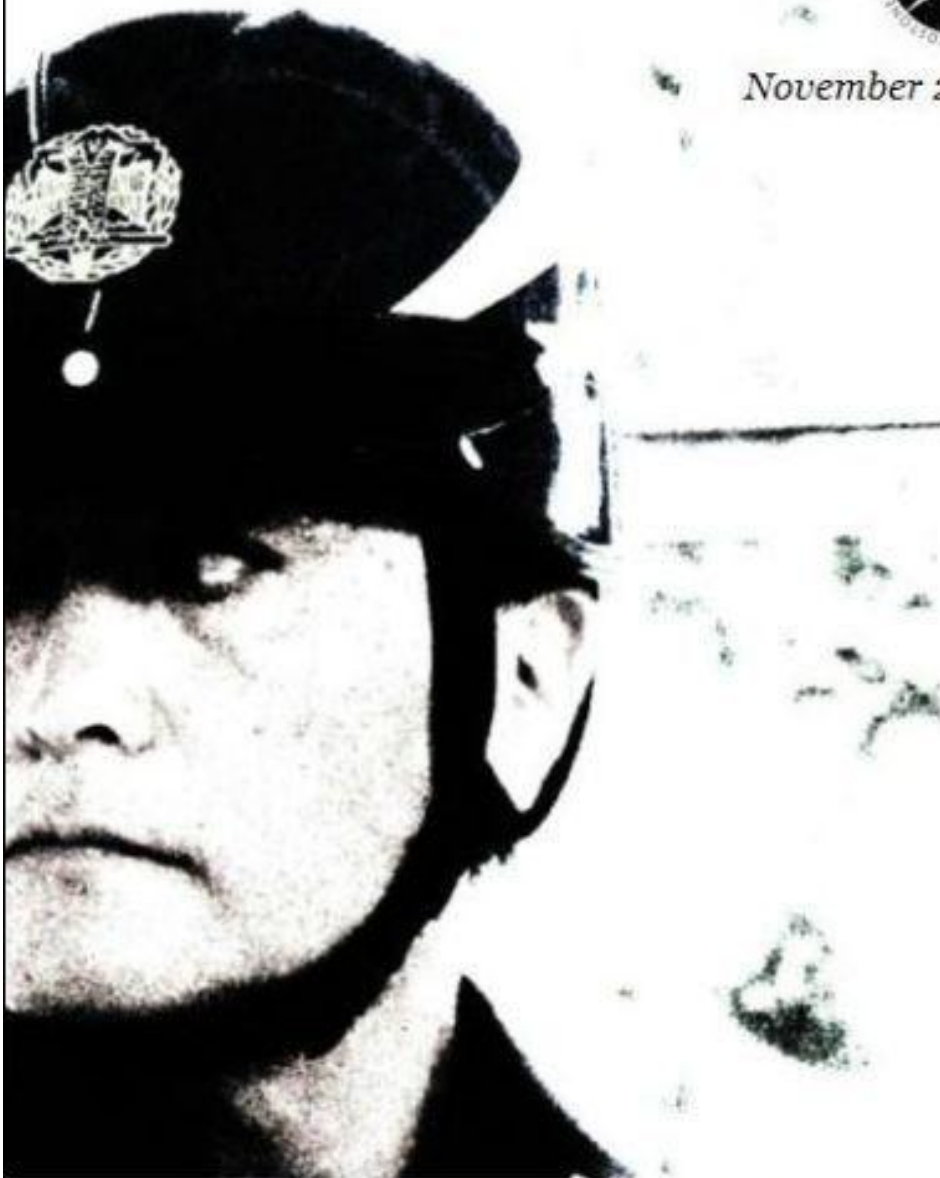


Redstone Science Fiction



November 2010
#6



Cat Rambo & Desmond Warzel

Cover Photo by Richard Newton

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Editor's Note – November 2010

by Michael Ray

Welcome to Redstone #6, in which your editor gets to eat a little crow.

I have consistently said that I do not prefer stories that are primarily about romantic relationships or humorous stories. So this month we are publishing a story that considers how a biotech advance could impact a couple's relationship and a humorous story about wrestling. There's a reason we have gone against type with these stories – they are damn good.

Cat Rambo's story, "Not Waving, Drowning" considers how technology that allows one partner to read the other's thoughts would complicate a relationship. Desmond Warzel's flash piece, "Wrestling with Alienation", uses a barroom story by a wrestler to make us consider the "universal" nature of pop culture. We enjoyed these excellent stories and hope you will too.

For many writers (and poor, poor editors) November has increasingly come to mean NaNoWriMo – National Novel Writing Month. Thousands of writers pledge to turn out a fifty-thousand-word novel during the month, much to the chagrin of many 'serious' writers, and particularly novel editors & agents, who will be inundated with half-formed manuscripts by New Year's. But novels written during NaNoWriMo have been published, and our Henry Cribbs tracked down five authors whose fifty thousand words were successfully transformed into published works. He quizzed them about how they were able to 'live the dream' and get their caffeine-fueled rough drafts into print and now shares with us what he found. (Hank and I are both taking a swing at NaNoWriMo this year – my id is mikeray – so find us there).

I also want to encourage you to check out our cover. The awesome photo is by Richard Newton, who is an outstanding photographer (and lawyer, and expert in all things Japan). It so reminded me of an anti-totalitarian image from a punk rock band flyer in the late's 70's, that I just ran with it. Give it a look.

As always, we hope that you find something here that you will enjoy.

Your Humble Servant,
Michael Ray
Editor
RSF

Not Waving, Drowning

by Cat Rambo

Curled on the couch, Jamie tried to pick a stubborn popcorn kernel from her teeth, worrying it with a fingernail.

"We need to talk," Emilio said.

The popcorn was wedged painfully between a side molar and gum. She stared at him. His tone sent a panicky thrill down her spine.

"I've decided to join the PsyKorps," he said. "They say I'm qualified. One in a thousand has the physiology to accept a shunt. I have it."

"I make enough money for us," she protested. PsyKorps? Unthinkable. PsyKorps Agents could riffle through a person's thoughts, pick through their innermost being. "You don't need to sell your soul to the government. My job gives us food and a roof over our heads."

"PsyKorps does good work," he said. "Keeps the airplanes able to fly, for one. Catches criminals. Monitors state events and provides absolute security where needed."

She would have said, "You can't," would have asked, "Does this mean you're leaving me?" but the look in his eyes forestalled her. She tried again to unwedge the popcorn, bowing her head so her bangs obscured her tears.

He had made up his mind, she could tell, and was prepared to resist any argument. Why bother?

* * *

After lovemaking that night, he stroked her hair, still struggling to control his breath. Once the gesture would have suffused her with love, left her sodden as a sponge with helpless emotion.

