

+^++^++^++^++^++^++^++
HELLNOTES NEWSLETTER

<http://www.hellnotes.com>

February 3, 2005

Volume 9 Number 5

Part One

+^++^++^++^++^++

+^++^+ WRITER TO WRITER

PLEBES GRADUATE FROM FIRST BORDERLANDS BOOT CAMP

by **Matthew Warner**

"What the hell have we done?" F. Paul Wilson said to his fellow instructors at the conclusion of the first annual Borderlands writers workshop. He gestured to the 20 participants they had taught all weekend. "These are all competitors now!"

Well, I'm far from his competitor, but I will say I had an overwhelmingly positive learning experience. From January 21-23, I was a plebe at the Borderlands Boot Camp, sponsored by Tom and Elizabeth Monteleone of Borderlands Press. Held at the Hunt Valley Marriott near Baltimore, MD -- the same hotel as the last two Maryland Horrorfind conventions -- I endured a grueling schedule that certainly lived up to the "boot camp" moniker.

For a \$500 tuition, I received in-depth instruction from four award-winning luminaries of the horror and suspense genres: Richard Chizmar, founder of Cemetery Dance Publications; David Morrell, author of *FIRST BLOOD*, the basis of Rambo; F. Paul Wilson, author of the *REPAIRMAN JACK* series; and novelist Tom Monteleone, co-editor of the *BORDERLANDS* anthologies. Elizabeth Monteleone took my head off a few times as well with her invariably on-target remarks. The tuition also included two breakfasts, a lunch, and a special hotel conference rate.

Taking the old teach-a-man-how-to-fish approach, the goal was to instruct writers how to critique their own stories.

The program took place in two conference rooms with slight noise problems and consisted of more than 18 hours of lectures, critiquing workshops, and coaching in dramatic reading technique. Four groups of students moved among the instructors, who focused on different areas of craft: dialogue and narrative voice (Chizmar); plot (Monteleone); grammar, style, and pacing (Morrell); and character and point of view (Wilson). I felt setting was completely overlooked, but this flaw was minor.

In September 2004, each student circulated a 4,000-word short story or novel excerpt to his particular group. The instructors received all 20. The manuscripts were returned to the respective authors at the workshop's conclusion.

Given the Boot Camp's exclusive nature, the Monteleones didn't admit just anybody with cash. In May, as they were opening their transom to BORDERLANDS anthology submissions, they solicited 3,500 to 7,500-word fiction samples as entry applications. The couple were quickly buried with more than 100 stories. "When we saw all these applications coming in, Tom and I looked at each other and said, 'We must be nuts!'" Elizabeth told me at last August's Horrorfind.

They accepted the writers who showed the highest aptitude, theorizing that those students would be the most receptive to feedback. "The last thing we want is for someone to leave here and say, 'Writing isn't for me,'" Tom said. "We're not here to crush anyone."

There was a definite trust issue, as well. Plebe writers not only needed faith in their sergeants' skill but in that of their fellow grunts. The Monteleones' admission standards ensured that faith. Almost none of the students knew each other beforehand -- I recognized only two faces -- and yet several commented that they had complete trust in their peers' judgment.

Trust went hand-in-hand with frankness. "Check your political correctness at the door," Elizabeth told us the first night. Salty language and laughter crisscrossed rooms like bullets on an Army firing range. Despite rumors that some instructors felt bad about editing us so heavily (Morrell said he felt awful for criticizing a writing sample as "junk"), everyone displayed a thick skin. "I didn't pay 500 bucks to come here and have my hand patted," student David Corwell said.

Despite their commonly high talent, the plebes had a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, and experience levels, and hailed from all over the United States and Canada. The 17 men and 3 women ranged from people like brand-new writer Beth Callis to HWA President Joe Nassise, who workshopped the beginning of his forthcoming Simon & Schuster novel. The workshop even attracted Matthew Smith, who's adapting Wilson's *THE KEEP* into a graphic novel. As Nassise said, the diversity of personalities elicited a richness of feedback that "built on each other like a Lego set."

Likewise, I detected no feelings we were in competition. Nassise said he made it a point of not Googling his fellow classmates beforehand. "I'm only in competition with myself," he said.

