

THE TEACHER'S EDITION

Afterschool 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: Mary Buckham.

After college and marriage, Mary Buckham joined the Corporate world to escape diapers (six kids!) and dishes. She worked in Accounting and Finance before she realized what she really wanted to do—write. And she did! Freelance articles. A non-fiction book. She became an editor for a regional magazine and a contributing editor for two others. In short, she wrote everything except letters to her mother...who continually reminds her.

Now Mary divides her time between her family, writing fiction, and teaching fiction. Around the country in 2008, you will find Mary helping all kinds of writers—published and non-published—in mixed genre, mystery, romance, and suspense. With her generosity of time and knowledge, she is a great role model. She always brings a smile to my face and usually leaves me laughing.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **How do you find time to write and edit your books, along with traveling, teaching, and sleeping? Do you throw back Red Bulls like they're PEZ candies? Do you have some time-management secret you care to share?**

LOL! If I'd known about Red Bull when I started as a writer I might have been pumping it into both veins and owning stock in the company. Actually I learned a very important lesson years ago that has kept me sane. The lesson is we're all given 24 hours in the day. So I looked around at women and men I admired asked myself how they accomplished more in their days? I noticed that they didn't wait for permission to allocate their time. They didn't make more time, they used their time more wisely – making sure their priorities were not buried beneath everyone else's priorities. If I'm a writer then I write – if I watch TV or overly volunteer or extend secondary projects [laundry, emailing, blogging] then it's my responsibility to reap what I've sown. This life isn't a dress rehearsal for my next one. Every day I get choices to make as to how I will find time to write while staying flexible with my whole life – mother, business owner, friend, wife, traveler etc.

2. **List three of your favorite writing self-help books. (For example, *GMC: Goal, Motivation, Conflict* by Debra Dixon.)**

The first is a book I'm currently writing now called the BREAK INTO FICTION™ book with the wonderfully talented Dianna Love Snell. This book grew out of a series of templates I designed as a teaching system to help writers understand plot and structure in order to write their synopses and plot commercial fiction. I can only help so many people individually, or even in classroom settings, and

as editors and agents can no longer fill a key roll in challenging us as writers – they have so many other duties to fulfill – there appeared to be a huge gap for writers who had some writing experience but couldn't find how to take their writing from pre-pubbed, or a few books under their belts, to published and productive. We hope to see this first book in the series on shelves in early 2009 and are very excited about the potential to help new and struggling writers with it. For more information about the book and project, visit www.BreakIntoFiction.com.

As for two other books – I love *WRITING THE BREAKOUT NOVEL* by Donald Maass for taking your writing to a deeper level and *WRITING WITH EMOTIONAL IMPACT* by Karl Iglesias as one of the few books on the market to address emotion in one's writing.

3. **Were you a teacher first and published writer second? Or the other way around?**

I've never been a teacher – never thought of myself as a teacher. I think of myself more as a person who feels passionately about what I'm doing and what I'm learning and I love, love, love to share. So I never walk into a workshop or seminar or online class thinking I've got something to teach you – I approach it more as we're all in this wonderful, huge game of writing and publishing with tons to offer each other.

4. **What's your next class on the slate?**

I'll be teaching *PACING* in April of 2008 and *SEX ON THE PAGE: Understanding and Writing Sexual Tension* in September of 2008 (both through www.WriterUniv.com). I'll also give live workshops in Houston, Richmond, Seattle, Portland, ME, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco and elsewhere. For the most up-to-date locations and topics, check out my website at www.MaryBuckham.com or www.BreakIntoFiction.com.

5. **Was there a key change you made to your writing or to your focus on writing in your pursuit of publication that became the turning point in your career?**

Great question, Ann, in part because you keyed into the fact that to be a writer involves not only craft aspects but a mindset, too. For many writers the only designation that we are "real" writers is a publishing contract. That's our degree to show the world that we are legit. But unlike a college degree – none of us know when we will receive our first contract. Some write for 20 years and some for two. Is one less a writer than the other? I don't think so. So at some point I eased myself away from defining myself as published or not and started thinking in terms of the process. I am a writer because I write, not because I am published in fiction book format. Once that statement is accepted – everything else becomes – what am I writing today, this month, or this year. You get to move past the "when will I be published" and move toward the – writing is a given, how shall I manifest it in my life at this time – in articles or books, by teaching or learning, in focusing on craft or learning more about the industry.

