

For One Coach, "Wranting" Isn't Writing

by Con Chapman

SOMERVILLE, Mass. Maggie Turbek is a writing coach who learned the hard way the perils of caring too much. "I turned in a magazine article a day late because I wasted a whole Sunday on a nuclear disarmament demonstration," she says ruefully. "After that my name was mud at Travel & Leisure, where the editors are more interested in perks from advertisers than the survival of the human race."

Turbek: "People are going to die. Get over it and get back to work."

And so the woman who was once heralded as among the more promising writers of her generation tells her students that they must be guided by three basic principles in pursuing literary success: "You've heard of 'location, location, location' in real estate?" she asks this reporter in her office just off Davis Square here. "In writing it's 'selfish, selfish, selfish,' or 'me, me, me' if you want to keep it to words of one syllable."

Today Turbek is working with her young assistant Lorna Twellman, a recent graduate of Tufts University with a worthless English degree, to put out the fires of flame wars between her clients and other writers wasting time in on-line forums or on social

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media sites. "This whole Syria thing has been a nightmare," she says grimly as takes a sip from a paper cup of black coffee. "Who gives a rat's ass whether a bunch of ragheads blow each other up? There's not a goddamn thing you can do about it, so finish your stupid coming-of-age novel already."

"The poor Sans-Serif people of Upper Volta!"

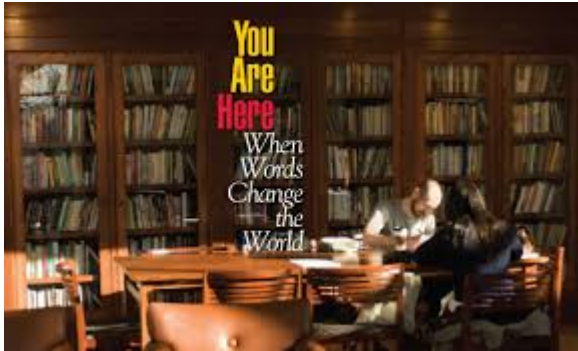
"Maggie, come here, take a look at this," Twellman says to Turbek, like a latter-day Alexander Graham Bell calling to her Watson. "Good Lord!" Turbek says as she reads a Facebook comment by Michael Hofstrau, a blocked writer of young adult fiction. "Can't believe I voted for Obama to keep us out of war," Hofstrau writes. "I think he should give back his Nobel Peace Prize!"

"I'm on it," Turbek says, and nudges the younger woman aside. "Hey Michael," Turbek taps out on Hofstrau's Facebook page, and Twellman recoils at the ferocity with which the seasoned pro cracks away at her keyboard. "The Middle East has been in an uproar since Noah got off the Ark. Do you really think anything you say or do is going to change that?"

"If I see any of you getting into a political argument, I'm going to come to your house and break your #2 lead pencil."

Soon the fruitless activity of the young writer ceases, a sign that he has turned back to his work; an anti-bullying novel that Turbek has been bullying him to finish since he signed on with her eight months ago. "Some people want to be 'wranter's' instead of writers," Turbek says as she returns to her desk.

She taps her space bar to make her screen saver disappear, then checks the blog of Melissa Hurwit-Hwang, an M.F.A. from Skidmore who's bogged down in a project a major publishing house has expressed interest in. "Going to big anti-war march this morning even though I think a nuclear strike would hasten the zombie apocalypse," the young woman has written. "Maybe I'll get inspired!"



"If words could change the world, a dictionary would be dictator."

Turbek scans the post with disgust, takes a piece of chewing gum out of her mouth and tosses it in a wastebasket, then adds a comment that causes the younger novelist's face to redden 90 miles away in Amherst, Mass. "Melissa, sweetie—let me give you a little advice. If you want to be a writer—WRITE. If you want to save the world—get into another line of business."

There is silence on the screen for a while before Hurwit-Hwang replies. "Sorry Maggie. I promise—I'll get back to my epic Emily Dickinson—zombie mashup."

"Get back to your desk and stop wasting your time watching idiots like me!"

Turbek then turns her attention to a male client whose productivity declines dramatically once football season starts. "The Jets have got NOTHING!" she sees when she logs onto the blog of Art Shmansky, a would-be crime novelist. "Now that you guys don't have Revis, Brady's going to pick apart your secondary like a supermodel's lace Teddy."

Minnesota Vikings "throwback" teddy.

"What a nimrod," she says with disgust.

"What?" Twellman asks, hoping to learn from the woman who's considered the Mistress of Darkness among writers who'd sell their souls for a six-figure advance.

"He's getting into it over a stupid Thursday night football game," Turbek replies. She quickly logs on to the site—knuckleheadsports.com—chooses a user name and a password and breaks into the discussion with a ice-cold blast of realism. "Hey Shmansky," she writes. "Do you think Raymond Chandler gave two shits about the Cleveland Rams vs. the Chicago Cardinals?"

Usually a rapid responder, the budding *noir* novelist is stunned into silence. "Well, uh, my writing coach just called for a substitution," he types after a while before signing off. "I've been benched, so it's back to my imitation hard-bitten, cynical prose."