The Boot Camp mainly attracted horror writers because of the Borderlands audience, but it was not a genre-focused workshop. We were there to learn craft. A caveat, however, is that aspiring writers of "lih-trih-chah" should not apply next year. This is a workshop on commercial fiction.

My group included David Bell, an English teacher; Sara Berniker, who recently won Playboy's fiction contest for college students; and authors Norman Prentiss and Lawrence Weinstein. At first, I was disappointed I wouldn't get to read all 20 manuscripts, but soon I appreciated the value of focusing on just four. After all day with the same group, I knew where each person was coming from. Plus, with that much time, you can really penetrate to a story's bones.

What surprised me the most was that the teachers had personalities as varied as the students. Elizabeth said no two instructors picked the same focus area. Tom Monteleone, author of *THE COMPLETE*

IDIOT'S GUIDE TO WRITING A NOVEL, teaches in the Seton Hill University master's program in creative writing. The Padrone, as we all call him, has 35 years of workshop experience. His teaching style was relaxed but disciplined: 20 minutes of group discussion per manuscript, with the author in the hot seat keeping his yap shut except for the final five minutes to ask questions. This gave the Padrone's session a collaborative vibe.

David Morrell, in contrast, ran things as I imagine he did while a literature professor at the University of Iowa for 16 years. With occasional references to Faulkner and Joyce, his style was to single-handedly analyze the hot-seat manuscript for most of each 20-minute segment before inviting a few minutes of group response. I would have been annoyed if he wasn't so damned interesting. A compulsive storyteller, he told anecdotes to illustrate virtually every point he made. The overall effect of him was so cerebral, in fact, that I was surprised he chose grammar/mechanics as his teaching area (at which he was brilliant).

Morrell, dressed in an authorly black suit and gesturing with hands knobby from his many years with manual typewriters, set the weekend's theme during his opening lecture Friday night. "Why do you want to be a writer?" he asked, explaining that our answers determine our artistic subject matter. Richard Chizmar picked this up during his group session by asking us the question individually. I answered pretty much the same as the Padrone: writing is fun, and I like the attention. Sara Berniker said she hears voices that only go away when she writes. And Chizmar himself said he "sees too much" not to write.

Like Monteleone, Chizmar brought the perspective of an editor/publisher, but he also possessed a unique take on his subject area -- dialogue and narrative voice -- borne from his recent experience in Hollywood. As a partner in a new movie company, Chesapeake Films, Chizmar said his last 18 months have been a crash course in how to write screenplays, which can be quite dialogue-dependent. He said, "I was scared to death, extremely vulnerable" learning the form, but he accepted his knocks with an invite-the-pain stoicism. After all, he said, he's Catholic.

Chizmar, who founded Cemetery Dance magazine while a journalism student at University of Maryland, chose his teaching area because "narrative voice is the number-one reason why I reject the vast majority of the 500 submissions I receive every month." He gave us a handout of writing tips solicited from 19 of his author and editor friends, people like Peter Straub, Ellen Datlow, Gary Braunbeck, Bev Vincent, and Christopher Golden.

Touching on narrative voice, he advised me to stop over-thinking my prose. "Let the story breathe," he said, and worry about the nitty-gritty on the second draft. Considering how well I did on the weekend's writing assignment -- composed under a tight deadline -- I think he was right.

Recovering from the flu, Chizmar left early Saturday night and was gone for the rest of the weekend. I hope he wasn't just sick of our writing.

I enjoyed getting to know Chizmar better, although the experience was initially a bit nervewracking. As

Michael Dixon later wrote about the instructors, "I felt like such a fan-boy that I had to bite my lip to keep from babbling incessantly during the small group critiques."

Author of more than 25 books, F. Paul Wilson astonished me when he revealed he'd never before participated in a writing course. I still don't know where he gets his great talent. His main teaching aid was an excerpt of a manuscript he'd refused to blurb on account of its sloppy POV technique. He pointed at the page and told us, "If any of you write a line like that, I'll find you and stab you." Also responsible for teaching characterization, he reminded us to endow a character with a life outside of the story. "He has to want something more than surviving the author's plot -- or in some cases, the author's prose."

