RIGHTING WRITE

BY: Kerrie Houston

"In your lead, don't spill the beans," he said. "If you do, let them be soy beans—because they are mysterious. On interviewing, get cozy ... become one with the interviewee's 'existential condition.' On writing, 'manipulate the reader'... bring gamesmanship to your piece. Work yourself into a 'fair state of mind'... Stay low …."

It's the first night of class at the University of Washington's Non-Fiction Writers' Program. I open the classroom door and, seemingly, enter a recurring dream I had in undergrad. I feel as though I'm in the wrong classroom, but I don't know where I'm supposed to be.

Unfortunately, this is reality and it's paralleling where I'm at in my writing "career."

Enter Mr. Kretchmar, who is contritely clad in the uniform of a writing professor—light-brown corduroy jacket, with dark-suede elbow patches; crumpled white shirt, with starched collar; and blue Docker pants. (He is, of course, a moderately Famous Writer; "Mr. Kretchmar" is a pseudonym.) When he speaks, he stands poised, one hand in pocket, the other, cradling his pen, like a Dr. Grabow pipe. He's in character, like he said we're supposed to be when we're writing our stories.

Tonight he savors the sound of his own voice (and the fact that some of as are actually tape-recording him). Later, his lectures become short, often leaving us hanging, like dangling modifiers.

As it turns out, my classmates appear to be an accomplished group. The class comprises, among other professions, psychologists, engineers, speech writers, lawyers, and nurses. Their writing ambitions are, well, ambitious: from the writing of environmental-impact statements, to a former White House correspondent, writing a trashy novel/autobiography.

Sometimes I think that Mr. Kretchmar would be safer if he stood behind a podium, as my classmates have an insatiable appetite for anyone who has had a by-line:

"*Who* do you know that can help me get published?

"*When* can you help me get published?"

"*Where* can I go to get published?"

"*How* can I get published?"

"*What* can YOU do for MEEEEEEEE?"

At our next three-hour weekly session, he begins his lecture based on a series of notes he has in a small notebook. He talks about the imbalance of power between a writer and his or her subject. "I'm the writer; you're the character," he says. Suddenly I dread the open-forum atmosphere about to take place. Sure enough, the classroom transforms into a side-show of mundanity-filled monologues, featuring the cast of "Miss Doc-Eyes," costumed in a cropped angora sweater and Levi's;

"J.O.A.," in pinstripes and pumps; and "Little Ms. Nordstrom," in camera-ready makeup and hair.

Mr. Kretchmar has run out of notes and now he's talking off the top of his head. Sitting closest, and staring dreamily at him is Miss Doe-Eyes (a self-described "journalist"), who is still breathlessly hanging on his every word. She seems to live in a fantasy world, in which Mr. Kretchmar plays a starring role. Every two minutes she luxuriously stretches her arm over her tilted head and coyly asks "Geo-o-o-o-rge" every question she can dream up. Tonight she was so bold to ask if she could come to his office to "study" some of his articles.

On our third meeting, we have the opportunity to critique each others' writing. Much to my dismay, Miss Doe-Eyes and J.O.A. join my group. As we begin to critique J.O.A.'s story about her "class-revealing" selection of an automobile, she admonishes us that she's a partner at a rather large law firm and that, "I essentially own that firm." (Her other interests include the Joint Operating Agreement between *The Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* which she repeatedly refers to—throughout the entire semester—as the "J.O.A. this" and "J.O.A. that.") Her story is so boring that it isn't until the end of the semester when I see her driving away in a new Honda that I discover how it ended. I'm a fair person, so of course I believe that attorneys should be allowed to speak their minds—they just shouldn't he allowed to write about it.

Later that night, Mr. Kretchmar excerpted examples of bad writing from our writing, then passed around examples of good writing—his writing. During the break, he asked some of us if we applied to this program because we knew he was featured in it.

By mid-semester, Miss Doc Eyes was expressing her disappointment that Mr. Kretchmar's editor had rejected her story. Little Ms. Nordstrom (a high-fashion brochure caption writer) squirmishly put in her two hundred dollars' worth. "Well, I don't know what all your experiences have been," she said. "But, the first time I sent an article to an editor in New York, he quickly rejected my story. The second time he quickly sent me a contract. And, the third time, he immediately sent me a check. So you see, if you want to sell articles, you have to go out and find what the needs are and fill them. I don't *believe* that it's the other way around."

In our last session, we again had the opportunity to read each others' stories. With head tilted back so far it looked as if someone was pulling her hair, Little Ms. Nordstrom turned to me and said, "As for your writing, Kerrie, it looks as though you're in the wrong writing section. Perhaps you should have applied to the *fiction* writing track." The rest of the group agreed and the class was over.

Before I left that evening, Mr. Kretchmar came over to me and said he liked my stories. Triumphantly, like a schoolgirl, I mentioned his compliment to one of the

women in the group.

Nonetheless, next morning, I felt lousy, realizing that I, too, was like a pigeon at Ivar's pier, waiting for Mr. Kretchmar to throw a scrap my way. To be sure, people who teach writing classes and people who take them unknowingly engage in a symbiotic relationship—one of quid pro ego, if you will. We stroke their ego by paying for their knowledge (and acting all author-struck) and they, for good measure, stroke ours, by perhaps throwing out errant—if not sincere—compliments.

Since then, I decided, humbly, that few of us who take writing courses will ever become writers. And that success as a writer has less to do with being the most talented as it does with having an astonishing ability to handle rejection, and an equally astonishing supply of sheer luck. For a case in point (and inspiration), just peer into Seattle's own back yard: at that lucky dog across the Sound who wrote something about snow falling on cedars.