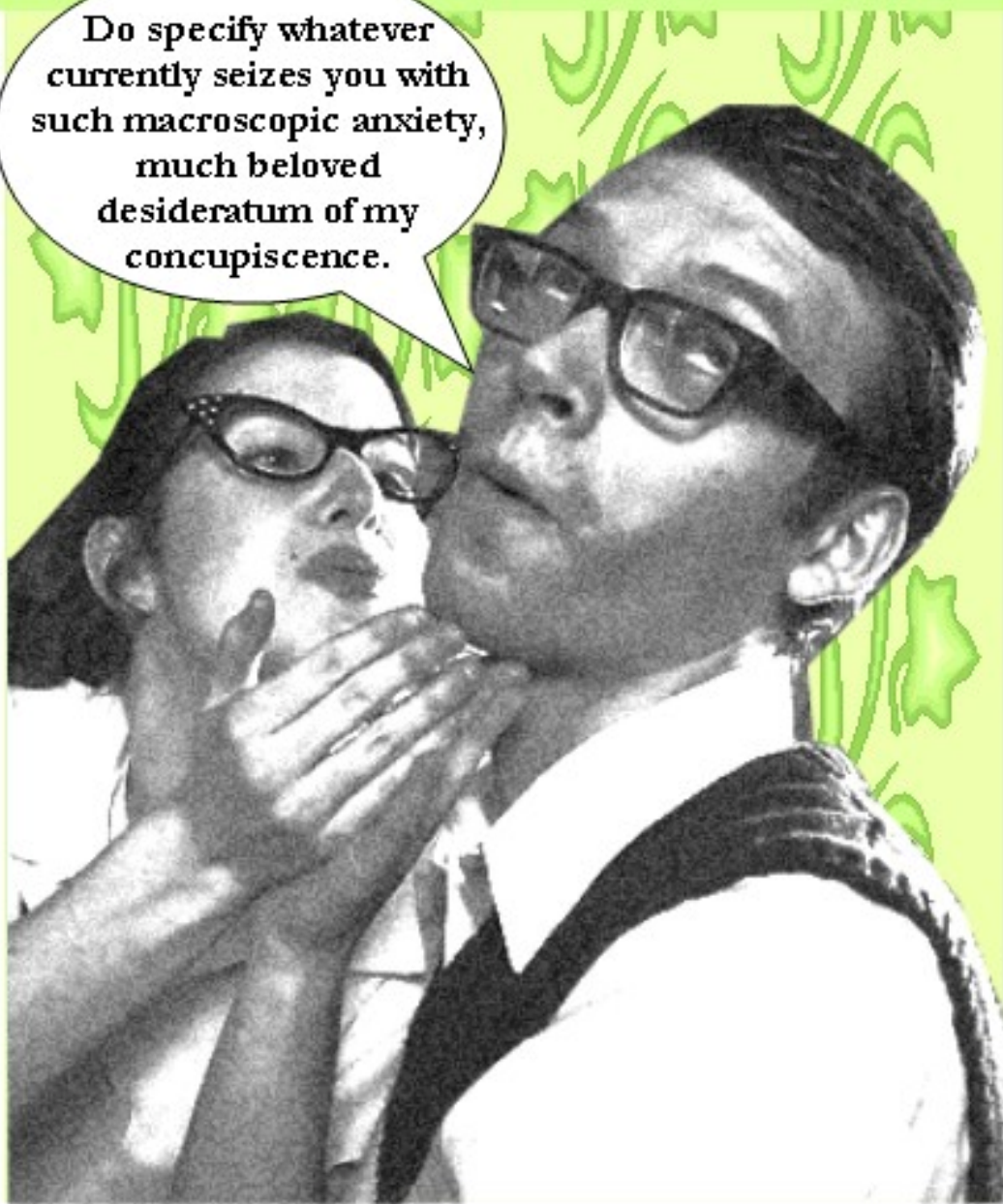


John and Marcia

The Novel Crash Test Dummies

by Lynn Viehl

Do specify whatever
currently seizes you with
such macroscopic anxiety,
much beloved
desideratum of my
concupiscence.



John and Marcia
The Novel Crash Test Dummies
By Lynn Viehl

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For Carla Stiles, Elly Decker and Pat Garnett,

Who taught me, encouraged me and,

no matter what I said or did,

never sent me to the Dean's office.

Thank you, ladies.

Introduction

Writers are human, mostly, and to err is our species' heritage. We are certainly as apt to mess up as any other human being. Show me one perfect, flawless author, and I'll go out in the backyard and build a bonfire out of my own books. You can come over and roast marshmallows with me over it.

The problems a writer has with creating stories are part of the learning process; they can help us the next time we take a swing at it. We should celebrate every time we drop the ball. Instead, writers agonize over mistakes. I remember one author writing of a single typo he found in one of his published short stories; he compared it to relieving himself in public. I hope he never reads my novel *Endurance*. There are at least eleven typos in it; probably more. I'm sorry I didn't read the manuscript more carefully, but that's what it taught me: proof-read slowly, and don't rely on editors and copy-writers to catch everything.

Since turning pro I've read dozens of how-to writing books. Some were helpful, some were whacko, but all but one* shared a common problem: there wasn't an ounce of humor in them. When I wrote *Way of the Cheetah*, my first how-to writing book, I tried to keep it light, casual, and infuse it with a bit of wry humor. It worked out so well that I decided to carry that over to posts about writing problems on my weblog, *Paperback Writer*,

Thus John and Marcia were born, and slowly evolved over twelve months into my novel crash test dummies. I've test-driven a lot of teaching tools over the years, but these two have become the most popular.

Whenever you make a writing mistake, take a minute to laugh at it and yourself. Then learn from it, and get back to work.

Lynn Viehl

May 2007

*One notable exception: *Fondling Your Muse* by John Warner. It's a how-to parody that is packed with scalding humor about writers and the writing life.

LagTime — May 30, 2006

This is a post I wrote to demonstrate what we call “filler” scenes in novels. Often writers will compose scenes that are beautifully written but serve no purpose except to beef up the book’s word count.

"Hello, John," Marcia said as she sauntered into the room.

"Marcia." As she had never been in this part of the house, or seen him in his present casual yet attractive attire, John waited for her to take in his appearance and that of his surroundings before he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Marcia indulged in several paragraphs of describing John and the room to herself. She allowed her conflicted feelings about him to rise and ebb before she felt a pressing need for dialogue and remembered she hadn't answered him.

