

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: Michele Scott

Michele grew up thirty minutes east of San Diego in an area called Jamul. It was out there in the country that her parents bought Michele's first horse and she learned how to ride at age five. At nine years old she knew she loved to write and one day wrote a short story that she showed to her dad. She'd written it on one of his legal pads. After he read it, he looked at her and said, "You are a writer." With those words spoken, she's never stopped writing stories.

She graduated from the University of Southern California with a degree in Communications, where she studied journalism and hoped to be a reporter. But deep down inside, she'd never given up on being a fiction author. Fate intervened and during Michele's senior year at college she became pregnant with her first son who was born six weeks prematurely. She had to stay home with her newborn who needed constant care and it was at that time she decided to write her first book.

She contacted *Writer's Digest* and ordered their correspondence course on writing a novel. For ten years Michele kept writing, submitting, attending conferences and workshops, and receiving rejections but never giving up.

Finally in March 2004, Jessica Faust at Bookends signed her as a client. One month later, Michele received THE CALL from Jessica telling her that she had a publisher—Berkley Prime Crime, and that they wanted to sign her for three books in [The Wine Lover's Mystery Series](#). "It was surreal, wonderful, and a dream come true when my agent called and told me. That night my husband and I got a really nice bottle of Champagne and celebrated." Then in December a second call came in about *The Equine Mystery Series*.

Michele writes full-time now and lives in San Diego with her very supportive husband, two sons, and daughter.

Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **What is your take on the health of "niche" mysteries in today's publishing world?**

I think that certain publishers love the niche mysteries such as Berkley Prime Crime, and they do them well. This is what Berkley does and if you have a niche mystery they are the house to look to. I think most houses like series these days. Even in a poor economy, publishers need to buy books. It takes anywhere from a year to eighteen months to see a book on the shelves and a lot can happen in that time. People will continue to purchase or at least check out books from the library.

2. **You include romance subplots in your mysteries. Do you think this mix of genres is a growing trend for mysteries? Or is it another sub-genre of mysteries that is gaining in popularity—a “mystery romance” category (similar to “romantic suspense” and how those two genres have mixed into a popular, in-demand category)?**

I think a romantic subplot is an author's choice. I like to write them because to me it seems realistic for my heroines to be involved romantically with someone. I like showing all of the facets of my characters, and relationships bring out the best and worst in us. I don't know that it's a trend, but many readers do like a little romance in their mysteries. I think my subplots have helped to gain a wider audience within the romance community and that is a nice cross-over to have.

3. **You list four workshops on your website that you have given/will give: *Uncorking the Romance in Your Mystery*, *Writing the Mystery*, *Writing the Niche Mystery*, and *The 5 Ps*. What is the next class on your slate and what will you be covering in it?**

Right now I don't have any classes slated. I am so busy writing and taking care of my family that I haven't been teaching. I have been approached to do a one-day workshop on plotting the mystery at The San Diego Writer's Ink. I base much of that type of workshop on Frey's book, "How to Write a Damn Good Mystery."

4. **What do you think is the biggest challenge in forming or teaching a workshop on writing for fellow authors?**

I think the biggest challenge is making it not only interesting but also entertaining. It's important to keep students' attention and there is a fine line to walk when teaching. I want writers to learn and have fun. If the writing isn't fun, or doesn't at least give you a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day, then you may want to rethink it. Once in awhile a bad writing day happens, but for the most part I want writers really getting something out of it.

5. **You have a new mid-grade children's fantasy book out (in December 2008) called *Zamora's Ultimate Challenge* under the pseudonym M.K. Scott. Was it difficult to land a publishing contract for this book since your other books are adult mysteries, or did being a multi-published author open doors for you?**

Well, *Zamora's Ultimate Challenge* is a book that I wrote eight years ago when I was pregnant with my youngest. I was on bed rest with her and at the time I had been writing thrillers. I couldn't do the research that goes into a serial killer book, so I really thought about what I wanted to write. I wound up doing *Zamora* and it was intended for my three children and no one else. I never had any intentions on this book being published. Fast forward eight years, and I was at a writers' conference where I met the publisher of Echelon Press. The publisher (Karen) told me she was starting a young adult imprint and asked me if I would be interested in doing a book with a boy protagonist. I told her I already had one. She took the book, read it, then called me, and the rest is history. I'm really looking forward to seeing this book out there.

6. **Based on your experience with your wine- and equestrian-based mystery series, list three pieces of advice you have for authors who would like to write a mystery series?**

1. Sit on your butt and write. 2. Sit on your butt and write. 3. Sit on your butt and write. I am serious, you know. Tenacity is a huge part of the writing business. Also—read! READ everything because it is such a good way to learn how to be a better writer. Take classes/workshops, join a writers group, read industry magazines. STUDY. You have to go to school for eons to be a doctor, attorney, etc., being a writer is not an overnight deal either.

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

I don't know if these are self-help necessarily but here you go: Stephen King's *On Writing* and all of James Frey's *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* series.

8. **What kind of promotion/marketing has worked best for you so far in building a fan base?**

I wish I had a real concrete answer for that because if I did I would keep doing it. I think the website is crucial, AuthorBuzz has been great, blog campaigns, newsletters, writing articles, etc. I try almost anything and everything. I think you kind of have to.

9. **You are part of a group blog called The Cozy Chicks. One of the questions I've heard a lot of unpublished authors ask is if they should spend time blogging before they are published. What is your thought on blogging, for both the unpublished and published?**

No. I do not think unpubbed writers should spend time blogging. I think they should spend time writing. The only way you're going to get published is by writing your book, not talking or writing about writing your book, but by writing your book. For published authors, I don't know that we sell a lot more books through our blog. I think it's a good way to touch base with current readers and there is a lot to be said for reader loyalty and the blogs help facilitate that.

10. **You were on the cover of the November 2005 issue of "Romantic Times BOOKclub" magazine. With only one novel (your first), *Murder Uncorked*, on the bookshelves, how did you manage to not only get a two-page interview inside the magazine, but also land the cover shot?**

I had a great free-lance publicist who has some great connections.

11. **Also, in regard to that last question, I see that in January 2006, *Murder Uncorked* was nominated by Romantic Times BOOKreviews as "Best First Mystery Novel." Did your article and cover-shot in the November 2005 issue play a key role in landing this nomination for you? Or was this nomination a separate bonus that had nothing to do with the promotional benefits from the November 2005 issue of the magazine?**

Maybe it did, because readers learned about the book and went out and bought the book (which is now in a fifth printing). I don't think the reviewers

at RT nominate because a writer has been in their magazine. I was also on the cover and had an interview about the equestrian mysteries in 2006, and *Saddled with Trouble* was not nominated. However, it did reach the Independent Mystery Bestseller list in Dec. 2006.

12. Do you have a publicist who helps you line up book signings and interviews, promote book releases, and spread hype about you/your books? Or do you do all of the work yourself and if so, how—with three kids (you can't have a lot of time to do all of this work AND write novels)?

Both. I have utilized publicists off and on. Right now, I am doing it on my own and it is not easy. I have pulled back quite a bit and really focused on my writing for the past year. I work twelve hour+ days much of the time. I love it though, and I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I wasn't always busy. I love writing. I love readers, and so doing both the writing and reaching out to the readers makes me a happy writer.

* * *

You can read more about Michele on her website: www.michelescott.com (where you can also go to contact her).

Thank you, Michele, 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, January 2009.



All rights reserved. No part of this Web page may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.