others in such an infinite variety of ways. I've studied it and am writing a book on the subject."

William was impressed. "Have you chosen a title?" he asked.

"Hard Wired to Hurt," she said.

At the end of the call, they agreed to speak regularly. As William and Susan's calls settled into a twice per week routine, he found his thoughts dancing between memories of Julia and excitement over what Carol might bring into his life. More and more, thoughts of Carol took over. After two months, he built up the nerve to tell her that he wanted to fly from his home in Massachusetts to visit her on the west coast when on their next call, Carol was uncharacteristically somber.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

Carol said that she was deeply ashamed, but felt that they had become close and that she trusted him.

"I've had some bad luck," she said. "My husband left me little when he died, and I've had some health issues." Long pause. "I've fallen behind on my mortgage and wonder if you could loan me \$500 to tide me over. I can send you my wire transfer information. I will pay you back. I always pay my debts."

"Of course," William said, "for old times and a new old friend."

Their calls continued as before. William set out one afternoon for his brisk daily walk. He fantasized a life with Carol, and felt a pang of guilt with the realization that in the last years of

his marriage before Julia died, his life had grown stale. Thanks to Carol, he was renewed. As soon as he got home and out of the shower, he called Carol sponaneously. They spoke easily as always until after a half hour, Carol sounded sheepish once more.

"I will never forget your generosity last month," she said. Do you think you might loan me a couple of thousand dollars more, just to tide me over? You know I'm good for it."

William may have been falling in love, but he was no fool and was not blind. He was being scammed, and whoever this woman who he'd fallen for over the phone was, it was not his second grade puppy love, Carol. How, he asked himself, could she know that he and Carol Leyton were in the same second grade class? He posted nothing of himself on social media, and hadn't even thought of Carol Leyton until the scammer called. He found the answer in the Internet Archive online, where reside tens of thousands of old school yearbooks, photographed and posted for all eternity. Tolestone was the rare elementary school that put out an annual yearbook, and there on pages 121 to 125, was Mrs. Preston's second grade class, and on page 123, his and Carol Leyton's pictures. As he recalled Carol's and his conversations, he realized that she had volunteered nothing of Toleston Elementary School, other than that they were in Mrs. Preston's class together. He provided the details, and Carol, as he still thought of her, said she remembered them all. A test was in order. He had to be sure.

"Do you remember," he said during their next call, "Mr. Gary, who substituted for three weeks when Mrs.

Preston was out sick? He was fat and had a slight stutter, and the kids thought his name was a hoot because Gary was supposed to be a first name. I'm afraid the boys especially were merciless."

"How could I forget?" Carol said. "I did feel badly for him."

There was his proof. Mr. Gary, their substitute second grade teacher existed only in William's own mind. Carol was a fraud. As he contemplated confronting Carol, tears welled in his eyes, and spilled onto his cheeks. The thought of returning to the emptiness he struggled with before she called, was unbearable. Over time, hadn't her tone changed - from the beguiling grifter to someone who genuinely cared? She had developed feelings for him as he had for her. He was sure of it and was determined to meet her. If he was to overcome the anonymity she needed to pursue her craft, he would need to outgrift the grifter.

He called Carol and told her it was time for them to meet. Before she could make an excuse not to, he said that he was a man of considerable financial means, that he did not want her to have to ask for help multiple times, that he would bring her a gift of \$50,000 cash. She sounded genuinely moved by his offer.

"That is so generous, William," she said. "Let's finally meet in person."

On the flight to the west coast, he fantasized a future with Carol, and wondered what her real name was. Would it be love at first sight or a slow burning courtship? Would she move to Massachusetts or he to California? He dreamed of the return of physical intimacy that he so missed since

Julia's death. After the plane landed, he checked into the hotel room he had reserved, and showered and freshened up before meeting Carol at her home, where he arrived at the agreed upon time.

As soon as William was inside her front door, Carol greeted him with a hug. She put her hands on his chest and with her arms extended looked him over.

"I see the boy in the man," she said.

She was perhaps ten years younger than he had imagined, a medium height athletic build, and dyed black hair with streaks of natural gray showing through. Her face held a hardness that unsettled William, until she hugged him again.

"You're not Carol," he said. "I knew that for certain before I flew out to meet you.

I considered ghosting you, but our conversations have become very dear to me. I don't want to lose the relationship we have developed from afar. Tell me your real name."

William guessed that she was calculating whether or not she could persuade him that he was mistaken. From her raised eyebrows and half smile, he could tell that she knew the game was over.

"How did you guess?" she asked.

"Mr. Gary, the substitute teacher we reminisced about, never existed. I made him up to test you when I suspected you were not Carol."

"You entrapped me," she said.

William nodded, and she hugged him

again. Was she managing him, he wondered? Probably, but he went along. She told him that her real name was Jennifer Riley and that she had fallen for him during their many telephone conversations.

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

When William told her the Hyatt just off the highway, she said, "we'll see about that."

"I've been thinking about how we should get comfortable with each other in person," she said, "and I thought a local art museum, then a picnic at a pretty park nearby would be perfect. The weather is ideal."

At the museum, Jennifer, formerly "Carol," regaled William with the nuances of each painting they studied. William focused more on her than on what she was saying. She became ever more attractive to him as her intelligence became obvious. During their picnic, William's first in a very long time, he learned more of her life. She'd mostly been a stay at home mother until her daughter, emotionally troubled, left home, and developed a drug addiction. They were estranged, she told him. Her husband, who died of a sudden heart attack, had been Director of a small non-profit that consulted to food pantries around the state. He was grossly underpaid, she said, and resisted her urging to take his talents into the private sector. They never had the money to support the life style she craved.