But now the touch roused impatience. He'd caused the pain that led her here, curled in her bed around his decision. She had fallen in battle. Her enemy knelt beside her, inexplicably tender.

All's fair in love and war, she thought, one of the brittle observations that had swirled through her mind since Emilio's revelation.

She went into the bathroom to splash water on her face, driving away the heat of tears.

When she came back, Emilio was sprawled, comfortable as a sleeping cat. Light laddered across his body from the streetlight outside. A car screeched past on the street. This area was respectable, but barely. It was what they could afford, if they wanted this much space. If their income doubled, they could move someplace nice, Greenwood maybe or Queen Anne.

In three months Emilio would be an active Psi. Then they'd know whether or not they could stand it, a Psi and a normal living together. Others before them had tried and failed. Living with someone who could read your mind when you couldn't reciprocate – like a rat in a cage, an experimental animal. She couldn't imagine it.

Their marriage was a patchwork of compromise, but she'd thought it was a partnership. Had he ever agreed?

He snored and stretched out in his sleep when she nudged him.

She wanted to shake him awake and say, "Can't we go back to the way things were, where I told you about my day? Sure, I always saw the envy in your eyes, but there was no *need* for it. I'd share it with you, share every scrap of it. I would have done that willingly. Instead, you cut out my heart without asking, you tore it away and never consulted me, just made it collateral damage, an accident of your own quest."

The last realization pissed her off. She'd been reduced to a peripheral, an odd accessory, while on her part, he'd been the piston to her pump. Now she couldn't function anymore, as though an integral part had been teleported away, its means of abduction unfathomable.

She hugged the pain to her as though it might fill that void. It was the only thing she could think of, now that he'd gone away, leaving his body behind to let her know what she'd miss.

* * *

"I want to go over what the process will be like," Emilio said during dinner. "So you know what to expect."

Jamie'd been too exhausted to cook. The day had passed in one weary, numb blur. She'd ordered pizza. It sat congealing on the kitchen table between them.

Why bother, she thought, but she nodded.

"The shunt won't immediately function," he said. "I'll have to work at learning to focus and hear thoughts. They said I could practice with you, would you be up for that?"

He beamed at her, pleased to have found a way to involve her in the process that would subtract him from her existence. But she couldn't think of how to put that without feeling as though she were raining on his parade.

"Okay," she said, and put a smile on her lips to match his. She wasn't sure if it fooled him or not.

Aside from that, they didn't talk about it.

It wasn't that it wasn't on her mind constantly. When she woke it was her first thought. It chased her, circling like the shadow of a shark, into the murky depths of her dreams. She felt submerged, awash, only her arms above the surface to try to signal. Not waving, drowning.

Sometimes she wanted to talk about it, but she was afraid of what he'd say. It'd only make him move faster. She had always disliked the inertia of action that sometimes surrounded him. But now she prized that quality, thinking that where her words couldn't prevent him, perhaps that force could.

But it didn't.

* * *

A PsyKorps handbook, mental exercises Emilio was supposed to work on before the shunt was installed, to prepare him. She flipped through it. *Envision water*, it said. *Imagine a pool that is deep and clear. Sunlight plays on the water's surface. Watch the patterns that the light creates.*

She closed her eyes and tried to see the pool. There was only darkness behind her eyes, flecks and freckles of light that seeped below her lashes, the imaginary light that one sees in a darkened room.

Emilio kept a notebook, as the handbook suggested, detailing his moods and influences that might affect them: sleep and food and sex. He wouldn't watch TV with her, saying that he didn't want those patterns imprinted on his mind. He shied away from music as well, and kept his laptop closed.

He went for long walks in the park near them. He invited her along, but she declined after the first one. She could tell he wanted to walk in silence, but to her the silence ate away at their relationship, with the sureness of waves eroding a shoreline, erasing its contour grain by relentless grain.

While he was gone, she lost herself in videos, painful love stories that made her go into the shower and cry. These bouts left her feeling ragged as a torn towel, fragile and frayed. She would not show this side to him, she kept it shelled inside. He would see and despise it soon enough.

Marriage depended on the ability to lie about little things, about daily farts and other human matters. Perhaps the lies kept us human, kept us from being forced to judge publicly, to confront the things that would tear us apart.

* * *

The day of the shunt's installation, Emilio rose and sipped some water. They had forbidden him any food the night before. She'd contemplated fixing his favorite meal: steak au poivre and broccoli, and cherry pudding for dessert. *Too obvious.*

She drove him to the hospital.

"You don't need to stay," he said. "If you want to just take the car, go shopping, come back in three hours."

She knew all that. He'd explained it to her several times. But she nodded, smiled, and waved goodbye. He never looked back at her. She stood there with her glassy smile, watching him go until he was gone. She settled into the orchid-scented waiting room with her paperback.

Trying to read was a futile enterprise. The words crawled along the page like recalcitrant insects, persistently worming outside of meaning. She looked at the page. Three chapters in and she still had no idea what was happening. She didn't want to read any further.

To pass the time, she walked the corridors, sniffing the changes in the air. A redolence of diapers rode the nursery floor, while a seventh floor lounge smelled of talcum and old age. Several times nurses or interns asked if they could help her. Each time she shook her head, trying to look as though she knew where she was going.

When she stepped into the operating room theater where a cluster of medical students sat, she paused, trying to see if the body lying on the table *was* Emilio. She couldn't tell. Several figures blocked her sight of what might or might not be her husband. She settled into a stiff-backed chair, careful not to sit too close to anyone who might ask why she was there.

The students ignored her, though. They chattered among themselves. Someone said something about paying attention, and a dark-haired girl scoffed.

"Like we haven't already seen this in first year!" she said. "This may be the only West Coast hospital installing psychic shunts, but that gets tired after a while. It's a simple process, one that any of us could do in our sleep."

Jamie hoped that her husband's doctor wasn't asleep. Or maybe he or she would be, and they'd make a mistake, fail to install the shunt correctly.

Across the way, someone raised their head, looked directly at her. A PsyKorps uniform. Someone watching to make sure that nothing went wrong. Someone who could read her mind already. Terror seized her. They'd tell him all her doubts and fears and despairs. He'd know she'd been lying the last few months, pretending to be happy.

But they went back to watching what was happening. It was Emilio. She could see the hawkish curve of his nose. His face looked vulnerable but serene, surrounded by white draping.

* * *

Afterwards, he came out in a wheel chair. She helped him into the passenger side of the car and drove him home.

She couldn't help but ask, "How do you feel?"

He was silent, his gaze turned inward, as though he was assessing his mind, to see what slithered or shone there. "I feel all right," he said finally. "My head's sore, but there's not as much pain as you would expect."

"Not sensing thoughts yet?"