6. **If you had to choose one trait that you believe writers need in order to be a successful, published writer (not just a published writer), what would it be?**

Know your own definition of success vs. someone else's definition of success. Many writers want NYT status – and it's a great goal – but it's not the only goal nor measure of success. Being able to work from home might be the more successful goal for someone. Or success to another is being in a career full of intelligent, creative people who aren't afraid to take risks. Know what you want for success and be willing to examine it closely – what does that word mean to you? Are there limitations you're putting on yourself or expectations that are really someone else's dream and not your own? Success to me is getting to wake up every morning doing something that makes me feel passionate. Since writing is one of my passions, I'm a very successful woman. Is this my only measure of success? No – but it's a great place to start and it took a long time coming so I celebrate it daily.

7. **What are the biggest mistakes beginning writers make?**

Oh, that's an interesting question. I think the biggest mistake a beginning writer can make is to wait for permission from someone else to do what they are meant to do. I see writers hand away their power all the time – a rejection means a "no" vs. a "not for this house at this time". A bad critique becomes a roadblock instead of a speed bump. A change in life – new child, aging parent, new job, old job – becomes justification for not finding time to write instead of just something that happens and can be worked around. I also see too many writers fall into a mind set of how a "real" writer writes. As in if they don't have chunks of time, or a specific writing place, or a pattern that happens every day – they must not be real writers. Phooey! Does it matter if these pages were written one way or another? Make your life work for you – it's all you have to work with.

8. **What do you tell your students when they get discouraged about writing and/or getting published?**

Writing is not for wussies. If it was, the 82% of the American public that WANTS to write a book would write one. The reality is less than 1% will ever finish a book. We are a powerful, special group! Celebrate it. Focus on what you do want – not what you don't want. Daily choices. Give yourself a well-rounded life experience. Refresh your creative soul if your passion is waning. Fuel all of your passions and not just your writing. Surround yourself with people who challenge you to be better than you are, that don't zap your energy but expand it, and then pass that energy along.

9. **While many writers seem to be focusing a lot of energy on self-promotion to their fans, you are busy giving a lot of time and energy to teaching the craft to other writers. What made you choose this path? Was there someone in your past who mentored you and motivated you to share your knowledge?**

I would have killed to find a mentor when I was starting out and for the first couple of years as I struggled learning craft. But the Fairy Godmother was busy elsewhere during that time period so I kept moving forward. I think many unpublished writers wait until they have a product in hand before they think of building name recognition. Once upon a time you wrote the book. It was published. You built a fan base from the bottom up – one book, one reader at a time. I think that's an older paradigm that can hold many writers back over the course of their career. Writers are readers first and foremost, and

voracious readers. I don't reach out to other writers to sell a book – I reach out to other writers because they are all around me. If, because we connected or I was able to help them in some way, they pick up one of my books down the road – great. If they never pick up my book – I'm okay with that, too. To me it's not about selling this book or that one – it's about connection and sharing – and I'll do that regardless of whether I think someone will buy a book.

10. **Speaking of self-promotion, is there a single promotional tool you use that you believe helps you sell more books?**

Sincerity. I sincerely believe that not every book is meant for every reader. If a reader loves high-energy, fun, witty and fast-paced books – I can give them mine. But if they love lyrical, literary, angst-driven stories – I am going to recommend other writers who they will enjoy more. That's a win-win situation for me. Authors are so much more responsible for driving their own careers these days as opposed to waiting for name recognition being built by book sales alone. It's been my opportunity to build name recognition outside of the books I've had on the shelves. I love that side of the business and strongly recommend all writers – published or not – learn about the business end long before their first contract is in hand.

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Mary loves hearing from readers, writers, and everyone in between. Feel free to contact her at mary@marybuckham.com. For more information about Mary's writing world, visit her website at www.marybuckham.com.

Thank you, Mary, 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!

Written by Ann Charles, this essay was originally published in First Draft, May 2008.



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