Jennifer's candid desire for more material wealth disturbed William, unfair he acknowledged to himself, as from his late 20's as a wunderkind in the financial management world, he had amassed a substantial fortune. If



he and Jennifer were to have any kind of future together, he would have to talk to her about her telephone scamming. He did not know the extent of it, but could not abide it if they were to continue a relationship.

They returned to Jennifer's home, where she led him into her study, the largest room in the modest ranch house. At one end facing a window, was her work station; a desk top computer with a large screen, and a high end landline phone into which headphones were plugged. Along the far wall was a leather couch in front of which was a coffee table. She bade William to sit down, left into the kitchen, and returned with two glasses of wine. They toasted and talked for awhile about their good fortune at having connected, and the humor in how it began. When both had finished their wine, Jennifer leaned over and kissed Williams's lips. He was startled

for a moment, then put his hand behind Jennifer's head and gently drew her to him.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" she said. "I will make dinner and my special apple crisp for dessert, and we can continue getting to know one another. We can take things slowly. I've got a comfortable guest room where you can sleep."

"That sounds wonderful," William said.

She kissed him again and walked over to her computer and telephone setup where she grabbed her head phones.

"I've got to make one quick call," she said.

William watched her, perplexed at why Jennifer so suddenly broke the mood. She put on her head phones and dialed a number. When the person on the other end of the line picked up, she began talking, her tone and cadence chillingly reminiscent of her first call to him.

"Joseph," she said, "I'm so glad you picked up. It's Jackie Burke. I hope you remember me. We were in Mrs. Stiles' kindergarten class together at Cascades Elementary School."

She pressed the mute button and turned toward William.

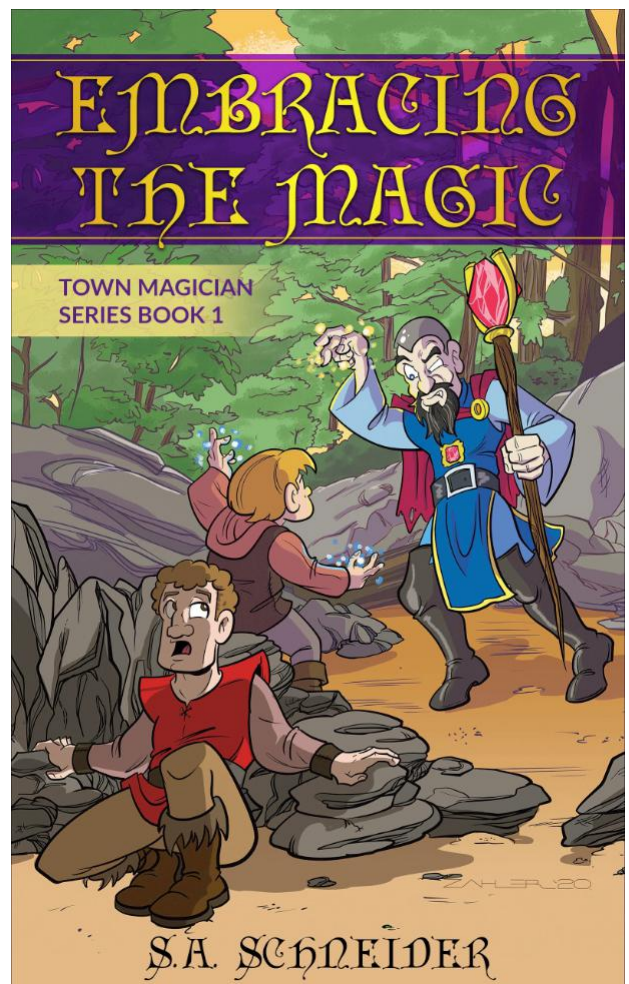
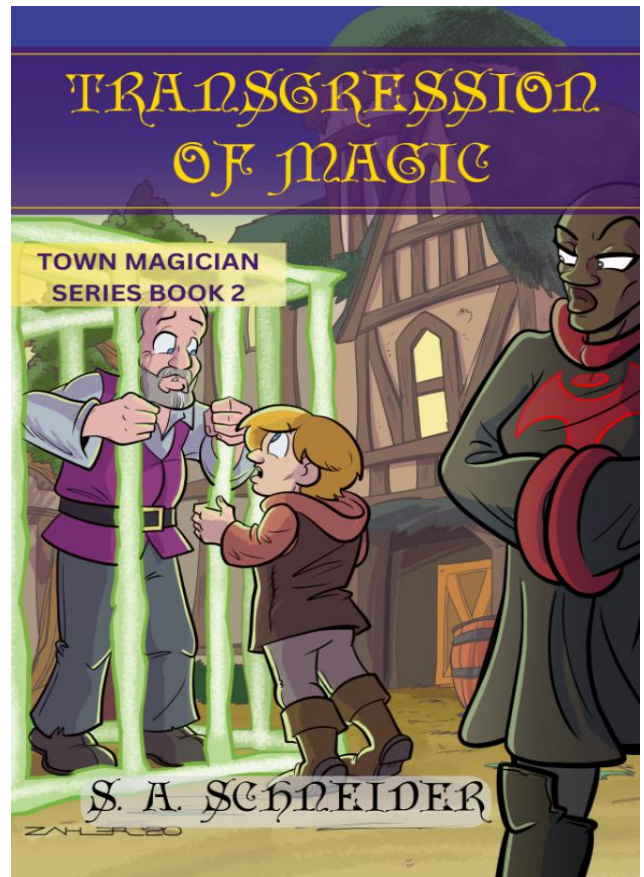
"I meant to ask," she said, "did you bring the cash?"