"That won't happen until at least tomorrow. There's a self-dissolving seal over it, to let me come into it slowly." He frowned. "Are you okay? I know this is hard on you. You've never liked hospitals."

How like him, to take her pain and make it something habitual and thoughtless and reflexive. "You've never liked hospitals." *I've never liked things that took you away from me*, she thought, *you turd. Remember that woman at work that had the crush on you? You thought it was funny, but I was ready to go down and punch her out. You never understood that, never understood how much it hurt that you'd been flirting with her. Leading her on. Encouraging her. Were you secretly hoping she'd make a pass, flatter you, make you feel desirable in a way that apparently I can't? You are desired*, she thought. *But I want you in a way that you can't give me.*

* * *

That evening, sitting out on the deck, he said, "I need you to help me practice."

Nice to hear you say you need me. She flinched internally. What would it be like when he could hear those thoughts? *A disaster.* But she said, "What do you want me to do?"

"I need to practice receiving," he said. "What I want you to do is focus your thoughts, make them easier to hear. Imagine a word, an object in the shape of a word – don't tell me what it is. Think of yourself throwing it at me."

She thrust the word *hello* at him, imagined herself clubbing him over the head with it. She thought he jumped in his seat, but he smiled. "Hello!" he said. "That was your word, wasn't it? I heard it in my head."

"What does that mean, that you heard it rather than saw it?" she asked, curious.

"There are three main sensory modes," he said. "Well, two important ones and a lesser one that they haven't explored more. People tend to think in terms of what they can see or hear or feel."

"Feel? How would that work?"

"I'm not really sure," he said. "But when I'm thinking I hear it as a voice in my head, so it makes sense that I'd perceive your thought that way as well. Let's try again!"

Each time she imagined herself pushing the word towards him, while shouting it somehow into the void. She tried simple words, then harder ones, *fortitude* and *visceral*. He perceived them all.

The shunt worked.

"What's the next step?" she asked. Despite herself, she had gotten caught up in his excitement.

"Later, we'll try some sentences," he said. The effort was telling on him. His face was drawn and gray as a migraine sufferer's. "I'll nap, then we'll go out to dinner and celebrate."

At the seafood restaurant, they ran into their friends Betta and Tim. Would Emilio tell them, she wondered. They were staunch liberals, and she'd never heard them refer to the PsyKorps with anything but disdain.

He said nothing about it as they exchanged small talk. Finally Jamie said, "Tell them your big news, Emilio." She felt a mean thrill at his frown.

"Finally found employment," he said.

"That's great," Betta said. She had worked with him at a start-up that had gone under years before, but they'd maintained the friendship. "Where at?"

"PsyKorps," he said.

Betta didn't even flinch. "What, working with their IT staff? Bleeding edge tech over there."

"In more ways than one, eh?" Tim said. "I hope they're paying well."

"I'm becoming an agent," Emilio said. His tone was polite. Jamie could see the danger signals in the crinkling of his eyes. He was furious, and growing stiffer and more polite the angrier he got.

There was a pause.

"Oh," Betta said. "Well, that should be interesting, shouldn't it?" She stepped away from the table. "Tim, we really need to get going. Call me sometime, Jamie!" She fluttered her fingers in farewell. Jamie suspected Betta wouldn't be returning the call.

Emilio waited until their meal had appeared.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

She bit the tip off a breadstick, contemplating him. "It didn't cross my mind that you'd try to hide it," she lied. "What's the point of that? People will find out, and if it's after you've kept it from them, they'll feel angry. Betrayed."

"We're supposed to keep a low profile," he said. "Not draw attention."

"So no one will know mindreaders are walking among them," she said.

"Is that how you feel about the Korps? Snoops and spies?"

"It's how you used to talk about them too," she said.

He crumpled the napkin in his hand, clutching it as though it held the temper he was struggling to contain. "Can't you just support me in this?"

"I could have," she said. "You never offered me the chance to."

"Do you want a divorce?"

The answer was too complicated for her to express. No, she wanted things to go back to the way they had been. She didn't want this world where he could hear what she was thinking. She took all her rage and fury and hurled it at him, was rewarded to see him pull back as though she'd punched him.

"How did that sound?" she said with a nasty sneer. She pushed her plate away and stood.

"We have to talk about this," he said. "What it means for you."

"Talk about it?" she said. She laughed. "That's two-way communication. Wait another week and you'll be able to pull it from my mind."

"Is that what this is all about?" he said. How could he look so stupid and bewildered? "Is there something you don't want me to know? Have you been keeping some secret from me?"

"Nothing like that," she said.

"Then what?"

She couldn't answer through the tears choking her.

She walked out of the restaurant with Emilio scrambling to pay the bill and catch up. She didn't want to strand him, so she walked a block over to the bus stop, and left him with the car. He wanted to be independent of her? Well, that cut both ways.

She rode the bus home. When she came in, he was sitting in the living room in the dark. The moonlight made his face a gleaming mask, tilted as he stared at his clasped hands.

She paused, wondering if he would call to her. He didn't. She took a shower and went to bed. An hour or two later, he crawled in beside her. She moved over. He pulled her close, cuddled her, let their warmth seep together.

He rested his chin on her hair, not speaking, just brushing his fingers back and forth along her arm. It was one of his signals that he'd like sex, and she hesitated, not sure whether or not to give in. Would it solve anything? Would it make things worse?

In the end she reached back, let her fingers stray over the curve of his side.

When she came, he was staring into her eyes. She shuddered and laughed and gasped. "What?" she said.

It struck her. He was trying to sense her emotions, trying to feel what she had felt at the moment of orgasm. An experiment, to see how much he could perceive. Indignation filled her. She pulled away.

"What did I do?" he asked.

She thought-screamed at him. *Snoop! Spy!*

He didn't deny it.

"I want you to be happy," he said. "Now I can tell when you really are."

* * *

She thought about pills. And booze. She bought a joint and smoked it, sitting out on the deck watching the shadows among the blackberry vines. A warm haze suffused her and she let herself slip away into that fog. But when Emilio came home and found her there, her anxieties reasserted themselves.

He didn't say anything, just took the roach and inhaled the last smoke. She wondered what the PsyKorps thought of drugs, even legal ones. It didn't seem as though they would help you much in envisioning a clear pool.

Emilio stood.

"They want me to stay there for training next week," he said.

"Stay there? As in overnight?"

"Yes. They want us getting to know each other and doing some team exercises."

"Well, that should be interesting," she said.

"Will you be all right if I go? You seem so fragile lately."

Fragile, she thought. Smashable. But already smashed. Maybe the only way to make something non-breakable was to break it. A very Zen approach.

