

"Best Travel Article" Missouri Writers Guild 2007
Originally published in Potpourri

An Enchanted World

A writer's journey to the Maui Writers Conference

By Mary-Lane Kamberg

Just after sunrise, dozens of pairs of footprints already mark Ulua Beach on the island of Maui, Hawaii. Birds sing, and trade winds offer a gentle breeze. I remove my sandals and leave the coastal walkway to take a short, sandy path to the Beachwalk that winds along the leeward shoreline of the Pacific Ocean. I tiptoe to avoid thin, black shards of ancient volcanic rock. When I reach the shore, I walk barefoot on cool, damp sand, letting my feet sink into it until it supports my arches. I deliberately walk heel to toe, relishing each step.

It is Labor Day weekend, and I am here from the Kansas City suburb of Olathe, Kansas, to attend the annual Maui Writers Conference at the Outrigger Wailea Resort. I hope to find an agent for my first suspense novel. I have also brought a children's picture book manuscript and a cookbook proposal.

Except for roiling sand and briny foam where each wave stops and returns to the sea, the water is clear. I stand in wet sand left by the receding surf and wait. The next wave washes over my feet. It's a perfect temperature—cool enough to refresh, yet not so cold that I must get used to it wave by wave. A sign posted nearby warns, "Never turn your back on the ocean." I look toward shore, taking in glimpses of palms and plumeria trees to hold in memory as I confront the sea.

For the next four days, I will immerse myself in a special world, joining more than a thousand writers from thirty states and thirteen countries. The Maui Writers Conference is the world's largest of its kind. It is to publishing what the Cannes Film Festival is to the motion picture industry. Authors with multiple titles on national bestseller lists, as well as editors, agents, and screenwriting consultants, will bestow gifts of wisdom, inspiration, and practical advice for both beginners and pros.

I wade out, up to my knees at first, then, just past the place where swirling sand tumbles toward shore, the water clears. A school of minnow-like fish comes near. Reports of shark attacks on CNN cable news network come to mind, and I freeze but breathe deeply to calm my fear. The fish ignore me and swim on. I walk out until the water reaches my shoulders. An approaching wave scares me as it builds height, but I stand my ground. The wave taps my chin as it moves past—a surprisingly gentle passing, not the crashing tidal wave I expect. I've heard that ocean water tastes salty, so I dip my fingers, dab a few drops on my lips and taste. I hold my breath, dip down, and let the water baptize me for the coming journey into myself.

I've already published five nonfiction books co-written with collaborators and aimed at niche markets. I've sold hundreds of articles and a few poems, but I'm eager to publish a book that's solely mine. Still, I face a nagging terror that when I stand alone, I won't measure up. So many writers have the same hopes. So many manuscripts—with so few published. At home, I'm an established, almost-famous writer. Here, I'm a novice.

Can I ever hope to compete?

Gifts

The conference opens with a presentation by Hawaii's unique storytellers, hula dancers wearing *ti* leaf skirts and fresh orchid *leis*. Accompanied by a traditional gourd drum, their graceful motions carry stories of Hawaiian lore. In the absence of a written language in early times, islanders used the hula to retain Hawaii's historical record for centuries.

After the dancers, keynote speaker Dorothy Allison welcomes us. She is author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a national bestseller and finalist for the National Book Award, and *Cavedweller*, which reached the New York Times bestseller list. She volunteers to be the "Maui Grandmother" and invites us to join what she calls simply "the tribe" of writers. She asks us to take a seat at the table for a little Red Eye Gravy—a Southern concoction made in "a skillet that hasn't been cleaned too good." Red Eye Gravy is prepared using hot fat, burned pork crust and black coffee—the three things she says all writers need.

And she asks us to share our stories. "I want to be destroyed by story," she says.

The workshops begin, and a dozen featured speakers and about fifty authors and editors share their advice at nearly one hundred presentations. Bryce Courtenay, whose first book, *The Power of One*, has become an international bestseller translated into eleven languages, tells us, "Write only the big story. Place bigger-than-life characters in extraordinary circumstances."

And don't forget the "bum glue," he adds. (That's the stuff you apply to your bum to glue yourself to the chair in front of your computer.)

The meeting room for the workshop, "How To Write a Great Sex Scene," is packed beyond capacity. The air is hot and steamy as we learn how to construct a sex scene with a beginning, middle, and end from presenter Elizabeth Engstrom Cratty. She has published six books, including *Lizzie Borden*, *When Darkness Loves Us*, and *Nightmare Flower*, a Bram Stoker nominee for fiction.

"What's the difference between erotica and pornography?" she asks.

"The reader," someone says.

I think that's a pretty good answer, but her answer is "a love element."

"Pornography is just body parts slamming together," she says. She stresses the importance of the moments after the sex act is complete. "That's when your characters are most vulnerable," she says. "It's a great time to reveal character."

Best selling suspense and horror writer John Saul teams up with Mike Sack for "Building a Solid Story," a two-session, audience-participation workshop. He starts with "What if?" to establish a conflict. Then asks, "Who's the character?" "What's her name?" "Where does she live?"

Christopher Vogler, a producer and writer who has worked in film development at United Artists, the Walt Disney Company, Warner Brothers, and Fox 2000 Pictures, and who also wrote a book called *The Writer's Journey*, show us how to follow the twelve phases of heroic myth structure outlined in his book.

I am learning much, but my quest has just begun.

