

2001

Sunday, Dec. 30

Star-Ledger

p. 1 - Features

Write on

Just get it down on paper, and don't sweat the small stuff



PHOTOS BY MITSU YASUKAWA/THE STAR-LEDGER

Students attend a master writer's workshop presented by author/teacher Alexandra Shelley in her New York apartment.

BY MEG NUGENT
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

You've always had a love of writing, but never took the time — or yourself — seriously enough to sit down and craft a short story.

The years haven't passed with enough scary swiftness to force you to tap out something on a keyboard that's more than an e-mail.

Until now, as you perch on the cusp of Jan. 1, 2002.

Maybe it's the tragedies of Sept. 11 that have you pondering what you really should be doing with the rest of your life. Maybe you're getting older and realizing you don't have an endless supply of tomorrows. Or maybe the time is simply right. But you know in your soul that you're going to do it in this new year. You're going to crank out that short, fictional piece that's been rattling around in your head forever.

But after all those years of stalling, how do you start? How do you take the first steps toward achieving this worthy goal and make a real dent in your progress by, say, Jan. 1, 2003?

First, get moving, say veteran writers. Pick up a pen. Approach the keyboard. Make contact.

"Start anywhere, anytime, anyhow. Just put down some words," advises novelist and short-story writer Rick Moody, who prefers e-mail interviews because, "I feel more like myself when I type my replies."

"Sometimes, you can start by writing nonsense or anything that comes into your mind until you arrive at a promising beginning for something. But as you work, you will find you have more and more ideas for work," adds Moody, whose accomplishments include "Garden State," his first novel and winner of the 1991 Editor's Choice Award from the Pushcart Press; "The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven," a collection of short stories, and "Demonology," another collection of short fiction and his most recent published work.

What if you're lousy at it?

"Don't be afraid to stink," says Alexandra

Shelley, a short-story author who teaches short-story writing at the New School University in Manhattan and at Yale University. She also runs a master writer's workshop from her New York apartment.

"The hardest thing about writing is turning off your internal censor, or your internal editor, who tells you things like, 'You're not Edgar Allan Poe.' 'Does your mother know you're doing this?' The self-doubt stuff," says Shelley, a past winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for short fiction.

"The idea of thinking you're not a good writer is such a waste of time because you can get so paralyzed by it," says Anthony Doerr, a writer from Boise, Idaho, whose first published collection of short stories, "The Shell Collector," is set to debut next month. "You have to remember the first draft is going to be terrible and you can always revise it a thousand times."

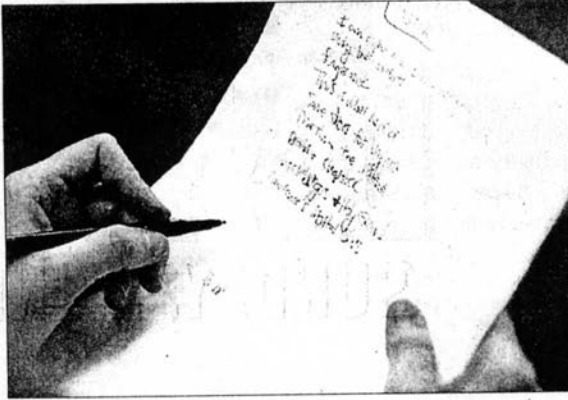
It was self-doubt that, for years, kept Pennsylvania resident Jane Palmer from trying her literary hand.

"I thought that writing fiction, short stories, was always something I wanted to do, but was afraid to try because I was afraid I wouldn't be any good. Because I was afraid that what I wrote would be pathetic," says Palmer, who finally decided to take the plunge two years ago, when she turned 50. "I said, 'Okay, I'm 50. If not now, when?' I kind of kicked myself in the butt and thought, 'You've got to try.' I thought, 'I'm going to hate myself if I died and I hadn't tried to do this.'"

Palmer actually started writing 15 months ago and has so far authored 10 short stories. She also takes a three-hour bus ride each week from her Reading home to attend Shelley's workshop.

Palmer is one of the lucky ones. She was able to save enough money to quit her job as a marketing writer and, with her husband's blessing, is devoting herself full time to her writing. But she and other authors advise all novice writers to seek structure by taking a writing course or joining a writers group or workshop.

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One of the participants in Alexandra Shelley's program works on a story list.

Writers on writing

Look to these resources for help and support as you continue your journey toward writing a short story:

■ "Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life," by Anne Lamott (hardcover — Pantheon Books, \$23; paperback — Vintage Anchor Publishing, \$12.95). A wonderful book about writing, in general, and how to allow yourself to do it.

■ "Best American Short Stories of the 20th Century," edited by John Updike and Katrina Kenison (hardcover — Houghton Mifflin, \$28; paperback — same publisher, \$18.95). A compilation of short stories taken from past, annual publications of "Best American Short Stories" dated from 1915 to 1999.

■ "The Art of the Tale," edited by Daniel Halpern (Penguin U.S.A., \$17.95). A collection of international short stories.

■ "Self Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Write Yourself into Print," by Renni Browne and Dave King (Harper Collins, \$13). Brass tacks book on how to write, with chapters that cover elements of the craft such as dialogue, characterization and point of view.

■ "Room to Write: Daily Invitations to a Writer's Life," by Bonni Goldberg (Putnam Publishing, \$12.95). Includes creative and funky writing exercises.

