

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 11: Where do I fit in?**By Cathe Jones, (cathejones.com)**

This week I was asked to write an article about software programs designed to keep a writer's life easier. The single article is now turning into a few separate specialized pieces. While test driving one particular package, I received an email from a young woman who feels a loss for reasons to write after a very unprofessional comment made by her Composition professor. It struck me that many of us don't really know how to weed out the bad advice, sadistic behaviors of those assumed to be mentors, or even our own inner-critic when it comes to knowing how, what, and why we write.

When I attended Massachusetts College of Art, at the age of 17, I hadn't thought that art included required English courses. I had already won prizes, scholarships, and even by-lines in periodicals, so my head was a tad bit larger than the door frame of that classroom. My instructor, a tall man with a face similar to that of a chubby John Lennon, spoke in hyperbole. His expectations of the students was shallow at best. His voice, fully faux in Harvard-Speak, bore a National Public Radio tone, and his humor was less willing than a five-year-old child asked to clean up after Thanksgiving dinner. In short, he was a snob.

For a full semester, I sat in a room with people of varied skills. Some could spell their own names, if nothing more. Others invented new ways to weave words which fascinated me. For the instructor, assignments were a method of determining our worth. If we interpreted improperly, we were shut down; cut off from any critique or enlightenment. If we showed individualism in any form, we were verbally assaulted in a manner that would have even made Shakespeare roll his eyes. The work had to be similar to our peers, and to the proctor's. For many of us, the love of

writing bled from our souls onto a floor of the tattered essence of previous victims.

I was raised by a woman who was a Shakespearean Professor. My father got out of the projects, into college, and drilled my sister and me with grammar and mathematics for as long as we could speak. I had just published my first chapbook, graduated high school a year early, was accepted to Emerson's writing program, but wanted to nurture my art. In Boston, my work had potential of being noted by the erudite, and I felt I was in the correct Write Zone. Sadly, I didn't have the rejection history necessary to build a back bone enough to handle this professor. The lesson was well overdue, but truly unkind.

We can take the words of another and claim them as our own truths. We can also take other's words and determine if they are fodder. The more personal our work, the more likely we are to do the former. For some of us, a whiplash to the heart can stop our drive of self-expression, slaying the muse within. For others, rejection becomes scar tissue, gained from the wars between a creative heart and indifferent needs of business, education, or even peers. There are some ways to learn to respond to rejection and criticism to ensure growth.

1. The Critic Within

Who better to tell you when you are failing than You? But, that's not where this critic lives. It is the belief others are better qualified to judge you that leads the Critic Within to act.

"Oh, my mom will hate this poem."

"My wife thinks writing about dogs is stupid."

"Dad thinks stories about sex will bring me straight to hell."

We all have tape recordings in our head of what someone else may think of us. To beat those thoughts to the punch, we let the Critic win.

SOLUTION: Let the Critic Within know how YOU feel. Every time you hear yourself saying, “If I do that, Uncle Pete will start a law suit”, instead say, “The rest of my entire family, all 654 of them, will love this story.”

Lesson from the Critic Within: You have control of how you think of things. If you are really afraid to do things because of the way others feel about them, then you need to be with people who support you regardless of what you do.

2. The {Evil} Critic

Literary Critics are paid by periodicals to talk about books they read. Evil Critics are amateurs who want to offer their views on where you should go with your words. He may be a rival writer in a weekly gathering, pointing out the same thing to everyone who reads: “You know, that works better if you keep your tenses straight.” She may be the friend you showed your manuscript to, who suddenly feels this means she is to reprobate at your request. “Honey, if you keep putting characters in who have red hair, you’ll never have a blonde reader.” An Evil Critic administers comments without your solicitation. “Really, do you think you should be writing, when your kids are home from school?”

SOLUTION: Understand the Evil Critic speaks mostly out of jealousy. She is keenly aware that you are accomplishing something. He may be hurt that your free time isn’t being spent with him. Most Evil Critics ought to be thought of as small children trying to get your attention.