"What am I doing here?" she repeated, in the event the reader had forgotten John's question. "I really don't . . ." She swallowed and looked around in confusion. "I really don't . . . know."

John noted two paragraphs worth of Marcia's considerable physical assets with a healthy amount of lustful yet restrained and heroic-sounding internal admiration, although it felt a good deal like what he had done in an earlier scene when he had observed her walking through the expansive gardens outside his mansion while she wore a thin frock that unbeknownst to her the bright sunlight had turned semi-transparent.

John discreetly acknowledged the always-surprising fact that he had a boner before crossing his legs and asking, "Aren't you supposed to be sneaking off to cheat on me with that struggling, under-employed painter?"

"That's tomorrow night," Marcia whispered, hoping the reader wouldn't hear. "In Chapter Five. And his name is Harold."

"I see." John fell silent and recalled a page of irrelevant information about the preceding chapter that had nothing to do with his rival before murmuring, "And I'm supposed to catch you sleeping innocently in his arms in chapter . . . ?"

Marcia discreetly held up six fingers. "This is a lovely room." She looked around as if she hadn't seen it, recalled that she had in the beginning of the scene and just a few second ago in a confused state, and quickly asked, "Did your mother decorate it?"

"Don't you remember?" John asked. "We talked about that when you first came to the house to confront me about my heartless decision to takeover your dying father's nearly bankrupt company and sell off its assets, leaving you and your sheltered, spoiled mother penniless."

"Oh, my." She pressed a hand to her throat. "You're not going to do that anymore, I hope?"

"No, dear." John shook his head in such a way that required a paragraph of hair movement description. "I made you promise to marry me in exchange for saving the company, seeing that your father had that bone marrow transplant that wasn't covered under his insurance policy, and keeping your mother in the family home collecting Yorkies and scrapbook supplies."

Marcia frowned. "And now I'm going to try to do the nasty with Harold because . . . ?"

"Because you resent me for forcing you to marry me, the cold-blooded, arrogant, merciless tycoon who, despite spending several million dollars to bail your family out of the mess they're in, does not deserve your love the way Harold, the boy that you have loved all of your life and don't yet know is gay, does."

"This sounds an awful lot like an info-dump refresher," Marcia said, clearly worried now.

John lifted his hands. "Darling, what else are we going to talk about? You know the guidelines; we can't have sex until after we're married. We don't even kiss until Chapter Eight. We have nothing in common. Our author needs this book to be seventy-five thousand words in length, but she doesn't outline."

"Ah." Marcia nodded. "I see. We're covering a story lag."

"You're such a bright little thing, for a self-sacrificing, sexually confused virgin." John beamed. "So, my sweet, tell me what you think of the weather. I know that hasn't been mentioned more than once or twice since the beginning of Chapter One."

Handling LagTime

If an important scene you've written reads like filler, it's likely that you've entered the scene too early, fumbled through the dialogue, or drawn it out too long. Think like a screenwriter: come into the scene as late as you possibly can without missing something important. Resist the urge to describe or explain everything that's happen. Don't try to account for every second of time.

I think the best way to handle filler scenes is to delete them. They're boring, they kill your pacing, and they don't reflect well on the writer. Also, repair jobs on filler scenes tend to read the way a patchwork quilt looks. It may take a little more time to rewrite the scene from scratch, but you're hitting the page fresh versus trying to spruce up comatose text.

It helps to always know the story purpose of the scene you're writing before you compose it. Any scene should in some way provide progression for the plot and the characters. If any scene you want to write doesn't serve the story, don't write it.

Plot Habits — June 24, 2006

One of my friends refers to John and Marcia, my story example characters, as my novel crash test dummies. This post prompted a pile of e-mail requests from my readers, asking me to actually write the story I outlined in it.

Very famous writers firmly believe in plotting out a novel. Other very famous writers don't. Both types have made, are making, and will make piles of money from their books. Thus the debate on To Plot or Not to Plot will rage on forever.

Plotting is one of my favorite things to do. I believe in it, I do it all the time, and it works for me. However, if you think plotting is unnecessary (or stupid, or pedestrian, or inartistic, etc. etc.), or if you worship writers who don't do it and resent the ones who do, or the thought of plotting your own novel makes you break out in hives, you should stop reading this post right now.

Yesterday Shiloh posed an interesting dilemma about plotting in comments here; specifically: *any suggestions on how to actually get more into the habit of plotting something out?* I responded with some examples of plot-timeline and plot-summary line methods I've used to teach writing students, but I really didn't answer her to my own satisfaction, and mulled over the question for a couple of hours.

This is what I ended up with: It's not how you plot as much as it's that you get into the habit of thinking about plot from the start of the novel concept. Doing that trains you to think in story versus detail.

Using the same premise I did in my response to Shiloh yesterday, let's say I have a wonderful idea for a character named John. He's a cop. He's also half-

demon. But I'm going to forget about plot and concentrate on the details. John's cool. John has possibilities. For me, it's all about John.

(Several days later) Okay, so I've got John all figured out. What he looks like, how he talks, the clothes he wears, what sort of demonic powers he has, the type of ice cream he likes, his shoe size, etc. He's all dressed up and pretty and ready to make a novel with me. Now what do I do with him? What to do. What to do. I know, I could have him meet a nice human girl who doesn't know he's half-demon. Someone wants to kill them. They have to help each other. And then . . . what to do. What to do. (I've got to do something; I just don't want to think about plot yet. I'm too focused on remembering John's favorite ice cream and shoe size.)

Now, take the same wonderful idea for a character named John but let's limit the amount of detail via constructive character-building. Remember those three questions I keep harping on:

Who is John? He's a cop. He's also a half-demon.

What does John want? To be a good cop and live a normal human life.

What's the worst thing I can do to John? Make him use his demon side to be a good cop, and ruin his chances for a normal human life.

Those are all the details I need to know about John right now; it's time to make story.

I build my story around John and the answers to those three questions. John meets a nice human girl named Marcia at a Halloween party. She'd like to find a decent guy, settle down and live happily ever after. Only during the party she gets stuck with a stolen, cursed diamond and the thief who wants it back is sending demons from Hell after her.

