

The  
Wow

e-newsletter

by Ken and Dahlynn McKowen

Principles

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# How You Can Write Like *the* Dickens!

By Terri Elders



In the enchanting Oscar-winning film, *Hugo*, young Isabelle gushes, “I’m half in love with *David Copperfield*.” How delightful that director Martin Scorsese pays tribute to the genius of Charles Dickens and one of his classic books during the author’s bicentennial year.

Dickens’ 200<sup>th</sup> birthday fell this month, on Tuesday, February 7, 2012. I traveled from my West Coast home to Philadelphia to celebrate this special birthday event at the Dickens Fellowship Banquet at the Omni Hotel Independence Park with 41 other Dickens devotees. On this same spot, the old United States Hotel once stood; it was here that Dickens stayed during his first visit to America in March 1842. We toasted the writer at the exact time he was born, which would have been 6:59 p.m. EST.

A couple of days earlier, I’d joined a crowd of nearly 300 who packed the auditorium at the University of the Sciences, adjacent to Philadelphia’s Clark Park, the home of one of the only two statues of Charles Dickens in the world, for a program of readings from the author’s works. The event concluded with a troop of Morris Dancers leading us to the statue; gazing up at Dickens

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## ...Write Like *the* Dickens

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was another sculpture of Little Nell, Dickens' beloved heroine from *The Old Curiosity Shop*. We then all sang "Happy Birthday" to our favorite author.

Also during my trip, I visited the Free Library of Philadelphia to view its world-class Dickens' collection in the Rare Books Department, which included Dickens' stuffed raven Grip. Grip inspired Dickens' historical novel *Barnaby Rudge*, as well as Edgar Allan Poe's poem, called, appropriately, "The Raven." And the West Gallery of the library lobby also had a collection of Dickens caricatures. But my personal celebration of Dickens' 200<sup>th</sup> birthday won't be complete until this coming June when I'll attend a Road Scholar event in England called "The Best of Times."

Why my fascination with Charles Dickens? Because I've been totally in love with his works since adolescence when I first read *David Copperfield*. Dickens is the writer who first showed me the world as it was, and the world as it could be, when good triumphs over evil. And Dickens addressed every issue of social injustice in his day. "His social conscience was so important—to narrow that gap between the rich and the poor, which is a situation we're still struggling with today," declared Gerald Dickens, a great-great-grandson, when he visited the Free Library last December.



*Smile, Terri!*



Dickens' stories continue to speak to me and teach me how to be a better writer and a better person. Dickens' stories are stuffed with unforgettable characters, mysteries, pathos and romance. Though some modern readers have criticized his work for its sentimentality and melodrama, his novels continue to be read all over the world. Dickens died in 1870, but his works have never been out of print. David Mitchell, in *The Telegraph*, reports that *A Tale of Two Cities* is the best-selling novel of all time. Published in 1859, it has sold more than 200 million copies to date.

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## ...Write Like *the* Dickens

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Here are some ways we can emulate “The Inimitable,” as Dickens called himself, in creating our own compelling true stories for anthologies:

**1. Write about your childhood.** What made us happy or sad? Who was kind and who was cruel? Dickens wrote from his own unhappy childhood experiences, from the heart. His fictional children are unforgettable—Tiny Tim, Little Nell, David, Pip. George Orwell claimed, “No one, at any rate, no English writer, has written better about childhood than Dickens.”

Your anthology story lines don’t have to be as dramatically harrowing as Pip’s adventure where he meets an escaped convict in a swamp. For instance, I’ve written anthology stories about the day my sister and I went to court to be adopted, about how my fourth grade teacher weaned me from chewing pencils, and about one memorable Halloween when I had chicken pox.

**2. Write for a general audience.** Some early twentieth century writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf believed that if writing wasn’t obscure, it wasn’t art. But Dickens wrote for everybody, for royalty and ragamuffins. One of his biggest fans was Queen Victoria, but he also was beloved by the common man, especially the illiterate factory workers and farmers who gathered in every English hamlet to hear the village pastor or schoolmaster read the latest episode from the weekly or monthly magazines that carried Dickens’ serialized works.