"I'm not fragile," she said. If he thought her fragile, wouldn't he be in even more of a hurry to get rid of her? She'd read an article the day before that had said when people developed cancer, women had a much higher chance of their partners leaving. She'd thought another one of those uncontrollable thoughts, *yep, he'd be out the door like a shot.*

Could she blame him for it, really? You go through childhood thinking they're promising you your soul mate will come along eventually. And then you find yourself with someone who you think might fit the bill, only to discover that they're as broken as you are. Marriages were work, but no one ever told you that.

She was trying to figure out where she fit into his new life. The fear was that there was no niche for her. And he didn't care about that, or if he did, he'd factored it in and it didn't outweigh the other considerations.

No, she couldn't stand it. He knew that no marriage had survived this. He'd accepted that. It wasn't that he was stupid, or overly optimistic. It was that the marriage's dissolution, the almost certain possibility of its destruction, didn't matter enough to make him reconsider.

Could he even go back, at this point? He'd signed papers. They'd given him training and installed a very expensive piece of equipment in his head.

The Korps hadn't even bothered to talk to her about the transition, she realized. They'd written her off without even thinking about it. She wondered if that was how Emilio and the other new agents would bond with each other, commiserating with each other about the partners that had tried to drag them away from their ambitions.

He stood watching her. She wondered how much of her inner turmoil he could perceive.

He said impatiently, "It takes effort to read someone, Jamie. I will never read you unless you ask me to."

"You can control it that well?" she said.

"Why do you think they give us all this training? They don't want rogue psis running all over the place giving them a bad name, you know that as well as I do. They had to struggle hard enough just to get the airport screening process in place. Everyone screamed privacy laws all over the place."

He leaned back on the railing, regarding her. "Believe me, I understand," he said. "But we can get through this, Jamie."

"When no one else has?"

He caught her hand. "No one else is us. No one else loves each other the way we do."

Despite the wariness that barb-wired her, the emotion in his voice warmed her.

But was it real?

She kept watching him, waiting for him to get inside her head. Early in their marriage, he had asked, "What are you thinking?" so many times. He wouldn't be able to avoid it. Curiosity would force his hand.

He practiced every day, asked her to help him, and she did, thinking word after word, then phrase after phrase. He drove himself hard, would not stop until he was shaking with weariness.

He gave her some of the money from the Korps for household expenses, and she put it away. She wondered what he was doing with the rest of it. Building himself an escape fund, money so he could leave when he was ready?

She had thought it would be a revelation when he gave himself away, but it was nothing more than her thinking that she needed salt and looking up to find him handing her the shaker.

He paled. "I'm sorry, you were thinking loudly," he said.

"You couldn't help yourself, could you?" she asked, her voice and heart cold. "Must have been asking for it, on some subconscious level I don't have access to."

"You don't need to worry," he said. "Listen, Jamie, we're all broken inside. We've all got bits that we want to keep hidden. Look, every time I find something out, I'll tell you something in exchange. I picked my nose when I was little, did I tell you that? A nun at school shamed me out of it."

But she had stood, was walking out of the room. He followed her, proffering more secrets: the roommate he'd been attracted to in college, his hatred of his mother's pressures to succeed, the time he'd taken money from the store he worked in.

"It's not that," she said, packing her bags. "Or maybe it is, I don't know." She looked tired and broken, and he felt a wash of guilt and shame over how he'd treated her, but he couldn't make her perceive it, no matter what he said or did.

* * *

Emilio watched from the doorway as Jamie marched away, suitcase in hand. Mist filled the air, glistened on the back of her unhatted head. She'd get the rest of her belongings later.

He stood there with his fists braced against the doorway, watching till she was gone, broadcasting *guilt* and *shame* and *sorrow*, but there was no one around to hear him at all.

The End

Cat Rambo lives and writes in the Pacific Northwest. Her collection, [Eyes Like Sky and Coal and Moonlight](#), is a 2010 Endeavor Award finalist. Her short stories have appeared in such places as [Asimov's](#), [Weird Tales](#), and [Tor.com](#). Her website is located at <http://www.kittywumpus.net>. [Redstone SF](#) [interviewed Cat](#) in our June 2010 issue.

Wrestling with Alienation

by Desmond Warzel

So I go up to Dutch in the hotel bar after the show and tell him I want to lose the title, ASAP.

Naturally he thinks I'm joking and turns back to the double vodka he just ordered. Sure, a wrestling title's just a prop in a TV storyline, but it's still an honor. The equivalent of star billing.

"I'm not kidding, Dutch," I insist. "I saw Ricky yesterday."

He isn't amused. "Ricky" is Rick King, the highest-drawing world champ in company history until he disappeared six months ago. After an appropriate mourning period, Dutch slapped together a tournament, the Rick King Memorial Tournament, and put the belt on me. Killer ratings, too. I could never draw the crowds Ricky did, but Dutch figured I'd do until he could build up a credible challenger to beat me.

Dutch doesn't like me making jokes about Ricky.

"He showed up in my hotel room," I explain, feeling like the dumbest guy ever bred. Dutch thinks I'm on something, and he is pissed, because one of the reasons he trusted me with the belt was my pristine, and scandal-proof, bloodstream.

"I'm not looking forward to elaborating on this, Dutch, so promise me you'll hear me out." I take a deep breath and blurt it out.

"Ricky told me he was kidnapped by aliens." Dutch doesn't even twitch an eyelid, just keeps shooting me that toxic glare of his. "He figured it out right away. It was partly the instantaneous teleportation, partly the stark white prison cell he found himself in, but mostly it was the detainees filling the opposite bank of cells, specifically, their unusual quantities of limbs and their violations of radial and bilateral symmetry.

"Well, that's how he put it. You know he's a Yale man.

"Anyway, Ricky noticed two things. First, every so often, guards, no better-looking than the inmates, came and took away two prisoners, and, shortly thereafter, brought one of them back. Second, one, and only one, of his possessions had accompanied him, the championship belt. That's why it wasn't with the rest of his stuff, Dutch. Ricky added these circumstances up, and realized that what he'd thought was the humming of engines was really crowd noise, filtered through countless layers of, well, whatever UFO bulkheads are made of.

"Ricky studied the occupants of the other cells and noticed that, diabolical as they appeared, each was hideous in its own way. He figured it must be one being per planet, and he was Earth's representative. It made sense when he considered the years of TV signals that had radiated into

space, all showing him besting his foes and wearing that gold belt embossed with WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT WRESTLING CHAMPION. The only part that strained credulity was that intelligent beings had apparently thought our storylines and match choreography were legit.

"Don't look at me that way, Dutch, that's what he said.

"Well, when the guards finally came for him, he tried to explain, but they either couldn't understand him or didn't care. They shoved him out into an enormous arena whose floor and walls were already stained with blood of every hue. Big video screens everywhere, and seemingly infinite grandstands receding up into the dark, filled with all kinds of aliens raising all kinds of hell. Weird-looking cameras every ten feet.

