

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: Robert W. Walker

Robert W. Walker is a graduate of Chicago's Wells High School, Northwestern University, and the NU's Graduate Masters in English Education program. Rob has taught writing in all its permutations ("All writing is creative writing but not all writing sings," he says.) from composition and developmental to a study of the literary masters to creative and advanced creative writing. His first novel was one only an arrogant youth could have conceived—a sequel to Huckleberry Finn (now published as *Daniel & The Wrongway Railway*, Oak Tree Publishers, hardcover 1982, and paperback on Amazon.com). But his first suspense-techno-thriller-sf-mystery came in 1979, after college, a novel that won no awards entitled SUB-ZERO. Since then, counting his Kindle books, he has published some 44 novels.

While born in Corinth, Mississippi, Robert grew up in Chicago, IL, so he was witness to crime long before anything else. At an early age, 12–13 perhaps, he began writing as most do, to gain some control of the chaos of life. He was drawn to stories and films having to do with the unusual, the arcane, the bizarre, and curious from Ripley's Believe It or Not to Twilight Zone to Science Fiction Theatre and the highly entertaining ONE STEP BEYOND as well as The Outer Limits.

His greatest influences have been too many to list, but here is the top of the list: Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Alexander Dumas, Martin Cruz Smith, Thomas Thomas, Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, and more recently, Patricia Cornwell, the person who finally unmasked Jack the Ripper (kudos to her!). He is also now reading the strange tale of Elmer McCurdy—a history of an American outlaw. He is in the midst of working on a screenplay, keeping up with Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, Acme Authors Link (blogging), online marketing, www.Speakwithoutinterruption.com, and 1stTurningpoint.com, as well as working on his next novel, a sequel to *Dead On*.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **In one of the interviews on your website, you recommended that writers should not quit their day job. Is there a story behind this recommendation?**

I have always had to "support the habit" so to speak as there is no steady stream of checks pouring in from writing for 99 percent of us writers, and only a small fraction of us enjoy the sort of success that relieves you of having to make a living otherwise. You can count on one hand the number of authors in any one genre who are independently wealthy – two in horror we know of. One year I made a hundred thousand dollar deal but it is doled out over four books in the contract, so that each book at 25,000 is further cut in portions so you get partial payment say of ten on signing, fifteen on final delivery, and so by the time each book is written, what four years later, you have earned a whopping average of 20,000 a year. Do you know anyone who can live and support a family on that these days? Don't quit your day job

is sound advice, unless Oprah or Clint Eastwood calls, OK? But also treat your writing as a full-time endeavor. You are working two jobs.

2. **You are very active in promoting your books. What are some of the toughest lessons you've learned about the "art" of self-promotion?**

No one knows what works and what doesn't in selling a book; Joe Konrath and I, over the years, have really concentrated on not selling the book so much as selling ourselves. If the prospective buyer likes you, responds positively to you, if he likes that you show an interest in him, or his kids (not the wife!) then bingo, you might well make a sale. You can carry it too far, however, as when I said in a crazy Jerry Lewis voice to this lady lifting the latest Stephen King tome to her hungry eyes, "Hey, lady! Put that down and—" before I could finish the poor frightened person raced down the mall away from the store and me. I was going to finish with "and take a look at a really scary book—mine!" It was as though she thought herself caught as a shoplifter, she was out of there so fast. So that was a lesson, but I still "toss" books for prospective buyers to "catch"—but only after I make certain eye-contact and they know it is coming. Online marketing is an entirely different animal, but I am doing blogs, blog tours, some his and her blog tours with my writer wife, Miranda, and am ever on at all the "usual" places and have been building relationships there. Even online you don't sell your book so much as you sell yourself, and besides, with my dog, Pongo, in the jacket photo with me, well, Pongo sells far more books than I ever could.

