Schmaltz and Balm for the Writer's Heart

**Bud Gardner on the Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul**

Elizabeth Michaelson

People love success stories, and our favorite ones are about overcoming odds. The phenomenally popular *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books supply that mix of inspiration and schmaltz (which means both emotion and, er, chicken fat) that its authors believe can "change the world, one story at a time."

Consider this Soup tale: two men write a book. It is rejected by a total of 144 publishers before being published. But when it hits the stores, the book has sold fifty million copies and spawned thirty-two sequels—so far. This is the story of Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, the coauthors of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. The stories in *Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul* (Health Communications), the latest installment, are imbued with the can-do spirit and sense of gratitude that have propelled Soup's cooks. The stories are by writers who've not just succeeded but, more significantly, struggled to succeed.

**Ninety Percent Desire**

*Writer's Soul* coauthor Bud Gardner started out as a coach at American River College in Sacramento, Calif., and when he enrolled in a writing class in 1967, he had doubts about his abilities. But when
Gardner’s professor Duane Newcomb declared, "It takes ninety percent desire and ten percent talent to get into print." Gardner perked up. "I thought, 'Ninety percent desire? That's my category! I can do this!'" He was right, and Gardner went on to become a journalist and writing teacher.

For the past seven years, Gardner has led seminars at the annual Maui Writers' Conference. Three years ago Gardner and Dan Poynter hosted the non-fiction retreat there, with Chicken Soup author Jack Canfield as the star attraction.

"One day at lunch Jack said, 'Bud, have you ever thought about making a contribution to Chicken Soup for the Soul?'" Gardner recalls in a telephone interview from Northern California. "And I said, 'Oh yeah!' and I told him this story about Nora Profit (her contribution "You Can't Afford To Doubt Yourself" is in the book). Jack said, 'You don't get it! I want to know, would you coauthor Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul?'" Gardner was amazed: "I about fell out of my chair!"

Mission to Improve Writing

Writer's Soul was born out of concern for the future of quality writing in America: "About two years ago, the United States Department of Education turned out a study which said that only twenty percent of American students write well. And that's kind of staggering." Disturbed by the findings, Gardner promptly approached writers he knew—and some he didn't. "I said to them, 'You know we've got to do something about this writing situation. You have struggled to get where you are, would you tell your story?' And that's how I got most of these celebrity authors (including Sue Grafton, Ernest J. Gaines and Art Linkletter) to come forth—they just loved the mission of the book."

"In this country we see English and writing as a hurdle to climb over: 'I have to do this essay to get a grade,'" says Gardner. "What I'd like to do is change America's attitude by saying, 'We don't write because we know, we write to know, to learn, to grow.'"

Hope and persistence are a writer's most important attributes, says Gardner: "Self-confidence comes from self-discipline; self-discipline is persistence in action. 'More people have talent than discipline. That's why discipline pays better,'" he quotes. He continues, "I honestly believe that more people should try their hand at writing. I think that they'll see the world differently and reach readers on a deep level with their writing."

Journal Writing is a Must

Gardner advises aspiring writers to "Make a decision to be the best writer you possibly can be and then write in a journal every day." He also suggests a technique known as clustering, in which you make note of topics you want to write about, and then link the topics with random words that come into your head. "From that you get a visual [aid] to writing; Gabriella Rico talks about clustering in Writing the Natural Way. I think it's one of the finest concepts I've ever seen."
Gardner is currently gathering stories for Chicken Soup for the Rags to Riches Soul. His belief in the power of these tales is clear: "There are great stories out there that need to be told. They help people feel good about life instead of the bad news we're constantly getting—the bombings and knifings and killings," Gardner insists.

**Chicken Soup for Every Home**

There are seventy-eight books in the works, providing nourishing fare for souls in virtually every category, including Christian teens, entrepreneurs, and fishermen. Targeting a niche audience seems less like a labor of love and more like canny marketing, but Gardner defends the seemingly endless stream editions. Pointing to the upcoming Veteran's Soul book he observes, "A thousand to 1200 veterans are dying every single day and so [it's important] to get a book out that honors them. The more specialized you go with the book today, the more you hit a niche market that maybe didn't have a book [aimed at] them."

In the tradition of Chicken Soup's mission to encourage and inspire, Gardner urges people to submit their own stories to the Chicken Soup writing contest. The winner receives an all-expense paid trip to the Maui Writers Conference in 2001, plus publication and $300.

Since taking on Writer's Soul, Gardner's "never worked harder in my life," he says happily. "We (he and wife Jennifer, a former English teacher) read nearly 5000 stories, and we send books and letters out regularly." But the rewards are great: "I see what I've done all my life as a calling to be in the teaching game and it's come to a crescendo with this book."

As Gardner bids me goodbye in order to prepare for his next interview, he says, "I really believe this: when we speak, our words only echo across the room or down the hall. But when we write, our words echo down the ages." With writing, "We don't know where it's going to go or how our brains are going to work, but if we'll sit down and do it and give ourselves a chance, I think we can do the wonderful things that Ray Bradbury says in the closing line of the book: 'May you be in love every day for the next 20,000 days. And out of that love, remake a world.'"

(Send original stories of not more than 1200 words to the Chicken Soup Writing Contest, Box 30880, Santa Barbara, California 93130, or fax (805)563 2945 www.chickensoup.com prior to March 1, 2001. Winners must be U.S. citizens 18 years or older.)

Elizabeth Michaelson is a freelance writer living in New York City.

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