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‘If You Want To Do Something Well, You Have To Do It Regularly’

BY STAVYAH VATSARAH ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))

Author Barbara Schnell does her best work in the mornings but usually finds the time to write in the afternoons. When she is seriously working on a book, we learn that she tends to sit down between 5 and 6 in the afternoons. ‘Sometimes I just stare at the screen; sometimes I write about 2,000 words. But I have to block out the time. It is like any exercise. If you want to do something well, you have to do it regularly. But that is optimal. Right now, I am struggling to clear my schedule,’ begins the California-based author, speaking to *The Literary Juggernaut* (<https://twitter.com/litjuggernaut>) in an exclusive interaction.

Be that as it may, the author, who holds a degree in Communications from South Dakota State University, lets on that her tryst with writing began way back in school. ‘I would compose short stories for myself, and I wrote editorials for the school paper,’ Barbara tells us. ‘I also wrote a one-act play in college that showed a lot of promise. But I shudder when I read it now. I remember the play made people laugh. I never pursued it though,’ she adds with a smile.



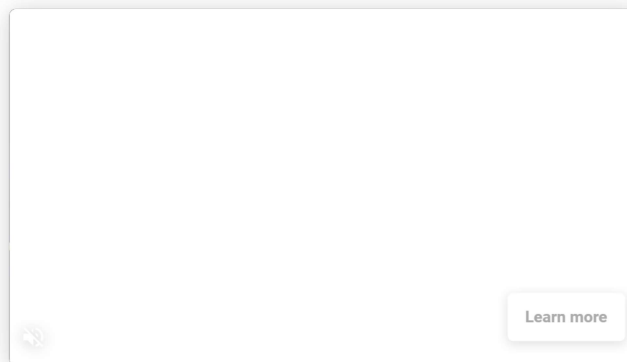
Author Barbara Schnell



Show in the Barn

Over the course of the interaction, we learn that after the author had got married, she and her husband wrote a holiday letter every year that people enjoyed very much. ‘A cousin, who taught Physics at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, told me he had to take it to his job every year because his colleagues enjoyed the letters so much,’ she explains, adding that that was quite encouraging. ‘So, I started my novel, *First Year*, just to see if I could do it — the urge was right up there with “Hey, let us put on a show in the barn!” I had a series of cute vignettes, but I had no chapter breakdown, no outline, no theme, no plot structure, nothing — a situation analogous to hanging wallpaper before the house is built.’

Sharing with us that she would write something, put it down for a few months, and start writing again while working on *First Year*, Barbara reveals she ended up with 1,000 pages of disjointed material, got frustrated, and pursued other projects. ‘I finally read someplace that I needed to be able to tell what my story was about in three or four sentences. Wow! What a concept! So, I figured out my three sentences. Now I knew what my story was about,’ she says, adding that each time she got bogged down with a digression, she would ask herself, ‘Does this add to the story?’



ALSO READ | [‘You Are the Only One That Can Tell Your Story’](#)

(<https://literaryjuggernaut.org/2021/07/28/you-are-the-only-one-that-can-tell-your-story/>)

‘Bloody’ Manuscript

And guess what? Eventually, the plot began making sense. And the author began doing a breakdown of chapters and writing character synopses. ‘I had a beginning and an end and a flexible middle. And I applied what I had learned writing a play before. I wrote the exposition, plot furtherance, and resolution, thereby cutting 550 pages out of the book. My manuscript looked bloody by the time I finished!’

Soon after, Barbara felt she needed a professional opinion. ‘I was ignorant of the existence of professional editors but remembered reading *Youngblood Hawk* in my childhood. In the story, the publishing house provided an editor to the protagonist to polish the manuscript. I thought a publishing house would help me, but to get to them, I needed an agent,’ she says.

Over the Moon?

Thereupon, the author wrote a query letter and sent it to a list of agents in alphabetical order. ‘It must have been a good query letter because I got a request for a full man



by a top literary agent on the West Coast. At least, that is what I was told later; to me, she was just D on the list,' Barbara says, adding that the agent told her she had never had a head reader so enthused about a book before.

Barbara elaborates, 'Her exact words were, "He is over the moon!" She asked me who I knew, which I thought was a little odd, and I responded that I did not know anyone; that is why I needed her. She seemed surprised at my response but asked if she could send a copy of the manuscript to the Big Six publishers in New York over the upcoming Thanksgiving weekend. She asked if she could do this without a contract — "a gentlewoman's agreement". Of course, I said yes.'

Building Up

Elaborating further, the author says she assumed the woman was as honourable as she was. 'Besides, it was all so exciting. She added that two top people at Creative Artists were excited about the book and wanted to represent the movie rights. Wow! All this for my first book; I thought it would be a lot harder.'

