

CAROLYN HAX

Adapted from a recent on-line discussion.

Dear Carolyn:

What are your thoughts on a long-distance marriage? I've been dating a man for five years total — with a 20-year break between years 3 and 4. During those 20 years, we moved to different states, each got married, had two kids and then divorced. There are joint-custody situations and young children on both sides that make it nearly impossible to live less than a five-hour drive apart. We see each other at least every other week and we have a wonderful relationship (easy when you see each other every other week, I suppose). I really do see him as my life partner.

We could continue this long-distance dating thing for the next 12 years (when the youngest turns 18), but I'd really like to be married. Difficult to quantify, but goes something along the lines of: We'd be a family. Our family would always come first and invitations would be easier as would the holidays — no questions that our "family" should be together — even if it means not seeing one set of relatives one holiday.

But having been through a divorce and not wanting to relive that experience in this lifetime, it seems the deck is stacked against long-term success.

Anywhere

It's easy to reverse a decision to keep dating and not get married — you just get married. Reversing a decision to get married, as you know, isn't quite as much fun.

As for long-distance marriage in general, I have no specific thoughts on that, but I do on this particular long-distance marriage.

You say this is about putting your partnership first. I would take every item you listed — holidays and . . . well, holidays — and talk with the man you're dating about your wanting to be a family.

What you're regarding as family, as you know, isn't a legal unit, but an emotional one. To work as an emotional unit you need his full contribution and commitment. Once you have that, married or not, the other stuff will follow, including invitations and divvying up family visits, etc. You may have to insist on it, and repeat yourselves, and persist through others' resistance, but that's all secondary stuff.

If on the other hand you don't have his full agreement on wanting to regard yourselves as family, then no "marriage" will make up for it.

Dear Carolyn:

A question I'm sure has been asked and answered a million times . . . but never by me, so: How do I break up with my boyfriend in the least painful way?

D.C.

Quickly, kindly, unequivocally, respectfully, and stick around for the question-and-answer session, even if he asks for it a day or 12 after the fact.

Don't go into excessive detail, though; you do want to be told you have spinach in your teeth, but you don't want to be told you're too tall/too short/too loud/too cringe-inducing, y'know? Limit your comments to why you didn't work as a couple, not why he doesn't work as a person.

Read the whole transcript or join the discussion live at noon Fridays on www.washingtonpost.com/discussions.

Write to Tell Me About It, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or tellme@washpost.com.



BY NICK GALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

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The Style Invitational »

REPORT FROM WEEK 822

In which we asked for exhibits and events that might be part of a Festival of Real American Folklife, in tribute to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, held earlier this month:

THE WINNER OF THE INKER
Today's Still Life, Tomorrow's Abstract: Tattoos and how they change over time. 1:30 p.m.: From Cute Little Cleavage Butterfly to Giant Drooping Winged Something. (Wayne Rodgers, Satellite Beach, Fla.)

- 2 the winner of the Mustard Marvin gross-out squeeze bottle topper: Old-Time Postal Methods: Dressed in 20th-century garb, reenactors affix stamps to envelopes with saliva. (Tom Lacombe, Browntown, Va.)
- 3 Ski Mask Knitting, with Moms of Liquor Store Robbers. (Vic Krysko, Suratthani, Thailand)
- 4 Dad Stories: A revue of stories told by fathers from across the country. Repeated every five minutes. All day. Every day. (Elizabeth Molye, Arlington)

FOLK LOWER: HONORABLE MENTIONS

The All-American Automobile Trip: Participants drive slowly up and down Independence Avenue, where road rage experts will demonstrate hand gestures, aggressive driving maneuvers and abusive language. (Lois Douthitt, Arlington)

Today in the Vanishing Arts tent: 11 a.m. Slide rule crafting; 12:15 p.m., buggy whip making; 1 p.m.: newspaper reading. (Ken Gallant, Conway, Ark.)

