

NETWORKING

Think Not What Your Writing Community Can Do For You, but What You Can Do For Your Community

FOR HERMITS

By Catherine Elcik



We're writers, damn it! We're the folks hard-wired to spend long hours inventing characters with rich back stories and brewing up all kinds of hell for them to get into. We voluntarily spend our time alone with the computer, blocking out the world.

Most of us are convinced we write better than we talk, so when a well-meaning someone tries pulling us into the world outside the one we've built within a five-foot radius of our computer screens, we either shrink away murmuring about the muse or blink at them, our faces blank, and ask: "You want me to what now?"

But what if networking didn't have to be painful? Don't even call it networking. Think of it as community building first and trolling for opportunities second—a distant second, according to Steve Almond, a Grub Street instructor and author of (most recently) *The Evil B. B. Chow and Other Stories*. From the outside, Steve's easy demeanor may make him seem like a natural networker, but he doesn't see it that way. In fact, Almond says the worst mistake a rookie can make is approaching people for any reason but a sincere desire to talk to them.

"I'm an artist. I like to yak with other artists. Mostly to discuss *art*," he says. "Inherent to the word 'networking' is the notion of working someone for an ulterior motive, which I find despicable and not very effective."

It was this community-first mentality that led Grub Street instructor Alexis Rizzuto to say 'hi' to the man who helped her land her first job in publishing. After an Emerson

College seminar on how to find a literary agent, Rizzuto walked into the Charles Street subway station to find literary agent Ike Williams waiting for the T. She recognized him from the panel, walked up to him, and said she'd appreciated the things he'd had to say. When he asked her about herself, Rizzuto mentioned she was finishing up her degree after teaching for several years and had decided that she wanted to go into publishing. There was a job available at his agency, and Williams invited her to apply. She did, she got it, and they worked together for two years.

"I wasn't expecting anything of the moment except to thank him so I wasn't as intimidated as I could have been," Rizzuto says. "That was a lesson in itself. You never know where the next opportunity is going to come from."

BUILD YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Oh, fine, you say. As if there wasn't enough pressure, now every stranger I don't chat up might have landed me my dream job! Well, no. The point is networking isn't all power suits and CEOs. For creative writers "networking" probably culminates in a book pitch, but if you think in terms of building your community, there are some simple shifts you can make to start feeling more comfortable

stretching beyond that tight little circle around your computer:

- **Don't be your worst critic.** When Grub Street instructor Jane Roper first started talking about her book, she told people it was stupid, and she swore they didn't want to hear about that because she didn't want to come off over-confident.

"I was definitely uncomfortable trying to sell myself," she says. "You have to find that line between arrogant and humble."

- **Make friends, then keep up with them.** In the same way that your best apartments and jobs came from a tip from a friend of a friend, it's possible that the best things in your writing life will come because someone mentioned an opportunity to you. But even if that doesn't happen, making fellow writing friends can only help our writing by providing community.

A former student mentioned Michelle Seaton's name when the *Robb Report* was looking for an aviation writer, and she got her start with NPR through a woman who she met at a week-long conference.

Has it been a while since you've taken a class? More important, when was the last time you sent an e-mail to a former classmate.

"Just going to class isn't networking," says Sarah Wernick, a Brookline-based freelance writer and consultant. "Keeping contacts up after the class is over is."

- **Reach out in a friendly way.** When you read books that blow you away, write to the authors and let them know—better yet, make it a point to visit them during their next reading in town and tell them in person.

"I guess some people are shy, or self-hating or conflicted," Almond says. "... If people want to talk to someone, particularly to praise their work, they should do so. It's nothing to get nervous about."

- **Be confident in your work.** Chris Castellani, Grub Street head instructor and author of *A Kiss From Maddalena*, swears he's not a natural when it comes to networking and community building. He says for him the key is confidence. Now that he has two books out and an agent, confidence comes easier, but he promises the unagented and unpublished writer that confidence doesn't have to be linked to tangible success.

"Lie to yourself, if you have to," Castellani says. "I've had to go into these social and professional situations when I had nothing. When I came out of BU demoralized, I made myself pretend that I was still a real writer. I told myself that I was on the brink, that I was really good but undiscovered. If you believe in your work and you have passion about what you're working on, that confidence comes easier. Do whatever it takes."

Remember, you're much more than your resume, Castellani says. "Be confident enough that you don't have to keep spouting your resume."

VENTURE OUT

When you're ready to move beyond simple community building and start talking about your project (say you're going to an event like The Muse and the Marketplace where you know there will be an opportunity to speak with agents), put a little thought into what you might say and who you might approach:

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Margot Livesey and Chris Castellani at The Muse and the Marketplace.

