

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: John Morgan Wilson

(Normally, I try to keep the author biography part of my interview to just a few paragraphs, but John's resume is so impressive that I wanted to share it in its entirety.)

John Morgan Wilson is an award-winning writer who has written prolifically in the fields of journalism, fact-based television, mystery novels, short stories, and screenplays. He is probably best known as the author of the Benjamin Justice mystery series, which has won the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award ("the Edgar") from Mystery Writers of America and three Lambda Literary Awards.

Born in 1945 on an army base in Tampa, Florida, John grew up in Manhattan Beach, California. In 1963, he graduated from Mira Costa High School, where he had begun to dabble in writing and was captain of the varsity wrestling team. At age 19, he began writing for his local newspaper, the South Bay Daily Breeze, as a stringer covering sports. In 1968, he earned a degree in journalism at San Diego State, where he was an award-winning columnist and managing editor of the campus newspaper, the Daily Aztec, and also the wrestling team captain.

In 1969, at age 24, after staff writing for several newspapers and freelancing for a number of magazines, John founded Easy Reader, a twice-monthly, "underground" newspaper in Hermosa Beach, California, where it is still being published today as a weekly, under editor and publisher, Kevin Cody. After handing Easy Reader over to Cody in 1971 for no money and with no strings attached, John freelanced full-time for many years. His byline appeared in more than a dozen major newspapers and many magazines, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune Magazine, Los Angeles Magazine, Surfer, TV Guide, Entertainment Weekly, the Advocate, and Writer's Digest, where John filed a regular column about writing for fifteen years. John has also written hundreds of pieces for the Los Angeles Times, writing for various sections. In the mid-1980s, he joined the LAT staff as an assistant editor, winning a Los Angeles Press Club Award for excellence in reporting on media. Most recently, John has become a contributor to West, the new LAT Sunday magazine.

In 1991, John moved from print journalism into television, first for Fox Entertainment News, where he served as a news editor, and later as a writer or supervising writer for numerous fact-based programs that aired on Fox, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, the Learning Channel, and Court TV. Among the regular series John wrote are Code 3 (1993-95) on Fox and Anatomy of Crime (1999-2001) and Video Justice (2005 and continuing) on Court TV. All three series are produced by Langley Productions, the company that also produces the long-running Fox documentary series, COPS. Other programs John has written for include Rivals, Mysterious Worlds, Police Beat, Now See This, and Hollywood's Greatest Stunts.

In 1993, John's first nonfiction book, *The Complete Guide to Magazine Article Writing*, was published, followed by *Inside Hollywood* in 1997, both from *Writer's Digest Books*.

In 1996, John's first novel, *SIMPLE JUSTICE*, was published by Doubleday, the first in a four-book deal. *SIMPLE JUSTICE* launched the Benjamin Justice mystery series and won the Edgar for best first novel. Other novels in the series (currently published by St. Martin's Minotaur) followed: *REVISION OF JUSTICE* (1997), *JUSTICE AT RISK* (1999), *THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE* (2001), *BLIND EYE* (2003), *MOTH AND FLAME* (2004), *RHAPSODY IN BLOOD* (2006), and *SPIDER SEASON* (to be published in 2008). When St. Martin's assumed publication of the Justice mysteries with the fifth book, *BLIND EYE*, the publisher decided for marketing reasons to drop the word Justice from the titles. In addition to the Edgar, the Benjamin Justice series has won three Lambda Literary Awards for best gay men's mystery, awarded by the Lambda Literary Foundation.

John has also written two mysteries in the Philip Damon series with bandleader Peter Duchin, both for Berkley Prime Crime: *Blue Moon* (2002) and *Good Morning, Heartache* (2003).

John's short stories have appeared in the legendary Ellery Queen's *Mystery Magazine* and the *Blithe House Quarterly*, a literary e-zine.

John has also sold or sold options on several original screenplays, to producers Don Ohlmeyer, Mike Farrell and Marvin Minoff, and John Langley. None have been produced.

John has served on the board of the Southern California chapter of *Mystery Writers of America*, which honored him with its distinguished service award in 2004; has been active as a member of *Sisters in Crime*; served as a mentor in *Pen USA's* Emerging Voices program for young writers; has served for several years on the planning committee of the *West Hollywood Book Fair*; and has been an instructor since 1980 with the *UCLA Extension Writers' Program*.

John currently lives in West Hollywood, California, where his Benjamin Justice mystery novels are set.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. What is your take on the health of mysteries in today's publishing market?

Book publishing has been in disarray for some years, not quite sure what's going to happen with the Internet and e-publishing and print-on-demand, and it's still unclear exactly where that's headed, though it's definitely going in that direction. More recently, the economy has jolted the industry, as it has all markets. Still, thousands of mysteries are being published each year and the mystery reading community is alive and well. Take a look at *Mystery Scene* magazine and you'll see that in spades.

The biggest change I feel is the continuing problem of massive used book sales on the Internet, which cannibalizes our new book sales, since we get no royalties or credit for used book sales. Many authors, myself included, no longer

come out in paperback because of this (and other factors), and now used book sales are eating into our hardcover sales as well.