Rust Bucket Displayin': The art of showing off old cars. With workshops on cinder block selection and proper weed arrangements. (Wayne Rodgers)

American Summer Camp Craftwork: A giant Popsicle stick made of Popsicle sticks. (Katie Maddocks, Royal Oak, Mich., a First Offender)

Hall of 15 Minutes of Fame: At 2 p.m., a special appearance by the Octomom. (Marcy Alvo, Annandale)

Weaving Techniques: Native suburban drivers discuss how to negotiate high-speed lane changes. (Jeff Contompasis, Ashburn)

Kindergarten Cuisine: Edible crafts made of dried macaroni, marshmallows, jelly beans, M&M's and paste. (Charles Koelbel, Houston)

Lawn Mower Artists: On the central Mall, suburban males create such patterns as "The Baseball Outfield," "The Crop Circle" and the ever-controversial "Confederate Flag." (Lawrence McGuire, Waldorf)

1 p.m. Turn City Wastelands Into a Garden. Preceded at 12:30 by the Create a Wasteland workshop (spray paint and glass bottles available for purchase). (Vic Krysko)

Fifty Years of the GSA, and Counting: The

highly distinctive occupational culture of requisitions and procurement. To apply for tickets, submit Form SI-4329 in triplicate. (Jim Deutsch, Washington, a First Offender who actually works for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival)

Radio-Free America: Aluminum foil headwear in U.S. cities. (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

American Uptalking: It's like this totally random thing where everyone is like 20 years old? And all they do is go on a stage and just talk like normal? And all these old folks are standing and watching and looking so totally confused? (Larry Yungk, from Geneva)

Satellite venue at the Tidal Basin: Personal-watercraft slalom racing around the paddleboats, in three skill levels — four, six and eight beers. (Dave Prevar, Annapolis)

Profiles in Furrage: The craft of black-velvet painting. (Jeff Contompasis)

Real American Authenticity: Brush clearin', pickup drivin', intellectualism eschewin' and stuff. (Charlie Wood, Falls Church)

American Mating Rituals: Volunteer festival attendees are randomly paired, regardless of age, sex, interests, etc. Sponsored by The Washington Post Magazine, which hopes to improve the success rate of Date Lab. (Peter Metrinko, Chantilly)

Fishermen of Three Mile Island: Come shake their hands, all three of them. (Russell Beland, Fairfax)

Next Week: Wryku, or Bad News to Verse

ONLINE DISCUSSION Have a question for the Empress or want to talk to some real Losers? Join the Style Conversational at washingtonpost.com/styleconversational.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



BY BOB STAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Week 826: The Inside Word

Ou"thou"se: That little shed behind the Quaker meeting hall. (Jennifer Hart, Arlington)

S"laughter": Stop! You're killing me! (Elden Carnahan, Laurel)

Di"agnostic"ian: This doctor is just not sure what you've got. (Steve Fahey, Kensington)

Here's a contest we've done more than once, but not in eight years: This week: Take any word — this may include the name of a person or place — put a portion of it in quotation marks and redefine the word, as in the examples above from 2001, all by renowned Style Invitational Losers. Important note: Notice how hard it would be to understand those three jokes if the quotation marks weren't there. That's what makes this contest different from another one we do regularly, the one to supply a new definition for any existing word. This time, the pun shouldn't just jump out at you.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives a Superfly Monkey, a stuffed animal whose arms, when you fit the tips of your fingers in its little hands, form the rubber band of a slingshot. Pull back and it sails through your yard, office, classroom, church aisle, etc., emitting a highly annoying scream. Discourtesy of newbie Loser Lois Douthitt. You can see a commercial for the thing at buysuperflymonkey.com.



The slingshot monkey: Screaming your way? SUPERFLYMONKEY.COM

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt or Loser Mug. Honorable Mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. First Offenders get a smelly tree-shaped air "freshener" (Fir Stink for their First Ink). One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, July 27. Put "Week 826" in the subject line of your e-mail or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Aug. 15. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. This week's Honorable Mentions name is by Beverley Sharp; next week's revised title is by Kevin Dopart.

Writers Spend Their Days Romancing the Tome

ROMANCE, From Page C1

Alpha, Extreme Alpha, Bad Boy Alpha, Wounded Alpha, Swashbuckling Alpha, Geek Alpha and Gentle Alpha) to sketching out "imperfect" heroines (possible flaws include: Too Tall, Big Hips, Ten Pounds Overweight and Too Beautiful).

In a brainstorming workshop on plot development, Amy Talley fretfully asks a small group for help. "I just don't know what their dark moment is," she says.

Her hero and heroine are both damaged — he's an alcoholic Iraq vet, she's a single mom with a snake-like ex. She needs help figuring out the big issue that will almost drive them apart.

"Something triggers Iraq for him," someone suggests. "Maybe there's conflict with her son."

"Whatever happens with the kid, she'll have to confront Larry the Snake, too."

"I think it's that your heroes have sex with each other," someone says.

Conversation stops. Intriguing thought. *Sex almost ruins the romance because they feel guilty for giving into their carnal desires.*

At a workshop called "High Concept," author Lori Wilde leads attendees through a slide presentation, showing them how to create instantaneous plot by choosing items from under the headings of:

Universal Themes, Classic Plots and Innovative Twist.