The wave of revulsion that coursed through William was so strong that he almost retched. He apologized silently to Julia for being there. Julia, who he'd met in college, courted and married after graduation, raised a family and built a life with for forty-five years,

whose hand he held as she died. When Julia became ill, William promised her that he would find a way to continue after she was gone. How had he become so pitiful that he would try to fill the void she left, with the heartless conniving thief who sat in front of him? William knew that he was being given the choice between defiling himself and dishonoring Julia's memory, and loneliness. He would choose loneliness. Without a word, he walked out Jennifer's front door to call a taxi to the airport, for a flight home.



Kenneth N. Margolin is a retired attorney, and lives with his wife, Judith, in Newton, Massachusetts. Ken's stories and creative nonfiction have been published in print and online in Short Edition, Sport Literate Magazine, Dash Literary Magazine, Concrete Desert Review, CommuterLit, Evening Street Review, Corner Bar Magazine, Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight, The Literary Hatchet, among others; poetry in Shot Glass Journal.



Embrace the Magic

An interview with S.A.Schneider



S.A. Schneider has a wolf, so of course he writes middle grade fantasy, wouldn't you? Since his Lego and action figure days, he's crafted worlds and stories within those worlds. This pursuit continues into his middle grade fantasies. He doesn't stop with inspiring kids to write linear stories. Oh no, no. S.A. shows kids how storytelling in video games work and how they can learn to write those. He wants others to join him and delve into creating fantastical worlds.

S.A.Schneider, you start off your book – Embracing the Magic: Town Magician with a teaser of what's to come in your book. Why did you decide to do this? Was the intent to pique readers interest in what's looming on the horizon for the characters?

It's only in the print book, and it's something they used to do in books. A quick, exciting scene to pique interest of anyone flipping through the book and deciding to buy. It gives them something to read other than some random page, which may not be as interesting.

In the first chapter of Embracing the Magic readers are immediately brought face to face with the tail end of a battle. What made you decide to start the story off this way?

It's like that hook at the beginning of a lot of TV shows, especially cop dramas. See the crime and then want to watch until the end to see your hero team solve it. Here we see the bad guy fighting a Town Magician and defeating him. And Morzul is plain mean. Then we meet Samual and Rory and know they are going to conflict with that evil wizard.

In this first chapter we get our first introduction to Morzul, a dark magician. He's on a quest for power and control. Does he seek to eventually rule the world so to speak? What prompted him to go on this "quest" so to speak for more power?

Oh, yes, he definitely wants to rule his world. He wants to be the most powerful magician – the Grand Wizard. He's defeating as many Town Magician's as he can, and gaining more power. The problem is, in the Town Magician world, there isn't an opening for a Town Magician, so his only recourse is to challenge them for amulets. He exploits a loop hole and fights more and more Town Magicians, he isn't happy with just one.

Since this is a middle grade book, we can imagine that you wished to keep from scaring young readers too much. Is that why you keep Morzul from being overly vicious and violent?

Yeah, exactly. The end battle I had to adjust to give it some excitement, but not be too vicious and violent. And how to let Samual win without actually killing Morzul Of course, that led to another story coming out where something happens and Morzul escapes – but Samual doesn't exactly stop him.

Rory is an interesting character so to speak. LOL! He's apparently a trickster from the way that Embracing the Magic plays out. He uses slight of hand (rather poorly), so my question would have to be – do the village people *choose* not to acknowledge his lies? Or do they just truly not see him for the fraud that he is?

He's really good, so they mostly don't see it. Like any magician in our world, it looks real, even when it's not. But in their world, they trust their Town Magician and can't imagine he's not real. They don't want it to be real, because their town wasn't doing well without a Town Magician. So there's a little lying to themselves and some seeing what looks like real magic, so they just accept it. This type of thing happens in our world often, just not with magic. That you know of.

Was the previous town magician just as weak to where they could only perform minor feats of magic and thus giving Rory the opportunity to perform his tricks unchallenged?

Town Magicians are typically powerful, and it's accepted that Rory is young and will get better with age. There's more a question of why he and his father wanted to fool people like this. There are hints in *Embracing the Magic* and *Transgression of Magic* – but the full story will have to wait until Book 4.

What is the story behind Samual and his dad, Joseph? Samual craves magic, but his dad appears to hate it. Why? Did magic negatively impact him, Joseph, in the past that went on to spark his despise-ale of it?

Oh, great question. That was what I asked myself which led to Book 2 – *Transgression of Magic*. Let me say – all those questions are

answered in that book.

Frequently throughout the book Rory mistreats Samual and degrades him at every chance he gets. Why doesn't Samual push back? Samual wants to be viewed differently yet he is always quick to avoid confrontation. Why?