Thinking through this scenario versus many tiny details allows me to sketch out the story in my head. It's progressive and the story is growing as I think about it, but my head's not cluttered up with details so I can still see the story.

Let's keep going: John saves Marcia's life and she's initially grateful; he's a decent guy and a cop -- the kind of guy she could fall head over heels for. But: Marcia discovers that John has a strange tattoo on his chest. And superhuman strength. And his eyes glow red in the dark. John is presently freaking out Marcia, but she doesn't have time to have hysterics, because now the thief is trying to kill both of them. (Note here: I'm still plotting, but John is also developing as a character via details from Marcia's POV. I've limited John's strangeness to three big things versus a thousand little things.)

Plotting from this point goes in all sorts of directions, as there are questions I have to answer, i.e.: How does the thief try to kill them? What sort of demons from hell are we talking about here? What's the deal with this cursed diamond? How does Marcia confront John about his oddities? How does John protect Marcia? Does he suspect that she stole the diamond? I need to work out these answers before I plot any further, but as with John's character I'm going to

keep the answers simple so that again I don't get bogged down with a lot of detail. Just the facts, ma'am.

When you think in story versus detail, you're putting together a collage of ideas. Too much detail clutters the collage; it breeds and it obscures things and it ends up confusing you. Less is not only more, it's vital to get the novel sketched out in your head. You can always add more detail to the collage later; too much gets in your way and suffocates the story before it gets rolling.

From Left Behind & Loving It
Virtual Workshop #1: Building Series Novels
July 25, 2006

John and Marcia made a cameo appearance in this workshop.

Each series novel should stand on its own and provide the reader with a beginning, middle and end. So in addition to the durable premise you need a conflict that is autonomous to the current novel. This conflict has to have a resolution, but it should also connect with or feed into the durable premise. Like battles during a war, the standalone conflict can be resolved while providing some advancement (or regression, or flip-flop) of the durable premise.

Example: You remember John, our half-demon cop, who must protect Marcia the librarian from a murderous diamond thief. John's tasks are to defend Marcia and stop the thief; that's the standalone conflict. The fact that John is half-demon would be part of the durable premise; especially if I made Marcia half-angel.

When you're contemplating how to come up with your standalone conflict, think about a television series that you like to watch. Every week, you get a new show that has a plot for the episode that is completed by the end of the show, but also progresses the series story line along a little more (or regresses it, or flip-flops it, etc.) The series novel's standalone conflict should work the same way.

Thesauritis — August 17, 2006

This post prompted the most protest e-mail from my readers, many of whom took offense at my suggestion that over-use of a thesaurus can result in unreadable prose.

"John," Marcia uttered as she promenaded into the illuminated dawn chamber of his domestic residence, her scarletine frock contrasting unfavorably against the embossed verdant wall coverings as might an exceedingly vexatious digit. "I am obliged to converse with you directly."

Ah, the female for whom he sustained strong emotions, John contemplated. Ostensibly Marcia was manifest to expound on that which he could not readily diagnosticate, yet nevertheless accepted in the bowels of his cardiac region would be a theorem of vital consequence to her. "Do specify whatever currently seizes you with such macroscopic anxiety, much beloved desideratum of my concupiscence."

"I have discovered it to be virtually impossible to discern the definition of the majority of the statements issued from your oral cavity," Marcia declared with her customary forthright emphasis as she arranged her lithesome frame on the brink of the alabaster brocade-upholstered divan. "Even during those tension-wrought episodes of debate which customarily result in illicit yet satisfying coition, my comprehension of your utterances is nil."

John's eyelids met and parted in a solitary displacement. "I entreat your forbearance?"

Marcia crimped the cosmetic-coated labium camouflaging her maxillary and mandibular arcades prior to offering verbally, "Our exchanges have set me

adrift on the oceans of ignorance. Cognizance eludes me during those occurrences when we confer. Misinterpretation has evolved into the bete noire of my perseity."

A crease made itself recognizable in the juncture between the strips of hair above John's ocular organs. "Please, expand on these articulations."

"I can't stand saying another freaking word of this dialogue."

John caprioled to an erect stance. "Discontinue your tirade forthwith."

"No, I will *not* shut up." Tired of parking her appendages on the bony parentheses flanking her nether regions, Marcia planted her hands on her hips. "I don't care how big and important the words are, these are the *stupidest* lines I've ever been written to recite. I mean, say. Yours are even dumber. You may have a yummy body and smell great, but every time you open your mouth I want duct tape, ear plugs and amphetamines. By the way, the wallpaper in here looks like cat puke."

"Oh, sure. Like / want to keep pretending to be interested while you're heretoforing and postliminarying every five seconds. I had nuns in Catholic school who talked sexier. And I didn't pick out the damn wallpaper." John skipped sensing the rosiness of rage altering the coloration of his facial features and simply turned red. "Anyway, the author initiated . . . started it."

Marcia began to contemplate the dilemma, caught herself in mid-ponder, and grabbed John by the front of the shirt. "Look. I like you. I want to do something else besides resemble a sore thumb and recite Roget chapter and verse. What do you say?"

"I say let's go have relations."

"For dinner?" Marcia tapped her finger against the part of her body she never wanted to hear anyone call labium again. "Oh, coition, *riiiiiight*. Do we have enough time?"

"The author's busy looking up a four-syllable synonym for argument. She'll be a while," John said, chucking all the non-said dialogue tags under the sofa cushions. "We can change the page numbers while she's gone. She never back reads."

"We'll still have to make it look good," Marcia warned. "You know, struggle with some post-coital feminist-related depression issues, endure a bit of non-fatal substance abuse and obliquely sneer at some chick-lit author who makes more money than ours does. May have to set fire to your Beamer, too, in order to free you from the capitalist enslavement preventing you from truly experiencing life, or something equally nonsensical yet intensely symbolic."

"I'm insured," John pointed out. "So, can we make like bunnies?"

"Works for me." She dragged him out of the parlor.

The Cure for Thesauritis

Words are the writer's main creative medium, and we love them. Words to us are like fine oil paints to the portrait artist, beautiful music to the cellist, and a great character to the actor.