Think: Good vs. Evil + Twins Switching Places + Banshees.

Think: Revenge + Star-crossed Lovers + Abraham Lincoln.

"I just turn on the TV" to find innovative twists, Wilde says encouragingly. "If you're just tapped out, [go with] the president."

Reading about these workshops is reinforcing your preconceived stereotypes about romance. You are righteously indignant. You are whining. *They're just writing FORMULA-S.*

To which the astute romance writer will reply: So? Our nation's entire entertainment industry thrives on formulas, from the bristly cop dramas on our televisions to the bubbly romantic comedies in our theaters.

"What speaks louder than anything else is money," says Macomber, the wildly popular author of such sweet, cozy novels as "The Perfect Christmas," "Where Angels Go," "The Snow Bride." "And we bring in the money."

The genre was the biggest fiction



BY RICHARD A. LISKO — THE WASHINGTON POST

At the Romance Writers of America book-signing at the Marriott Wardman Park, passionate fans get ready to grab autographs from their favorite authors.

category in 2007, the last year for which the Business of Consumer Book Publishing has compiled numbers. The recession has only helped: While other genre sales dipped or dived, Harlequin's sales were up 9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2008, compared with the same period in 2007. Barnes & Noble and Nielsen Book Scan both reported an increase in early 2009 romance sales. The genre pulls in nearly \$1.4 billion in revenue each year.

To keep momentum and build name recognition, many working authors release three or more books a year, 40 or 50 books per career, cheerfully churning out 8, 10, 13 pages a day.

"I don't believe in writer's block. I think there are lazy writers." Famed romance and mystery author Janet Evanovich addresses the conference-goers in a packed Q&A section. "When we have writer's block, what we mean is it would be so much more fun to go to Saks and buy shoes."

This is the refreshing thing about romance writers: They resist the shoes. They keep plodding and plotting along. There are no *artistes* at

RWA. There is no insufferable going on about how each sentence is like a precious baby, or self-expression or T.S. Eliot's objective correlative. Nobody calls these books "fictions." There is only story — chesty, heavy, plump, glistening story.

"Every other genre has managed to pull itself up by its bootstraps and be defined by its highest level," says Lynn Coddington, a historical romance writer who also has a PhD in English. Just look at Dan Brown. People brazenly read "The Da Vinci Code" right on the Metro. "But romance is *always* defined by its dreck."

People always picture Fabio. People *still* use phrases like "bodice-ripper" and "heaving bosoms," even though bosoms rarely heave in good erotic fiction. Tell a man that you write romance and his eyes take on that glazed, smarmy look. "I get, 'How do you research your love scenes? Heh heh heh,'" sighs Beverley Kendall, a conference newbie who has just sold her first novel, "Sinful Surrender."

"And the women," her friend Devon Gray adds. The women are even worse. "They act all judgmental. Oh,

I never have time to read that trash." She is kind enough not to call them on it, to tell them they probably do.

"They want to know, 'Why don't you use a pseudonym?'" says Kendall. She was lucky enough to be born with a lacy bell-toned name. Other writers have to go invent pseudonyms, a laborious process that can involve flipping through phone books, looking for something melodious toward the middle of the alphabet. (It's better to steer clear of A's or Z's; that way, when your books hit the stores, readers don't have to stand on tiptoe or crouch down to see them.)

Lindsay Downs is a good name. Perky, pouty, evocative. Of course, Lindsay Downs is a man. He's here promoting his first book, a military romance story in a collection titled "Operation L.O.V.E." When he first started, his friends kept asking: *What are you writing? What are you writing?* He tried to brush them off with evasive non-answers. "But finally, I got fed up and said, 'I'm writing romance, okay?'"

Now he is here, and he is among

friends.

"I have a heroine who is 18." Back in the plot-development workshop, the writer of a sci-fi romance explains her problem to the group. The heroine "has committed some crime, and the retribution is that she has to give up love." The writer can't figure out what crime could reasonably result in that punishment. What could the heroine do that would make her unworthy of love? "Maybe she did something that destroyed someone else's love," someone suggests.

"Or someone else's soul." "Maybe she was accused of something she *didn't* do."

The romance writers find this plot point disturbing.

What kind of barbaric society would deny someone human connection as punishment?

In the land of the romance writers, everyone — vampires, shape-shifters, extraterrestrials, politicians — is deserving of love. Which is why they will keep writing it. Whether you admit to reading it or not.