It's an interesting relationship. Rory feels a bit unsettled about lying as Town Magician. He was ok with it when he just performed. But now that he's been challenged and he knows he can't channel magic, he's worried. And Samual has been saying all along that Rory is a fake – so it makes him uncomfortable that this kid knows the secret. And Samual has been the outcast his entire life. No mother. A drunk father. No friends. Everyone in town disregards him because he's the local drunk's kid. He lacks self-confidence. This inhibits his internal powers – as we come to see by the end of the book.

The Grand Wizard is quite the character when he makes an appearance. What was your inspiration for his character? Was it your original intent to have him be so eccentric?

Oh yeah, totally wanted him quirky. Started out as a combination of Fizban from the *Dragonlance* series and Merlin from the *Disney Sword in the Stone*. He has some conflicts of his own and knows a bit more than Rory, Samual or the reader. By the end of book 2, we learn more of the issues the Grand Wizard is dealing with himself, which leads us directly into book 3.

Grand Wizard Toby appears to have some secrets that he's keeping. How long will readers have to wait before we get to discover what it is that he's hiding?

We know what's going on by the end of book 2, but the fallout will be something our heroes have to deal with through book 4.

When it comes to the characters themselves, you leave their physical descriptions and ages vague and

undefined. Did you do this intentionally? If so, why?

Yes I did. Some description, but I wanted kids to picture each character how they imagine. Maybe not the recommended, but I also encourage kids (and their teachers and parents) to write stories based on these characters. Or draw pictures. Or make a comic book. Or the best – make a video game. I want them to show me what they imagine.

Embracing the Magic is your first book. What inspired you to write this story and create these characters?

At Kent State, which is near me, there is a Wizarding World festival each year. I wanted to setup an author table, but didn't have any books about wizards and magic. I came up with an idea for a short story that had a young boy wanting magic because other people in his world can channel magic. This led to the thought that magicians were the most powerful people and not the warriors. Something I thought the kids I can relate to could understand. Samuel's essentially the band kid while the warriors would be the football players.

But from there, I kept asking more questions and the history and stories grew. Must be my Dungeons and Dragons background coming out. So right now there are 4 books planned in the series, with some accompanying short stories. Though, I have one short story that has grown to its own book and I have a couple short stories that are outside Samuel's time period. There is also the possibility of

the original story of how the magic came into the world with Zardonis.

Do you see Samuel embarking on many adventures in the future? If so, how many books do you think this series will encompass?

As mentioned, there are 4 books in this series – kind of like the original Star Wars trilogy. Some other adventures to fill in (like the books, comics, and video games with Star Wars). But the world is pretty open and rich, so there is quite a bit of room for other stories.

What was your favorite part about writing Embracing the Magic?

Getting it done to where it felt like a good story. As I continued to get better with my writing during this time, some things did change. Is it a perfect book? No, but as perfect as I could at the time. And the feedback has been great. Kids enjoy it because they can relate to Samuel. Now that book 2 is coming out, I've heard that they can't wait for book 3.

What are you looking forward to most regarding a Town Magician series moving forward?

Continuing the story with the hints in the previous books. There are some parts of Embracing the Magic and Transgression of Magic that are going to lead directly to book 3 and 4. I enjoy the interwoven stories and the direction I can take these stories.

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The Argument: Amazon v Ingram v Draft 2 Digital v Books.by. Wide or KDP Exclusive? Or Direct? Pros and Cons. You Decide.

by William Gensburger

It's a tale as old as time...er...no, not that old. But one often argued about. Authors want sales. Publishing outlets restrict how that happens. Authors always seek the easy way. Honestly, there is no easy way. There is no one way. And any way often changes from time to time.

Aside from print quality, returns issues, billing, lack of visibility, each outlet has pros and cons.

Amazon holds 70+% of the ebook market and 40-50% of the print book market. Ingram does better than Amazon with print distribution because bookshops and libraries won't take an Amazon book because there are NO wholesale discounts, and many do not like the monopoly that Amazon represents.

I know many authors are fearful of Ingram because of horror stories of returns and shipping costs billed to the author. A partially justified fear, and yet not one that is justified. Ingram offers wholesale discounts of 40-55% with the option of return shipping. Go into a bookstore and look at the volume of books. If the retailer had to buy them up front, they would go out of business.

10–20% of book titles generate 70–80% of unit sales, while 30–40% titles sell occasionally, 40–60% do not sell in a given month

To offer a wide selection, distributors like Ingram offer a discount set by the author, generally 50-55% with the right of return. This way the store is not liable for holding



onto dead inventory and also is relieved of return shipping costs.

Authors can choose to have the book delivered to them (since they are charged the wholesale price because the book got printed) and then have to pay the added postage, or they can elect to have the books returned to Ingram and destroyed, in which case Ingram doesn't charge the shipping cost.

So, as much as you want your book in Target, Supermarkets, or Costco, imagine 100,000 copies printed and delivered to just these three national chains, only to have 60% (60,000 copies) returned. Your wholesale cost is what the retailer would have paid. For a \$20 title, that might be \$10, multiplied by 60,000

copies returned, and you are out of business as an author.

Which is why, unless you are signed with a major publishing company that can remainder out the returns and reduce the loss, your focus should be on the easiest path possible.

So, you tell yourself, who needs print anyway? YOU DO!

In 2024, 72.9% of the market sales of fiction were print, according to the Association of American Publishers (AAP). Digital and audiobooks only captured 14% of the market. Print is still king!

- Professional Books increased 2.5% to \$1.4 billion.
- University Presses increased 3.1% to \$350 million.