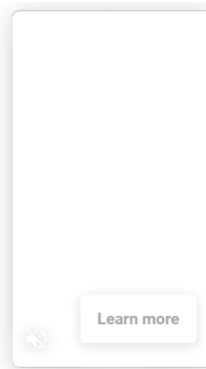
However, Barbara got a little puzzled when she was told that 25 per cent of her earnings would go to agents – both literary and film. 'What in the world could they do that was worth that much? But I put that aside. Someone liked my stuff! Well, I was "over the moon" until some sense kicked in. I looked at my husband and said, "After all this buildup, what if it does not go? I will just die." Well, no one in New York had ever heard of me, I had no sales record, and the opening pages of *First Year* were flawed. That is when I figured out that the publishers expected a completed, vetted manuscript.'

Being Shopped

Thereupon, Barbara found a New York manuscript doctor who pointed out the problems. 'So, I went to work. By the time the edit was complete, the agent had fired all my white knights in the agency. She returned the manuscript unread with a note saying she had never really been behind the project. That is when I found out about being shopped — another new term.'

And that was precisely when the author decided to go the self-publishing way. 'I would have been locked out if the option didn't exist,' she avers. 'And I think I dodged a bullet with this agent. She tried to get me to sign a contract that included signing away ideas. I had sense enough to refuse to sign until that wording was taken out. I thought it was litigation waiting to happen. The agent also refused to meet with me. I offered to buy her coffee when I was in her area, but she always had an excuse,' the author divulges.





Barbara has since been told, and she agrees, that if an agent will not meet with you, they are probably not very good for you. ‘Also, publishing was in such flux that I am glad I kept the rights to my work. I have had problems, but I have learned a lot. And, as I said, I still own the rights,’ she laughs.

Admitting nonetheless that she was disappointed, Barbara says she still managed to get some good reviews from reputable sources. ‘And now, I am learning about marketing. ‘I have learned my craft, how to self-edit, and how to format. I have learned. And that’s the ten-year saga of how I wrote my first novel, *First Year*,’ she shares.

ALSO READ | ‘[Writing Is Art, a Calling](https://literaryjuggernaut.org/2021/02/06/writing-is-art-a-calling/)’ (<https://literaryjuggernaut.org/2021/02/06/writing-is-art-a-calling/>)

A Romantic Comedy

When asked what exactly *First Year* is about, the novelist says it is a romantic comedy about a young woman who follows her husband from Los Angeles, her home, to South Dakota, his home.

The American, who has also restored a 1921 California bungalow in Los Angeles, thanks to her wallpapering and painting skills, shares the storyline: It is based on my own experience in reverse. I was raised in South Dakota and moved to Los Angeles, where I married my husband. The first year of marriage is usually fraught with drama; and when you add dislocation into the mix, well, you have an adventure story.



Always on the Move

Notwithstanding, the author’s second novel, we learn, took her only about a year to write. ‘It is another romantic comedy called *Marianne Moves On*,’ states Barbara, who is also a great fan of high church music. She goes on to explain the storyline: Marianne is a small-town, sheltered young woman who moves from South Dakota to Los Angeles to find adventure. And, boy, does she find it!



The lover of baseball and theatre, who has also won six flash fiction contests sponsored by Southern California Writers' Association, adds, 'They say write what you know, and that is what I do. I know South Dakota and Los Angeles. *Marianne Moves On* just won a 2020 National Indie Excellence Award; so, I am writing a sequel called *Marianne Moves In*. Marianne is always on the move. The holiday letters I mentioned were so popular I compiled them in eBook form. People seem to like them. I guess laughter is hard to come by these days.'



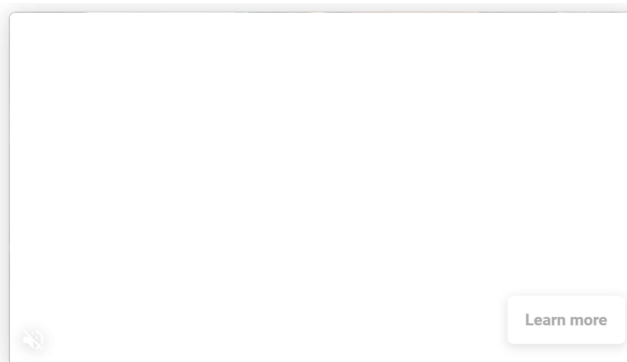
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BARBARA SCHNELL

'I Like Dickens Because the Man Can Plot'

When asked if she tends to plot out her stories in advance, the author says categorically that she almost always knows where the book is going to begin and how it is going to end. 'Getting there is sometimes a struggle. I have made complete chapter breakdowns and ended up throwing most of them out the window. But it gives me a place to start,' she tells us.

