

Statuette in the Rain (1985)

In Minneapolis, with a baby girl to feed and a mortgage to pay, I became what I am today, a guy who knows how to hustle writing. The high point of my writing career was writing novels, and it was followed soon after by the low point, ghostwriting books for other people.

I decided in Milwaukee that the way to write books was to have someone hire you to write books. And ghostwriting was the way to go for that reason.

It was better than writing trade books for several reasons.

First, the money was better. A person whose ego or whose business requires this kind of promotion will be willing to spend far more than what a trade publisher will risk. I made as much as \$30,000 on a couple of these projects; no trade book ever netted me more than \$15,000.

Second, it is easier on the mind. Your ego is not on the line, so you never experience writing block.

Third, you only accept the projects you want to accept. I decided to accept only projects by captains of industry -- CEOs, consultants, and other well-heeled hotshots, who I knew had money. I avoided like pellagra people who had a great story to tell, and just needed someone who could write to dress it up a little for them.

Fourth, it doesn't strictly have to get published. Often, the "author" is just happy to have a stack of paper to look at. The first book in the following list worked this way:

- *Death of a Lawyer*, by a Minneapolis attorney who was disbarred on the grounds that he violated lawyerly ethics in his handling of Dalkon Shield cases in the upper Midwest. I cannot say whether he was guilty or innocent, but it was plain that he sincerely believed himself to be innocent. What made his project interesting was that he

did not want a straight nonfiction account of his rise and fall. Instead, he asked for a fictionalization, a la Sidney Sheldon, with himself as the handsome good guy. And he wanted me to include sex scenes so his enemies would know what a stud he was.

- *Demass*, by a dotcom software entrepreneur who felt he'd stumbled upon the solution to the problem all big companies were having in the 1990s -- they were too big to innovate or be flexible. Not surprisingly, the solution (break the large company into virtual businesses numbering no more than 100 workers each) required his software to work. It was actually a fun project, and the entrepreneur in question, a Missourian by way of Silicon Valley, while he spoke and acted a lot like Ross Perot, was a pretty good guy, and worked hard to make the book as good as possible.
- *Anatomy of a Merger*: A fun project for a Minnesota foundation, explaining the whys and wherefores of nonprofit organizations joining together to avoid mission overlap.
- *Beyond Bureaucracy*. This one was for, believe it or not, the U.S. government. An entity called the Federal Quality Center puts out training materials for government departments on how to be more efficient, provide better service, and save taxpayer money. This book was the partial basis for Al Gore's government improvement schemes during the Clinton administration.
- *Satisfaction Guaranteed!* A book about quality guarantees -- "Delivery in 30 minutes or your pizza is on us!" I was brought in as a fixer-upper on this project, and I could see why it needed fixing up. It was dull. The publisher, AMACOM, was none too impressed with my handiwork, either, suggesting to the "author" that he hire yet a third ghostwriter, "one who knows how to write." I would have added, "or one getting paid more than \$3,000 to write a

book."

- *The Baldridge*. This was the first book on the Malcolm Baldridge Award, the business equivalent of the Oscars or Grammys. McGraw Hill published it without doing a lick of copyediting. I counted over 600 spelling errors in the print edition. I never saw it reviewed anywhere, but I imagine it helped the "author" in his consulting practice.
- *Just in Time Leadership for Teams*. A neat little book with a hundred great ideas on how to just about everything better.
- *Turf Wars*. This was my first book with Harvey Robbins, a psychologist with whom I would later co-write three books with. It was an archetypal 56-day wonder, written under the gun, with no idea what came next. No sooner was it published than the publisher, Scott-Foresman, went out of business and the book vanished from shelves.
- *The Authentic Leader*. This was my last ghost project. A fancy publishing-oriented PR agency contacted me because I was a top-rung ghostwriter. The project was well-paying and interesting: a book for businesses incorporating the teachings of existential philosophers like Paul Tillich and Jean-Paul Sartre into organizational leadership. That sounds funny, but it actually worked on paper. My problem was that the "author" was a recent PhD and wanted the book written in an authoritative, academic style. Suddenly the paradox of being asked to write someone else's book about authenticity, in an academic style, overcame me, and I fired myself from the project.

I hated to pull the plug on ghostwriting, but I knew that as time passed I would be less and less happy operating behind someone else's curtain. So I busied myself in Minneapolis trying to create a little buzz around my own name.

I made a list of resource people (folks I knew from the old days,

who knew where there was work to be had) and target markets (kinds of organizations that I understood, and could obtain work from). Then I got on the phone and started calling.

Among my resources was my old choir director from the seminary in Wisconsin. She got a new job as VP for fundraising at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Boston, and she made me head writer for their magazine, the *UU World*. My job was to write a story a month about interesting Unitarians. I did stories on Clyde Tombaugh, the astronomer who discovered the planet Pluto; Thomas Jefferson, ... various liberal theologians from around the world; and May Sarton, the poet/novelist/memoirist of Maine who wrote the popular journals as *At Seventy*.