Print

In the industry overall, print formats (Hardback, Paperback, Mass Market, and Special Bindings) accounted for 50.5% of publishers' revenue. During the year, revenue from the Hardback format climbed 3.6% to \$7.9 billion, while Paperbacks increased 3.2% to \$7.8 billion.

Within Trade, the Hardback and Paperback formats together accounted for nearly three-quarters of revenue (72.9%), maintaining their position as the most popular formats with \$7.7 billion in revenue each. On a year-over-year basis within Trade, the Hardback format was up 3.6% and the Paperback format climbed 3.0%.

Digital

In the industry overall, digital formats (Digital Audio and eBooks) accounted for 14% of all revenue for 2024, representing a revenue increase of 11.4% since 2023. Digital Audio increased 22.5% to \$2.4 billion in 2024, and eBooks increased 1.5% to \$2.1 billion. During the five years covered by this report, revenue for the Digital Audio format grew by a significant 78.1%, and eBooks by 2.0%.

Within Trade, digital formats accounted for 21.2% of the overall revenue for 2024, returning an increase of 11.8% for the sector. Digital Audio revenue for Trade enjoyed a healthy increase of 22.5% while eBooks increased 1.8%.

Other than Amazon and Ingram, there are other Print on Demand (POD) outlets, including Lulu.com, Draft2Digital, Books by, and several others. Each offers a variance of the process with differing base costs, shipping costs, and royalty rates.

I've spent significant time analyzing the merits of each, including selling direct to buyers. My initial premise was that it was far better as an author to retain as much control as possible, therefore maximizing my royalty income. Amazon serves a purpose, and despite tighter restrictions on royalty rates, it is still the major dominant player globally. Now, many people argue that since bookstores won't buy from Amazon, what's the point? As I demonstrated above with the horrific potential for returns, one needs to have a distribution system that favors the author and not the publisher.

Selling directly to buyers means that I need to have inventory on hand, which I can do with the purchase of Author copies at a discounted price, and then a process to ship the book to customers, and in this age, where the Postal Service rates are becoming obscene, to keep that cost low, not to mention needed supplies like envelopes, packing tape and labels , etc.

So let's do an example. The list price for my book is \$16.99. I can buy an Author copy from Amazon for \$3.79, but in order to make the shipping charge of eight dollars worthwhile, I buy 10 copies for a total cost of \$37.90 +8 dollars shipping, which equals \$45.90 or \$4.59 per book. This means that as long as the customer pays shipping, any price above \$4.59 is a profit for me. If my list price was \$16.99 and I reasonably offer it at a reduced price of \$12.99, autographed, then my profit is \$8.40, far higher than I would get from Amazon, Ingram or

anybody else.

If the customer expected shipping to be included, I would probably not reduce the list price so much.

Let's say I then offer the book for \$14.99 and free shipping, and I shipped it by media mail from the US Postal Service, which today runs about \$4.79, meaning that my total cost for this book was actually \$9.38 and I was paid \$14.99, which means I made a profit of \$5.61.

Selling directly to buyers is the best way if you can find the buyers.

Pay attention to that part because it's the same problem that we all face, whether it's Amazon, Ingram, or anywhere.

Finding the buyer is our primary problem. Buyers are out there; statistics show that books are being sold in large quantities, just not ours. And the reason for that is obvious: there are just so many books out there all competing for the same attention, and our books are not standing out.

So, possibly the argument isn't where or how we should be selling our books so much as how we should be marketing our books and getting the necessary eyeballs in order to make sales.

Let's address this more a little later on.

Draft2Digital has a very nice setup that

looks very streamlined, easy to use, and gives you the option to go both Print and digital and even audiobooks. And for a while, I thought it was a fantastic opportunity, especially since they are affiliated with Smashwords, which has been an outstanding e-book outlet for many, many years. Then I looked at their royalty structure, and finally, I looked at the wholesale opportunity for retailers because they also go through Ingram. What I noticed was that their wholesale discount was only 20%. And in addition, the selection indicated that returns were not accepted. When I approached them and asked about this, the curt response I received was that the information was confidential. Since I have an account with Ingram as a wholesaler, I could see clearly that the discount offered was only 20% with no returns, which in essence would mean no exterior store would buy the book unless the author was already a major best-selling author with a recognizable name.

This, by the way, is a good way if you list with Ingram to prevent the problems I referenced earlier. Keep your wholesale rate, but select no returns. That way, stores that wanted to order could still get the discount, knowing full well that they needed to sell the book and could not return it. That way, the author wins, the bookstore wins, and everybody should be happy without any risk to the Author. This is what I do with my clients. I can order their books wholesale and sell at whatever price I choose.

Books.by is one of the newer contenders and functions a little bit differently. Yes, it

is a print-on-demand outfit and basically will do whatever Ingram can do, except it does not do any distribution marketing. What it does do is allow the author to market or sell directly, and outside of Print costs and an annual fee, the remainder of the royalty stays with the Author. Sounds terrific. Their printing cost is higher than Amazon's or Ingram's, and they do charge the customer shipping, although their rates for shipping are very, very reasonable, including internationally. However, the books have to be purchased online from your book webpage on their site, and to me, it seems an unnecessary step since I have to find the buyer in the first place, so I may as well just sell Direct and make a better profit margin on top of that. My first thought was that it sounded like a good opportunity for me as a publisher to maximize sales profits for my Author clients. But at the end of the day, the amount of work versus the payoff made it less interesting. And as such, I don't use them.