And does Barbara have any favourite authors? 'I love Jane Austen because I like her characters,' declares Barbara, adding, 'She also writes about universal women's experiences. They have not changed all that much in 250 years.'



The author adds that she also likes Mark Twain for his humour and astuteness regarding human nature. 'I like Dickens because the man can plot. I like lots of sci-fi writers: Niven,



Herbert, LeGuin, Stephenson just off the top of my head. I like the fantasy of Norton, Tolkien, and Rothfuss; and I enjoy the history books of McCullough and Chernow. I'm getting an education reading their histories. I like writers who make assessable characters in interesting situations.'

From Acting to Writing

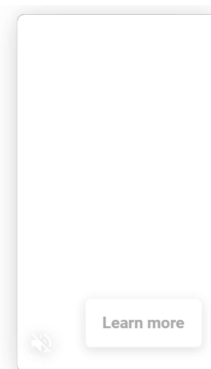
When asked if becoming an author was a conscious decision she made, Barbara, who is also a member of Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, says she was working as an actor, which gave her a lot of down time, and she needed an outlet to keep from worrying herself to death between jobs. 'I have always loved reading, and I thought I would see if I could write a book. I mean, how hard could it be? It looks so easy! Well, it was not easy, but it kept me occupied. And I learned I prefer writing to acting, so I switched emphasis, which is good because as a woman of a certain age, my acting career was stalling out.'

ALSO READ | [Amanda's Block](https://literaryjuggernaut.org/2020/11/20/amandas-block/) (https://literaryjuggernaut.org/2020/11/20/amandas-block/)

'Any Success in the Arts Is a Long Shot'

While the author is currently working on a sequel to her award-winning novel, *Marianne Moves On*, she lets us know that there might be another book after that. She says, 'The idea of a trilogy appeals to me, but I am not sure it will happen. I would like to interpret Shakespeare using a prairie setting. We shall see how things go. I am trying to learn about advertising, and that takes up a lot of time now. If I could make a living at writing, that would be great. But it is beyond my control right now. I *can* make my books as good as they can be. That will have to do for right now.'

And does Barbara have anything to tell budding authors who lose motivation if their works do not do well? 'I would tell them to take the pressure off themselves,' the author states. 'Any success in the arts is a long shot. Very few have major successes. So, I approach my writing as a pleasurable hobby. If I cannot enjoy it, I do not want to do it,' she explains, adding, 'And if I become successful — great! But if not, I am not going to drink myself to death. Maybe I will be one of the lucky ones. Maybe not. Hope so. A long shot is still a shot.'



The writer, who can understand French by reason of the classes she took while in college, also hopes to write a few more books to tempt traditional publishers. 'And I have been told



that some will not touch you until you have a body of work behind you; some publishers require a minimum of seven books. But I do not know if that is true. The point is this: Keep writing. Get those reviews, enter those contests, and hope for the best. Make your work attractive to the money people. And understand that, to publishers, it is business. They want to make money. Art is secondary.’

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BARBARA SCHNELL

‘Why Do People Use Anonymity to Bully People?’

Last but not least, is there anything that the author would like to change if she could? ‘Well, I would like to stop the screaming and name-calling,’ she pronounces.

Expressing her shock and anguish at the lack of civility people have these days, the author questions, ‘Has it always been this bad?’ She adds thereafter, ‘There is no point to it. I have seen people give authors one-star reviews just to be obnoxious.’

As a matter of fact, Barbara lets us know that an author on Twitter traced a reviewer who had given out 50 one-star reviews on Goodreads. ‘No reason was given for the reviews. The reviewer was reported, and his reviews are being taken down, but why would anyone want to cause that much pain and damage? I do not understand people who use anonymity to bully people. I guess we shall just have to keep exposing trolls. It is too bad it takes so much time and effort when we could be doing more positive things,’ adds the author, thereby signing off on an insightful note.

DO READ | [Art: The Idea of Concealment](https://literaryjuggernaut.org/2021/06/20/art-the-idea-of-concealment/) (https://literaryjuggernaut.org/2021/06/20/art-the-idea-of-concealment/)

PS: For reviews and links to purchase Barbara Schnell’s works, visit

www.barbaraschnell.com (http://www.barbaraschnell.com). *All her books are available on*

Amazon (https://www.amazon.com/Barbara-

Schnell/e/B003N03MEK%3Fref=dbs_a_mng_rwt_scns_share).

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Stavyah Vatsarah is the nom de plume of an Indian poet, storyteller, and former journalist. He is the founding editor-in-chief of The Literary Juggernaut and dwells in Delhi, India. View all posts by Stavyah Vatsarah

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Celebs Who Died The Past Year

These Celebrities Passed Away In The Last Year And You May Have Forgot.

Definition