"Ricky had observed the winners living to fight another day. The fate of the losers remained a mystery. Ricky's a logical guy, and he saw one logical course of action: fight to win.

"And he did. They stuck him in there against some blue shaggy yeti-looking character, and Ricky wore himself out beating on the guy, looking for a vulnerable spot. He finally got in a lucky genital shot, and it was nowhere near where you'd expect.

"Afterward, he sat in his cell, nursing his wounds, and concluded that the straightforward approach couldn't work forever. He regarded the menagerie in the other cells, each creature a distinctive product of its native environment. Ricky's only chance was to exploit what made him unique. His potential opponents sported all manner of natural weapons: horns, spikes, tentacles, fangs. But only Ricky possessed an Ivy League biology degree.

"Against insectoid opponents, he dragged the combat out as long as he could, counting on their inefficient oxygen diffusion to do them in. For amphibian opponents, he used grappling techniques, seizing them in complicated holds and letting the constant dermal stimulation dehydrate them. For beings who lacked eye structures, he covered himself with blood from the prior combats, to fool their olfactory senses, and hugged the walls so the crowd noise masked his movements.

"I don't really understand this stuff either, Dutch, but he wrote that part down for me. Here, see? And it's not important, anyway. The point is, he won. The whole enchilada."

Dutch interrupted me to theorize, reasonably, that I've flipped my lid. He was determined to humor me, though. "Where's Ricky now?", he asked.

"Well, he's kind of a celebrity, you know, out there." I point upward. "But not his own man, by any stretch. He had trouble just getting permission to come back long enough to tell me what happened. Still, he has it pretty good, all things considered. As champion, he only has to fight in the final round of each tournament.

"You know, like in *Karate Kid Part III*."

By now Dutch is sizing me up for a straitjacket, but at least he accepted that I believe what I'm saying. His last-ditch strategy for restoring my sanity is to poke a hole in my story. "So if Ricky's tenure as galactic champ is ongoing," reasons Dutch, "why should I ditch my title? They wouldn't need a second earthling, so I'm in no danger, right?"

"Ricky came back to warn me. Apparently they want to change the format, freshen things up." This, Dutch understood. As entertainment, wrestling, real or fake, gets stale easily.

"For the next tournament, they're switching to tag-teams." And I drained Dutch's untouched vodka in one swallow.

The End

Desmond Warzel is the author of more than two dozen short stories in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres. His work has appeared in a number of periodicals, including Abyss & Apex and Shroud, and in anthologies such as Night Terrors (Blood Bound Books) and Timelines (Northern Frights Publishing). He lives and writes in northwestern Pennsylvania. He's been a wrestling fan since 1986 and doesn't care who knows it.

A NaNo-Tech Cure for Writer's Block

by Henry Cribbs

Interviews with successful NaNoWriMo authors S.A. Bodeen, Simon Haynes, Kathleen Kaufman, James R. Strickland, and David Niall Wilson.

I'm not likely to get much sleep this month. Today, November 1, marks the beginning of National Novel Writing Month, affectionately known as [NaNoWriMo](#), the month in which thousands of those who call themselves writers commit themselves to somehow fit enough extra time into each of the next thirty straight days to crank out a novel. (The "official" goal is 50,000 new words written, whether or not that winds up being a completed novel.) I've participated for the past two years, and I "won" both years in the sense that I produced my target word-count (though I've still got nothing near a finished novel).

For those who don't know much about it, NaNoWriMo was created in 1999 by twenty-one would-be novelists in the Bay Area as a way to force themselves to set aside time to write for the main purpose of getting dates (which they expected to occur after they became successful novelists, of course). The next year a website was added, and the project expanded to 140 participants. The third year there were a whopping five *thousand*. This past year there were more than 165,000 participants all over the globe who together logged nearly two and a half billion words during November! Over thirty thousand of last year's participants "won" by penning at least the required 50,000 words. (I will, however, admit to "cheating" myself last year— at least in spirit; though I technically met my 50k goal last November, quite a few of those words were not fiction but the result of other writing obligations which got in the way of my novel.)

This year I debated whether or not to bother this year. I expect that this year, like last, more mundane tasks will encroach upon my Muse. Indeed, even were I to manage to finish a novel (especially a scifi novel), would it ever have a chance of being published? I decided I needed to find some success stories to inspire me, to convince me that it is, in fact, possible to turn a NaNoWriMo novel into a published book.

So I did a little digging. It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be to find successful science fiction writers who were willing to comment on their NaNoWriMo experiences. I would like to thank the five who did for taking the time to interview with me.

Each of these authors has managed to turn a NaNoWriMo product into a published novel. They range in publishing experience from seasoned horror, scifi, and fantasy writer [David Niall Wilson](#), the Bram Stoker-winning author of more than a dozen published books and 150 short stories, who completed *The Mote in Andrea's Eye* during his very first NaNoWriMo year, to [Kathleen Kaufman](#), an English teacher in a Los Angeles inner-city school whose very first attempt at writing a book became her debut novel, *The Tree Museum*. In between those two extremes can be found [S.A. Bodeen](#), award-winning author of children's picture books whose

first novel-length story, *The Compound* came out of NaNoWriMo. Since it was published last year *The Compound* has already been nominated for YA reading awards in seven states and is listed as an ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers. For NaNoWriMo [James R. Strickland](#) wrote *Looking Glass*, whose wheelchair-confined protagonist might appeal to readers who followed *Redstone*'s recent "Future Imperfect" contest (though the post-cyberpunk world in which she rolls is not exactly a poster-child for universal access). Aurealis-winning [Simon Haynes](#) turned his NaNoWriMo effort into *No Free Lunch*, the fourth book in his humorous Hal Spacejock series (the first of which is available as a free ebook on his website), which won the Western Australia Science Fiction Foundation's 'Tin Duck' award and was a Ditmar finalist last year.

So after hearing from this Fabulous Five, I'm back on the NaNoWriMo wagon again. Knowing that many of *Redstone*'s readers are writers as well, I hope these authors' stories also inspire you to devote the month of November to doing some of your own NaNoWriMo-ing. And let me know if you wind up with a published novel— then maybe I can interview *you* next year...

How would you describe your NaNoWriMo novel to potential readers who are trying to decide if they would be interested in reading it?

S.A. BODEEN (*The Compound*): The premise of *The Compound*: For the past five years, 15-year-old Eli has been living in an underground compound with his family after a nuclear attack. His identical twin was left on the outside, for which he blames himself. But all is not as it seems in their utopian fallout shelter...