3. **What is your favorite writing-related subject to teach and why?**

Creative Writing is my favorite class to teach – surprise! However, I have taught reluctant writers at the college level and high school level who could not put their thoughts together, and in the same day have turned round and taught folks who had completed their first or second novels or book of short stories or poems. I enjoy seeing the light bulb go on at the back of the eyes, somewhere in the skull of a student when he/she sees that within their first paragraph they have committed the same error three, four, sometimes ten times such as using the word WAS ten times in a paragraph—in other words, passive on top of passive construction. The number one sin in writing is to confuse and/or bore your reader. I enjoy teaching the myriad elements that make dramatic writing dramatic and so very different from textbook and nonfiction writing, and I have a gift for training others to write far more compelling fiction than when they started with me. I do have a degree in English and a MS in English Education, and I ghost write and edit the works of others, bringing to bear the thirty-odd years I have been edited by the best—NYC editors from whom I have learned my lessons.

Oh, and I love teaching Literature and talking about it from the "other side" – from the author's side of the book or story as in what was Hawthorne thinking when he penned Young Goodman Brown? Or Browning when he penned My Last Duchess?

4. **List three of your favorite writing self-help books—can be craft- or promotion-related. (For example, Chris Roerden's book, *Don't Sabotage Your Submission*; or J.A. Konrath's free book, *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing*.)**

I know Chris and Joe both, and both have excellent advice that cuts across any and all genres. In other words, Ms. Roerden's book is not just about mystery writing but about writing your synopsis, your outline, and your query letter no matter the genre. Joe's book is fan-tab-u-lous for beginners and a work of labor. He's gone through the

crucible and he doesn't want YOU—anyone else—to suffer as he has, and I know the feeling myself. My other all-time favorites are: Jerome Stern's great Making Shapely Fiction (as if Stern crawled into my head and told me what I do and how I do it—and I use the book in my writing classes). Others like Dave Morrell, Dean Koontz, even, and Tom Sawyer (not Twain's Sawyer) have great books out. If you Kindle, you can find MY how-to on writing entitled DEAD ON WRITING – named after my latest novel, Dead On. If you don't Kindle...you'd have to beg, borrow, or steal it...or contact me for a download of the PDF or RTF file and I may or may not charge you for it.

5. **Do you have any classes or workshops you are scheduled to give in the near future? If so, what and when?**

I am teaching two classes of the boring stuff— freshman composition at West Virginia State University this fall but no creative writing there, although I incorporate and encourage creative writing even in the nuts and bolts class designed to get students to organize their thoughts in a coherent pattern or shape. Much of fiction rules are in fact hugely helpful to the composing of research papers and the like as in exaggeration and imagination, even dialogue, and a host of fictional tools. I have an online one-on-one class that is ongoing anytime, anywhere you are and your fiction is the content. I work with you on it closely—comments, edits, suggestions, deletions, prepositions as well as suppositions on how to make it sing and not just clear. In composition the watchword is if you can't make it sing, at least make it clear; in fiction vice-versa. And, of course, there's my Knife Editing Services found on my website wherein I do a complete book autopsy on your book. Yes, I put it on the slab and we butcher it; I have been called a butcher and a saint depending on "where" the student was at—when the student is ready the master appears! When the student is not ready, he/she can be led to water but not made to drink.

6. **In one of your writing-related articles, you speak about story and character webs. Please explain what these "webs" are and why we need to keep them in mind while writing our stories?**

The character web is so helpful. Picture your favorite story, TV drama, film, or book. If it is the Sopranos, who is at the center of the character/story web? Tony Soprano. If it is TrueBlood, it is Sookie's story, so she is at the heart of the web. Draw a web, picture it. If it is Monk, he is center stage inside the web of characters and story lines and subplots and every 'thread' leads back to Monk, or Sookie in her case, or Tony in his. If it's Huck Finn the book, it's Huck Finn at the core of the web of characters and storylines Twain has crafted (and note that why this book is flawed is in the end, Tom Sawyer takes over at center stage and ruins the seriousness of the theme, trivializing it). In each case ask of the story and ask of your own story this question: Whose story is it anyway? Every point of view, every tangent, every other character is there only to relate to the center. The first circle consists of those closest to Sookie or Tony—family, friends; doctors at the next circle on the web along with grocers, bosses, shrinks. Where on the web do the enemies fall? The outer circle and they are conniving their way toward the center. And beware if you are close to Tony or Sookie or even Monk, you can get hurt or taken out. You can craft a character web for the antagonist as well as the protagonist (as well as other characters) and find where each web coincides or bumps. The main thing is that all the relationships are made clear and in concise lines, so you begin to see that much of character building is what the satellite characters whirling around your main character say and do in relation to Tony, Sookie, Monk as they help so much in defining who he is in how he relates to them, and vice-versa. Everyone's mind works differently, many rivers to the ocean,