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• **Pick the right person.** Castellani says he rarely goes up to two people who are already talking to each other. Instead he chats with the people who are standing alone. Of course, if the person you really want to talk to is a mega-best-selling literary writer on the night she gives her hometown reading, chances are good she won't be off by herself the whole night. But if

her book blew you away, steel yourself for those awkward minutes as you wait on the sidelines for an opening. It's worth it.

• **Use the magic words.** "If your goal is to feel more comfortable at a public event, or you're tied in knots trying to perfect your elevator pitch, stick with the basics. Castellani

swears "Hi, I'm Chris" is the best social tool he's got.

• **Be interested.** When someone tells you they're working on a sonnet sequence about the planet Mars and you know little about sonnets and even less about Mars, you can still engage that writer in conversation. Do they have a background in science? What is it about the planet Mars that fascinates them? What type of sonnets are they writing?

• **Warm up to book talk.** As a waiter at Bread Loaf, Castellani was given one night off to attend the cocktail party. The program stressed to the waiters how important it was to take full advantage of this one-shot deal. No pressure, right? By the time Castellani got to the cocktail party, the only thing he could think of was pitch well and often.

"Writers are like anybody else; they want to be asked about themselves," Castellani says. "But I was just going on and on and *on* about myself. In other words I completely turned people off."

Think of it like getting into the ocean: Unless you're a member of the polar bear club or just plain crazy, you get used to the freezing cold water inch by inch, only diving in when your torso's about to get wet anyway. When networking you want to put your big toe first in just the same way.

"Start with the party itself," Castellani says. "Comment on the strong drinks. Pick something that puts you in context, and eventually you'll get around to talk about something that's more meaty."

• **When you get a chance to talk about a book, be specific.** There was a time when Roper's brain seized when someone asked her what she was working on. "I'm not

a shy person, but when someone asked for a one-sentence summary of what my book was about, I always froze. There's so much pressure." In a desperate attempt to say something she resorted to a stock description and told the listener she was working on a story about a mother and a daughter and the contrast between their lives. "It was so generic. But if I say it's set in Bridgeport Connecticut and Italy during World War II and the early seventies, I'm giving them specific details and they can start to get a feel for my book.

• **Put your new skills into practice on September 15.** So now you're pumped (or at least less paralyzed) about giving up the wall and venturing into the heart of the next social event you attend—all you need's a venue, right? You're in luck—on September 15 at 6:30 p.m., Grub Street's throwing a housewarming party and you're invited! Why not challenge yourself to talk to three new people that night?

REMEMBER: WRITING IS KING

If all this networking talk feels like a distraction from writing, that's because it is. Being comfortable in a community beyond the one you create on the page is an important skill for writing and life, but it's possible to write without that—Emily Dickinson talked to visitors through a nearly-closed door, and by the most recent reports, Salinger's writing up a storm from inside a bunker in New Hampshire. As long as you're disciplined in your writing, and believe in your project, the social skills can be worked on.

"People don't 'get ahead' because they can work a room," Almond says. "They get ahead because they write well. Period." ☺

TWO TALES FROM THE SHADOWS

1. At first, Michelle Seaton was proud of a personal essay she penned. But when friends and family came over to the house, she was suddenly absolutely certain she didn't want them to see the piece. So she did what any good wallflower might: she hid it.

"I can't really account for that except I'm afraid to draw attention to myself," Seaton says. "Part of what's great about writing is that people read it in another room."

2. There was a big literary event on the horizon. Literary powerhouses would be in the room. The setting was going to be intimate. But instead of feeling butterflies about the chance to hobnob with writers and editors she admired, Alexis Rizzuto's stomach gave her knots. "I told myself: I haven't been in publishing that long; I don't know the people they know. I don't know any publishing gossip."

In the weeks leading up to the event, Rizzuto researched everyone who was going to be there. She committed publishing house affiliations to memory. She read up on recent developments in the industry so she could ask if they'd seen the article and then ask about that.

"When I got there it was so easy," she says. "One person introduced me to the next. There were even some people there who knew who I was and wanted to meet me which was really interesting. Nobody talked down to me. Nobody treated me like I was an underling."

All that prep time? Rizzuto says putting in the time helped her calm her nerves before the event, but the reality was she never talked about any of it.