Our love of words predisposes us to chronic bouts of thesauritis, and the only way to combat it is to put a choke-chain on our obsession. Resisting words may be as great a part of writing as using them. So when you are writing, consider these tactics:

1. Keep it simple. Clarity enhances the story and serves the reader better than confusion.
2. Never use two, three or ten words when one will serve.
3. Stop trying to impress the reader with how smart you are by throwing a lot of big important words at them. With most readers, it will only have the opposite effect.
4. This is a busy world. Brevity registers faster and has more impact than abundance.
5. Descriptive words are like pearls. Bury the reader in tons of them, and the resentment of having to plow through all that mess will cause the reader to ignore their beauty and luster. Instead, dangle a single, shining strand.

Euphemisery — October 7, 2006

If I could eradicate one thing from our language, it would be the euphemism.

"Marcia," John said, glancing respectfully at her womanly curves. "I think we've reached the point in our special time together that it would be acceptable for you and I to consensually agree to reach for the apex of our love and merge our hearts, minds, souls, and engage our other parts into a symphony of such sweetness as to be beyond my power to describe appropriately."

John's personal suggestions usually thrilled Marcia in that special way that utterly transcended all other pleasures yet did not leave any embarrassing moisture on her underclothing, but this time she was somewhat puzzled. She also had other, delicate needs demanding timely attention. "Beg pardon?"

"You know." He gathered her into his arms so that discreet contact points could be created between them. "We've discovered that we are perfect soul mates, haven't we?"

John had torn down the unpleasant infant expulsion-colored wallpaper in his library purely as a most welcomed but not expected salve for her sensibilities, so Marcia knew he was the gentleman for her. No one else had ever worshipped her femininity with such tactful tenderness. As for her other needs, perhaps if she placed one ankle over the other . . .

"Marcia?" John seemed to desire rather than demand a response.

"Yes, you are my soul mate." She shifted so that one of her lower limb joints pressed into another. "May I please be excused?"

"Not now, darling. Haven't we also rearranged our personal relationships to create closure for those ties which did not benefit either party involved in order to liberate ourselves, each for the other?" When she nodded, John smiled and kissed the place between her nose and chin. "I know we're ready to better explore our unique and possibly life-changing emotional connection. By coming together in this singular and indescribably uplifting--"

"I apologize for interrupting," Marcia said, her eyes bulging slightly, "but I must leave you so that I may briefly visit the smallest room on this floor and powder my nose."

"Your nose is perfect," John assured her. "As I was saying, by coming together in that edifying and greatly stimulating --"

Marcia's eyes began to water. "John, I apologize again, but if I don't powder my nose right this minute, I'm afraid something humiliating will happen, our relationship will crumble and your lovely carpet will end up stained." She withdrew emphatically from his gentle embrace and departed with haste.

Now it was John's turn to be baffled. "I don't understand, Darling." He followed her to the smallest room on that floor and found the door locked. "What are you doing? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm relieving myself."

"Of what?"

"Urine. For God's sake, John. I'm *peeing* in here."

"I beg your pardon?" John winced as he heard the activation of the waste removal system. "Sweetheart, you do know that this isn't that sort of novel. Our

author holds herself above that sort of base, tawdry, vulgar, inappropriate and offensive dialogue. Always remember, what you're doing is one of the unmentionables."

The door opened with unusual speed. "One of the what?"

"The unmentionables. I'm sorry; I assumed you were given the list. Here."

John removed a paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to Marcia, who began to read.

"So we can't use the common terms for alcoholism, alternative lifestyles, bathroom functions, bdsm, childbirth, death, drug addiction, environmental issues, gay or lesbian persons, handicaps, hookers, masturbation, my breasts, my vagina, persons of African, Asian or other-than-American origin, politics, religion, sex of any kind, the anal area, violence or your penis?" As John inclined his head, Marcia sighed. "What about that time you and your cousin Rocky got drunk and compared weenie sizes in the men's room at the Hoe Down?"

John shook his head. "You mustn't use the 'w' word, Darling. We only refer to that area in total indirectly, as 'manly parts.' And that incident, while amusing, is far too suggestive and homoerotic -- here, just let me write it in." John produced a pen and added "weenie comparison, Cuz R." to the list.

Marcia had a lot of memorizing to do. "So what were you asking me before I had to run and p -- relieve myself? Is it on here?"

John turned over the list and pointed to a phrase on the back. "That. I'd like to do that with you. As soon as it's convenient."

Marcia nodded and ran her finger down the list. "That sounds good. And that. I really like that. Never tried that, but -- ooooooh, can you do that?"

"Hmmmmm." John peered at the list. "We'll need vegetable oil, bungee cords, Toll House Morsels, Kevin Sorbo and lots of dry ice, but okay, sure."

Marcia grinned and allowed the back of her hand to accidentally graze over John's manly parts. "I knew there was a reason that you were my soul mate."

Evading the Euphemism

Using a euphemism is voluntary censorship. We all censor ourselves to a certain degree, and euphemisms are convenient ways of glossing over what we perceive as ugly, frightening, threatening or distasteful. Most of this is thanks to our parents and teachers, who instill a sense of what is acceptable language and what is not. My generation never used clinical words like *penis* and *vagina* because they were viewed as very obscene. An odd idea, when you consider that everyone in the world has either one or the other. It took me years to work up the nerve to use those two words in my work, and yet every time I do I still hear my mother in the back of my head hissing, “Don’t write about people’s bottoms!”

The presence of a euphemism in a story is usually the writer saying to the reader, “I don’t want to offend you.” How you handle potentially offensive words is up to you, but no matter how many euphemisms you use, you’re probably going to offend someone. Euphemisms annoy the hell out of me, so you definitely won’t make a fan here.

We want readers to enjoy our stories, not come to our book signings carrying torches and pitchforks. At the same time, tip-toeing around words is like writing in a strait-jacket. Don’t buckle yourself in too tightly, or it will paralyze you as a writer.

As for how you're perceived by the readers, I will give you the same advice I give all my creative writing students: If you want everyone to like you, don't be a writer. Get a job delivering flowers.

Excesssetting — December 12, 2006

I am a bit notorious for my hatred of writing setting. This was an exercise in self-torture.

The dark and stormy night was not dark and stormy, exactly; in fact the night in whatever manner it would proceed to manifest itself had yet to arrive. At this cherished moment in the sprawl of time, the present hour effortlessly hovered between a magical sunset and sensuous twilight like a slightly bipolar dragonfly, not certain if it might fly up in manic glee into the golden-fleeced clouds or plummet with withering depression into the purple depths of coming darkness.