but this visualizing and often sitting down and sketching out character webs has helped me greatly. Another visualization that helps is to draw each main character's "lifeline" in a graph showing from left to right how they intersect with the thickest line being your main character. This looks like so many snake lines on a sales chart. Visualization is the key here.

7. **What is the "fully realized, completely materialized character"?**

This is a character you have lived with for some time, not just a few days, and he has said to you, buddy, if you want to know me, to truly get in my head and in my bed, then you just will have to do some research, some meditation, some interviews, and maybe make some long distance calls to track down all the folks that ought to be in my character web. This is the character you in essence "become" in order to "portray" her, as in my Dr. Jessica Coran, ME for the FBI...who was lead character in an eleven-book series. I figuratively climbed into her bed and head for the duration, so that when I went on a vacation, I saw through her eyes what it'd be like for her to be at this location where I was drinking in the beauty of Hawaii, feeling so like a kid in this paradise and asking everywhere I went, 'how would Jess like this', 'what would her reaction be to meeting a forty-year veteran of the Hawaii police force (Five-O) now driving a tour bus and spitting at the Japanese, saying they, "bomb my homeland and now they are everywhere! Worse than Americans!"' How would Jess handle the lopsided problems found on the underbelly of this paradise as in the racism on all sides? Would she be surprised to find that the American melting pot was alive and well in Hawaii and that a postage stamp here cost the same as on the mainland, and the level of crime was the same as on the mainland? Or that a box of cereal cost 6.50?

To craft a fully realized character is to make a magic trick happen, to materialize a person onto the dramatic stage that before was a blank page.

8. **Your books span the genres, many crossing multiple genre lines within one story. Do you believe it is easier or more difficult these days to publish multi-genre stories? Have you struggled with finding a home for multi-genre stories?**

I have struggled indeed with one foot forward, two back due in large measure to agents who could not figure out what square hole to place this round peg into, with editors who want a niche for the book, as labels appear the watchword in publishing. Every book needs to be pigeonholed and every author should be "known" for writing X, Y, or Z. What fool of an author writes YAs, hystery-mystery, police procedurals, occult, horror, science fiction, monster mash, and serious literature? Said author is not building a Brand Name and is cutting his own throat. My friend and author, Joe Konrath, says of me, "Rob, you've burned more bridges than you've crossed." He is referring to my title fights (arguing over a change in your title gets you nothing but enemies), edit fights (ditto), book length fights (ditto), but what your agent and your editor want mostly is that when you have a success as in your medical examiner books, you keep writing medical examiner books even though CSI has cornered that market twenty years after you began it (I am one of the pioneers of the forensic, ME serial killer novel and had I a lab coat photo like others despite their not being surgeons...maybe I would have been more successful, with larger numbers, and then crowned by my publisher wherein I would have been catapulted to having an army at the publishing house getting out the word on my next book, or at least a press kit, but I digress.) Yes, if you notice, the big successes are fixed genre. What's an editor to do with a book that begins as a police pro, turns into an occult with science fiction

elements as in *Brain Watch*, now an ebook entitled—my title—*Brain Stem*. My last two books were a PI novel, *DEAD ON*, just out this July, and a Kindle ebook set in the past, what I term a *HYstery* novel...*Children of Salem*. One is my modern day PI Noir nod, the other the many times rewritten dissertation turned dramatic historical romantic thriller. Will the real R.W. Walker please stand up? Sorry but my interests are far reaching. The Kindle has freed me up to bypass agents, editors, and publishers to become my own boss—my own publisher and it is freedom. No title fights!

