

Writing Coach Helps Blocked Women Tap Inner Meanness

by Con Chapman

WELLESLEY, Mass. Friday night in this suburb of Boston finds the house packed at *L'Endive*, a wine bar where a large pine table is surrounded by a group of five women, all would-be writers and all apparently having a wonderful time.



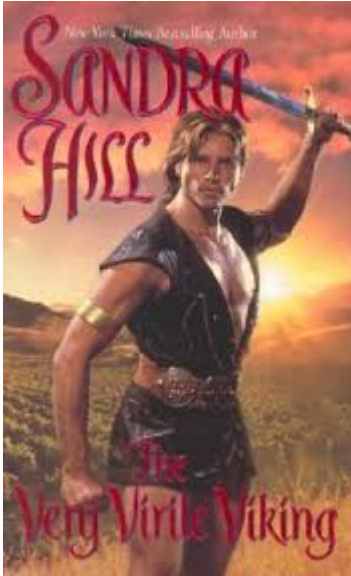
“It is so great to get together and talk about each other's work,” says Sue Casagrande, who's been writing a torrid Viking romance novel for “way too long,” according to her own self-deprecatory assessment.

The women are just about to order another bottle of Kendall Jackson chardonnay when a brooding presence appears at their table; a man dressed in black t-shirt, jeans and blazer, the standard-issue uniform of the professional writer, with a look of disgust on his face.

“Susan,” he says menacingly, as if he's a husband who's caught a cheating wife in a discreet liaison with another man. “I thought I made myself clear about this sort of thing.”

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"I love you more than sacking wussy French cities like 'Cologne.'"

Casagrande gulps and her face turns a light red as she blushes with embarrassment. "You're right, we did," she says weakly as she drops her phone in her purse, puts some money on the table and prepares to leave her friends. "I'm sorry," she announces to the table at large. "My writing coach is here and . . . I'm not supposed to be."

"I'm sure you lovely ladies understand," says Neil Dormunder, author of over twenty Civil War potboilers that typically feature a doomed love affair between a New England abolitionist bluestocking and a dashing Confederate soldier. "Sue isn't going to get anywhere wasting her time fraternin—I mean, sororitizing with you."

And with that Dormunder escorts Casagrande to the bar, where he plunks her down in a seat between two eligible divorcees who scoot their stools aside to make room for her. "You're pissing away your talent being sociable," he says through gritted teeth. "Either stare sullenly ahead and ignore these overgrown yuppies or throw yourself into a foolish affair that will break up your happy home, but

do *not* spend another second of your time being nice to another female writer.”



Dormunder: “When Chloe asks you what you think of her sestina, you say ‘Crap.’”

“Okay,” she says with a snuffle, and Dormunder signals to the bartender to bring her a fresh glass of wine. “Keep ‘em coming” he says as he throws some bills down and turns to leave.

Dormunder is one of a new breed of “tough love” male writing instructors who help female writers get over blocks by coaching them to be more selfish and egotistical—“Like men,” he says with a sardonic laugh. “89% of writers’ groups are all-female, and 97% of them never produce anything that is sold,” he says with disdain. When this reporter asks him where he got his figures he says “Blow it out your ass” by way of explanation.

“You told Veronica her poem was ‘luminous’—you’re just encouraging her!”

Another practitioner of the manly art of herding female writers is Floyd J. Miller, who supplements his income as author of 47 e-books featuring hard-boiled private eye Dick Floodlight by teaching group seminars in crawling ruthlessly over the backs of your peers. “It’s a proven fact that women are too nice, always ‘helping’ and ‘encouraging’ each other’s work,” he says as he makes finger quotes

of scorn in the air. “What you need to do is make such brutally cutting remarks about your weaker sisters' work that you drive them from the market and shrink the slush pile.”



Flannery O'Connor: Hated "To Kill a Mockingbird."

Miller rattles off a list of noteworthy female writers who were tough as nails on their sister writers and rose to the top without a caring instinct in their bodies. “Flannery O'Connor, Mary McCarthy, Dorothy Parker—do you think any of them ever said anything nice about a female competitor's work to ‘encourage’ her?” he snaps. “You've got to be like Faulkner—aloof and scornful—or Hemingway, punching out competitors.”

Sometimes the intense focus of the new mode of instruction causes a student to break down in tears, a sign of weakness that Miller has no patience for. “Oh excuse me,” he barks at a thirty-something woman who says he's being too mean to Ariel Sundstrom, a “flarf” poetess he caught smiling and laughing during a mandatory smoke break. “I thought you were here to be a writer, instead of what you are, which is an overgrown cheerleader.”

