

# Master Class

## By Michael Salisbury

Let's create a world, shall we? A special world for Guppies. Take the current world we live in, edit, select all, copy, paste, save as "Guppies Earth.doc." Nice start. Let's customize it.

First, every Guppy's keyboard has two special buttons—the e-champagne button and the e-chocolate button.

When you press the e-champagne button, a bottle of champagne, better than Moët, better even than Veuve Clicquot, perfectly chilled, shows up outside your door (and the door of every other Guppy) on a silver tray carried by the person who best suits your mood at the moment, dressed exactly the way you want him (or her) to be, ready to pour for you and toast you, ready to tell you how brilliant you are and how wondrous your manuscript is.

When you press the e-chocolate button, an enormous bowl of chocolate, better than Godiva (sacrilege!), shows up outside your door (and the door of every other Guppy), carried by your fantasy lover, who wants to feed it to you slowly, in bed, and then while you doze, cleans your house, does your laundry, balances your checkbook (finding and correcting a \$7,200 transposition error in your favor), and finally wakes you gently with a neck and shoulder massage.

Of course, the champagne and chocolate are calorie-free. In fact, they are slimming, and they retard or even reverse the aging process.

The second feature of my Guppies Earth is that college professors will audition for you, giving you a six-



Sharyn McCrumb (left) and Nancy Fletcher-Blume, CWW president, at Landmark Booksellers. Photo courtesy of Kathy Rhodes, event co-chair, [www.asouthernjournal.com](http://www.asouthernjournal.com).

hour preview lecture of their courses. (That's special for me because I'm thinking of going back to school.) Of course, you'll break for lunch, and have a couple of breaks to schmooze with others. You'll make new friends who have similar interests.

The e-champagne and e-chocolate buttons aren't working too well in my version of the world. But the college-professor audition—that has more or less happened.

The Council for the Written Word hosted its 14th annual Fall Writers' Seminar on September 15 at the Williamson County Library in Franklin, Tennessee. The Fall Writers' Seminar was that

fantasy academic audition, a master class with Sharyn McCrumb, who would be a dream professor. The night before the seminar, Joel Tomlin, owner of Landmark Booksellers, hosted a reception open to everyone attending the seminar. Landmark Booksellers is a cozy independent bookstore housed in an antebellum Greek Revival building in historic downtown Franklin, and Joel is a faithful supporter of the Council. Incorporated in 1799, Franklin is located south of Nashville and was the location of a decisive five-hour Civil War battle in which over 8,000 were killed or wounded. Franklin has been named the Number One Small Town in Tennessee. The city's website says Franklin is one of the wealthiest cities in one of the wealthiest counties in the United States.

**Three components of fiction are structure, selection, and sentiment.**

New York Times best-selling author Sharyn McCrumb led the seminar. McCrumb is best known for her Appalachian Ballad novels set in the North Carolina/Tennessee mountains. Her most recent novel, *Once Around the Track*, chronicles the adventures of an all-woman NASCAR team that hires a “pretty” male driver.

The morning session was titled “Tell It Slant: The Truth in Fiction.”

McCrumb began with a discussion of the difference between fiction and nonfiction. The difference, she said, is style. I believe she was contrasting reporting only facts with using creativity and imagination to



smooth out the story. McCrumb cited three works to draw out this distinction. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* is considered nonfiction, though some say otherwise. Meyer Levin’s *Compulsion*, the novelization of Leopold and Loeb’s murder case, is fiction. Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*, the story of Gary Gilmore, is fiction. Yet, Mailer’s and Levin’s works are based on real people and incidents. Think of fiction as imaginary toads in real gardens, she advised.

Three components of fiction are structure, selection, and sentiment.

Structure sets limits on a subject. It can be based on place. McCrumb’s own *St. Dale* is

Sharyn McCrumb at the Williamson County Library. Photo courtesy of Eddie Moth.

a retelling of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. Each chapter takes place in a different location and is told from a different point of view. Updating and retelling *The Canterbury Tales* was an idea that came to McCrumb in graduate school and stayed with her ever since. In *St. Dale*, she found the right circumstances to honor that idea.

Structure can be based on time. (Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* and Ann Patchett’s *Run*, both set over the course of one day, come to mind.)