9. **One of your writing-related articles speaks about the importance of learning how to write romance and incorporate it in your stories. Why do you feel it is important to include romance? How did you learn how to write romance? And is there a book or course you would recommend to other authors to help them learn how to incorporate quality romance writing into their stories?**

A loaded question that. I tell students to write me a fight scene before I ask for a romance scene. There are a lot of skills required in choreography of both types of scenes. I feel a good mystery ought to carry on a good romance at the same time, but I love juggling more complex stories than do some. By the same token in my estimation a good romance ought to carry a good mystery embedded as well. A fine historical novel ought to have a huge romantic element. *Gone with the Wind* was a romance set against the backdrop of the Civil War and not so much about the Civil War as about *Scarlet*—who was at the center of the story web, and the whole of it was to illuminate her character as she went through the stages of coming of age amid the horrors of war and her ravaged and beloved Tara or home. Sure Rhett was important to the story but it was *Scarlet's* story through and through; Rhett never stood a chance of taking over at center stage or web. At the heart of what I am saying is that no matter the science in your science fiction tale, the history in your historical, the setting in your Atlanta PI by night, accountant by day tale—it is the human element, the human story that makes people care about it all, so that *Star Wars* would be nowhere had Luke Skywalker been robotic and unlikeable and not in search of his destiny and love found and lost, and father lost and found any more than *Moby Dick* would be of interest if we care nothing for Ishmael and the human plight that Ahab had placed him in, or *Scrooge* in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* if we cannot find something worthy in the old miser—as in his losses. The human condition is the real stage upon which the high wire of tension and conflict is tightly strung and not the technology or the history or the whaling industry or the banking industry and the like. Put a girl and a boy into any of these interesting settings and allow nature and drama to take their course.

10. **You have recently been reformatting some of your stories for use with Amazon's Kindle. Is there anything you have learned the hard way in this process that you can share to help the rest of us as we move into this new format?**

First, it is a freeing experience, and you sense that you have taken some control that was never yours before. You are not waiting for months, years, and you are tossing out old ideas and beliefs ground into you from youth that you have to "pay your dues" as if there is some "permanent record" and assessor paying heed. I have edited authors with great gifts and fantastic stories knowing they will be going through hell to find a home for the piece, and that they had a lot of "dues" to pay. Who is it that set this down as a rule? Who is keeping track of how many dues you

have put in or not? How many dues did James Patterson put in? How much Dan Brown? Kindle puts you in the driver's seat. You are now the guy who has often stood in your way in traditional publishing—the art director. You determine how large your name on the cover is going to be, what font to use, what the title will look like and how it will be laid out graphically (you may get help with this as I have with my son who owns his own graphics design business, Stephen@srwalkerdesigns.com, who has also helped me convert a document to html).

But think of it. You are the public relations director, and you are the bean counter, and you are the budget director, and you are the editor, agent, publisher, cheerleader, and boss. You determine the pub date (tomorrow or next Monday? Arbor Day or Halloween); you determine page length. You craft it and you stand by it. You write the description or “backflap copy.” And it is a fast and easy three-step process found online by anyone who goes to dtpamazon.com –Amazon's digital platform. Open it up and browse. Monthly royalty statements are easily accessed and readable. Ever try to read a traditional publisher's royalty statement? I have placed eight books up, most I set at 1.99, some a bit higher, and some quite a bit higher but even my Dead On is set far less than half the hardcopy at 8.99. Yes, you set the price as well; sometimes Amazon leaps in and cuts the price, but they typically leave it up to you.

I have only been at it for two months, and while I have not made a huge fortune, I have made more in those two months than I did from any other published book of mine, and I hope to make far more as word gets out on my original material, a book of short stories called Thrice-Told Tales, a novel called Cuba Blue, another DeJa Blue, two horror titles—The Serpent Fire and sequel, Snake Flesh Wars, Dead On, the novel, and Dead On Writing, the how-to. I am working on placing up the out of print occult novel, Salem's Child, with my original title and brought up to date as ABADDON.

11. What made you decide to go through the process of reformatting your books for the Kindle? Just experimenting? Felt like a change? Potential sales? You see it as the way of the future??