■ "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft," by Stephen King (hardcover — Simon & Schuster, \$25; paperback — Pocket Books, \$14.95).

— Meg Nugent

WRITE

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Get it down on paper

The biggest benefit of a workshop is you're forced to write because assignments are given with deadlines attached, says Doerr, who adds libraries, community centers and local colleges are good places to start looking for writers workshops to join. Another advantage is that you're getting feedback from writing peers about your story. In a workshop, writers submit a story, providing copies to each classmate, who take them home and critique them in time for the next class.

If this sounds daunting, do it anyway, says Palmer. "If you're afraid of what they'll say when they read it, you're dead. You've got to be willing to take that risk."

It's also important to devote time to reading what other short-story writers have written and published, says James Lasdun, a teacher of creative writing at Princeton University, and a poet, screenwriter and short-story author who is a past winner of the Dylan Thomas Award for short fiction (1986).

"The more you read, the more you work, the more you imitate, the more you find yourself," says Lasdun.

He says beginning writers shouldn't be afraid to imitate the style of well-known authors while striving to find their own unique writing style. "It's an apprenticeship. Go in and steal ideas and steal plots. Take an old plot and put new characters in it. Take a myth and rewrite it in a present-day context. Just plunder the existing literature — that's how it evolved, itself."

Shelley has observed this behavior among many of her own young students. "They start out as Shakespeare, then they go through a Hemingway phase. They may go through a Raymond Carver phase and, by the end, you hope they realize that they're kids with stories to tell."

You should also think like a writer if you want to be one. "Carry a notebook around with you and anytime anything occurs to you or you find yourself in an interesting situation, try to write it down im-



PHOTOS BY MITSU YASUKAWA/THE STAR-LEDGER

Author Alexandra Shelley, at right above, conducts a writing workshop. At top, Shelley checks the story list of Emily Kim, center, while Johanna Gohmann reviews her own list. In photo at right, Harriet Goldman takes notes during the class.

mediately," says Lasdun, who takes a small spiral notebook and pen with him wherever he goes. "It gets the verbal muscle in shape."

Flex that muscle by writing whenever you can. "What I hesitate to say is that you have to write every day because, generally, that

is not possible for most of us," says Shelley. "If you write regularly about what's happening around you, about things that cause deep emotions in you or just fascinating stories you read or hear about; if you have that raw material down, that can often be imported into a story."

Take comfort in knowing you have a lot of leeway in writing short fiction because there is no formula for writing a short story. "There is no formula, alas, but this turns out to be good news," according to Rick Moody. "The short fiction form is so flexible that you can

reinvent it to suit any particular narrative you want to work. In addition, there is no limit on the sources for story ideas, Moody says. "Good stories can be found anywhere. In cracked pavement, crooked paintings, dental hygienists. Anywhere."

Ideas to jump-start your writing effort

BY MEG NUGENT
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To get your creative juices flowing, try some of these writing exercises recommended by teachers of short-story writing:

■ Spend a few hours in an airport, park or other large, public place and watch people as they go about their business. Try to come up with a story about the people you watch.

■ Without getting yourself into legal trouble, transgress some kind of taboo and see what happens when you do. Write a first draft about how people reacted to you and how you felt. Then, use that material as the basis for a fictional story about a character who transgresses some kind of social or personal boundary. "The point of an exercise like that is the most interesting characters in a piece of fiction are characters who engage in risky behavior," says Alexandra Shelley, who regularly assigns this exercise in her short-story writing courses at The New School, in New York City, and at Yale University. Shelley says one of her students broke a long-held family taboo of never contacting the birth father who abandoned the family when she was born. Another student, a Jewish/atheist

high school girl who never wore skirts, dressed herself up in a skirt and attended Sunday services at a Methodist church. "She broke her own taboos and wrote a great story about a young Jewish woman who goes to the Methodist church to meet the right kind of guy."

■ To develop your talents at writing dialogue, interview someone you know about the most embarrassing moment of their lives. Record the interview and transcribe it so you can see what the speech patterns look like on the written page. Then, continue the interview in your imagination, while trying to pick up the voices of the interviewer and the person being interviewed. You want to continue the conversation in such a way that some type of revelation the interviewee has made transforms the relationship between the two characters.

■ Begin with the least interesting thing that happened to you during the course of a day — a visit to the post office, taking out the trash or doing a load of laundry, for example. Then, spin your writing out so the uninteresting activity is the first in a chain of increasingly fantastical events.

■ To develop a character, write up a sort of psychological case study. Then, try to write a personal ad for the character in order to get a sense of what the character is striving for and how they present their ideal self. Next, write a short obituary of your character. This will help you focus on the main accomplishments of the character's life, as well as the nitty gritty "facts" of their biography, such as place of birth. Then, describe their physical appearance. "That's always very hard to do," says Shelley. "I'm opposed to hair and eyes as being the only source of descriptions and that's what everyone uses." Don't forget to give your characters some flaws. That's what makes them interesting to the reader.

■ Take a memory of your own and build a story and characters around it.

■ Choose a historical point in time that people could recognize — the Cuban missile crisis, for example — and create a story line and characters that suit the theme. Don't be afraid to do some research on the historical period you picked. That can easily lead to new story ideas.