

A Common Problem: Lots of Ability But No Direction

Tracking the Elusive Niche

There are writers who are very serious about writing, but feel they have yet to find their niche. They're not sure what format they can write better than others; they're not sure what length and discipline appeals to them more than others. These people without niches tend to be writers who have the intelligence, creativity and linguistic skills to write almost anything well, and the plethora of possibilities may well be the root of their problem.

In what direction should they work at developing their career? They wait in frustration, toying with this, trying out that, dabbling in the other, hoping one day their Muse will show up, smack them over the head with her glittery wand, and announce, "You were born to be a screen writer. Now get cracking!"

If you are still casting around for your best format, your ideal niche, maybe there are tricks that will kick your Muse in her little pink satin underpants and cause her to point the way. Below is a list of questions that may help undecided writers pull away a few cobwebs and find a clearer path.

Kick Your Muse In Her Little Pink Satin Underpants

The questions have been culled, intuited, adapted, squeezed, and gleaned from various writing sources. There is no one place, one advisor, responsible for their creation [more about that after the questions]. Answer the questions as best you can; play along and imagine the "what ifs." See if anything breaks loose. Remember to look at your

negative reactions as well as your positive ones, because they, too, help point the way.

1. If you could have a nine-to-five job doing nothing but writing, what would your ideal job be?
2. What one quality do all of your close friends have in common?
3. What's your gestation period? How long do you prefer to go full out on a written work and then be done with it?

What's Your Gestation Period?

4. How intelligent are you? Why do you say that?
5. What sort of stuff is in that folder you've got marked "Misc." You know, the folder with all those little ideas that pop into your head when you're in the shower.
6. Are you more organized or more spontaneous?
7. What do you read for enjoyment? What's the appeal?
8. What do you feel guilty about not reading? Why don't you read it?
9. In your obituary, what event or relationship in your life would pique the curiosity of others?
10. If you had a phaser that you could set on "smarten up" instead of "stun," what type of doofuses would you target?
11. What about you deserves more respect and acknowledgement than it gets?
12. What device do you use to get your words recorded? Why that?
13. What do you have to say that would interest people? Seriously. What?

14. Whatever path you decide your writing should take, do you expect to do it perfectly right away, or are you willing to work at it?
15. What qualities of your writing style would an experienced critic cite as good? How about those that "need work?"
16. What would your mother say you should write?

What Would Your Mother Say You Should Write?

17. Why write? The world is full of writers; why you too?
18. What type of criticism do you desire?
19. What one adjective would you choose to describe your writing?
20. What reward do you want for your writing?
21. What well-known writer is your role model?
22. Could you write raw, steamy erotic stuff well?
23. Could you write well about the brownies under your back porch?
24. Do people know when you're joking?
25. Do you belong to a writers group? Who among them do you think is a really good writer? A really helpful critic?
26. What piece of your own writing have you not finished lately? Why, exactly?
27. What piece of published writing by another have you not finished lately? Why, exactly?
28. What does your Significant Other say you should write?
29. Why don't you know what to write? Seriously. Describe the maze you're lost in.
30. If you absolutely could not be a writer, what would you be?

These questions are fun, possibly even helpful, but if you scour all the available writing resources you will not find them. In fact, you will find no advice anywhere on how to decide your ideal format, your niche. While a great many writing advisors have written pieces purporting to help writers decide what they should write---each and every one of them deals with finding the ideal *subject*. Obsessing over format, we are told, is very often the maze that prevents a writer from going forward. The ex-

perts advise that a writer first decides what s/he wants to *say*, then decides the best way to tell it, and after that, format will fall into place.

Just for example, what if you want to write about pollution in Lake Superior? Does what you have to say work best as an article in an engineering magazine regarding the effect of pollutants on ships hulls? Is it best as a medical brochure on health effects of pollutants? Is it best as a video script for the fishing channel? Is it a young readers book on the story of pollution and how to prevent it? Is it a heart-wrenching novel about a family-owned fishery driven into bankruptcy by pollution? Subject dictates format.

It might be fun to go back over the questions, this time seeing if they shake loose any good ideas for your next ideal subject.

As for those who prefer to start with format first, that's fine. If, for instance, you say you're going to write poetry and that's that--fine, no problem. If, six months from now, you have 99 half-finished poems ranging from sonnets on sunsets, elegies on polluted fish, and limericks on brownies under the porch, don't despair. You are not doing nothing. You are perfecting your craft. When you do finish a poem, it's going to be a wowser.

Future Projects

One of MWA's goals is to establish small homogenous writers groups in SE Minnesota. Specifically, groups of four to six people who would all be working on the same type of writing--all poets, all mystery writers, all memoirists, all coming-of-age writers, all fantasy writers, and so forth.

To that end, we will be contacting writers individually, asking what they are working on at the present time. That information will help us try an experimental group to see how it goes and if it has value, and then go on, or not, from there.

The idea of sponsoring play reading events is also alive and being worked on. Having place, participants, and parameters all fall in line is the goal.

