
Opening Lines

Contesting Fate

BY NICHOLAS WEINSTOCK

Published authors are generally viewed as the luckiest people in the world. And fair enough, given the rarity of the chance (and rarer still, the professional entitlement) to pursue a creative impulse for years at a time. Add to that the good fortune necessary to land your project in the right person's hands at the right place and at the right time; not to mention the serendipity of selecting a topic judged to have the potential to appeal to thousands of members of the public you've never met. Every author of every book on every shelf of a bookstore has lucked out. Yet it's easy to overlook how hard and long most of them labor in order to be around when luck happens to strike.

When Ronna Wineberg was touched by the hand of fate, she had been quietly courting that hand for 18 years. A graduate of the University of Denver College of Law, Wineberg worked as a public defender for Colorado Legal Services in Denver and as a public defender in Littleton, Colorado. She met her husband, a doctor, in Colorado, and moved with him and their three young children to Nashville, Tennessee when he was offered a job at Vanderbilt University. While devoting herself full-time to the kids, Wineberg found that her longtime interest in writing (she used to pen snippets of fiction while waiting for her cases to get underway in court) could not be ignored. So she joined a local writers' group, took evening classes in writing, and—in the small and smaller pockets of time between family caretaking—got going.

"My goal when I started to write," Wineberg recalls, "was to complete a short story that worked well enough to be published. I had limited time, young children to take care of, and couldn't imagine any achievement in writing greater than a published story." But

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Ronna Wineberg

Genia Blaser

when she began to land stories in literary magazines—one in the *Colorado Review*, another two years later in *Midstream*, then one in an anthology of Tennessee writers three years after that—Wineberg began to aim higher, and longer. She wrote two novels—one, naturally, about a public defender—that were never published, but are still alive in a drawer, and later published stories in a wide array of literary magazines, including *So To Speak*, the *South Dakota Review*, *Controlled Burn*, *Sou'wester* and *Writers' Forum*. Then she discovered short story contests.

"There are a huge number of contests out there," Wineberg says. "In a way, each one I entered became a goal for me. They served as deadlines. By the entry date, I had to have a manuscript in finished shape. You have to select carefully, though. Most contests charge a fee to enter, which can become expensive. I once sent a manuscript to a contest—and that year they didn't choose a winner. You have to be realistic about contests, too. Since there is just one winner, the chance of success is small. It's a risky way to get your hopes up." But it's an effective way as well. When in 2000 Wineberg was a finalist for the Willa Cather Prize in Fiction given by Helicon Nine Editions, "it was wonderful. For the first time, really, I had the feeling that I might be able to publish a book."

For seven years Wineberg diligently submitted stories and collections to contests, working between the deadlines to rewrite and reorganize her pieces. Six years ago she and her family moved to New York City when her husband got another job. There Wineberg was one of the founding editors of the *Bellevue Literary Review*, a literary journal devoted to themes of health, healing and the body that is published by the Department of Medicine at New York University, and became its first fiction editor, a job she still holds. She was a finalist in the *Moment Magazine* short story contest of 2002. A year later she made it into the last round of the *New Millennium Writings Awards Contest XV*. Then, in June of 2004, when Wineberg was typically busy hosting family and planning a party for her daughter's college graduation, she got a call from the *New Rivers Press Many Voices Project Literary Competition* to let her know that she'd won.

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them. It's sort of hit and miss, but you do get a sense of what various magazines are paying.

Q: Are agents of any use out there?

GEORGIADES: No. I had an agent take me out to lunch once and he said it's not worth his time to pick up the phone and call up magazines because the percentage of magazine commissions just wasn't worth the effort. But then he bought me lunch, so—

GREENBERG: Most agents stipulate that they won't handle magazine work when they sign you up. When you're in the higher echelons it's very good to have an agent, because you can double your fee. I know it's gauche to talk about what you're paid, but it's difficult to make a living and you do have to worry about this. And you are wondering what the next guy is getting.

TAYLOR: Some agencies assign younger staff members to try and sell magazine articles for their book authors just to keep their names out there. I want to ask

one more question. Would you recommend this life to your children?

GREENBERG: I'd recommend it to anyone but my children.

GORDON: I find it almost impossible to answer just because it's really fun, but at this point in my life, not having a pension plan and all that stuff, it makes me think maybe 10 years ago I might have gone in a different artistic direction.

GEORGIADES: I'll find out when I have some.

DOMINUS: I love it so much. That's why it's worth all of the difficulties. I love not having a boss, and I love traveling, and all of those things make it worth it. But I guess it depends. They'd have to really love it a lot. But no, I wouldn't encourage it.

TAYLOR: Love it a lot, that's the answer. Susan Dominus, William Georgiades, Meryl Gordon and Michael Greenberg, thank you so much for joining us. ♦

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"At first, I had forgotten I'd sent the manuscript in," Wineberg admits. "And I'd entered back in November; we were supposed to hear in April or May, so I figured that nothing had come of it. When they called, I was stunned."

While the victory was good news—her manuscript had been selected from some 450 submissions—the better news was the reward: publication of her winning collection of stories by New Rivers Press. *Second Language* came out in October of 2005, following an editorial process that was both thrilling and particularly challenging.

"I had a lot more decisions to make than I'd expected," Wineberg admits. "Most of the stories in the book were written in the last five years, but a few stories were 10 or 12 years old. Reading them again, and seeing how differently I would have written them now, I had to restrain myself from taking them apart and rewriting them." There were also the peculiar problems that come from working on diverse batches of fiction over years. "When you write stories over a

span of time, you run the risk of repeating names and situations from story to story without realizing it. One of my readers pointed out to me that I had mentioned the same disease in a few stories. So I went through the manuscript and came up with a new illness."

Nonetheless, Wineberg's outlook has never been healthier. She is working on a new novel, investigating agents, and—as always—tinkering with an array of short stories. For the first time in her writing life, she may not have to win a contest in order to get her next book published. But that doesn't mean she won't enter any. "There's something about contests that you see listed in magazines, in *Poets & Writers* or the *AWP Chronicle*, that is encouraging for a writer," she says. "They do give you the feeling that one day something can happen." ♦

Correction

In the introduction to our transcript of the New York Public Library panel on Google, we gave the date of the discussion as November 29, 2005. The event took place on November 17, 2005.