

# THE TEACHER'S EDITION

*After-School Sessions with Our Favorite Teachers—by Ann Charles*

Hello, everybody. I've set out to interview some of my favorite writing teachers and learn more about them as teachers, not just as authors.

Today, I'm staying after class to talk with: **John Foxjohn**

Best-selling author John Foxjohn epitomizes the phrase "been there—done that." Whether consciously or unconsciously, maybe one of the first authors he followed contributed to this.

Many years ago, John became afflicted with a disease he calls "readaholism." His addiction to reading led him to Louis L'Amour, and even today, he continues to reread books by this author.

Louis L'Amour had a diverse background before he began to write and John followed that path—born and raised in the rural East Texas town of Nacogdoches, he quit high school and joined the Army at seventeen. Viet Nam veteran, Army Airborne Ranger, police officer and homicide detective, retired teacher and coach, and now he is a multi-published author.

Although John writes an entirely different genre than Louis L'Amour, he followed the author's path by using his diverse background and meticulous research. Although John's novels are fictional, many readers believe they are true stories.

Like his favorite author, John creates characters that readers love and root for—not cardboard cutouts. John says, "Normal people have faults and strengths—they make mistakes and need to overcome them and other obstacles thrown in their path. People judge others by how they handle adversity. That's how I attempt to create characters."

If you have read John's novels, you know that he is successful.

John hasn't yet reached the huge success of Louis L'Amour, but don't bet against him.

John is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Romance Writers of America, Elements of Romance, Kiss of Death, Lethal Ladies, Sisters-in-Crime, East Texas Writers Guild, League of Texas Writers, and more online writing groups than he can count. He is a full time writer and speaker and lives in Lufkin, Texas, but travels extensively across the U.S.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **Based on all you do (teaching, promoting, traveling), you sound like a very busy author. How do you fit writing time in with all of your other 'jobs'? Are you extremely disciplined, or just extremely prolific—or both? Is there a technique you can share to help us be more successful in juggling the many roles authors now face?**

LOL, you are right, I am busy and miss a lot of sleep. Sometimes busier than I want to be, but then I think of what got me this busy and I plunge ahead. At the moment, I am preparing for a month-long online class on writing. But to answer the question, I am extremely organized, and to be honest, I prioritize well.

I get about five hundred e-mails a day. Many of those are questions on police procedures, homicide investigations, that sort of thing. But about ninety percent of them are the same questions over and over. I actually have a list of answers so I cut and paste the answer.

2. **List three of your favorite writing self-help books. (For example, Chris Roerden's book, *Don't Sabotage Your Submission.*)**

- *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne & Dave King—I think every writer who is serious about getting ahead should have this book.
- *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing* by Evan Marshall
- *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass
- And I want to add one more to this list just so no one will think I am modest—I have one that I am in the process of writing that I believe will be pretty good.

3. **Did you decide to become a writer after retiring from law enforcement work? If so, what prompted that decision?**

Over the years, I can't tell you how many people think that I retired in law enforcement. People have introduced me as a retired homicide detective for years, and it isn't true.

My bio says that I epitomize the saying, been there and done that. It is perfect for me. I was a cop for ten years and a homicide detective for four. I investigated over three hundred homicides and many consider me an expert in several phases of forensics and investigations.

I quit police work to go to college, and I didn't major or minor in criminal justice. I graduated from college and started teaching and coaching, and that is what I retired from.

I actually decided to write a book about Crazy Horse when I was twelve years-old—it just took me about forty years to do it. I started writing murder mysteries and romantic suspense after I wrote the historical fiction.

4. **Your website mentions that you are ‘sought out to teach writers self-promotion techniques.’ What kind of self-promotion has worked best for you in selling your books?**

Other writers have labeled me “The King of Self-promotions.” I guess it has something to do with the 5,000 books I have sold at IHOP, not to mention other places. I never miss an opportunity to tell people about my work. When people ask what I do, I don’t just tell them I’m a writer. I brief them on my latest projects, as well as my best-sellers. In other words, I’m not shy.

I take an active approach to promoting. It has a tendency to get me in trouble because I hate to say no to people and therefore, I have a tendency to overextend myself.

Right now I have a bunch of ARCs for writers who want blurbs for their books, and I probably should have turned most of them down, but I only said “no” to a few and I have to figure out a way to cram them in.

5. **This June you are teaching an online class for the RWA Kiss of Death Chapter titled, “Eight Ways to Murder a Manuscript without a Conviction.” Will you give us a brief teaser for this class? Will you be teaching it again any time soon?**

This is the month-long class I talked about earlier. When I began writing, other writers found out that I had expertise in law enforcement, and began asking me to talk to their groups. The more classes I taught, the more in demand I became.

Somewhere along the line, these groups also figured out that I knew a little about writing, too. Someone asked me to teach a class on characterization. This is something many people believe I excel at, and it escalated from there. I also love to teach.

After several years of seeing the most common mistakes, I created the Eight Steps of Murdering a Manuscript without a Conviction.

The class covers eight major areas that get a writer rejected. For this class coming up, I am adding a section on scene and sequel as well as action and reaction.

A few weeks ago, I was working to expand this class and my wife said, this isn’t a class—it’s a book.

I thought about that for a moment and realized I actually had a writing book.

6. **In August, you are teaching a Police Procedures/Homicide Investigation workshop for the RWA Kiss of Death Chapter. What are some of the biggest mistakes that writers make when it comes to using law enforcement in one form or another in their stories?**

By far the biggest mistake is with jurisdictions. All that ninety-nine percent of writers know about law enforcement comes from TV or

movies, and they seldom realize that the entertainment industry's goal is to entertain—not educate.

It is very difficult for most writers to put themselves into the head of a homicide detective, or understand what goes on inside a law enforcement agency.