SIMON HAYNES (*Hal Spacejock: No Free Lunch*): Hal Spacejock the character is a friendly, well-meaning bloke with bad luck and even worse judgement. He doesn't know how to fly his ship, he's no good at business, he's anti-establishment yet mostly honest and law abiding. (I've had people email me complaints when Hal breaks the law or does something underhanded.) Hal Spacejock the novel? It's a digging contest. See how far Hal can get over his head before the sides cave in.

KATHLEEN KAUFMAN (*The Tree Museum*): It's the story of a disintegrating marriage and speaks to the lengths we will go to try to make things work when it comes to someone we love. Nate and Rosemary love each other but they're both broken, and no amount of intention can fix what they've lost. The story is set in a world that has been taken over by a mysterious and dominant force known only as The Signmakers; who have instituted many of the changes that they have deemed necessary to keep our planet alive. The story speaks to the changes that need to happen both in a global sense and a personal one that will eventually have to happen if we are to survive.

JAMES R. STRICKLAND (*Looking Glass*): *Looking Glass* is a cyberpunk/post-cyberpunk novel about a network security professional who's forced from her quiet, virtual life into a storm of intrigue, death, and a journey into the most terrifying place - the real world. It's set in a world

not too different from today, and not too far in the future, either, a world where people work for a living, fall in love, get screwed over by the company, and have to deal with tragedy and situations beyond anything they're prepared for. Cyberpunk with real people, and without the detached cool.

DAVID NIAL WILSON (*The Mote in Andrea's Eye*): The best description in a few words that I've come up with is "Forever Young meets Twister". In the novel a young girl, Andrea, loses her father in the aftermath of a hurricane. She grows to become an expert in the storms, working with the US Government's Operation Stormfury in the 60s. When they close that down, she starts her own operation. They try to stop a huge storm, and they make it worse. Then – suddenly – the storm, as well as her husband flying over it, disappear in the Bermuda Triangle. Then – in 2006 – they come back. It's a very "clean" read – I wrote it so that my 14 year old (at the time) daughter could read it. It's been called very cinematic, as well.

How much of it did you already have planned out before NaNoWriMo? How much of it did you already have written?

BODEEN: *The Compound* was my project for NaNoWriMo 2005. I had none of it planned beforehand, and actually had started a different story on Nov 1. Then an initial brainstorm came that night while watching television, and I switched direction the next day.

HAYNES: Although I'm sometimes known as a 'Nanowrimo author made good', I'd like to point out that it was the fourth Hal Spacejock novel which benefitted from the intensive November writing sessions. The series was already in print, but when it came to book four I needed the extra impetus of NanoWrimo to help me get the book started.

KAUFMAN: *The Tree Museum* did come out of a NaNoWriMo project back in 2006. I had hardly any of it planned before I started writing. I had a weird dream about a boat yard that was filled in with dirt and robot like waitresses dispensing advice – after talking it out with my husband over beach drinks, I started thinking that it could be a much bigger story. I started writing on November 1st, not a word before then. Partially because I was terrified. I had never written anything of any length before. I actually only decided to attempt NaNoWriMo that year because I was considering a Masters in Creative Writing program that required you to write a novel length project. I figured if I could churn out 50,000 words I could probably handle the MA program. I ended up starting Law School instead of the Masters program in the end.

STRICKLAND: When I started out to write *Looking Glass* (then known as /dev/ice) for NaNoWriMo, all I really had planned out was the end of Chapter 1 - that now reads "I don't work for the military. I work in a net where legitimate users have to be allowed to come in. We're a discount store chain, for Pete's sake. I'm the best at what I do on this site, maybe in the whole province. Me? I work for OmniMart." I thought of the chapter, more or less as it appears, in one gust as I got out of the shower a few days before the start of NaNo, and I started the process of trying to figure out who this caustic, angry woman was. That said, when I needed a

world for her to live in, I recycled one I'd written 11 years earlier, for a completely different novel that never got beyond the first 30 pages or so. My whole goal with NaNo 2004 was, unlike 2002, to play to my strengths, and preferably with a world I had already gone to great pains to build.

WILSON: It's all supposed to be written during November. I didn't have anything written but a chapter outline when I started out, and that's been my strategy each year since then. Not fair to get a head start, though I've seen some relaxed guidelines that say those who've won in the past can bend the rules as long as they actually write 50,000 new words during November.

How much more writing, editing, and revision did you wind up doing to it afterwards before sending it out to publishers?

BODEEN: There was a lot of revision before sending it to my agent, and then there was MAJOR work before he sent it out to editors. We did get one rejection, I revised some more, and then it was acquired in early July of 2006. There was plenty of editorial revision before it was actually finished.

HAYNES: Bear in mind my Hal Spacejock novels are almost 100,000 words in length, so a 'winning' NanoWrimo effort still needs a year or more of extra writing, rewriting and editing to turn it into a full novel

KAUFMAN: I wrote 50,000 words in November, another 50,000 or so in December and then the manuscript sat on my computer for a few months... I spent another few months tinkering with it, and then let it sit, unread by anyone but my husband, for another six months or so. Around 2007, I started seriously rewriting and editing. In about Mayish, I sent it to a friend in New York who was kind enough to tear it apart for me. After that rewrite, I actually started the process of nitpicking and copyediting. It still needs a lot of copy editing, I think most writers would happily spend the rest of their lives tinkering with their projects, but at some point you have to be content to release it out into the world for better or worse. So...all in all...2 months to write, 2 years to edit.

STRICKLAND: When I finished NaNoWriMo, I had a 50,000 word draft with a lot of good ideas, and a lot of deficiencies. I spent the entire summer of 2005 revising it, adding characters, sharpening scenes, adding whole sequences of events, making scenes echo each other, and extending one particular motif (look for it in Italics) through the novel because it worked so darn well at the end, but was terribly jarring when it first popped up. The character of Shroud's internalized mother came into the story then, and she swiftly became a very important part of the thing.

WILSON: The novel was finished in November and sold in January. I revised it once prior to submitting it, and then several times as the publisher copy-edited and made suggestions. That book came out very clean on the first run through, so it wasn't heavy lifting to do the edits.

How many years have you participated in NaNoWriMo?

BODEEN: I have participated in NaNo every year since then, but with varying degrees of success and failure.

HAYNES: I've participated in Nano four times, from 2005-2008.

KAUFMAN: Three – 2006, 2007, 2009... I love the opportunity to push NaNoWriMo, It's truly the only time of year I really ever get any writing done

STRICKLAND: I've participated in National Novel Writing Month off and on since 2002.

WILSON: This year will be my 7th.

Did you “win” each of those years by meeting your 50,000 word goal for November?

BODEEN: The year I did *The Compound* I didn't technically win, because I only had 40k+ words. In 2006 I did hit 50k with the story that ended up to be *The Gardener*.... Last year didn't work because in October I sold a novel based on an outline, and I was already working on that.