Like Dickens, we can strive to make our readers laugh or weep, or even better—both. Dickens often focuses on beauty in the midst of ugliness, or virtue among a variety of vices. His characters encourage us to look for silver linings and positive outcomes. For example, in my story called “Withstanding Winter’s Woes,” I wrote about my late husband’s critical illness and emphasized how one of my cats inspired me to remain hopeful during those bittersweet days. They indeed were the best of times and the worst of times, both poignant and hilarious.

**3. Write to create tension and suspense.** Dickens couldn’t proceed with a novel until he selected the right title. Not all of his titles are simply the name of the protagonist. Think about the meaning of this title—*Great Expectations*. Will Pip turn out to be another David Copperfield? Dickens made certain he wouldn’t by going back and reading his earlier work to ensure he wouldn’t duplicate that story. He didn’t call the latter book *Pip* for a very good reason; he wanted his readers to consider their own expectations.

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## ...Write Like *the* Dickens

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In Dickens' works, change equals tension. His stories are records of characters being threatened and transformed by a series of changes. For example, think of the changes Ebenezer Scrooge experienced in the Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol*. Twists are another favorite ploy of Dickens. How long does the reader, like Pip, believe that his real benefactor is Miss Havisham, and share in Pip's amazement in learning that it indeed is the convict he met in the swamp—Magwich.

In our anthology stories, we can show how an incident or event changed our outlook or even us. For example, in my story, "Kisses for Mr. Castle," I relate how a junior high school science teacher forever cured me of the notion my father had planted in my young brain that girls were naturally inferior to boys when it came to math and science. Not only did I get an "A" in that class because of the project I did on Hershey's Kisses, my favorite candy, Mr. Castle's influence led me to be an advocate for women and girls in my subsequent careers as a teacher, social worker, Peace Corps Volunteer and writer. Like Dickens heroes, we've all experienced life-changing moments that can be turned into absorbing and entertaining stories.

**4. Write like "the devil is in the details".** Dickens was a true proponent of the old adage, "Show, don't tell." His characters reveal themselves through action and conversation, not through long passages of exposition and interpretation. Dickens frequented the theater, and in his youth wanted to be an actor. In plays and movies everything is visually shown. Dickens doesn't tell us his character is upset, angry or frustrated. He shows us emotion through simile, metaphor and vivid imagery.

In such a short form as an anthology story, every word must count. We need to be specific, not vague, as we paint a picture with our words. The artist Vincent Van Gogh wrote of Dickens, "There is no writer, in my opinion, who is so much a painter and a black-and-white artist as Dickens. His figures are resurrections."

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# The Wow Principles e-newsletter

## ...Write Like *the* Dickens

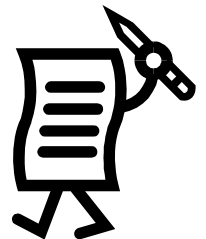
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Here are some resources for learning to write more like Dickens—how to show, not tell (copy the addresses into your web browser):

- 1) Toni Buzzeo: [http://www.tonibuzzeo.com/show\\_dont\\_tell.pdf](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com/show_dont_tell.pdf)
- 2) What If? <http://www.bookhooks.com/showdonttell.pdf>
- 3) Allan Hancock College Writing Center, Show, Don't Tell: <http://dl.getdropbox.com/u/65745/showdonttell.pdf>
- 4) Really Good Stuff: <http://www.reallygoodstuff.com/pdfs/157881.pdf>
- 5) Show Don't Tell: [http://www.cyber-spy.com/ebooks/ebooks/Show-Dont-Tell-\(ebook\).pdf](http://www.cyber-spy.com/ebooks/ebooks/Show-Dont-Tell-(ebook).pdf)
- 6) Writers Workshop #1 Show, Don't Tell: Okay, But How Do You Do It? <http://www.deborahdavisauthor.com/workshops/workshop-1.pdf>
- 7) Handout: Show, Don't Tell: [http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/offices/itd/cti/middle\\_school/m\\_pc/lesson\\_plans/lp\\_word/lp\\_w\\_la\\_growup/dwkh1\\_d\\_edit.pdf](http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/offices/itd/cti/middle_school/m_pc/lesson_plans/lp_word/lp_w_la_growup/dwkh1_d_edit.pdf)
- 8) Daily Writing Tips: Show, Don't Tell: <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/show-dont-tell/>