The second biggest mistake I see is writers who can't separate reality from their ideal of what law enforcement should be. They don't seem to understand that law enforcement is made up of people—the same kind of people as everyone else.

7. **In 2007, your book *Cold Tears* was voted the best mystery in the world in the Preditors and Editors Readers Poll. In the same poll, *Journey of the Spirit* was voted second in the mainstream category. How did you get your books entered in this poll? And what effect did your first place and second place wins have on your sales' numbers?**

Actually, readers nominate the books and vote in the poll. It is one of the best polls I have seen. They have anti-stuffing software that keeps unscrupulous writers from stuffing the polls.

It is truly the vote by actual readers.

In that one, I never got to vote on mine. The poll was over when my editor called me to let me know about it.

It is one thing to receive honors from writers and writing organizations, and I have received some, and appreciate them, but that isn't why I write.

For me, there is no bigger compliment than my fan base taking their time and own initiative to nominate and then vote.

And to be honest, it made my sales soar, but it also helps that those are two pretty darn good books.

8. **Why do you enjoy teaching/helping other writers?**

I didn't get to where I am by myself—trust me on that. I have had so many writers help me that it would be impossible to name a fourth of them.

They did this without asking for a single thing of me. Teaching is my way of giving back.

I travel all over doing workshops and conferences and the only thing I ask for is bare expenses. Writers tell me that I am crazy for not charging a fee, but I don't. That isn't why I do it.

I sent a blurb on an ARC to a writer on a debut novel yesterday, and she e-mailed me back thanking me, and jokingly asked, "What do I owe you?"

She probably didn't realize that I do require a price. I told her to remember what I did when someone asks her for one in the future.

That is my price—pass it on.

9. **You're a big fan of Louis L'Amour (me, too!) What is it about his writing that makes him stand out from other fiction authors? What do you feel readers can learn by studying his books?**

I'll start with what authors would learn by reading his books—characterization, pure and simple. He was a master at it. I have never been as mad at an author for dying as him.

He left millions of fans wanting more.

He just had a way of telling a story. For me, *To the Far Blue Mountains* was one of the best books I have ever read.

Many of my fans who have read *Journey of the Spirit* compare it favorably to Louis L'Amour. That is one of the greatest compliments that anyone has ever given me.

10. **What is one of the most popular questions you receive from writers regarding police procedures?**

LOL, that is easy. Is CSI real?

My answer is as simple—of course not.

11. **Given your experiences in law enforcement, what story do you most like to tell?**

Ah, you did say like to tell. Without naming people and places, I'd just graduated from the police academy and spent a couple of weeks on patrol with a training officer. This happens in all police departments.

Then, the moment finally came. They let me go out on patrol all by myself—soloing.

I can't tell you the adrenaline rush that produces. Here I was with no safety net and I was determined to rush out and nail all the bad guys. This is also a common emotion in rookies.

The department chose to let me solo on the evening shift—3PM-11PM. It had been a slow day for everyone else, but not for me. I probably gave out a hundred tickets from 3 to about six-thirty, then I got the call I had been waiting on all day.

Dope party reported at 1234 West Fake Street. I was about to make a huge drug bust. I floored the car getting there—really had to curb the urge to turn on the lights and sirens. I flew down the street reading addresses, but something was wrong. I went by the post office and it was 1230 West Fake Street. The next building on that side was the police station.

I went down about six blocks to see how the numbers went but they continued up.

I was in the downtown area and there wasn't any dope party in that area.

I went the other way to make sure I was actually on West Fake Street and not East.

When I discovered I was, I didn't know what to do, and it was getting dark. I called the dispatcher to confirm the address, and she gave it to me again, 1234 West Fake Street.

Now, I was in trouble. No way could I call in and tell them I couldn't even find the darn address of a serious call. They'd laugh me off the department. Then something occurred to me.

Why didn't they assign me back up? It was standard procedure on calls like that. Then it occurred to me that no one had spoken on the radio since the call came in. I was going back in the direction of the police department and I pulled into the front parking lot. I was thinking about running in the front and asking the dispatcher where the heck the place was, and that way no one else would know.

I sat in the front a couple of minutes and I figured it out. I called the dispatcher and told her I was 10-23—Arrived on the scene.

She came back and with the most surprised voice I have ever heard, asked me where I had arrived.

I told her 1234 West Fake Street.

About a minute later, I called back in and requested back-up.

I couldn't see the back of the police department from where I was, but I sure wish I could have. Seconds later, police cars exploded out of the back parking lot, tires screeching, rubber burning, and lights and sirens going.

Every single cop on duty, and quite a few who weren't, had been inside while they played their little joke on me.

Until that moment there had been no radio traffic, not a peep. It also exploded, the patrol sergeant demanding to know where I was. I told him I was at 1234 West Fake Street.

They couldn't find me. The lieutenant and captain were in cars racing to find me and demanding to know where I was. They were positive I had gone to the wrong place and stepped in it badly. Of course if something bad happened, they were all in trouble because proper procedure wasn't followed.

This went on for about ten minutes—cops going up and down the street in front of the police department, taking all the side streets trying to find my car. The sergeant was directing some to go east just in case I had gone that way.

Finally, one of them flew by and saw my car right there in front of the police department—1234 West Fake Street.

I won't tell you some of the names they called me. I don't think they ever did that particular rookie initiation again.

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Check out John's website at <http://www.johnfoxjohnhome.com/index.html> to learn more about his books, speaking schedule, and contact information.

Thank you, John, for sharing your time with all of us Guppies; and thanks to all of you Guppies for reading along! If any of you have a particular "teacher" you would like me to interview, please email me with his or her name and any other helpful information.

Until the next after-school session...

Ann Charles  
Mystery, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sun!

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