HAYNES: Yes, I won each year. In 2009 I signed up even though I had no intention of competing - I was showing a bit of moral support for everyone else.

KAUFMAN: Reached 50,000 each year – although some projects were in better shape than others. *The Tree Museum* was probably the most put together of my November endeavors.

STRICKLAND: I skipped a couple years, but every year I've participated, I've won. *Looking Glass* was my second win.

WILSON: Yes. I have made the 50k goal each and every time, and I also sold my novel *Vintage Soul*, which was written during Nanowrimo a few years later.... *The Mote in Andrea's Eye* was completed during the 2004 Nanowrimo event. Nano only requires you to write 50,000 words in 30 days. The Mote is over 80k – I wrote all of the 80k in 31 days, so – yes – I completed Nanowrimo that year.

What other published books of yours, if any, have emerged from NaNoWriMo projects?

BODEEN: *The Gardener*, my second novel that came out this past June.... I first got into this business with my picture books [published under the name Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen]. But while I was writing those, I was also writing novels. Well, trying I should say, because *The Compound* was my first to be published but was the tenth I had written. The others will remain in the dark recesses of my closet.

HAYNES: None of my other NanoWrimo efforts have resulted in completed projects yet....

KAUFMAN: None from NaNoWrimo, yet. I have one that is ready to enter the editing stage and will hopefully be ready for 2012.

STRICKLAND: Of the two books of mine in publication, only *Looking Glass* emerged directly from a NaNo project. *Irreconcilable Differences* emerged from, and cannibalized ideas from my 2005 NaNo novel. It is set in the *Looking Glass* world, but it's a different story from both, with different characters. I do have another novel that I started in NaNo 2006, shortly after I finished the first draft of *Irreconcilable Differences*, but that novel is still under construction and likely won't bear much resemblance to the NaNo draft when or if it comes out.

WILSON: *Vintage Soul* – the first in an urban fantasy series The Dechance Chronicles, sold a few years ago and was published in HC last December – as well as in limited, signed hardcover. I am marketing the second in the series, written last year, titled *Heart of a Dragon*.

Is NaNoWriMo's 50,000 words/month writing pace a normal production rate for you? If so, how do you manage it? If not, what is your normal writing output when you're not writing for NaNoWriMo, and how do you structure your time for writing so you can accomplish it?

BODEEN: I think the NaNo pace is perfect for a fast draft. I've discovered I'm a writer who works best by getting that beginning to end down on paper, then going back and rewriting. So the quicker I can get that "completed" story down, the quicker I can get to fixing it. My family is gone for the majority of the day, so I have no excuse for not sitting down and just pounding it out.

HAYNES: I'm a pretty lazy writer most of the time, which is why I enjoy NanoWrimo. For one month I can prioritise and it's amazing how much more I can achieve. When writing a novel I aim for 2000 words a day, which is what I do during NanoWrimo, so it works out well. I work from home so I have to steal time from my software business to find time to write. Creating software pays a lot better than writing novels, as you can imagine, so longer-term I really struggle to allocate time to my novels.

KAUFMAN: I think the pace required for NaNoWriMo is hectic to say the least, but also necessary. In reality, 50,000 words isn't a complete novel – if you hit the 50,000 mark you have at best a very short novel. Personally I work best when I am pressured to sit down and just write, sometimes write without thinking about it too much, but just write and get it all out. If you torture yourself too much trying to get it right on the first draft you'll never finish writing anything. I've read accounts of authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald who would spend years working on a first draft, making sure each and every word was right. While that might work for some, I think the rest of us have to just spat it all out, for good and bad, and sort through the mess later. In terms of structuring time, I try to write at least 1,700 words every day. I try to carve out an

hour minimum where I won't be interrupted by anything. Sometimes this means that I get up at 5am and write before anyone else wakes up. Sometimes it means that I stay up until midnight after everyone has gone to bed. Everyone has an hour they can spare, even if it means making your life a little inconvenient for a month. Outside of November, I'm not quite so strict. I try to write for a block of time everyday but when I'm not under pressure to complete a project I tend to slack off a lot more.

STRICKLAND: I only wish NaNo's 50,000 words a month writing pace was normal for me. To do NaNo, I try to do 2500 words a day, Monday through Friday. That way I can take weekends off, or use them to catch up if I'm behind (which is usually the case.) That schedule also leaves me a bit of a safety margin. By contrast, on the novella I just finished, I was averaging about 1500 words a day, but that's after a long dry spell, and I was taking it easy and not pushing too hard.

WILSON: Most working authors claim around 1500-2000 words a day output...so that makes the nano goal very doable. I can usually hit the 2000-2500 words a day limit pretty easily, and you only need to average 1,667 to make the goal.

Are you participating in NaNoWriMo again this year?

BODEEN: This year I have just had the outline of my fourth novel approved and I plan on doing NaNo for that. Of course I already have the outline, etc., so I will be a little ahead of the game.

HAYNES: I'm participating in Nanowrimo again this year.

KAUFMAN: Yes, although I'm a little nervous about my time management. My extra hour that I usually use for writing has been allotted to other endeavors, so it looks like I will be looking for yet another extra hour.

STRICKLAND: I don't know yet if I'll be doing NaNo in 2010. It depends on a lot of factors. The novel I've got in planning right now could certainly use a 50,000 word hell-bent-for-leather push, but I'd really like to get started on it sooner.

WILSON: Yes, I intend to do it every year as long as I'm able.

What can you tell us about your planned 2010 NaNoWriMo novel? Would you be willing to share your NaNoWriMo name with *Redstone's* readers so they can follow your progress?

BODEEN: I need to look up my name! I think I changed it last year.

HAYNES: I signed up with no intention of writing anything, since I'm STILL editing Hal Spacejock book 5. However, I have plans for a couple of junior Hal Spacejock novels where the character is 10 or 11 years old. That's been bubbling away in my mind for a few months, and I

reckon I can spare a few weeks from Hal 5 to see whether the junior books are going to fly. (Unlike the main character ...) My forum name is HalSpacejock, and many Nano-ers know me as the designer and programmer behind the free yWriter5 software.

KAUFMAN: My novel for November is not particularly well fleshed out yet; I don't like to plan too much before I start writing. I've never been one to make outlines and character charts and the like, I think your characters will lead you where they want to go. My basic story idea is something along the lines of the summoning of the four horseman in a modern context – not by any means an entirely original idea but I've been watching a lot of Miyazaki lately and have been inspired by his ability to create entirely fictional worlds intertwined with reality. I have the opening scene in my head, that's enough for a good start. My NaNoWriMo name is just Kathleen Kaufman – I would be thrilled to befriend any readers who are also writing this month. I'm also on Facebook under Kathleen Kaufman as well; I post a lot of my writing progress there too.