Character can dictate the structure of a story. In *The Longest Day*, the events of the D-Day invasion are told from several different points of view. McCrumb encouraged us to examine our story for a natural way to structure it. Structure lends balance to a story—if you honor the structure. By that I mean, if your structure is based on characters, you’ll want to provide a fair representation of the major characters, showing how each of them affects or is affected by the events. If time is your structure, you’ll want to avoid leaving gaps of time unaccounted for. I’m not suggesting you tick off every moment and fill it with mind-numbing detail, but you’ll want to somehow acknowledge the empty moments, or the fact that they passed by. And if you want to see a master’s treatment of time, as if McEwan’s and Patchett’s works aren’t enough, check out Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, in which time flows backwards.

Once you have your structure, it’s important to begin well. Write an opening that hooks readers and makes them care, makes them want to turn the pages. One of the best book beginnings is from Louis L’Amour’s *To Tame a Land*:

It was Indian country, and when our wheel busted, none of them would stop. They just rolled on by and left us setting there, my pap and me.

McCrumb guided us in analyzing how much information and how much interest is packed in that opening. What year is it? Probably before 1861, when railroads finally crossed the nation. Probably after 1849, when gold was discovered in California. It’s on the prairie. The narrator is probably 10 to 12 years old, a boy. What will happen? Probably an Indian attack. And probably the boy’s pap will die.

McCrumb pointed out that opening has no adverbs and only one adjective: Indian. L’Amour interested the reader first with a lean, suspenseful opening. And he saved the backstory for later.

Selection is the second component of fiction. Whose story is it? Whose POV is best for the story? In the above example, we don't know his name yet, but we know he and his pap have been abandoned to a terrible fate. To discuss selection, McCrumb talked about her own work, *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*. Frankie Silver was hanged for killing her husband, Charles Silver, in 1831. McCrumb felt she couldn't tell the story from Frankie's point of view. Frankie was too backward, and she didn't know the town where she was jailed. The sheriff (an elected office) changed over the course of the story, so he was out. The defense attorney spent little time in the town, and the prosecuting attorney was a circuit rider, as was the judge. That left her with the clerk of the Burke County Superior Court, 25-year-old Burgess Gaither, who was the perfect narrator.

McCrumb teased us that during her research, she discovered the real killer. I think it's safe to say there was a little spike in sales of *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* immediately after the seminar. Safe, too, to say I was a part of that spike.

Sentiment is the third component of fiction. You must make your reader care. The best example is Dickens. Dickens often made his protagonist a sympathetic, struggling boy: Pip, Tiny Tim, Oliver Twist, David Copperfield. Dickens's books, his works of fiction, were what brought public awareness of exploitative and cruel child labor practices to the tipping point and were responsible, suggested McCrumb, for the enactment of child labor laws. From her own body of work, McCrumb cited *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* for the attention it brought to environmental issues.

There was a break for lunch and an opportunity to get books signed.



Joel Tomlin, owner of Landmark Booksellers, [www.landmarkbooksellers.com](http://www.landmarkbooksellers.com), and Sharyn McCrumb, [www.sharynmccrumb.com](http://www.sharynmccrumb.com). Photo courtesy of Eddie Moth.

characters from the inside. Identify with them. Understand their motivation, and find a way to sympathize with them.

People read to make friends, McCrumb asserted—to have a relationship with a character who makes no demands on them. People read to escape the unsatisfying components of their own lives, to live vicariously through a character, and they want this escape to start in the first chapter. McCrumb recommended we read our own work to see if it gives us the escape we hope to offer our readers. Keep your writing smooth, simple, clean, and transparent. Some “literary” writers want you to be conscious of them, of their writing. That's not good escape.

The afternoon session was titled “Literary Feng Shui.” Feng Shui is the study of the placement of objects—for example, the furniture in your home—and the effect the objects and their placement have on the flow of energy through the room and the people who enter it. As McCrumb applied it to literature, the “objects” would be tone, emotion, description, and characterization.

Tone is word choice. Slang lightens tone.

Emotion is your strongest weapon in keeping the reader interested. Don't tell the reader how to feel. Let the reader see the characters' emotions through their actions and words. Controlling the readers' emotions is advanced writing technique.