Wilson adhered more rigidly to workshop protocol, directing orderly round-robin critiques before summing up. While his session was highly educational, I found it more formal than the others, as if I were a patient in the medical office he still runs part-time. Nevertheless, and like the other instructors, he often strayed beyond his assigned subject to make clever suggestions -- in my case about some plotting issues.

The true brains behind the Boot Camp, however, was its designer, Elizabeth Monteleone, who radiated a high energy level that cheered everyone. She was incredibly organized, with color-coded binders for each group and an ever-present cooking timer that cut off readers and lecturers alike. Thanks to her, the Boot Camp had the feeling of an already established, long-running program.

But again, it wouldn't have been quite as special if not for the diversity of talents involved. Elizabeth's friend Tamara Faulstich functioned as a gofer until Sunday morning, when she used her experience as a professional radio announcer to read aloud our writing assignments from Friday. The objective was to hear if what we had intended on the page came through. She gave incredible cold reads of the 20 stories -- in some cases of handwritten manuscripts (like mine) -- which made it easier to concentrate on the content and not the performance. I especially needed this help because my mind was shrapnel by that point.

The assignment was to write a four-page story or excerpt based on one of four scenarios. Mine was to dramatize how an anthropologist succeeds in communicating with animals -- with unexpected results. I stayed up until 2 a.m. writing it, learning the inherent lesson that to write, you must find time.

A "lighting round" critique by all 20 students and teachers followed each reading by Faulstich. Tom forced the sleep-deprived grunts to pay attention by singling us out to answer questions. The difference in writing quality between the first workshoped manuscripts and the ones written while at camp was dramatic. Dan Waters said it best: he felt like "four homunculi" shaped like the instructors now sat on his shoulders.

We still had an opportunity to take the stage, though. Saturday night featured three entertaining hours of 12-minute readings. Dramatic readings are indispensable to self-promotion, so the focus here was not on content but performance. Following each story, the instructors critiqued our eye contact, body

language, and tone. They were overall tremendously supportive. Elizabeth also snuck in an insightful evaluation of my dialogue technique (she doesn't read "wahwrrrrr" the same way I do). But don't take my word for it -- listen to an .mp3 of my flub and her critique at <http://www.matthewwarner.com/reading.htm>. The clip shows the good humor and cooperative feelings evident all weekend long.

Aside from the handouts, freebies included copies of Cemetery Dance magazine and Tom Monteleone's FEARFUL SYMMETRIES, plus graduation certificates and Army-green hats, both autographed by the instructors.

The catered food was surprisingly good, and hotel staff constantly refreshed our pitchers of ice water. The conference rooms grew hot only because I kept noodling with the thermostats. A snow storm blanketed the area with some nine inches of powder, raising the possibility of being snowed-in with our favorite authors. To my disappointment, everyone was able to leave as scheduled on Sunday.

The workshop concluded with anonymous quality-control questionnaires and parting thoughts from instructors. Morrell, recently returned to the convention scene after a long absence, encouraged newcomers to keep reaching out. I echo his advice as this conference reminded me that gatherings are valuable not just for networking reasons, but educational ones.

The next Boot Camp will be January 20-22, 2006, at a hotel to be announced. The number of students will double, and there will be separate study tracks for short stories and novels. So far, committed short story instructors are Douglas Winter, Tom Tessier, David Morrell, and Elizabeth Massie. Committed novel instructors are Tom Monteleone, F. Paul Wilson, Jack Ketchum, and Random House editor Coates Bateman. Graduates are automatically re-admitted.

At the Borderlands Boot Camp, each plebe -- and, I believe, each drill sergeant -- came away with something. For me, the experience was a rediscovery of how much I enjoy writing. For others, it was the key to unlocking our craft's mysteries. "If writing were a door, then all this time I've been pushing when I should've been pulling," I heard somebody say.

It's my fervent wish that we continue throwing those doors open.

[Matthew Warner is author of the novel THE ORGAN DONOR, a forthcoming story in Cemetery Dance magazine, and "Author's Notes," a monthly HorrorWorld.org column on writing. He lives in Falls Church, VA, with illustrator and web designer Deena Warner. His website is <http://www.matthewwarner.com>.]