Let me tell you, May Sarton was a piece of work. When I called her she was 78, and had just suffered a serious stroke. She was the sort of person for whom the sobriquet "tough old bird" was coined. To put it bluntly, she was not an especially kind person. She was impatient with most of life's foolishness, and she regarded my calling for an article in the *UU World* as Grade A foolishness, telling me not to call her again and hanging up on me.

I knew this was a good gig, though, so I decided to come at Sarton from a different angle. This is a ploy that I recommend only with cranky poets. I send her one of my books of poems -- I'm guessing it was *Home Trees*, my most sedate work -- and sent it with a note of personal appreciation. Three days later, May Sarton called me, anxious to do the interview. I was a poet first, and a journalist second, she decided, so I was OK.

We conducted the whole thing by phone, and it was really very good. She talked about why people like memoirs more than fiction, what it felt like to be old and alone, and what (little) consolation she personally found her Unitarianism to be to her through life. I worked the chat up into a 3,000 word feature, titled "The Governor in the Garden." She liked it a lot, so that at the end of the year, when she was named Unitarian of the Year or some such, she insisted that I be flown to Boston to sit beside her at the winner's table.

She and I drank too much, and laughed up our sleeves at the freethinking suits making their little speeches. But my real reward came a year later, when the book she was currently working on appeared, and in it was a little paragraph about me, and how I wasn't as bad as most everyone else. The name of the journal: *After the Stroke*.

While I worked for the Unitarians three days a week, I spent the other three working for the opposite client, the Archdiocese of Saint Paul. The Archbishop, a very decent chap named Roach (same as my great grandmother), needed to issue a series of pastoral pronouncements on matters relating to sex. None of the people at his immediate disposal -- chancellery PR people, archdiocesan newspaper flacks, etc. -- either knew anything about sex or wanted to admit they knew anything about sex. So I was drafted to write five or six letters to the faithful on subjects like abortion, support for pregnant teenagers, homosexual priests, contraception in the schools, and embryo implants. It was easy work for me, as I just pretended I was the rector in my old seminary novel, and wrote as religiously as I could.

The only hard part was partitioning my mind so it could work on a Unitarian sentence one moment, and shift to a Catholic one the next.

I moved laterally through the regional magazine market, manning three business columns in three magazines, moving from one to the next as each magazine failed.

Because I was interested in getting free software and hardware, I introduced myself to a local tabloid called *Computer User*, and was soon a regular contributor, specializing in funny essays about the frustrations of the desktop revolution. After a few years, the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* -- the same paper that fired for skipping Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn to see the Rolling Stones -- decided to add a weekly computer column to its business coverage, and they chose me to write it.

It was while writing these columns that I met and interviewed Harvey Robbins, the psychologist who would become my partner,

and we would write four books together: *Turf Wars* (1989), *Why Teams Don't Work* (1995) *Why Change Doesn't Work* (1997) and *Transcompetition* (1998). Harvey provided the psychological context for these titles, and I provided the words, the humor, and the attitude.

Most of these books went nowhere, but the second of them, *Why Teams Don't Work*, resulted in one of those mysterious phone calls I used to get, that ring in the afternoon and change my life. The book didn't sell many copies, but it was nominated out of the blue for a big new international book award, the -- prepare for a mouthful -- Financial Times/Booz Allen & Hamilton Global Business Book Award.

Our agent, Andrea, notified us of the nomination, and she begged one of us to attend the award ceremony in New York in January 1996. We demurred. I had better things to do than look like a fool flying to New York and sitting pale-faced at our table while someone else won the award. So Andrea went in our place. Late that night, I was awakened by a call. It was Andrea. Our little book won the big award -- Best Management Book, The Americas, 1995

And I had the most peculiar reaction -- I became angry. I became really angry. Not at Andrea -- I agreed with her that we should fly to London for the final round of awards, in which the American book would compete against books from Germany and Japan. But after hanging up, I stormed around the house, furious about something. Then I figured out what it was. I was furious about all the proposals I'd written that went nowhere, at all the books I'd sent out that didn't pass muster, all the letters I sent to top editors that were intercepted by editors lower down, and answered with form notes beginning, "Thank you for submitting, but ..."

One final note to this song. Harvey and I flew to London in March. I was still dumbfounded that our little wiseguy management book was representing the entire Western Hemisphere. I told Harvey what my theory was. They were afraid to give it to known writers because they wanted the new award to be the star, not the authors. And I told him we were chosen to be

gun fodder, that there was no way our dumb little book would prevail over the Germans and Japanese.

But when the envelope was opened, my heart was in my throat, knowing this was a once in a lifetime moment, and we were probably going to blow it, but what if -- what if?!

We lost, of course. But I will never forget how that party broke up. A steady rain had started to fall. Handshakes were offered to winners and losers alike. We took down phone numbers and email addresses. And as Harvey and I prepared to return to our hotel, and after that, our hemisphere, we saw the winner, Noboru Konno, standing on a curb in the falling rain, holding his award over his head to hail a cab.