All of the above and the reasons enumerated in answer to number ten about the freedom of self-determination. You are talking to an author who has next to nothing to show for over forty novels published, a sad state of affairs but out of prints and poor judgments, errors I made, errors my “handlers” made all contributed to this fact, so yeah, money is my chief motivation but also I believe I have manuscripts that have been turned away not due to quality issues but due to bean counter issues. My last book didn't sell enough to suit the publisher, so they turn away a perfectly fine next book based on earlier numbers. It is their numbers game, and they don't want to bet on you, they go bet on another author who has a proven track record in their stable and pretty soon you are spoken of in terms of a broken down old race horse, so there's that. Most authors do not make it to the Olympics or the NBA or the NFL – I mean the pinnacle of publishing as there is not room up there for you and for Pamela Anderson and the other celebrity books that, like Sarah Palin, are given fast track green light treatment since the publisher has sunk millions into them to begin with. Kindle offers a new, fresh opportunity, a new door that authors have been going through and publishers have been reluctantly standing before, afraid to step through. HarperCollins has placed three of my books on Kindle—a trilogy starting with City for Ransom. These books are still available on Amazon. The original publisher priced them way too high. I didn't get to see the sales figures and was not consulted on the pricing or any other issue as they were in control. With Kindle I am

the MAN and no more fights with art directors, publicity folks who take your three-year working title and change it so it sounds more like a Stephen King novel, none of that.

12. **What story/book are you currently working on? Will this book also be available on Kindle eventually?**

DEAD ON just hit stores and Amazon.com and B&N.com, etc., as a hardcover and it is targeted expressly for the library market as it is a Five Star book and beautifully done as this time a publisher listened to me, as did Echelon Press when I published PSI Blue, and allowed my son's artwork to be used on the cover—that is his graphic design. So in this case the hardcover original and the ebook for Kindle both are sporting Stephen's fantastic design. It is at Kindle now at less than half the price of the library edition. I just put up on Kindle too the work in progress that has been occupying me for the past year – Children of Salem, my master work if you were to ask me. Do one for money, one for art, and this one's certainly for the art of it all. I am now re-formatting ABADDON and that is taking some time as I have to retype it entirely from a scanned copy. I am using the latest in HP scanners, cheap at two hundred bucks and an HP laptop as my Mac died, but the HPs are nicely compatible. I encourage anyone to browse at dtpamazon.com if at all interested in putting up a Kindle version of your book. I tell you, it is liberating! But you may want to get your stuff professionally edited first by a guy like me or Joe Konrath.

13. **You are very giving of your time, rarely asking for anything in return. Why do you enjoy teaching and helping other authors?**

You mean like now, here and now? Nature of the beast. Dunno really but have always liked showing others how things worked, especially helping other kids with their homework...guess I was always a teacher at heart. As to helping young writers find their way, well...sadly, I can never forget the truly black, dark depression and fear as a kid starting out that I was a raving fool to think that I could ever, ever, get any writing of mine published, and my teeth were knocked in by my first college writing instructor who agreed with my self-doubts and told me I'd never be a published author, and that in fact, I should save myself the embarrassment and drop his class. I later put Mr. Scarborough in as a minor character in the first Instinct title – Killer Instinct (Jess Coran), and I made him a fool and a small town pimp. Revenge is sweet. The next writing instructor I had was just the opposite and he could find something worthwhile and good in any piece of writing—even if it were just the effort put in. His name was Elliot Anderson, and he figures in my books only in heroic form. He was a student of the Iowa School of Writing where David Morrell taught. Anderson knew what he was doing along with John Jacob who allowed me to do my dissertation as a novel—a novel which is now my Kindle original, never before published Children of Salem – romance and intrigue in the time of the Witch Trials. Scarborough can eat it.

So I pass it forward. It's who I am. Joe Konrath and I have this in common as with so many other things. If you want something so badly that it burns in your soul, you work at it and you make it happen, and I learned from all this that you never tell anyone he or she cannot succeed. No one has that right, not even a blowhard professor, and Hemmingway was right, "Every freshman needs a built in bullshit detector."

Check out Rob's website at <http://www.robertwalkerbooks.com> to learn more about his books, blog, writing articles, and contact information.

Thank you, Rob, 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, September 2009.



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