STRICKLAND: I've learned the hard way not to talk about work in progress in more than the vaguest of terms, because invariably when I give people a sneak preview of a novel in progress, that's the one that suddenly tightens up and I can't seem to make it go anywhere anymore. So in broad, vague terms, if I do NaNo this year, it will probably be something steampunkish, as that's in line with what I've been writing lately. The truth is, I don't know if I'll do NaNo this year. NaNo novels usually need a /lot/ of work to whip them into publishable shape, and I've found that taking a little more time up front sometimes saves me work later. On the other hand, as usual, if I edit and plan too much, the novel dies on the vine, so NaNo is good for "stop overthinking and write the story. Then fix it." Sometimes I need that.

WILSON: My username is Shadeaux – long story I won't go into. The novel this year is actually a previous Nanowrimo project that hit its 50k but stalled. I had problems with the timelines of one of the main family trees, and I just never got back to it. A segment from it is available for Kindle – *The Preacher's Marsh* – and was published in my collection "Ennui & Other States of Madness," but the entire book has languished. This year I will rewrite the first 50k and attempt to finish a second. There will be a read-along blog, as usual, for those who register. <http://gideonscurse.crossroadpress.com> – The novel is about a young man who worked on a cotton plantation in the 50s/60s – the owners of the plantation have a history that stretches back to the Civil War, and a lot to answer for. There is swamp magic, history, and more – as well as a bad case, by the end, of rising dead folk.

What advice would you give to a writer who is participating in NaNoWriMo for the first time this year?

BODEEN: My advice for first-time NaNo'ers is to think of the best idea, the one you are most excited about living with for 30 days, and just dive in on November 1. Don't think it over too much beforehand or prepare very much. Do it on the fly.

HAYNES: My advice for all participants is to aim for a minimum of 2000 words per day, not the 1667 or so you think you need. My website has a 'how to write 7500 words in a single day' article which I recommend all participants read, because the same technique can be used for the daily 2000 words.

KAUFMAN: Don't be afraid to write garbage. Seriously, don't edit yourself, just write. You'll write great stuff, good stuff and terrible stuff. You can't stop and fix the terrible, just keep plowing through and it'll flush out and turn into good eventually. You can go back and fix things and rewrite later; November is just for writing. Also, don't research as you go. If you are missing the name of the widget that makes the submarine go – don't waste your time looking it up and calling your submarine friends. Just make something up and move on. You can do your research later, for purposes of NaNoWriMo – just write.

STRICKLAND: I always tell NaNo first-timers "pace yourself." Set a goal to write to for the day, then stop there, and leave a little in the tank. My first time doing NaNo, in 2002, the only way I got it finished was a couple nights in a row that went very, very late, and if memory serves in excess of 7000 words at a sitting. That's too much, at least for me, 7000 words leaves me brain dead the next day, and some of the last scenes of that first novel really, really show it. Among other reasons, this is why that first novel will probably never see the light of day. By contrast, in 2004, when I finished *Looking Glass*, I was pretty sure I had something viable, even though I had no idea just how much more work it was going to take. The other piece of advice I'd give new NaNo writers is, "Give yourself permission to write crap." You can edit and re-edit the first scene for the whole month, but that won't get you to the winner's circle. Write what's in your head now and move on, and fix it in the edit. The sneaky truth about giving yourself permission to write crap is that most of the time you won't. But even if you do, so what? You could have spent that month playing *Plants vs. Zombies* just as easily, and at least you wrote /something/ right?

WILSON: Go in with an outline, don't revise until you are done, and try to stay ahead. Don't shoot for 1,667 words a day, shoot for 3k until you get several days ahead, so if something happens, you have it to fall back on...and enjoy yourself. If it's not fun, it's not...well... fun.

What advice would you give to a NaNoWriMo "winner" who is staring at a finished novel at the end of November?

BODEEN: For a 'winner' who has a completed Nano project, I would advise them to be prepared to do major damage to their baby. Honestly, when I was working on *The Compound*, at one point I took my 250 page manuscript, kept only ten pages and the premise, and started over.

HAYNES: It's only 1/4 finished. (Sorry!) I go through 15-20 drafts for each novel, so typing up one half of the first draft is just a step on the journey. Apart from junior fiction, most published novels are 80,000 words plus, so I'd look on NaNoWriMo as a good opportunity to get the words

flowing without too much regard to plot, character, etc. It's the repeated rewrite jobs which will bring out the finished work.

KAUFMAN: Even if you hit 50,000 words at the end of November, you won't be finished. You'll want to spend December finishing the book, although you might not want to move at such a frantic pace. A good-sized novel should hit no less than 65,000 words with a longish novel running somewhere in the 100,000 word range. After you do finish your first draft, however, let it sit. Let it sit for at least a month. Don't attempt editing, don't attempt rewriting. You're too close to it to have any kind of impartial opinion. Whatever you do, don't let anyone read it. One nasty word from a well-meaning friend can stop you right in your tracks. The brutal truth critiques will be easier to take when you have a little distance from the project. Then you can decide whether you want to listen to your friend, or whether to ignore them. I actually suggest letting it sit for a few months. Write something else, work on another project; let your NaNoWriMo project air out a little. It won't go anywhere, and you'll be pleasantly surprised at how good it actually is when you finally do come back to it. By the time you actually get close to publication, you will be so desensitized to critiques that they will sting a lot less, in fact, by the time your project is actually published it won't much resemble what you wrote in November. You'll have reshaped characters, killed off subplots, changed the ending, and inevitably destroyed what you once thought was the heart of the story. It's all for the best, but if you look at your newly spawned writing too soon, you'll halt the process with emotionality and pride. You have to abandon all pride before publication and before the reviewers call you every name in the book. To make yourself feel better, read negative reviews of your favorite authors. Right after *The Tree Museum* was published I spent hours looking through negative reviews for Cormac McCarthy and Alice Sebold – seeing that even extremely successful and influential professional authors get knocked every once in awhile somehow made me feel better.

STRICKLAND: A big part of doing NaNo is the community, so I'd advise newly minted NaNo winners to go to the TGIO party (Thank Goodness It's Over) if at all possible. This is your support group. Writing is a lonely business, and that support group can be really great to have. Sure, people will want to read from their novels, and inevitably /someone/ in your NaNo group has probably written furry porn, or something else not to your taste, but so what? These people were there with you in the trenches, y'know? NaNo really isn't about the end product. It's about the journey.

WILSON: That depends a lot on the writer. If it's a first time novelist, I'd say get some readers to read it, listen to what they say, then do a heavy revision before sending it anywhere...if you are, like myself, a seasoned author – you'll already know what to do with it. I use Nanowrimo to ensure that I have at least one new, stand-alone work each year to look forward to.

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