Lesson Learned from the Evil Critic: Most people have a “Selfish” gene.

3. The Constructive Critic

It's easy to confuse the Constructive Critic from the Evil Critic, especially when you're not ready to deal with rejection, or requests to change your work. You want to have a Constructive Critic in your life. She will help guide you to finding the enchanting in thoughts originally deemed prosaic. The Constructive Critic is ready with "You have used a terrific adverb I hadn't heard in some time, but you use it a bit too often. Is there a synonym that would work better?"

Another comment often said by Constructive Critics is, "This manuscript doesn't fit in with our current needs, but I encourage you to seek out others who will leap for a chance to read it."

SOLUTION: The words of a Constructive Critic are well chosen. He seeks to open your eyes to other options, broader characters, and new literary paths. She wants to guide you well, without blinding your way. Because she is concerned with your specific goals, she has no time to tell you what you don't need to hear. The best solution is to silently listen, take notes, and test out his theories to see if they hold true.

Lesson Learned from the Constructive Critic: Not all critique is negative. There are those who enjoy the growth in the path you have selected, but see that instead of gliding on the ice, you're still dragging your skates on rubble. They won't feel badly if you don't follow their advice; they understand that you will find your footing. Learn how to listen, and you will become a stronger writer.

4. The Wrong-Path Fairy

There are times when you may wonder exactly what genre suits you best. As you sit at the desk, you keep typing in rhymes for "Geode", yet you

can't work the words into a haiku. The library is the only home you have known since the fourth grade, and yet, you are unable to have two characters enjoy a conversation without discussion of the Dewey Decimal System. The local paper hires you to write a Q&A column about auto repair, and you have iterated the same question a hundred different ways. You are a red puzzle piece on a jigsaw of the Pacific Ocean.

One of the biggest mysteries of life we face is in learning the answer to "Where do I fit in?" Some of us go to colleges, and discover our part time jobs would be wonderful careers. Others go to trade schools, only to discover that they have no mechanical abilities. Some want to have children in their lives, and nothing more, but can't break away from a board room long enough to consider when, never mind with whom.

SOLUTION: Own your growth. I got hired by a syndicate to cover gambling stories because of my town of residence. Not only do I not gamble, but every writer in town had the same beat. Instead, I found myself listening to the stories of retirees. I approached my editor and told him that I had some essays written, and expressed my desire for these to be published in lieu of yet one more gambling endeavor. He dropped me from the poker tables, and placed me on the slot machines, where I continue to this day, soaking up tales from the wiser, retired generation.

Lesson Learned from The Wrong-Path Fairy: If you find yourself drawn to a certain style, theme, composition, methodology of writing, then by all means, follow the right path. Editors and Agents may try to pull you into ten different directions, but the words that give you the most comfort are the ones you are supposed to write.

None of us enjoys hearing about faults, unless they belong to someone else. None of us enjoys literary snobs displaying a haughty need to

belittle. You may find yourself in the role of Evil Critic, Constructive Critic, or even the Wrong-Path Fairy telling a young writer that he should focus on dinosaurs instead of ballet. The Critic Within, when trained to be a positive role model, will guide you. Don't be afraid to let it reveal the best writer inside.

For some freeware on writing notes for novels, or prompting exercises, visit the links below. If they feel right to you, use them.

Freeware Screened for Adware and Trojans

<http://www.pricelesswarehome.org>

- **Write This:** A writing prompt program
- **TreePad Lite:** A note keeping program designed to help writers outline and develop chapters.
- **Simple OCR:** Allows you to scan printed documents so you may edit them using a word processing package of your choice.
- **Big Oven:** For cookbook writers this is a must! Recipe card keeper for computers.
- **Power Tracker:** (Write-Brain.com, other software available) Serves as a database for tracking submissions to agencies, periodicals, and journals.
- **Chaos Manager:** A date book, calendar, and address book in one simple, USB Jump Drive usable software package.