We reach more and more readers with each new book, but so many of those are with increasing used book sales that we actually earn less and less money and have fewer and fewer credited sales, even as our audience expands. Eventually, our publishers can't afford to publish us anymore and our contracts aren't renewed. (So readers, please, stop buying used books that are still in print. And while you're at it, try to purchase your books at independent booksellers, who are so vital to hand-selling and promoting the less established authors who need it most.)

Also, it's worth noting how many fine small presses have sprung up to supplant the major publishers and bigger imprints, which have been downsizing or disappearing for years. A number of small presses specialize in mystery writing, and do an excellent job of specialized promotion, and it's where many new authors and seasoned authors find a home. Bold Strokes Book, for example, recently brought out my first four Benjamin Justice mysteries in reprint, including *Simple Justice*, my 1996 Edgar winner for best first novel. It has been out of print but in demand for years, and it took a small press to bring it back. Bold Strokes (<http://www.boldstrokesbooks.com>) specializes in LGBT books, but others specialize in crime fiction, such as *Poisoned Pen*, *Midnight Ink*, *Rue Morgue*, and *Deadly Ink*, among others. Times are tough economically all around, but the mystery market remains healthy.

2. What do you think is the biggest challenge in forming and teaching an online writing workshop for fellow authors?

I don't teach online. I'm not comfortable yet teaching that way and continue to teach in the classroom, although the Internet plays an increasing role—in communication with students between classes, grading, even testing. I just took a one-day class in the basics of online teaching administered by UCLA Extension, where I teach. I'm a technophobe—I don't even own a cell phone—so it wasn't easy for me. But a lot of instructors there, both younger and older, really took to it. It's the wave of the future, I guess.

3. What is your favorite writing subject to teach to aspiring authors?

I'd have to say fiction. I was a journalist for many years, most of those freelance, and I still write articles and essays and enjoy teaching nonfiction. But most of my writing in recent years has been novels and short stories, which are my first love. So if I had to choose, it would be fiction.

I'm currently teaching a ten-week course for the UCLA Extension Writers' Program called "Voice and Craft: The Keys to Successful Fiction Writing" and really enjoying a new crop of students/writers. I find that I get as much from teaching as they do, and I think most writers who teach feel this way.

4. You are currently teaching a class at UCLA on voice. What is the next class on your slate? When will you be teaching it and where (online or in person)?

I'll teach an eight-week class for UCLA Extension (<http://www.uclaextension.edu>) in Spring quarter called, "Writing Nonfiction for Publication," focusing on writing nonfiction for print. It's in the classroom and very hands-on.

5. How do you go about teaching “voice,” something that is such an individual quality, something that isn’t as black and white as plotting and pacing?

Teaching “voice”—the unique and distinctive way you put your words together and “talk” to the reader on the page—is challenging. Voice is one of the most difficult writing elements to grasp, define, and communicate to students. But I believe it’s crucial for effective writing. In the end, the only way a writer finds and develops his or her unique writing voice is to read a lot and, especially, write a lot. Write every day, if possible, and stick with it, for months, years, whatever it takes, if you really want to make a go of it. Voice is like a muscle: the more you write, the stronger it gets. The less you write, the weaker it will be. Write enough and eventually it will show itself to you, reveal itself in the writing. And, as you keep writing and rewriting, it will get stronger.

6. In your recent article (How to Find and Develop Your Unique Writer’s Voice), you say that you’ve always felt that “voice” plays a crucial role in effective writing. Please explain why you feel that way?

It’s what sets your work apart from other writers. It gives credibility and authority to your stories. It’s the driving narrative power that pushes your story forward, along with character and plot. It’s the conversational quality of your writing, the way you “talk” to your reader. It’s as important in writing as it is conversing aloud with someone or speaking to a group. If your voice isn’t confident, assured, authoritative, natural, and appropriate for your characters and story, the writing will feel stilted, forced, ragged, weak, awkward. Just as speaking aloud is ineffective if one is halting, hesitant, lacking in confidence, and so on. Many editors will tell you that the most important thing they look for in manuscripts is the strength and quality of the voice.

7. What distinguishes voice from style? Is there a difference?

I think there is a difference, though, again, it’s difficult to get at. To me, voice is closer to attitude and the emotional quality of the prose, reflecting the personality of the author—angry, lost, tough, intelligent, world weary, arrogant, and so on. It’s a deeper quality, connected to who the author is and how he or she sees life and the world. To me, style is how you put it all together on the surface—fast-paced, spare, elaborate, light, serious, slick, more literary in the use of language and word choice, etc. In the end, I think, the important thing is not to get too cerebral about it but simply to write a lot. Eventually, you’ll find your natural writing voice and style, though each might change somewhat as you work with new characters and new story material, or even change over time. This is just how I see it. Others might have a different opinion or approach. There are no hard rules about this. In the end, each writer has to find his or her own way, by doing it.