To bone up on Dickens during the bicentenary:

- 1) David Perdue's Charles Dickens Page: <http://charlesdickenspage.com/>
- 2) Charles Dickens Gad's Hill Place: <http://www.perryweb.com/Dickens/>
- 3) The Victorian Web: <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/index.html>



## About Terri...

Frequent guest columnist Terri Elders is a great editor *and* a great friend. She is also the co-creator of three upcoming *Not Your Mother's Book* titles: *On Travel*, *My First Time* and *On Sharing Secrets*. You can read more about Terri on the Publishing Syndicate website under the NYMB link!

If you'd like to contact Terri, her e-mail is [telders@hotmail.com](mailto:telders@hotmail.com). And check out Terri's fun blog: <http://atouchoftarragon.blogspot.com>



## NYMB update...

Thank you so much for all of the submissions for our new *Not Your Mother's Book* anthology series, which we call "NYMB." The series is so popular with writers that we have seen 30,000+ hits on the Publishing Syndicate website this month alone! We appreciate your title ideas, suggestions, comments and stories. We have so many submissions that we can't keep up and are calling in reinforcements. Keep them coming!

### A few NYMB housekeeping items:

- 1) At your request, the maximum word count is now 2,500 words.
- 2) We added new titles this month: *On Business*, *On Cowboys*, *On Family*, *On Firefighters*, *On Law Enforcement* and *On Politics*.
- 3) We will be announcing three new titles in March, so be sure to check the website often for the latest info.
- 4) Subtitle links: there are now descriptors for each of the NYMB book titles. And some even have working table of contents, updates and "Meet the Co-creator" bios. Check them all out!
- 5) We'll be posting some deadlines soon, as books are starting to fill with great stories and we're setting production schedules.
- 6) Get published and share in the royalties! And don't forget, if your story is picked up, you'll also receive a sample press kit to promote yourself and your writing.



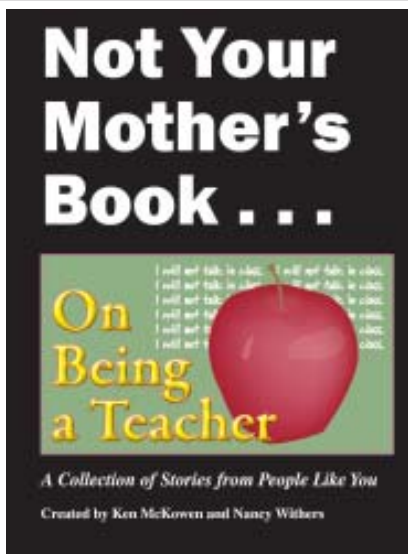
## March's Issue...

Author James L. Butler will be our guest columnist for March. James had submitted a story for consideration for *Not Your Mother's Book: On Being a Stupid Kid*, which was so great we started communicating by e-mail. To our surprise, James referred to himself as a "new unpublished writer," even though he has had numerous articles and two books published. Intrigued by his self-imposed moniker, James sent us a column, appropriately entitled "The New Unpublished Writer" and it is so timely that we'll share it with all of you in the next *Wow* issue!



**STORIES NEEDED! Get published!**

Updated 2/27/12



*Not Your Mother's Book* & *OMG! My Reality!*

Stories are flying in for our two anthology series: *Not Your Mother's Book* and *OMG! My Reality!* Consideration will be paid by way of royalties. Nearly 40 *NYMB* titles are listed on our website, along with details about the book. And some already have chapter headings and bios of our co-creators.

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*The nation's newest anthology series for the LGBT community!*

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*Dream of Things* has a great line-up of anthology books. On their website, be sure to click on the "Workshop" tab for a listing of titles. Good luck!

[www.DreamofThings.com](http://www.DreamofThings.com)

*Go for it! Get published!* 📖