Which brings me to Amazon. Whether I sell my e-books on Amazon exclusively or sell them elsewhere, the primary problem remains, which is finding the buyers. That, in and of itself, is a lot of work. I don't need more work. Selling exclusively on Amazon for e-books has some added bonuses. You get to enjoy select free days or discounted days and other featured promotions every 90 days, plus you are enrolled in Kindle Unlimited, which offers a pretty good revenue chunk to authors that I know who have a number of books. The proviso of this, of course, is that your book is exclusive to them, so it cannot

be sold through other outlets. There's a workaround for this, which I won't detail here, but the point is...

if Amazon has 70% of the market, am I better off utilizing the methods available that I just mentioned, or struggle just to get a small piece of the other 30%?

One author I know with many books manages to make a living from Amazon e-books and KENP page reads. Another author, I know, refuses to do print and relies strictly on e-book sales that he generates himself from his own website. And if you ask yourself where you buy your books from, generally speaking, Amazon holds the market, and if you're a Prime member, you get free shipping, which is a difficult combination to beat, especially since Amazon also reprices your book for better sales.

But here is a good thing that you may not know. If Amazon lowers the list price that you set, they still pay you the royalty from your list price, not the sale price. This is just one of the ways that they can beat out other outlets often with discounts that pass way beyond a wholesaler discount.

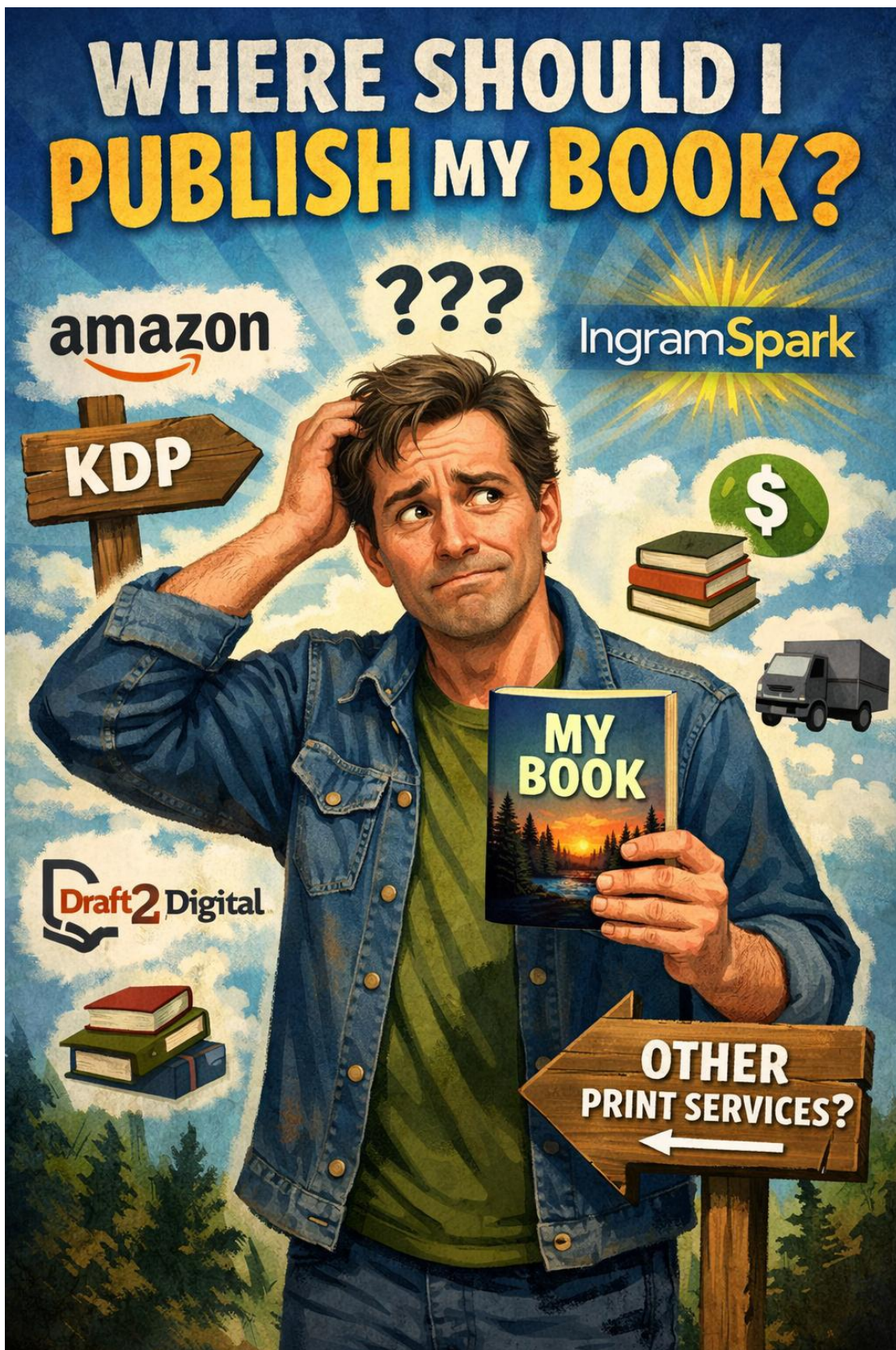
I will share a funny story. I recently revised my Texas Dead books and asked Amazon to remove the old version. They refused. I did not want competing copies out there so I raised the price for the obsolete books to \$200 a copy believing no one would choose to pay that. Amazon lowered the price on their own, made some sales, and I enjoyed a \$117

royalty just from one book.

