

The Amaazing Mr. Maass

By Sharon Buchbinder

In January, 2008, I attended a day long *Writing the Breakout Novel Workshop* with Donald Maass, sponsored by the Southwest Florida Romance Writers (SWFRW). At the end of eight intense hours, I came away with the knowledge that I had worked with a truly outstanding educator. He used all the tricks of great teachers: humor, lecture, large and small group dynamics, individual exercises and instant feedback. The day I returned to Maryland, I signed up for his three-and-a-half-day course, *Writing Tension on Every Page* in November, 2008 in Tampa, Florida. This is the latest installment in my writing adventures with the Amaazing Mr. Maass.

Day One:

At nine in the morning, thirty published and aspiring authors gathered in a hotel conference room with a stunning view of Tampa Bay. Those who knew each other from other Maass workshops hugged or shook hands. I recognized a best-selling author's name, and asked her why she was there. Her response: "Because my writing can always be better." My two textbooks, multiple published short stories, and numerous non-fiction articles pale in comparison to her track record. I mumbled something insightful like, "Um, yes, of course," and slunk to my seat in the back of the room. Attendees opened three ring

binders, laptops, and note pads, poised to work. Donald Maass walked into the room, as boyish-looking as ever, and everyone sat up straighter, eyes front and wide open.

"The secret of the page turner is not a matter of where you start the story, the setting, the plot, or the nature of the theme," Maass said. "You want readers to avidly await your next word. How? By building up the conflict, what I call microtension, in each word, sentence, and paragraph, creating microtension on every page. You can learn how to do this. This weekend, we will use case studies with excerpts from published authors, to see examples of how it's done in different genres. We'll use excerpts from your manuscripts--and show you how to make them better. You will have time to work on a portion and share it with a critique group. Then we'll return to the class and see how you did. This is your weekend, your time to learn, your opportunity to improve your writing. Are you ready?"

A murmur of assent rippled through the room.

"Okay. Who wants to give me an example of dialogue?"

Hands flew into the air. Not my hands. But the folks in the front rows--those who came early and staked out their claims--were ready to share their work.

He placed a student's page of dialogue on the overhead projector and read it aloud.

"Who wants to read the next page?"

About half of the class raised their hands.

"Not bad. But let's see if we can make this better."

He turned the page over and asked for suggestions. At the end of fifteen minutes, a new page of dialogue crackled with tension.

After several more volunteers' examples, reviews of case study excerpts, and questions and answers, we broke for lunch. After lunch, we met in pre-assigned critique groups, reviewed, and commented on each other's work. Then we went our separate ways and APPLIED the lessons of the morning. When we returned to the larger group later that afternoon, the results of our efforts were dramatic.

Amaazing Lesson #1

Minimize the screen or turn the paper over. Do not look at what you have already written. Think about what you want to accomplish in the scene. How can you increase the conflict between the speakers and ratchet up the tension? Examine each word--is that a blah word or does it zing with conflict? Does the sentence jump off the page at you? Does the scene make you want to turn the page?

Day Two:

Everything we did on Day One was repeated, using some new assignments and methods, different parts of our works in progress, reconfigured critique groups with a much more comfortable crowd.

Amaazing Lesson #2

It takes time to trust people with our "babies." Those who volunteered early and often the first day had spent time together in previous Maass workshops. You need time--more than one day of workshopping--to develop a level of comfort that allows you to share your inner visions. While I volunteered responses to his questions, I was still not ready to put my babies on the altar of the overhead for critiques. That all changed on Day Three.

Day Three:

This day began like the first two: lecture, volunteers, case studies, critique groups, and at then end of the day, new assignments. However, as soon as I heard this one, I felt it calling my name.

"I want you to pick a violent scene in your manuscript and slow it down. Find three oblique details and three conflicting emotions and put the scene in SLOMO. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, feel? When you slow down the violence, you increase the tension. And this time, I want you to do it now. You have fifteen minutes."

When he called for volunteers, I raised my hand and said, almost as an upfront apology, "This one is different--it's from the perpetrator's point of view." Then I took a deep breath, used my teacher's voice to carry to every corner of the room, and offered up my baby.

While I read, the room was still, almost as if the class held its collective breath. I tried not to make eye contact with anyone, fearing expressions of disgust, or worse, boredom with my piece. When I finished, Maass stared at me with a shocked expression on his face. And said nothing for several long beats. My stomach churned. I liked it--but did he?

"All this time, I thought you were this nice, sedate lady sitting in the back row. Wow. That was horrific and creepy. Well done."

I was thrilled! Donald Maass liked my scene. He really liked it!

Little did I know that Mrs. Maass was in the class, too. Over breakfast the next morning, she told me, "I couldn't get that scene out of my head. It went so contrary to maternal behavior. You gave me the chills."

Amaazing Lesson #3

Not only will the Maass method improve your writing, you will surprise yourself--and others. At my age, it's nice to know I still have a few surprises left in me. My guess is a lot of us do, but are afraid to show them.

Day Four:

This half-day was the culmination of the three previous days and built on the foundation of his lessons. By articulating the conflicts and outcomes à la Maass, I was able to craft a query letter that snapped with tension and drew kudos from

Maass, despite the fact that my story takes place in a university, and "slush piles are full of academic novels."

Amaazing Lesson #4

At the end of our time together, I asked Maass why he taught these workshops; after all he's a famous author and agent--what's in it for him?

"I love to teach. And, the honest answer is, I want to get more good novels to my agency. We reject most of what we receive. I want to help develop authors--because I believe an author can learn these skills and improve his or her writing."

I'm not going to give you all the secrets he shared at this workshop. You must go, listen, learn, and apply his lessons to YOUR work. You must experience the Amaazing Mr. Maass in person to internalize your own lessons. If you want to be spoon-fed bites of wisdom and take home handouts that sit in your files, do not attend this workshop. It is not for the faint of heart.

If you want active learning experiences and immediate application of new knowledge, DO ATTEND a Maass workshop <http://www.free-expressions.com/site/default.htm>. You will surprise yourself!