Beneath these lovely if indecisive skies, a large and impressive house rose from an abundant carpet of well-tended grasses of many shades of green and flower beds spilling like rainbow pools at their precise edges, a stately house that many square, uneducated hands had masoned out of brick and mortar and low-income sweat. An eminently suitable house that served an appreciative master whose flaws, aside from some very poor taste in wallpaper color, were as scarce as the teeth of feminine chickens.

A house of houses, that waited for the unexpected visitor that it sensed would come driving like Mario Andretti down the dusty lane winding out from the huddle of the quaint little town not five miles away, waited with the resignation of the immovable, always waiting as it had been since it had first gazed through its some thirty-odd windows at the blazing globe of its first post-construction dawn, although not with eyes, as it was simply, beautifully, completely a house.

And so Marcia, she of the exquisite taste in wallpaper, came. She came in a cloud of raw sienna dust, came in her lovely green dress which she knew would clash horribly with John's library, or at least its expansive walls and their unfortunately-chosen coverings, came with her blue eyes flashing like sapphires and her sweet red lips compressed into a slashing line, came to the door of this magnificent house and hammered on it with a white-knuckled fist that moved with the vigor of a rainbow trout in the vicinity of a winter-starved, golden brown-furred grizzly bear.

The carved oak door slowly swung in, framing the man within, the man with whom Marcia had shared so many hours of appreciation of the unassuming, thirty-odd-windowed house, and those mellow, lazy if somewhat waffling sunsets that hinted at the possibility of an unprecedented rollback in time, much as the happy yellow smiley faces in Wal-Mart ads often precipitated rollbacks in prices, but perhaps not with as much avarice and sunny indifference to the dire straits of those forced to make the bulk of their purchases within its prefab, anonymous, unnoticed walls.

"Marcia." John looked past her slim, green-clad shoulder to gaze upon the last flicker of buttercup radiance sending its beams through the thick green lace of the leaves on the oak tree in the very front of the house. The tree of his youth, the tree under which he had first kissed his second-grade girlfriend Gertrude Hicks, who had tossed her carroty curls and screeched with the venom of a banshee before punching the seven-year-old version of himself in the belly. Or perhaps it had been Marcia; she had never taken his decision not to remove the

deep, serene, soothing pea-colored wallpaper in his study with anything resembling understanding. "How lovely to see you."

"You're not looking at me, John," Marcia said, turning slightly so that more of the last of the ebbing day's light could bathe both of them in a gentle, luminescent glow that would have made round-cheeked cherubs with purest alabaster wings sigh with envy from their perches in the endless vaults of heaven. "You're looking at the sun."

"It is glorious, isn't it?" He smiled at the horizon, captured by the enchantment of the moment when day met dusk, when the long afternoon hours drew to a silent close, when he could draw the curtains and listen to the crickets sing to him from the depths of the small woods behind his modest dwelling, which—

"John." A hand waved in front of his face, a small but strong hand, a hand that promised as much pain as it did delight. "I've been standing here for thirty minutes. I'm cold, my feet hurt, and I'm bored."

"Wait, darling." John encircled her waist with his arm, gently turning her toward the magnificence of the yellow star that warmed their planet, that shed its power and glory over the fields to coax tender green shoots up from the rich soil, shoots that would grow into fine, sturdy stalks of yellow and white corn, the kernels of which held the sweetness and warmth of its touch, especially when liberally soaked in the rich, melting creaminess of butter, with perhaps just a tiny sprinkle of sea salt from the shores of faraway, exotic India, where—

"Snap out of it!"

Marcia's hand slapped his cheek, and so stunned was John that all he could do was gaze down at the face of his beloved, that delicate oval now tinted a light pink, a pink that rivaled the inside of a conch shell—

"I mean it," Marcia said, raising her hand in a menacing gesture. "Quit it, or so help me God I'll get the duct tape."

Her threat so unnerved John that he couldn't imagine how to better illustrate how menacing her gesture seemed. "Quit what, dearest?"

"The sun?" She pointed to the horizon. "Is setting. That's it. Get over it."

"The sun?" He smiled wistfully as he leaned over to gaze around her at the light symphony that danced over his retinas with the feet of tiny ballerinas in tutus made from the down of newborn chicks. "The sun is setting, darling, it's setting like a soft, lemon-colored feather drifting to the glassy surface of a silvery lake at--" his head snapped back as she hit him a second time. "What?"

"Inside. Now."

Marcia marched him in the same manner a drill sergeant might to his library. John tried to envision the interior of his home in a poetic and enlightening fashion, but she hurried him too much for him to compose the proper expository phrases.

"Darling, if you would just slow down, I could show the reader--"

"Every freaking inch of the inside of your house with more adjectives than Webster's prints? Spare me." Marcia shoved him into the library. "The readers are already in a description coma from the setting sun stuff." She gave him a

furious look, a glare, a stare with lethal intent, a gaze that chilled him down to his bunions, and added, "Don't you dare start on me, either."

"What would you have me do, darling?" John asked, closing his eyes so that he would not be tempted to compare her to Blake's rose, or Faulkner's Miss Emily, or one of Viehl's diminutive, slime-coated alien slaver beings.

"I don't know." Marcia began to pace around the room. At least he thought so; he heard her footsteps thumping but his eyes were still squeezed shut tightly. "Talk to me? Do something to me? We're supposed to be in love. Not with the setting sun, not with this house, not with anything but each other. So say something. *Do something!*"

"You mean, use dialogue and action instead of setting?" He shuddered. "Sweetheart, how can I stoop to facilitate such vulgar prose? Our readers deserve to know my world as I know it, and see it, and feel it. I just bought the newly revised and expanded edition of Roget's, too. You're so beautiful. The sun is so incredible. This house, this wallpaper--"

Marcia grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "If you even *think* one nice word about this hideous wallpaper, I will *strangle* you with my bare hands. Which, by the way, do not move like rainbow trout."

"Very well." John swallowed and opened one eye a fraction of an inch. "I'll talk to you. I'll . . . do things to you. Are you sure I can't tell you how inspiring I find your--"

"No."

"Not even when your hair and eyes remind me of--"

"NO."

"Oh, very well." John sighed. "Best get out the duct tape."