There are no exclusives when it comes to print editions. And you can also sell those yourself and offer personalized autographs since you're shipping it out.

My advice is to place your print and e-books with Amazon, but not Amazon's expanded service—avoid that like the plague—and your Print book with Ingram, selecting no returns, which will keep you safe from unnecessary and pricey expenses. When you become a best-selling author with millions of fans and wrapped by a large, big-name publishing house, they can handle all that.

If you have tried other variations, let me know.



[Update 1/2/26: Draft 2 Digital just announced an increase in print costs. No doubt this will ripple throughout all outlets.]

Beer & Bourbon

a story by **Kenneth M. Kapp**



Chuck's thinking: Dad's Bar's been history for a half-dozen years. Now I'm drinking on the other side of the counter. Good news is that my hands no longer stink from a smelly bar rag. I've noticed some things about bars and the people who come in for a drink. I ain't a rocket scientist; it's easy to see that a guy coming in for the first time who stops and looks around before waltzing over to a spot where there's lots of light is a couple of shades different from the one picking out the darkest corner.

I'm a middle-of-the-road guy, not too bright, nor too dark – we're talking about light here, not IQ. That's where I like to find a space for my elbows.

Willi's is a great neighborhood, with plenty of watering holes. I've a couple of favorites I patronize, spreading the joy and dollars around. It's much the same in all of them. Never going to be like Charlie's Bar & Grill – that was my dad's. Tapas and chichi now. Doubt even the most upscale have a bright corner where you could sit and read a book. You wouldn't be sitting there if you had a book you needed to read anyway.

Anyhow, I'm sitting in the bar down the block when the guy next to me bumps my arm, says he has to pee. A couple of drops of my beer spilled onto the counter. Must have been the way I raised my eyebrow, but the guy said he'd buy me another when he got back from the head. I lowered my eyebrow and stored the information in my file under "secret weapons."

He comes back, waves at Joe who's tending bar, and points to my glass. "One for my friend."

for my friend.”

I didn't hear any general giving me a promotion to "friend" when he was in the pissoir and was tempted to raise both eyebrows but was afraid it could have been considered an act of war. So, I cross my legs and hold my pee. I was two beers away from my bourbon chaser and sayonara, adieu, auf wiedersehen – whatever. It doesn't matter. The guy wasn't a regular – probably wouldn't come back here for a month of Tuesdays.

So, he buys me a beer and then another, starts going on as if someone opened the tap to his mouth and closed the one to his brain. On and on about how great a state Wisconsin is: state bird, the robin; state flower, blue violet; state tree, sugar maple. He was a walking encyclopedia, and trust me, he didn't get that way from drinking beer.

Finally, he gets to this old Airflow camper he's going to hook up to his SUV. "Really," I was going to tell him, "I didn't think you'd hitch it to your dingus!" But you never can tell. When he told me it was from the early fifties, I said that it sounded old. He steamed through his clenched teeth, "Vintage. We say it's vintage!"

And then he pulls a picture out of his wallet. "Here."

I give a nod of approval even though it looks like what you'd get if you squashed a tin-foil football in a shoebox.

Then he gets to his Airflow. How it's this and that. You'd think he was talking about Madonna. Pity Madonna, then, and it was getting late. I look down the bar and catch Joe's attention – bourbon time.

But Mikey – at some point he slips in his name – goes on without missing a beat.

When Joe puts the glass with the brown liquor in front of me, the guy finally stops talking, pops his eyes wide open, and asks me how I did it, as if my drink had floated down from the ceiling like a dust ball.

"No big deal," I answer, "beer and bourbon is Wisconsin's state drink."

I pour it straight back, take out a couple of bills, and put them under the glass. I wave at Joe who waves back.

Decide I'll give the bar a pass for the next couple of weeks, no sense taking any chances. Figure by that time Mikey'll be off somewhere in his Airflow.



Kenneth M. Kapp lives with his wife in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, writing late at night in his man-cave. He enjoys chamber music and mysteries.

He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His stories have appeared in more than ninety publications worldwide including the Saturday Evening Post, October Hill Magazine, EgoPHobia in Romania, Lothlorien Poetry Journal in Ireland, and The Wise Owl in India.



**It's a dog's life
after all!**

Behind The Book With Candace MacPhie



Born in Montreal, Quebec, Candace MacPhie spent years backpacking and working around the world.

She holds a Bachelor of Commerce degree, an MBA, and has worked for twenty years on four different continents now calling Calgary, Alberta home.

Find her at <https://candacemacphie.com>

Q: Would you please give a brief description of Hello I Am Here?

A: Hello I am Here? is the third book of my five book Back in a Year Series. The true story of a young woman backpacking around the world in the 1990s.

This book travels through Europe and The Middle East. Visit Oktoberfest, sail in the Netherlands, swim in the Dead Sea, ride camels to the pyramids, and climb Mt. Sinai. The real backstory unfolds between visiting the shiny locations, and your immersed in life on the road. There's romance, tension,

and wild travels to enjoy. It sucks you in the ultimate adventure and discovery. Be ready for all the feels because this entertaining read will make you laugh, cry and cringe in dusty the chaos.

Q: How long did it take you to write Hello I am Here? What lessons and emotions do you hope readers get out of reading the book?

