

Donald Maass: Author, Agent, Teacher Extraordinaire

By Sharon Buchbinder

January can be a tough month for those of us in northern climes. At times it seems the frigid temperatures, gray skies, and people's moods conspire against us. One dreary evening, I flipped through my November issue of the *Romance Writer Reporter* and spotted the ad for the Writing the Breakout Novel Workshop with Donald Maass, sponsored by the Southwest Florida Romance Writers (SWFRW) to be held on January 26, 2008. Under the picture of his serious face, the ad said: bring a copy of Donald Maass' *Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook*, a copy of your work-in-progress manuscript, and the motivation to work. I leaped out of my chair, waved the magazine at my Darling Husband (aka DH) and said, "I'm going to this!" Kind and tolerant as he is of my writing obsession, and perhaps frightened by the crazed gleam in my eyes, he said, "Yes, dear."

Conveniently located near the Miromar Outlets in Estero, Florida, the Grandezza Country Club boasted seventy-degree weather in January, tall columns, enormous floral arrangements, and friendly staff. The officers of the SWFRW greeted me warmly and invited me to come to them with any questions or concerns. Like any good conference attendee, I asked the hard questions: Where's the coffee and where are the rest rooms?

Once those issues were resolved, I entered the large, gracious space and saw a table of women waving at me. I looked behind me. Yes, they were waving at ME. Did I tell you how *friendly* this workshop was? After introductions, I looked around for the featured speaker and spotted a young man with dark hair deep in conversation with an SWFRW officer. *Was that Donald Maass? He looked so young—almost as young as my son!* This was a man who has been in the field for over two decades. How could he look so young and be so experienced?

I glanced around at the crowd of expectant, happy faces and my concerns faded away when Donald Maass jumped up to the podium and began a stand-up comedy routine. After warming the crowd up with his well-timed one-liners, he moved on to the task at hand: helping us to improve our writing and our manuscripts.

Exercise #1: How do you purchase a book? How many of you, he asked, pick a book by the publisher? Let me see a show of hands. None went up. "What? None of you picks a book by the publisher?" he asked. "Okay, how about the color of the cover?" No hands. "Font size of the title?" Laughter. "So how do you pick a book as a reader?"

The answer: two-thirds of readers buy books because the author is "branded." Grisham. Cornwall. King. Koontz. Steele. Roberts. We buy their books because we know what they will deliver. One-third of readers buy books because of word-of-mouth

recommendations. Someone says, "I loved this book. You have to read it!"

Maass Teaching Point #1: It's not the publisher, cover art, or font size that matter to the reader. It's the author and the story. So, how do you become a branded author? By writing a novel that pushes you to the top of the heap and breaks you out as an author. Not by firing your cover artist or your agent. Write the best novel you can. To that end, he ran us through our paces for the rest of the day.

Exercise #2: Who is your hero/heroine and why should the reader care about her? What about this person makes him/her your hero? Why do you care?

For this, I wrote about my deaf grandmother who in the 1800's attended Kentucky School for the Deaf, moved to Washington, D.C. to work for a Congressman, and met and married a wild, motorcycle-riding gardener over her family's violent objections. I cared about her not only because she raised me, but because her story is one of overcoming great disabilities to earn her Happily Ever After. Did I feel this strongly about my heroine in my work-in-progress? Unh, maybe?

Maass Teaching Point #2: Many novels are turned down because the author has given the reader no reason to care about the heroine. Make the reader care. Create a multi-dimensional heroine. He recommended that we pick twelve different scenes to

show the different dimensions of our heroine and to shake up the reader's expectations. Make your heroine bigger and stronger, and hook the reader.

Exercise #3: What is the REAL reason for a scene? Pick a scene and write down ten reasons/motivations for the main character in that scene. When you get to the last reason, use that one to rewrite the scene. Make it the principle reason for the scene.

This exercise was a HUGE revelation for me. I discovered that my main character, aka, the boring Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes was really a HUGE control freak who wanted to be in charge of everything because of her past with her alcoholic mother and the times when her life was out of control. Holy cow! Where did that come from? From me, of course, but I hadn't unearthed it until this exercise. My writing muscles were getting quite the work out.

Maass Teaching Point #3: Dig for the gold in your scenes. Your characters are only as real as their motivations. By digging down, you find their character traits and can use that to enlarge them, and breathe life into two-dimensional paper dolls.

Exercise #4: What is the MAIN problem that pre-occupies your heroine? What would make the problem matter more?

In my work-in-progress, the love child of the heroine's husband is literally dumped on their doorstep. Originally, I had planned for the birth mother to be dead, a tragic footnote in the story. However, I realized with this exercise, that by keeping her alive and troublesome, I could make the problem matter more to my heroine. Yipes! All hell's going to break loose in *her* life!

Maass Teaching Point #4: Torture your characters. Make the *Book of Job* look like a fairy tale. Put your heroine through hellfire and brimstone, making her larger than life, simultaneously forcing her to earn her happy ending. To quote Donald Maass: "Remember, they're NOT REAL. You make them up. It's okay to torture them."

There were many more teaching points hammered home with our own words and works, but my absolute favorite--and the *hardest* exercise was:

The Grand Finale Exercise: Fifty-two Pick Up: Take your manuscript, pull out clumps of pages , and toss them in the air.

Pick them up. Arrange them face up, out of order, neatly squared. Now, read a line on the first page you see. Can you add more tension to that sentence? He called for volunteers to do this (*sans* manuscript tossing) and three brave souls offered up their babies. The entire group was invited to make suggestions

on the proffered sentences. The before and afters were stunning.

Maass Teaching Point #100 (maybe it was 1000, I lost count): When we read our sterling prose in sequence, our mind jumps ahead in the story, filling in the blanks. We love our darlings, cherish each *bon mot*, and don't want to disturb them. When we read each sentence out of sequence, under a microscope, and out of context, we focus on that line and can see where we can make improvements.

While you won't find him in RateMyProfessor.com, Donald Maass used all the tricks of great teachers: humor, lecture, large and small group dynamics, individual exercises and instant feedback. At five in the evening, I left the workshop exhausted, writing muscles quivering, happy to be picked up by DH who had been shopping all day long.

My strong recommendations:

- BUY his books: *The Career Novelist*, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, and *Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook*.
- VISIT his website:
<http://www.maassagency.com/index.html>
- EXPERIENCE Donald Maass and his inspirational teaching in person.

I've already signed up for his three-and-a-half-day course, *Writing Tension on Every Page*. I hope to see you there, ready to exercise *your* writing muscles to build a better story and push your novel to the next level.

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