Don't use setting as filler or a way to avoid writing the story. Characters and dialogue are harder to write, because they move and feel and make things happen; setting generally doesn't. The most popular story opener is a weather-report-styled description of the setting, or the "dark and stormy night" approach. If you suffer from weather-report openings, try starting your story with action or dialogue.

If you must describe a scene, go for what I call active setting. Instead of telling your reader a boring travelogue as a set-up before anything happens in it, try showing them the scene through character interaction in it and/or with it. You can describe a hotel room to the reader by describing it in minute detail, and they'll probably yawn their way through those pages. Describing the hotel room as a man pursues a woman around it, knocks over chairs and lamps, and finally pins her up against the closet door gives the reader the setting, the action, the dialogue and a lot more excitement.

Finally, if you're totally absorbed in writing your setting, and don't give the same attention to your characters and action, you're going to end up writing stories set in beautiful places where dull people do boring things. Give at least as much attention to building your characters, working your plot and creating dialogue as you do describing your setting.

Protagonism — January 9, 2007

Someone more famous than me said "No one wants to visit the Village of Happy People." After reading one novel populated by an entire cast of the sweetest, kindest, most polite characters I had ever encountered, I wrote this.

"Marcia, please come into the library," John said from the open doorway. As his one and only true love walked over the threshold, he gestured to the sofa. "Do sit down over there, darling, if you don't mind."

Marcia sat and crossed her legs daintily at the ankle. "Would you tell me why you asked me to come into the library and sit, dearest?"

"Don't let my request disturb you, beloved, I *beg* you." John went and kneeled with the utmost courtesy before her. "If you would kindly comprehend that all I want to do is talk with you. Not about my request for you to come into the library and sit, of course. Would you be so gracious as to allow me to discuss something else with you?"

Marcia nodded.

"Excuse me, sweetheart, but I would be terribly grateful if you would put that head motion into words -- as long as it doesn't *inconvenience* you." He pressed a hand to his heart. "I'm sure you recall what Jack and Diane had to go through with that 1-800-CONSENT situation. If you have no problem with recalling that blog post, that is."

"If you have nothing better to do," Marcia said, tapping the floor with her shoe, "I would be gratified if you would relay the details of that something else that you wish to talk to me about that is unrelated to my coming into the library and sitting down, John."

"Naturally, I *live* to please you, my sweet." He smiled at her. "Permit me to say that my affection for you, if you are interested in such a thing, knows no boundaries. Except the usual, polite ones."

"I would love to express how hearing that your affection for me, in which I *am* interested, knows no boundaries," she said through gritted teeth. "Only I can't think of another synonym for please."

John felt uneasy, but forced a laugh. "Don't forget your manners, darling -- I mean, if you are so inclined *not* to forget them, that would be very convenient at this moment."

"Please -- oh, the hell with it." Marcia grabbed John's tie and used it to jerk him forward until their noses were only a centimeter apart. "I'm yours. You're mine. Forget about the polite chit-chat and kiss me."

"Please, Marcia." Sweat began running down the sides of his face as he tucked in his chin and watched her unknot his tie. "*Please* don't ask such things of me. I feel compelled to adhere to my innate courtesy--"

"Which does not make for very good dialogue," she pointed out. "You're polite as all hell, which makes for good Beta hero, but you're basically saying nothing. I practically have to give myself diabetes just to respond in kind. You're my boyfriend, John, not a robotic butler. I swear, sometimes I could just put you over my knee and spank you. . . ." Her eyes sparkled. "Is that it? You want to play Big Bad Sexually Deprived Beta Hero again?"

"Oh, I *couldn't* impose on you like that." His eyes bulged. "It would be unspeakably rude of me to ask you--oomp." His eyes widened as she suddenly

pressed her mouth over his. He jerked his head away. "Honeybunch, I *entreat* you--"

"Not for the next hour or two." Marcia whipped off his tie and gagged him with it before she pushed him back on the carpet. "Tell you what. This time *I'll* play the monosyllabic Special Forces demolitions expert who fell in love with you when I sat behind you in Mrs. Randa's second grade class and again during senior year but who ditched you on Prom Night to join the military because your mother secretly hated me for being so big, strong and sexy, and who never forgot you or had sex with another person for an unspecified but lengthy-seeming amount of time while single-handedly defeating thousands of terrorists and who has finally taken an honorable discharge to come back from the Middle East to claim my ancestral ranch, the millions in the saving account left to me by my maiden aunt, and have wild monkey sex and a subsequent, pseudo-shotgun wedding with my one and true love. *You* can play the one and true love."

John jerked down the gag. "That's backstorybalance," he protested. "Not protagonism."

"All right." Marcia sighed. "You play the one and true love," she said, trailing her finger down the buttons of his shirt, "pretty, *pretty* please with sugar and me on top?"

"I suppose . . . as long as we understand each other." John tucked his hands behind his head and batted his eyelashes as he let his voice rise to a sweet falsetto. "Oh, Major Marcia, whatever are you planning to do to me?"

She ripped open his shirt and said in her deepest, gruffest tone, "Anything I please, Cupcake."

The Argument Against Protagonism

Maybe there is a Village of Happy People (VoHP) out there. A place where, as Walgreens' commercials would have us believe, nothing bad ever happens. The residents are all pretty and handsome, polite and charming, and have a permanent case of Euphemisery. I can even envision a rainbow perpetually lighting up the sky over the village. Not that it ever rains there, of course.

I can see that village perfectly in one of my books. For about ten seconds, or however long it would take me to burn it to the ground, blow it up, or have a blazing meteor from outer space level it.

A lot of people think they want to live in the VoHP, just as a lot of writers believe their novel should take place there. If you write for the inspirational or motivational market, you may even sell a VoHP novel. If that's what you want to write, have at it.

For those of us who don't want to exist or write in LaLaland, the best way to avoid this sort of problem is to write with our eyes open. See the world for what it is; capture that in our fiction. To paraphrase Thomas Harris, we have typhoid as well as swans. We should write about both. If for no other reason than what I've observed over the years: when things are at their worst, most people come through with their best.

Novels are all about conflict. If you have no conflict in your fiction, you're writing what amounts to a very long greeting card. Think about it.

Productivity — January 17, 2007

John and Marcia make another cameo appearance.

A few new/revised ideas on getting more out of your writing time:

I know how much I harp on quota, but don't count or think about the number of words, pages or scenes you're getting down while you're in the process of writing. This can be as detrimental to your progress as backtracking and rewriting. Forget all about the numbers and simply write straight through your allotted writing time. You can get out your calculator and kick yourself (or pat yourself on the back) when you're done for the day.