...And One from Center Stage

At Grub Street's Muse and the Marketplace, Michelle Seaton met a number of people who expressed an interest in working with her in the future. "I walked away with a couple of business cards, but I still had my heart in my throat," she says. "I find it draining to foist myself on people, so it took a day's energy to pull it together, find clips, and write them an e-mail. And when I did, it was: 'You probably don't remember me because I'm an insect, but here's what I said and here's what you said.' Then they wrote me back and asked me to send them samples, and it was another day's energy, even after they asked me to do it."

—Catherine Elcik

BY CATHERINE ELCIK

THE LOIS LANE ANTIDOTE

I'll admit it: I'm a recovering wall flower. There are still times when I walk into an event and want to turn around before I get through the door. When I feel like that and go through with it, the first thing I do is scan the crowd and god help the friendly faces I spot—I'll stick with them like a head cold for an embarrassingly large percentage of the night. Mercifully, such moments of severe social paralysis have grown few and far between. I'd like to say it's because I've grown older and wiser, but who am I kidding? For me, the road to recovery was good old-fashioned journalism.

Journalism seemed like a good idea—I wanted to write for a living and my family didn't want me to starve. By the time I realized that being a reporter meant I'd have to approach absolute strangers on a regular basis in exchange for rent and grocery money, it was too late. For the first few years, the only thing that got me through the door on assignment night was a deep breath and a reminder that as unlikely as it seemed, talking people up was my *job*. Do that long enough and you can psyche yourself up to talk to almost anyone anywhere.

I'm not the only one who relies on the crutch of professionalism to blow past shrinking violet tendencies. Michelle Seaton is a Grub Instructor who has written features for the *Robb Report*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Yankee Magazine*. Although she's shy enough that she hid a magazine so her friends and in-laws wouldn't see a personal essay she'd written, she says it's easy to be extroverted on the job.

"When it's somebody else's assignment or somebody else's idea, it's like getting into an elevator with a stranger," Seaton says. "You get to ask them whatever you want and it's OK because that's your job."

WRITING AS A BUSINESS

Sarah Wernick, a Brookline-based freelance writer and consultant, spent the first 15 years of her writing career working in isolation—she did her assignments, sent them off, and that was it. All that changed after she joined the American Society of Journalists and Authors (www.asja.org).

"I looked at an anonymous salary survey and realized that other writers were making double for the same kind of stories and getting better contract conditions," Wernick says. "I had \$166 worth of telephone charges for one story, and it never occurred to me that I could send it in until I realized all these other writers were doing it."

The business of writing can be a tricky thing. Some pointers for the journey:

- **Think and act like a professional.** "A writer's lack of confidence has to do with the stereotypes people have about writers," says Pauline Stieff, a freelance writer and writing coach.

"A lot of writers don't see themselves as professionals," Stieff says. "They think of their friends as professionals, but when it comes to their own work they dismiss it. They say, 'I'm *just* a writer.' They get bogged down in feeling like they're supposed to lock themselves in an attic or live a "Sex and the City" life. They need to see it as a business. They're offering a worthwhile service, and they need to promote that."

In her class called "Steps Toward Effective Writing" at the Boston Center for Adult Education, Stieff has her students interview guests she brings into the classroom. She instructs the guests to use a variety of techniques to dodge questions. The idea is to teach her students how to draw information from people.

"Writing isn't just about the writing; it's about ideas and information," Stieff says. "Writers have to take time to learn all the skills that will make their writing stronger."

- **Face-time is critical**—Although Wernick was happy to conduct her relationships with editors over the phone, after she met a few editors face-to-face, she noticed a big improvement. Assignments came out of brainstorming sessions and she noticed that editors called her back more often.

- **Community mindedness can yield assignments**—After deciding to become more active in the national writer's union, Wernick volunteered to bring refreshments to a meeting that featured an editor from *Smithsonian*. "I learned after the meeting that because I'd brought lemonade and cookies I was in a small group of people who was going to have dinner with the editor," she said. "The next time I queried I was able to point to the connection we made over dinner."

Similarly, at a time when few people were online and publications were just catching on that they were going to have to deal with electronic rights, Wernick noticed that websites were posting print materials that the original authors knew nothing about. Outraged, she put a note in the ASJA newsletter offering to run a search for members. Suddenly she had fifty writers and editors who were very grateful to her—one of whom helped her find a publisher for one of her articles.

- **Create your own "audience"**—Wernick sends out "an irregular e-newsletter with information and shameless self-promotion from Sarah Wernick" to professional contacts she's made. You may not be ready to launch your own e-newsletter, but it's a good idea to keep a record of your contacts. Your computer probably has an electronic address book—get in the habit of inputting the contact information for every business card you're handed. ☺

