



*High Hope for the Freelance Writer*

C. Hope Clark, Editor

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## INCORRIGIBLE GUIDELINES

By Gwynne Spencer

I have a friend who is a forensic pathologist. There is not a piece of furniture in her house that hasn't been moved in the past month. She has never seen a dust bunny in her house. By contrast, I have couches that haven't moved in thirty years, so who knows what's living under them. I wish I could put my friend in charge of my guidelines file; she would have it whipped into shape in no time.

My guidelines file has gone through several incarnations. First it was a dowager aunt in the form of a manila folder full of guidelines collected at writer's conferences, requested by mail, gathered randomly, and occasionally visited. When it got too fat for the file folder, it was hole-punched and put in a notebook in alphabetical order, which didn't encourage me to visit it EVER. It languished, unloved and alone.

Then its pages got reorganized topically, dog magazines with their own divider, children's book review outlets in their own section, archaeology outlets buried in the back. This met with the same fate as my blue cloth-covered fifth grade notebook.

I tried to tame the ever-growing guidelines file into two notebooks-- "new possibilities" and "already queried" but they did NOT want three holes punched in them, they did NOT want to live in seldom-visited notebooks on my office shelf. They wanted to be FREE! So I took them all out of the bulging notebooks. They now included little scraps of paper with magazine mastheads taped to larger pieces of paper taped to yet larger notebook pages. They sat obediently in a pile on the dining room table for about a week while I drank coffee and wondered what to do with them, like a bunch of delinquents.

By now, some of them had lots of handwritten notes in the margins, ideas for possible articles that would be a good fit, someday, somehow, if I could only get them organized. Then, one day the cat managed to catch a very large woodpecker, somehow managed to bring it inside, and somehow let it loose in the dining room. There ensued a furious chase scene, with

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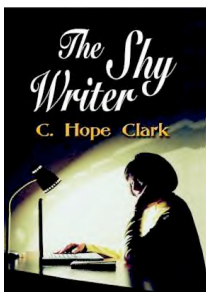
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the terrified woodpecker, like the Golden Goose, followed in close pursuit by one befuddled cat and two very excited weener dogs. The woodpecker got away. The pile of guidelines was destroyed.

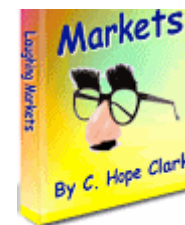
I've heard from more experienced writers that this is how the Muse manifests herself. So I cleaned up the mess and considered my wicked ways once again. That was when I realized my guidelines file was not my enemy; it was like the indispensable box of wood matches next to the woodstove I heat with—all reasonably similar, all with latent spark, the whole having a tendency to erupt out of the container, not neat and tidy, and with a very serious capacity to be dangerous.

So I bought a scanner. Days later, I had a nice neat electronic file of pdfs. But The Muses are not tidy and well-mannered—they kick you in the shins, they hoist you out of bed in the middle of the night, and they stretch your imagination until it aches. That's why Writer's Market sells millions of copies every year--because in school, we learn from papers on a nice flat horizontal surface. My guidelines wanted to be printed pages, not pdfs. This time I knew what to do. I would use heavy laser paper, I would put them in a lovely box on my "morning table" where I do first drafts while trying to get my heart started, and I promised not to punch holes in them.

Now, my guidelines are happy. They are not alphabetical, they are not topical, they are not the enemy any more. I visit them often. On good days, they remind me of the seed catalogs that come pouring into my mailbox in January, full of idealized images dwelling in possibility. Some of them have notes scribbled on them, ideas for articles and pitches, but I segregate those untidy fellows into another pile. They have become too dangerous to co-mingle with the other guidelines, all virgin and pristine. They have taken on a new life, full of possibility and promise. I'm making a new box for them: it's wrapped in bright yellow crime tape that says: CAUTION DO NOT CROSS. It's better for everyone that way.

## BIO

Gwynne Spencer writes a monthly newsletter, The Cosmic Raccoon, from her secret rebel base near Mesa Verde. In winter, she also



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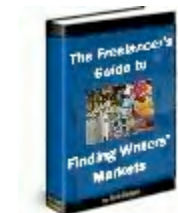
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