

Chasing the “Z” words

by Mathew Paust

It ain't the steak, it's the sizzle. I first read this sentiment decades ago as an insider's tip on how to pitch a book idea, or even a completed manuscript, to an agent or publishing house. It made sense at the time, cynical as I'd become with a file folder bulging with rejection slips. Thus, this sage advice prompted me to spend perhaps more creative energy than I had to spare coming up with clever titles and blurbs for my queries and cover letters.

Amid a newspaper reporting career at the time, I'd gotten fairly good at snagging a reader's interest with the first sentence, and I knew a catchy headline when I saw one. Yet, despite my best efforts pimping my fiction with carnival come-ons, that folder of rejection slips kept getting fatter. My sizzle failed to entice anyone to try my steaks. Why? Well, to dance around the probable truth, the last thing a writer wants to admit is that he's fooling himself and that his steaks are merely gristle.

Richard Wheeler had entered the writing game a few years before I did. We share some common ground. Both are Wisconsin boys (or were) and both were floundering in sputtering newspaper careers. We each ended up writing fiction, but Wheeler had more guts. He jumped off the creaking boxcar and headed for Fiction Junction without a map, while I rattled along to the end of the line. Today he has more than 60 published novels and a bunch of awards under his belt. Me? Three books, self-published.

I hadn't heard of Wheeler until recently. My favorite mystery writer, Ed Gorman, recommended his friend's literary memoir, *An Accidental Novelist*, which I immediately ordered. Finished reading it yesterday. Wheeler taught me a lot in this book, besides introducing me to a man so much like myself it's scary—a distinct difference being his having more guts.

Perhaps his most important lesson, which I happily share with all other aspiring novelists, is the secret of the other “Z” word. As I

consider suspense a form of torture, I'll give you the word right now: *Buzz*.

Buzz is the hipper, *au curranter* version of the traditional "word of mouth." It's more effective for selling books than big-budget publicity by a big-name publisher that takes out full-page ads in literary magazines and sends an author on big-time promotional tours. Wheeler speaks from experience here, having enjoyed the luxury of big-time tours that stroked his ego, got him TV interviews and audiences with important literary lights, book-signings galore and nights in the best hotels. Despite all this, the expensive tours did little to stimulate sales of the touted books, he says.

What did work, he claims, was the reaction of readers. If they like a book and recommend it to their friends, the sales will take off. How to get the buzz started, especially for an unknown author? Free books:

I believe that publishers should simply give away half of an obscure author's first printing at free bookstore signings, book festivals and other venues, and that this sort of pump-priming is the only type of promotion of obscure authors that will ultimately pay off.

With this advice in hand, I hereby announce a five-day free download of my latest novel, *Sacrifice*, at Amazon.com.

