

Will Write For Crab Cakes

by Roz Warren

By: Roz Warren (and Janet Golden)

I'm a humor writer. My work appears in publications from The Funny Times to The New York Times. Janet is a history professor whose writing was confined to academic journals and the occasional op-ed. Driving back from the Jersey shore one day, we were kibitzing and Janet had a funny idea.

"That would make a good essay," I told her.

"You can write it," she said.

"Let's write it together," I suggested.

We hatched a plan. We'd turn Janet's funny idea into a humor piece, sell it to "The Funny Times" and spend the money on crab cakes at our favorite lunch spot the next time we were at the shore.

(Janet: I couldn't turn Roz down -- none of my other friends can take off mid-week to go to the beach with me.)

When I got home I came up with a title and a first draft and emailed it to Janet. Within an hour she'd punched up some lines, deleted others, added some funny business of her own and shot it back, with a much better title. A writing partnership was born! The essay went back and forth till we couldn't make it funnier. We submitted it to The Funny Times.

They took it.

Acquiring a partner this late in my writing career was completely unexpected. I felt like the friend who'd had one of those late-in-life babies. You think the pattern of your life is set, then -- surprise!

(Janet: At our age, a new writing partner is much better than a newborn.)

Writing with a partner is more fun than writing solo. It's easier too. You know when you -- creatively speaking -- hit a wall? With a writing partner, there's always a door in that wall. When you're stumped, you just open the door and lob the mess you've created at her. It comes back fixed! Or at least, improved. With Janet, I can even place an order. "The third paragraph needs a movie title that's a pun about monetizing nature documentaries." I once requested. Within moments, she came back with "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Profits."

Our brains don't always work together as one. Janet once put a wisecracking baby elephant in an early draft. I didn't think he was funny, so I deleted him when I returned it. When her redraft hit my in box, he was back. As we sent it back and forth, redrafting and polishing, I kept removing the baby elephant and Janet kept replacing him. Finally, the piece was done. Except for the elephant. In or out? I figured the piece was now strong enough that an unfunny elephant wouldn't stop an editor from taking it. Let the editor delete the elephant! I punched up the elephant's lines and he stayed in. Later, when I read "Gone With The Wildebeest" in print, I thought the baby elephant was hilarious.

(Janet: You're welcome.)

We've encountered a few glitches. Whenever I emailed one work-in-progress to Janet, it vanished. Turns out her prudish spam filter kept dumping it in her spam file because it contained the words "erectile dysfunction."

(Janet: My spam filter obviously didn't get the joke.)

We haven't merged into a single Humor Writing Brain yet. We both continue to write solo. But I can count on Janet to add a funny line to whatever I'm working on. (She hasn't asked me to make any of her academic papers funnier. But I'd be happy to try.)

(Janet: My academic papers are hilarious enough already, thanks.)

While we work well together, we don't always think alike. I love Terry Gross; Janet lunges to change the channel when "Fresh Air" comes on. I spend my evenings reading magazines; Janet prefers movies. She's happily married; I'm happily divorced. But we're both opinionated and fairly clever, and neither of us is afraid to fall on her face when reaching for a joke. And we throw out each other's lines, paragraphs and ideas with impunity because we both recognize that it's not that important -- it's humor writing, not brain surgery. It's fun.

And there's a big reward: crab cakes.

(Janet: Make that a tasty reward. The crab cakes are actually pretty small. It's not as if we're stuffing our faces like those morons who enter hot dog eating contests.)

So we sit at our respective computers, batting our work back and forth until its done. She's in charge of keeping us moving forward and I'm in charge of sending the completed work out. We're currently working on a darkly comic mystery novel set in a suburban library. Who knows if it'll sell? But we're having fun writing it.

(Janet: If it sells, we're celebrating with crab cakes at the beach -- in Aruba.)

So the next time you're chatting with a friend and she comes up with a Good Idea, don't just grab it. Offer to share. You never know what might happen. Maybe we'll run into you at the shore next summer, enjoying crab cakes.

(Janet: But remember, the left front table is ours!)