Subjective description—don't stop the action to throw in a lump of description. Every bit of description should convey emotion. Nobody looks at something neutrally. Everyone has interests and filters. Who is describing the thing? Use that character's vocabulary. Let the words describe the thing and the describer. No description is neutral, so control it as much as you can.

How do you keep stereotypical people from being stereotypes? McCrumb said that in one predictable writer's work, the villain is always overweight and always speaks with a Southern accent. Immersion is the key to avoiding this. See

It takes two ideas to make a book. The first is the idea you carry around with you. It's your hang-up. For Dickens, it was boys who were suffering. For McCrumb, it's the strong sense of being a stranger. Her parents came from vastly different backgrounds, and though she knew both cultures, she felt she was a stranger in each.

The second idea is whatever stimulates you or provokes you. It can be something you read, maybe something on the news. I once heard a detective on a cop show complain to his chief that after their department made a public appeal for more information regarding a murder, they'd had half a dozen people call in to confess. That provoked me. I found myself thinking, what if my neighbor was one of those people, but instead of confessing, she claimed to be the deceased's next of kin and wanted to claim the body? And what if she did this once or twice a year? What would she gain from this? Attention? Sympathy? Money, somehow? And I was off to the races.

Most writers are flooded with ideas for stories, more ideas than they will ever have time to write. Many of these ideas will fade away, and others aren't strong enough to sustain the writer or the story once he begins. Write the ideas that stay with you.

The unspoken contract between fiction writers and their audience is, Trust me. It's important to keep readers entertained without losing them. It is essential to do the best research you can to keep the readers with you. If you do shoddy research, readers may catch you. That can ruin their experience with your book. Good research offers opportunities. If you find a set of facts that don't make sense, you're missing something. You need to ask someone else for another point of view or do more research.

Research background by reading books.

Go to your subject, the place, the event, and observe it. Immerse yourself in it.

Interview experts after you've prepared with other research. You'll show the expert you're serious; you'll ask better questions and learn more.

Also, write what you know. You know your own culture, the one you were born and raised in, better than any other culture you could explore.

This one-day seminar was a master class for me. McCrumb is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and holds an MA in English from Virginia Tech. She has lectured at Oxford University, the University of Bonn, Germany, and the Smithsonian. Obviously she was hitting the high points, and could have gone on for semesters. Enroll me in that, please.

Full disclosure:

The Council for the Written Word's mission is to encourage, educate, and empower writers. Founded in 1993, its primary project is maintaining a bibliography of the past and present authors of Williamson County. The current listing contains over 300 authors, with their biographical sketches and lists of published works. The bibliography is on line at [lib.williamson-tn.org/Local\\_Authors/LocalAuthors.htm](http://lib.williamson-tn.org/Local_Authors/LocalAuthors.htm).

The Council presents two annual workshops: Spring Writers' Workshop, an intensive one-day event with instruction and hands-on experience in a specific genre. The Fall Writers' Seminar is an all-day event for aspiring writers, with authors, agents, editors, publishers, and publicists teaching the art and business of writing. Past workshops have featured Darnell Arnoult, Peggy Walton Walker, Cynthia Williams, Clay Stafford, Eddie Lightsey, Suzanne Kingsbury, Susan Choi, Brenda Vantrease, Andy Van Roon, Cheryl Zach, Steven Womack, Deborah Adams, Rick Warwick, Philip Lee Williams, T. Vance Little, Terry Kay, Tracy Barrett, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Sharon Green, Lynne Bachleda, Jimmy Gentry, Tracy Miller, Kathy Knight, Etta Wilson, Elizabeth Daniels Squires, Cecilia Tishy, Tom Armstrong, Barbara Nowak, and Peter Honsberger. For more information on CWW, visit its website at [cww-writers.org](http://cww-writers.org).

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Michael Salisbury is a member of the Council for the Written Word. He also belongs to the Tennessee Writers Alliance, Mystery Writers of America, and Sisters in Crime, and most important, he is a Guppy. He is working on his manuscript with a critique group now. And he's hoping to get the champagne and chocolate thing to work the way he wants it to. Contact Michael at [msalisbury@bellsouth.net](mailto:msalisbury@bellsouth.net).