Try using footnotes or comments as block tags. I've mentioned that when I can't find the words to describe something (usually setting), I tag it in the manuscript like this: [describe Central Park in mid-winter] and move on. Later I would do a search for the [] brackets and fill in what I didn't write. Recently I've instead tried using MS Word footnotes or highlighted comments to perform the same task. It seems to work better and faster for me than my old method, and I never miss a tag now.

Some potentially useful freeware* to make the most of your lunch hour at work (if your boss is okay with you using the company computer for personal stuff, naturally): Portable Scribus freeware is "a portable version of an open source page maker called [Scribus](#), which is much like Adobe Pagemaker, which can help create professional looking documents, newsletters, magazines, etc.

With Portable Scribus, you can put it on your USB drive, and plug it in to any computer, and leave not trace behind when you're done."

A sidebar on Scribus: Author Jacques Centelles used Scribus to put together his lovely, photo-rich book on marine life, which you can read about it on the Scribus site [here](#); there are also some notes on the site about another French author [who actually published a book](#) made with Scribus.)

Work out a scene timeline in your head or on paper before you write the actual scene. This is simply a way of sketching out the main events of a scene in sequence and in advance of the writing (organic writers may ignore this if it crowds them too much.) Example:

John takes Marcia home from Halloween party.

Marcia produces stolen, mystical diamond.

John informs Marcia that he is a cop.

Marcia attempts to run into her house.

John uses his half-demon powers to stop her.

Marcia gives John the diamond and insists it was planted on her.

John has precog vision and pulls Marcia into his arms.

Marcia's house explodes.

Finally, an interesting setting trick passed along from one of my high school students that can help those of us who struggle with fleshing out settings: you can furnish your character's house by cutting out bedroom, living room and

dining room sets from sale circulars in the Sunday paper or from furniture catalogs and taping them to pages in your novel notebook (historical writers may want to use images of period furniture taken off the internet.) If you don't like what's advertised, go to furniture stores and take photos of what you do like. If there's some element in the picture that you want to add or change, draw it in or tape in a replacement item. If you really want to get detailed, add paint, counter, rug and/or flooring chips from a home improvement store for each room. Now, how does all this save time? Before you write a scene in that room, look at the room pages in your notebook to refresh your memory about exactly how you planned it to look.

The Escapist Artist — April 10, 2007

Everyone tries to tell writers how to write their books. I'm most amused by the censorship disguised as advice, which is constantly being doled out by various internet hen parties. One day I decided to give them exactly what they wanted.

"I won't let you go," Marcia shrieked, slamming her fists against John's chest. Blood from his soaked jacket splattered her face. "He'll cut your heart out of your chest, and then he'll steal your soul!"

John cradled her face between his hands. "If that's what it costs to send that murdering bastard back to the abyss, I'll pay it." He kissed her as if their lips would never again meet, and then slid his hands under her bottom. "Just one more time," he muttered as he lifted her onto the edge of the desk and pushed her skirt up, tearing at her panties. "One more time, I have to f--"

"Freeze!"

John drew his service revolver and hauled Marcia off the desk, shoving her behind him as he faced the stranger. The man wore a beautifully tailored white suit, a salmon-colored shirt, and a pale blue tie. In his right hand he carried a white-flowered mauve briefcase. "Who the hell are you?"

"Cantwri~~gh~~that," the man said as he held out a pink business card. "Concerned friends of the author sent me. I see I'm just in the *nick* of time."

John snatched the card and read the pretty italic printing on it aloud. "Euwell Cantwri~~gh~~that the third, Escapist Artist?"

"*C'est moi*. I've been sent to redecorate the story. Call me Euwie." As Marcia peered over John's shoulder at him, he gasped. "Dear girl, there's *blood* smeared all over your cheeks. Did John do that? Haven't you people heard of

AIDs?" He whipped out a snowy handkerchief and tossed it to her. "Run along to the little girl's room and have a wash while I talk to your hero."

"Don't let him summon the demon," Marcia said as she hurried out of the room.

John shrugged out of his jacket. "Look, this isn't a good time--"

"No, it's *not*, which is why I'm here," Euwie said, taking a can of freesia-scented air freshener out of his briefcase and spraying the air around John. "This scene has become far too realistic and graphic for the delicate sensibilities of your readers, who, by the way, don't appreciate the way you've been handling the heroine. She's a *lady*, remember? Not a *slab* of *meat*."

John watched Euwie use rhinestone-studded tongs to pick up his blood-soaked jacket and drop it in a lemon-scented pastel garbage bag. "I love Marcia. I'm going to die for her."

"So that makes it okay to *brutalize* her first?" Euwie shook his head. "You were about to use the eff word when I came in here, too. Is that your idea of *true romance*, my boy?"

John blinked. "I . . . I didn't think about it."

"Of course not. You alpha types *never* do. Too busy thinking with *that*." The escapist artist sniffed as he gave John's crotch a contemptuous look. "Now, go get changed out of those *disgusting* clothes while I check on your lady. Use some deodorant, too. You *smell*."

"That's because I'm sweating."

Euwie shook his head. "You *never* sweat around the heroine, or tear at her clothes, or force her to have sex on a desk. When you make love, it has to be in a bed with candles burning and moonlight pouring through the window. Preferably initiated by her, *after* you're married and you've had a good long shower." He strolled out of the room and followed the smell of sweat and blood to the little bathroom down the hall. Through the door he could hear a distinctive tinkling sound.

"Marcia?" He tapped on the door. "That's water running in the sink, isn't it?"

"No, I'm peeing."

"Don't *tell* me that!" Euwie winced as the tinkling ended and a muffled fart erupted inside the bathroom. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Can't you wait until the scene ends?"

"Sorry. I had broccoli salad for lunch." The toilet flushed. "Euwie, John is going to battle a demon to save me from certain death. I just know he'll be killed."

"That's what you're supposed to think, dear." Euwie took out his copy of the first draft manuscript and thumbed through it. "Oh, no. *No*, he can't do that. All this *blood* and *gore*. We'll have to think of something else."

The door opened, and Marcia came out, her face freshly washed clean of every scrap of makeup. "I'm ready."