A: It took me almost a year to write, edit, edit some more, and publish this book. As for lessons, traveling in the Middle East as a woman is not for the faint of heart.

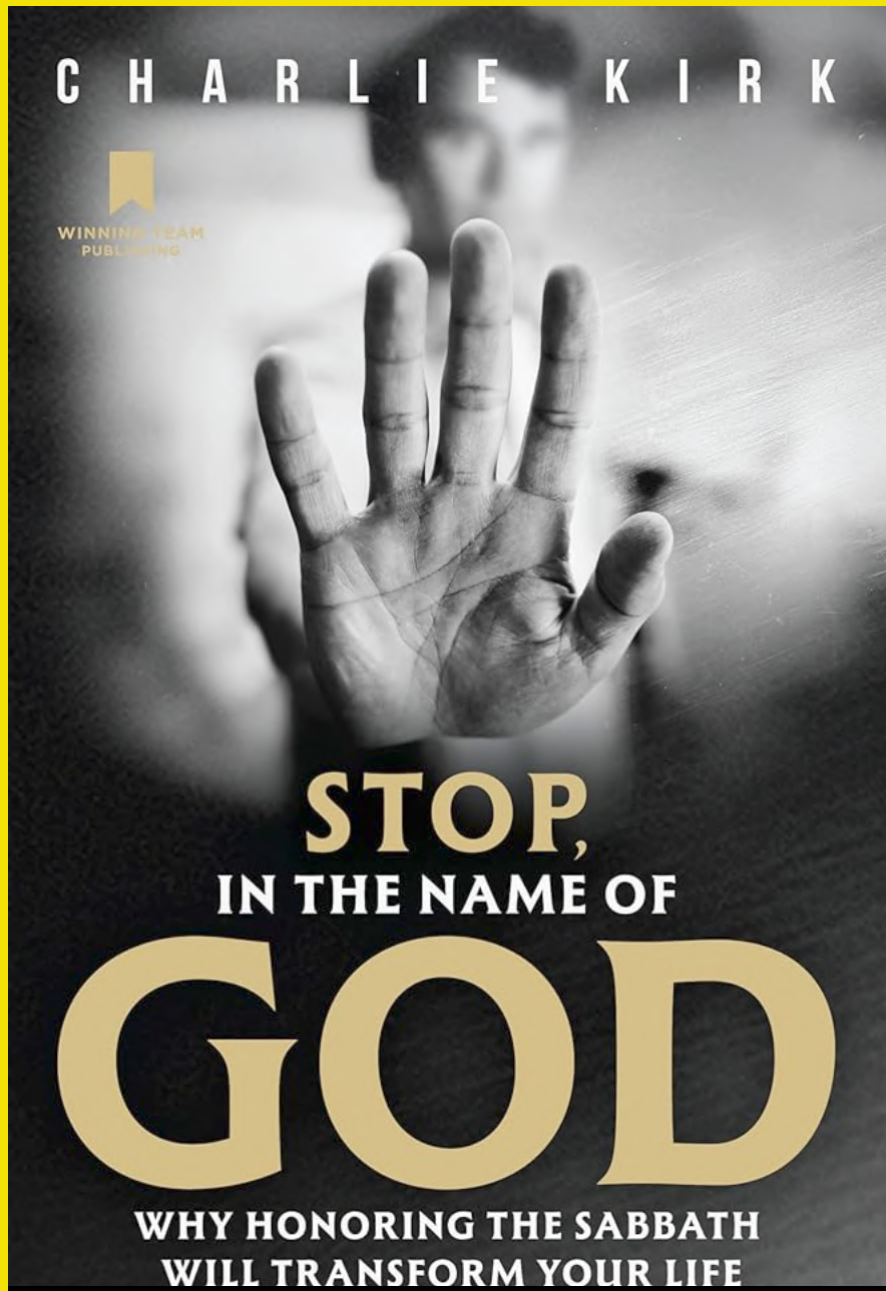
Every day was a challenge, physically from the heat and dust, and mentally dealing with ongoing harassment. I pushed through with the help of my friends and I hope it inspires folks to tackle something that scares them. As for emotions, there are so many to experience in this book. Love. Heartache. Fear. Frustration. Happiness. How to fill an empty heart. All woven together with a light heart and laughter.

Q: Are you currently writing the sequel to Hello I am Here?

A: Yes! I'm working on the fourth book in the series, Beautifully Warped. This adventure happens in Africa. And you'll travel the rustic roads on an overland truck with a group of strangers who're obsessed with curry flavor anything: chicken, vegetables, eggs, you name it. Get ready to experience animals in the wild and find peace on the Serengeti.



Interview credit: Book Notions



Stop, in the Name of God: Why Honoring the Sabbath Will Transform Your Life by Charlie Kirk, will help you discover how observing the Sabbath isn't a rejection of modern life but a rebellion against busyness and a pathway to genuine connection, peace, and presence. Through *Stop in the Name of God*, bestselling author Charlie Kirk guides you on how to unplug, recharge, and reconnect with God, family, and yourself in a way that nurtures your soul. In a world dominated by screens and constant noise, *Stop in the Name of God* presents the Sabbath as a radical act of resistance. Packed with practical insights and spiritual wisdom, Charlie Kirk demonstrates how honoring the Sabbath restores balance, reduces anxiety, and nourishes your soul. It's not just a day of rest—it's a lifeline to reclaiming what truly matters.

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