We would also be interested in hearing from people about their preferences and disinclinations in regard to larger multi-event writers conferences.

We are grateful for feedback, suggestions, questions, grumbles, attaboy's, anything.

The Lily Pad

By Nicole L. Czarnomski

[Nicole Czarnomski has just moved back into the St. Charles area after finishing her master's in teaching. When she mentioned that she was casting around trying to find her best writing niche, we asked her to give us a personal light on her search. Ed.]

As a writer, looking for the perfect place to land or take off is never easy; that place where energy runs freely and words are transcribed onto paper faster than a cat's paw in attack mode. I yearn for that place where subject matter is always available, where ideas are concrete and no longer bouncing around in my noggin like a brainstorming session for Apple computers. It is then that I ask myself, where is my lily pad, where is my place to land, and where is my place to take off? As ugly as I feel some days for ignoring my creativity, I remind myself that I am not a toad, nor am I a frog and I don't need a lily pad for arrival and departure-what I need is to start writing!

"I remind myself that I am not a toad, nor am I a frog..."

I have read numerous works by the author Julia Cameron to inspire my muse. Her prescribed morning pages are the closest thing to a religion that I have ever accepted-that is, three pages of random drivel spouting from my black gel pen every single morning. But inevitably it happens; I lose my faith for one reason or another. Was it sleep that I found so necessary rather than inking the page before the brilliant sun began to peer over the horizon? Was it the full time teaching job coupled with finishing my master's program that began to take its toll and forced me to leave the page empty? Something had to be sacrificed and it has always been the writing. That very place where I feel whole, where I feel as if I am connected to all things-it is the same place I turn my back on every day. Then loaded with guilt I tell myself tomorrow. Tomorrow I will write that novella; tomorrow I will write that haiku, tomorrow I promise I will show up at the page.

Consequently, today with the help of a friend, a friend who I have never had the pleasure to meet inspired me to write- and I did. She called me 'highly educated', and 'well traveled', she even thinks I am 'creative!' Before I could begin the devastating disagreement in my head-you know-shouting the obscenities-you can't write-that topic is boring-what do you think you're doing? Rather than aimlessly forcing myself to focus on the past, the present, the future, my job, my hobbies, marriage, being a new homeowner, or how much I love coffee as valuable tools for writing, I stopped and wondered. Maybe, just maybe there is an extremely creative writer or two who has the same sense of angst when he or she shows up at the page? I ask you all do you feel the same angst as I? Are we all just hiding our pens and pencils in a far off land because each idea we have is wonderful and each idea we have is horrible? So my friend I ask you, maybe I really do need that lily pad? I am ready to land and I am ready to take off-just tell me-what shall I write?

[Contact Nicole at nczarnomski@yahoo.com]

----Opportunities----

The Green Blade, a literary arts publication by the Rural America Writers' Center in Plainview, is published spring, summer, fall and winter. Prose not exceeding 1,600 words and poems are encouraged from writers living in Southeastern Minnesota and who are affiliated in some way with the RAWC, either through membership, attendance at Open Mic events, or participation in events sponsored by the Center. For information, contact Kevin Rafferty. raffam@hbc.com.

Minnesota Writers' Alliance is a registered Minnesota Nonprofit Corporation networking writers of all types in the 11 counties of Southeastern Minnesota---Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, and Winona.

Writing What You Want

By Michael Kalmbach

[*Michael Kalmbach is a freelance writer and editor from the Rochester area who has created the web site WritAnon.com. We asked him how he attacks the decision of what to write. Ed.*]

There's an old saying about the difference between an amateur and a professional photographer: a professional photographer only shows you the photos that turned out well.

Like a good photographer, a good writer only shows you the final draft. A good writer doesn't show you the failed attempts, sloppy first draft, or the pieces that simply didn't work. A good writer only shows you what turned out well.

Recently, I found myself in between projects, and faced with the question: what do I want to write next?

Notice the phrasing of the question above. It's not "what am I good at?" or "should I try writing a novel?" I ask myself what I *want* to write next.

"I ask myself what I want to write next."

This approach frees me from expectations. I don't have to worry about writing it well, or of any specific length (yet). Since I'm working on something I *want* to write, that's enough motivation to get me started. I can worry about fixing the format after I've completed the first draft.

After all, there are usually a couple more drafts after the first.

You're going to make mistakes in your first draft, whether you're a poet, a journalist, a novelist, or something else. That's fine. Not everything needs to be right at first.

The important part is to get started. Trust in your skill (or your local writers group!) to help you find errors later.

If you wake up one morning and want to write poetry, go ahead. If you're inspired about a new company in the area, write an article. If you've decided you want to try your hand at the Great American Novel, give it a shot.

The only certain way to fail is to never get started. By starting something today, you increase your chances of success a thousand fold.

And by showing your "good photos" to the world, you'll also become known as a good writer. So start writing. Write now!