The Inmost Cave

With fifty-three available agents, editors, and screenwriting consultants and so many writers who want to meet them, I must get past the first of the gatekeepers, the volunteers who serve as palace

guards for the inner sanctum—the inmost cave. That’s where the interviews are held and where the object of my quest resides. The process for gaining access reminds me of college enrollment before the days of the personal computer. I remember waiting in long lines at the University of Kansas, hoping the 9:30 a.m., Tuesday-Thursday “Introduction to Anthropology” would still be open when I reached the enrollment table. If not, I’d have to take a 6:30 morning class.

In Maui, an elaborate lottery system assigns me a place in line. While I wait, I consult the list of agent bios and the genres they represent. I fill out a form listing my top ten choices in order. After a conference credential check, I am admitted to the room. It is set up with long tables and roped off with a back-and-forth line like the one at my bank, except for the Hawaiian greenery. I stand elbow-to-elbow with other attendees and hand my list to the “first available teller.” She scurries from station to station behind the table to set my appointments.

“Your first choice is full,” she says upon returning. “But I got you your second third and fourth.”
I move on.

Outside the room, I stop a volunteer and ask whether the agents we don’t get to see will leave their business cards somewhere so we can contact them.

“They don’t like to do that,” she says. “If they’re interested in a project, they’ll give out their cards.”

Five minutes before my first appointment, I comb my hair. My hands tremble as I apply eye shadow and lipstick. Expecting rejection, but hoping against it, I line up outside the double doors guarded by two more gatekeepers. Other volunteers perform a credential check and appointment verification. With one minute to go, one of the volunteers at the door explains the process.

“The agents, editors, and screenwriting consultants are arranged at tables in alphabetical order,” he says. “You have exactly ten minutes. After eight minutes, we’ll ring a warning bell to tell you to wrap it up. When the second bell rings, exit through the doors over there.”

We crowd toward the “in” doors, and he opens them. Hopeful writers flood into the room like water through a failed dam. I take a deep breath and join them. The room looks like a restaurant set only with tables for two. I find the agent and introduce myself.

“Where are you from?” she asks.

I shrug and look at the floor. “Kansas.” I’m afraid she’ll count me out unless I live in Los Angeles or New York.

Her eyes shine. “I’m from Kansas!” Her hometown is much smaller than mine.

I show her my cookbook and children’s picture book rap sheets—one-page documents with author’s bio and manuscript synopsis or table of contents. She has represented several cookbooks, but says she’s not the right agent for mine. And although she handles children’s picture books, she classifies mine as “children’s inspirational,” which she doesn’t represent. A bell that sounds like the one that rings when the angel gets his wings at the end of *It’s a Wonderful Life!* signals the two-minute warning. I gather my things to leave, but she is still talking. She gives me the name of a publisher who might be interested in my book. The unexpected advice softens my disappointment and renews my hope. The bell rings again.

The next day, I meet another agent. “Where are you from?” she asks.

"Kansas," I say with more confidence than yesterday.

She leans around the table and looks at my feet. "Where are your red shoes?"

"I don't need them," I say. "I don't want to go home!"

I hand her my cookbook rap sheet. She reads it and shakes her head. "These chapter titles are boring. No one wants to read them." She suggests "spicier" wording.

I nod, resisting the urge to argue. I want people to read the book, not the table of contents. She elaborates, and I realize she's right. If the table of contents grabs potential readers, they'll be more likely to buy the book.

"I can do that," I say. "I just went to Sam Horn's 'That's Original' workshop on creating titles. I have some tools to use."

"Good," she says. "When you do that, I'll take another look."

It's an encouraging response, but one lacking enthusiasm.

The next afternoon, I see my fourth-choice agent—the one I'd never have met if my first choice agent's schedule hadn't filled before I got to the "enrollment table." She first looks at my cookbook rap sheet and nods. We discuss the concept.

"My son would love this," she says.

I summarize my novel. She carefully reads the rap sheet. I sit still, not wanting to interrupt her concentration.

"Sounds good!" she says, handing me her business card. "Send it to me!"

I clutch the treasure, the object of my quest. I will myself not to jump up and engulf her in a bear hug.

"And when you do," she adds, "send the cookbook proposal, too."

I can't believe it! On the way out, I concentrate on each step, making sure each foot touches the ground before I lift the other. My projects are worthy—at least good enough for an agent to want to see more. I am bathed in the warmth of success and reborn a new writer!

Packing for home, I assemble handouts, class notes, and tapes from the workshops. I will share these lessons with other members of the Kansas City Writers Group back home. And I'll remember to share a bit of Dorothy Allison's Red Eye Gravy and Bryce Courtenay's "bum glue."

But I'm not ready to leave.

I understand why no one ever leaves Maui without vowing to return. I'm like someone who, during a near-death experience, gets the choice of staying in paradise or going back to complete unfinished business on Earth. I want to choose to stay here. I devise schemes to miss the plane. My ordinary life of editors, deadlines, and trips to the veterinarian calls me. But the call is so faint, I pretend not to hear it. In my reverie, I turn my back on the ocean and walk up onto the beach. Without turning to look, I know that I, too, leave footprints for someone else to follow.

I am reminded of a television show called *Inside the Actor's Studio*. Host James Lipton interviews famous actors for an audience of acting students. At the end of each show, he asks the same list of questions. "What's your favorite word?" "What profession other than yours would you like to pursue?" The list ends with, "If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the pearly gates?"

I know my answer.

I want God to say, "Aloha and welcome to the Maui Writers Conference."