"For sixth grade, maybe." Euwie pulled out his emergency makeup kit and began fixing her shiny face. "I can't say I'm happy about this John person. You'd

do so much better with a beta hero in this story, darling. They're too pussy-whipped to mess you up like this."

"But I love John!" Marcia wailed.

"Is that why you were slamming your fists against his chest, and about to let him schtup you on top of the monthly planner?" Euwie whisked sheer rose blusher over the apples of her cheeks. "Is that how a lady behaves?"

Marcia pursed her lips for the gloss wand. "I'm not a virgin, you know."

"You had a single, dismal experience in college that lasted three point six minutes in the back of a Gremlin with the boy who jilted you the next morning for the Homecoming Queen, and then quick, emotionally unsatisfying sex with John in Chapter Seven. All very forgivable. I wouldn't be surprised if it grew back before the honeymoon." Euwie's upper lip curled. "Now, repeat after me: I am not a slut."

"I am not a slut."

"Sluts do it with blood-soaked boyfriends on the desk. Ladies do the college thing to take care of the pain and bleeding prior to meeting the hero, have one brief encounter with the hero to establish physical chemistry, but then save it for the wedding night." After Marcia dully repeated the words, he nodded. "Right, that's the best I can do without a hair stylist or Botox. Back to the library."

Euwie and Marcia joined John, who had changed into faded jeans and a skin-tight black T-shirt.

"Why are you dressed like you *live* in a *barn*?" the escapist artist demanded. "Is this a *cowboy novel* now? And what demented creature picked

out this godawful wallpaper?" He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "I'm getting *such* a migraine. Both of you, sit down while I try to sort this out."

John and Marcia sat and held hands as they watched Euwie straighten the desk and use stain remover on the crimson spots John had dripped on the beige rug.

"We have a demon problem that won't wait," John reminded him. "He has to die before midnight or he'll use the diamond to fully restore his powers--"

"And he'll take over the *world* and make Marcia into his unholy *bride*, yes, yes," Euwie snapped. "I read the synopsis." He went to his briefcase. "I despise paranormals, they're beyond gruesome. At least there aren't any of those icky undead vampires running about biting everyone."

"But Euwie, our author couldn't sell the story as a romantic suspense," Marcia protested.

"I don't want to hear it. Ah, here we are." Euwie drew out a glass vial filled with a sparkling lavender liquid. "Make the demon drink this, grab the diamond, and then run away."

John took the vial and held it up to the light. "What does this do?"

"It won't *kill* him, but it gives him a *very* bad tummy ache. He'll double over, drop the diamond, and you'll take it away from him. No blood, no swords, no hearts being hacked out of chests, just some nice, tidy shadow beings emerging from the depths to whisk him back to Satan. Remember, like what happened to Tony Goldwyn at the end of *Ghost*? Mix it in some Tab and he'll *never* taste it."

Euwie checked his watch and then took the vial from John and handed it to Marcia. "You'd better hurry, dear."

"What?" John stood up. "Marcia can't go!"

"Oh, *please*, do you really think a demon would drink a Tab for *you*?"

Euwie sighed as he went over and retrieved the iron poker from the stand by the fireplace. "By allowing Marcia to square her shoulders, take control of her destiny and defeat the demon, she becomes empowered and superior to you. That's what *true romance* is all about, my boy. Fictional compensation for the fact that in the *real* world, we men have all the power, make the best salaries, and own everything."

Marcia squared her shoulders. "I'll be all right, sweetheart."

John frowned as Marcia grabbed her car keys and fled the room. "But what will I do while she's gone?"

Euwie hit him over the head with the poker, sending John crashing to the floor. "You'll be unconscious." He smiled as he took off his jacket and went to lock the library doors. "And, just for the homoerotic thrill of it all, *completely* at my mercy."

[Can Marcia retrieve the mystic diamond without wrinkling her twinset? Will John wake up before Euwie has his wicked way with him? How bad will the demon's tummy ache be? Stay tuned . . .]

**John and Marcia's adventures will continue
at [Paperback Writer](#).
Stop by when you have a chance.**

About the Author



Since 2000, Lynn Viehl has published thirty-seven novels in five genres. On the internet, she hosts [Paperback Writer](#), a popular publishing industry weblog which she updates daily. Lynn's StarDoc science fiction series has been a genre bestseller for seven consecutive years. Lynn's first three novels of the Darkyn, *If Angels Burn*, *Private Demon* and *Dark Need* all made the USA Today bestseller list, and her fourth Darkyn novel, *Night Lost*, debuted in May 2007 at #21 on the New York Times extended bestseller list.

Readers are always welcome to send feedback on this free e-book by e-mail to LynnViehl@aol.com.

Note to Readers

If you've enjoyed this free e-book, please let other people know about it, as word of mouth is the best advertising a writer *can't* buy. Also, if you're interested in reading other books I've written, here's my public bibliography:

Science Fiction (*writing as S.L. Viehl*)

StarDoc SF series:

StarDoc January 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457730
Beyond Varallan July 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457935
Endurance January 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458141
Shockball August 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458559
Eternity Row September 2002 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458915
Rebel Ice January 2006 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460626
Plague of Memory January 2007 Roc SF/F ISBN# 9780451461230
Drednoc to be published in summer 2008 Roc SF/F

Other SF novels:

Blade Dancer August 2003 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459261
Ring of Fire (Anthology; short story: A Matter of Consultation)
 January 2004 BAEN ISBN# 074347175X
Bio Rescue August 2004 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459784
Afterburn August 5, 2005 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460294

Romance (*writing as Gena Hale*)

Paradise Island April 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451409825
Dream Mountain August 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451410033
Sun Valley June 2002 ONYX ISBN# 0451410394

Romance (*writing as Jessica Hall*)

The Deepest Edge February 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451207963
The Steel Caress May 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451208528
The Kissing Blades August 2003 ONYX ISBN# 045120946X
Into the Fire March 2004 ONYX ISBN# 0451411307
Heat of the Moment October 2004 ONYX ISBN# 0451411587

Dark Fantasy (*writing as Lynn Viehl*)

If Angels Burn April 2005 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451214773
Private Demon October 2005 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451217055
Dark Need June 2006 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451218663
Night Lost May 2007 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 9780451221025
Evermore to be published in January 2008 Signet Eclipse

Note to Readers (cont.)

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Lynn Viehl