8. Do you think it is possible to be a successful author if you have not “found” or “mastered” your voice?

I believe it was Michael Chabon, a very successful author both critically and commercially, who said he doesn’t believe in voice, that there is no such thing. I hope I’m not putting words in his mouth. But I would argue that Chabon is an exceptionally gifted writer—he wrote *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, as I recall, when he was in college or thereabouts—and might be one of those rare authors,

unusually and naturally gifted, who doesn't have to think about such things. Personally, I do believe it's crucial to effective writing. As Margaret Maron puts it, it's hard to grasp and understand, but you know it when you see it. I bet if you asked a hundred respected book editors if voice was important, the vast majority would say it is. Very.

9. **List a couple of your favorite writing self-help books. (For example, *Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight V. Swain.)**

It's been years, decades actually, since I read a writing self-help book. I recall enjoying *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott when I read it eons ago, and less experienced writers in particular might benefit from it. Oh, I did read Stephen King's *On Writing* a few years ago and liked it quite a lot. Does that one count?

The only advice I would add in this area is to beware of writing teachers who write books that tell you never to rewrite or polish your work. Check the backgrounds of these authors and you'll invariably find that they haven't been successful writers but have made a living teaching and writing books about how to write. What separates most writers, even many brilliant writers with exceptional raw talent, from those who make a living at it or are consistently published is the ability to rewrite and polish, shaping, honing, and refining their work until it's ready for publication. Talent is all well and good, but it's not worth much without craft.

10. **On your website, you advise that writing every day is very important. These days, however, writers have to work on their own marketing and promotion in addition to filling the pages with great story. How do you find time to juggle it all, write every day, AND teach?**

First, I don't teach that much, maybe a couple of evening classes a year, plus a few workshops here and there. But I do write a lot, because I have bills to pay. In a given year, I'll probably write a book, several short stories, a dozen articles and essays, some documentary TV scripts, maybe a ghostwriting or editing job, and other freelance work I pick up here and there. I cobble it all together and make a living at it. It's no secret how one makes a living as a writer. He or she puts their behind in the chair and keeps it there until a reasonable amount of work is done, every day or certainly most days. It takes discipline. There's no way around it.

But about writing every single day. Personally, I think it's important to write every day in the beginning, as you're finding your voice and developing your skill and craft. And I'm talking years, because it takes a long time to reach this point, sooner for some, longer for others. That's just how I feel about it, what worked for me. Others might disagree. Jan Burke once said to me, "Writing is work but it should never become a job." So you need to know your limits, when you're burning yourself out, when writing is becoming more drudgery and less creative. Still, it's pretty simple: The more you write, the sooner you get good at it. The less you write, the longer it takes. Also, writing every day can help you find a flow, a rhythm to your writing, or to a piece of work. Writing now and then, or when you feel like it, can lead to inconsistency of voice, rhythm, style, etc. Not to mention not getting much work done. If a person only writes 500 words a day, which isn't much, he or she will have written 105,000 words by the end of the year, and that's with two weeks off for a vacation. That's a long

novel. So there are really no reasons a person can't get the work done, only excuses.

Those of us who got to where we are had to make the sacrifices, find the time, turn off the TV, get up two hours earlier before work, write late in the evening before bed, whatever it takes, until you get established. Either you want it badly enough, or you don't. I remember someone asking a mystery writer once how she went from being unpublished to having a contract to write a mystery novel a year. She said, "When I went from being committed to being obsessed." It does take real passion and commitment to get there and stay there. If it were easier, more people would be successful at it.

11. What kind of promotion/marketing has worked best for you so far in continuing to build your fan base? Book signings? Advertising? Teaching?

I wish I were better at promotion, and enjoyed it more. We all have to find what works best for us and decide how much time we're willing to devote to it. But you have to be serious about it and do what you can. I always write at least a few articles or essays for national magazines or newsletters when a new novel comes out that either are connected to my novel or mention it in my bio credit at the end of the piece. That comes from my freelance journalism background. I've sold hundreds of articles and essays over the years and know how to do that, so I play to my strength. More and more I find myself using the Internet, promoting through Facebook and Crimespace, that kind of thing, and using my e-mail list of readers that I've accumulated over the years. I also take some of my advance money and buy a few ads for each new novel in key publications, targeting my niche audiences.

I find myself doing less traveling and bookstore signings, partly because of the expense and because it wears me out. But I do signings when I can and if I can afford to get there. I just try to plug my new book any way I can—in the UCLA Extension catalog, when I teach a class, on radio shows where I've made contacts, in newspaper columns where I submit items that indirectly mention my book, and on and on.

I write a column called Book Buzz gratis for the nonprofit Lambda Literary Foundation website (<http://www.lambdaliterary.org>) that covers news of the LGBT writing and publishing community. I do it partly to promote the foundation and other authors, but I also get to plug my own books. And, of course, I maintain my author web site (<http://www.johnmorganwilson.com>), where readers can read the first chapter of my latest Benjamin Justice mystery, *Spider Season*. There's a convenient link on the home page. Oops, did I just slip in a shameless plug?

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Ha! Great ending to my last question, John.

You can read more about John on his website: www.johnmorganwilson.com (where you can also go to contact him). Be sure to check out his "Tips on the Mystery Writing Craft" webpage. It is full of some good questions and great answers.

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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