[Contact Michael at mikekalmbach@gmail.com]

-----Events & Classes-----

June 5 & 12, Saturdays, 10:00 am-noon\$55.00
"Monsters and Creatures in Lakes, Oh My!" A story-making experience for 6-8 year olds. Instructor, Kathy Clock. Both Saturdays for the one fee. The Loft Literary Center, Minneapolis. 612-215-2595, jdodgson@loft.org

June 15-July 13, Tuesdays, 6:00pm-8:00pm..\$95.00
"Children's Picture Books and How They Work." Creating a picture book for possible publication. Instructor: Carol Iverson. (Note: no class on July 6) Bloomington Art Center, 952-563-8587 info@bloomingtonartcenter.com.

June 17-July 15, Thursdays, 6:30-8:30pm....\$95.00
"Discovering the Heart of the Poem." Study poetry and its literary devices. Instructor Evelyn Klein. (Note: no class July 8) Bloomington Art Center, 952-563-8587, info@bloomingtonartcenter.com.

June 19, Saturday, beginning at 9:00 am
"Graphic Novel and Comic Book Writing Conference." Workshops, performances and presentations. Keynote speaker, Gene Luen Yang. The Loft Literary Center, Minneapolis. 612-215-2595, jdodgson@loft.org

June 26, Saturday, 9:30am - 2:00pm\$39.00
"Garden Memoir." Using gardens to inspire stories that make memoirs vivid and memorable. Instructor, Mary Jean Port. Bloomington Art Center, 952-563-8587, info@bloomingtonartcenter.com.

-----Area Group Meetings-----

Austin Writers' Group meets weekly on Wednesdays at 7:00 pm in the Austin Public Library. All are welcome. Contact facilitator Betty Benner for more info. bennerbj511@charter.net.

Brick House Coffee House Writers meets monthly, every second Friday, 7:00-9:00 pm at the Brick House Coffee House, 412 Third Ave NE, Austin, MN. Writers read their works aloud to an audience of their peers. Storytellers, poets and listeners join the mix. All are welcome. Contact facilitators Michael and Bev Cotter, 507-373-4748, cotter6@q.com.

Open Mic meets monthly, every third Wednesday at 7:00 pm, at the John Hassler Theater in Plainview. Writers read their works aloud to an audience of their peers. Suggested length is 3-5 minutes. All are welcome. Contact facilitators Dean & Sally Harrington. dean.harrington@fnbplainview.com.

Rochester Library Writers' Group meets monthly on the second Tuesday from 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm in Conference Room A of the library. All are welcome. Contact facilitator Helen Chen for more info. helen@helenchen.ws

Washington Avenue Writers' Group meets weekly on Tuesdays at 7:00 pm at Christ Episcopal Church, 204 W. Fountain St, Albert Lea. All are welcome. Contact facilitators Rachelle Flieman or Maren Ring for more info. rflieman@charter.net, ringmaren@yahoo.com.

First-timers should double-check with facilitators, as weather and conflicts may change meeting times.

We will always be interested in publishing short, get-acquainted articles about individual writers in southeastern Minnesota. Please write and tell us about yourself--what do you write, how do you find the time and place to write, what can you pass on about your writing experience that others may find helpful, and all sorts of other interesting things.

Speaking of What to Write...

A market that people seldom think of is greeting cards. A typical writer's fee for a greeting card is \$35.00 to \$200.00. If you excel in short pithy expressions that reflect popular sentiment, then maybe that's your niche.

Here are some greeting card publishers that can be found on the Internet. They will have submission guidelines for writers and artists: Abacus Cards, Blue Mountain Arts, Comstock, Hallmark, Paper House, Paper Rose, P.S. Greetings, Papyrus.

Writing Contests

Writer's Digest Magazine just published its annual "101 Best Websites For Writers" list. The following sites from that list say they offer contests for writers:

sixsentences.blogspot.com; inkygirl.com;
allisonwinn.com/ask-allison; alongstoryshort.net;
invirtuo.cc/prededitors; bookreporter.com;
fundsforwriters.com; blog.nathanbransford.com;
mediabistro.com; cba-ramblings.blogspot.com;
nanowrimo.org; writing.com; kidlit.com;
writergazette.com; writerschatroom.com;
absolutewrite.com; mywriterscircle.com;
dglm.blogspot.com; onceswritten.com; sfga.org;
winningwriters.com; horror.org/writetips.htm;
scbwi.org; muslimwriters.blogspot.com;
wow-womenonwriting.com; rwanational.org;
mysterywriters.org; moontowncafe.com;
poetryoutloud.org; christianstoryteller.com;
romancedivas.com; romancejunkies.com;
coolstuff4writers.com

MWA has not checked out these sites and is not recommending them; writers must make their own assessment and decision. We do not recommend any contest requiring an entry fee or asking for any information other than for contact purposes.

-----Contact Us-----

Joan Sween, Editor
5031 Tongen Ave NW, Rochester, MN 55901
507-281-1472, sweens724@charter.net

Unless otherwise attributed,
all content is written by Joan.