

**LEE RODDY'S GUIDE FOR TEACHING**

# **HOW TO WRITE A STORY**

**AN INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE**

**FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING**

**BASIC STORY WRITING**

**By Lee Roddy**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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|                               |            |    |
|-------------------------------|------------|----|
| Introduction-----             | Page ----- | 1  |
| Lesson 1: Ideas-----          |            | 7  |
| Lesson 2: Story Building----- |            | 15 |
| Lesson 3: Objective-----      |            | 23 |
| Lesson 4: Obstacles-----      |            | 35 |
| Lesson 5: Outcome-----        |            | 43 |
| Lesson 6: Characters-----     |            | 51 |
| Lesson 7: Plots-----          |            | 59 |
| Lesson 8: Scenes-----         |            | 67 |
| Conclusion-----               |            | 77 |
| Teacher's Answers-----        |            | 80 |

Back of the book:

- About the Author

# INTRODUCTION TO SHORT STORY GUIDEBOOK

## INTRODUCTION

This guidebook was written at the request of many teachers and parents who have attended my seminars over the last 20 years on How to Teach a Child to Write a Story. These lessons evolved from a one-page handout I used in countless workshops.

That handout is so simple that it can be used with beginning writers, so I've included it at the end of this introduction. This book is slanted for teachers dealing with younger writers. However, this same basic material, taught in my adult seminars all over the nation, has helped hundreds of aspiring writers to sell their first (or many) novels.

Those younger students who do not have sufficient experiences to write a story about something they know can be introduced to writing by using familiar stories they've read themselves or that were read aloud to them.

My objective is to help teachers instruct children in how to enjoy writing a good story by learning the fundamentals of fiction as covered in eight lessons. Questions for the student plus a writing assignment are at the end of each lesson to help reinforce what has been taught.

The teacher may move from the known into the unknown by reading a story aloud to the child or having him read one by himself. Encourage him to join you in trying to discover what the author did to create the story. Have the child point out the situation the character faced at the start of the story. What problem did that cause? What goal (objective) did he want? What were some of his obstacles? How did it end (outcome)?

Incentives, as praise and little rewards, are suggested when the student has identified the main parts of a story. Encourage the child to think about writing his own story, using the basic elements he's just learned. Always try to keep the fun in learning to write a story. Avoid making it a chore. If there's a weakness, present it as a question rather than criticism. "Do you think this (whatever it is) would be better if you changed it to...?" (Mention the right answer.)

For those teachers whose students are ready for more advanced training, the rest of this introduction will provide what is needed. Teachers may begin with those simple nuts and bolts or story basics and move into the book's lessons as the child is able to comprehend greater details of story writing. The idea is to make the learning experience enjoyable and let the lessons grow with the child's development.

Some redundancy throughout this guidebook is deliberately included to reinforce learning by review and repetition. Also, if you are teaching a particular session, you may not have to refer back to earlier teachings on this subject except for review purposes.

I recommend that teachers approach the students with the idea that writing is fun, not work. It's like a game because all children know those are enjoyable, and all games have certain rules to be followed. The same is true of writing a story.

Those rules are fairly simple, yet important. They should help make creative writing enjoyable, just as recreational reading is primarily for pleasure.

However, there is a serious side to being able to write well. In fact, reading and writing skills are absolutely essential for the future success of today's students. Great educational stress is currently placed on improving the nation's overall dismal academic records in reading and writing.

According to thirty years of National Assessments of Education Progress, recent measures in reading and writing showed that fifth-grade boys ranked on par with eighth-grade girls. Boys will read nonfiction or action-filled stories, so encourage them to write their own stories. That's an enjoyable way of learning to write well.

Statistically, girls seem to naturally be more inclined to read and write, so they are often open to learning to write creatively. However, it's important that both boys and girls write well, so this practical guidebook is designed to help them achieve that goal. To simplify the learning process, I have used male pronouns in this book.

Teachers are urged to limit their instruction to the child's age and learning ability. At the end of each lesson, there is a worksheet for students to help them see how well they have understood the lesson. Answers for the teacher are at the back of the book.

Teachers should first familiarize themselves with each section to better decide which increments individual students can handle, depending on age, comprehension ability, and need. Feel free to adjust the lessons as students progress so that their needs are met, they enjoy the experience, and they learn the contents of each lesson.

## THE PROBLEM

As the author of countless short stories and nearly fifty novels for young readers, I have judged dozens of short stories by children in those age groups. I discovered that almost all have the same problem. They start writing without recognizing the critical role of properly structuring a story. Without this, the narrative elements won't work well.

Well-told stories, from the Bible to the literary classics to comic books, all have the same invisible three-part structure with specific elements within each of those parts. Without this structure, the story will collapse.

Most of the work I've judged proved this to be true. Without that knowledge, a solid narrative is virtually impossible.

## INTRODUCTION TO SHORT STORY GUIDEBOOK

Children may be given an assignment to write a story, but without the proper awareness of structure and elements the child often blunders into trouble.

Consequently, some children resist creative writing. Others ramble on for pages but still don't end up with a real story.

In this book, a simple short story is defined as a three-part fictitious narrative about a situation involving a character with a problem, an objective, and obstacles over which this character seeks to triumph as the outcome. Details are in the lessons.

There are many ways to write a good story, but the system I use and teach really works well for those interested in learning how to write a concrete narrative.

### PROBLEM / SOLUTION OVERVIEW

The problem of writing a well-constructed story is eliminated by a three-step method using a tangible Objective, some Obstacles, and the Outcome. It's a simple blueprint that helps shape a story idea into a finished narrative. In three easy steps, the student learns what must be in the beginning, the middle, and the ending of a story.

The first "O": OBJECTIVE. A story idea is developed from what's called a Setup which falls under the first "O", for objective. The beginning introduces five necessary elements: (1) a changed Situation, (2) an affected and motivated main Character, (3) his Problem, (4) the Objective of solving the problem, and (5) a Decision to go for the tangible Objective, which ends the first part of the story.

The second "O": OBSTACLES. The middle of a story begins with the character taking the first action toward achieving the objective and promptly runs into obstacles. The middle continues through the character's various efforts to overcome the obstacles until there's a crisis where it seems the character faces disaster and cannot possibly reach the objective. The middle part of a story ends on this high crisis.

The third "O": OUTCOME. The ending part of a story starts with the character making a final desperate effort to overcome this ultimate obstacle to snatch victory from defeat and reach the objective.

See how simple it is? The story's beginning sets up the Objective. The middle deals with the Obstacles. The ending shows the Outcome.

This Triple "O" Method is a proven, practical system that really works well. I've used it in all my novels. I've taught it to myriads of teachers and to aspiring adult writers who went on to write and sell countless novels that have sold millions of copies.

Before presenting this very simplified guide for writing a story, here are a couple of important rules the teacher should instill and reinforce in each student:

1. Good stories are not written; they're rewritten.
2. Revisions should not be allowed until the entire story is roughed out.

Let's take the second point first. Sad experience with both children and adult writers over many years has convinced me that the work is rarely completed if the author starts revising an incomplete work. Insist that the story be down in writing from beginning to end before any editing is done.

Not only are good stories rewritten, but many famous authors admit to having rewritten a novel several times. I have rewritten my own stories after they were completed, and once I revised a first page forty-two times. If I had not completed the work first, it's unlikely I'd have had the will to take the time needed to edit the opening to where it was finally the best I could make it. It's the fun of writing that makes an author try to produce the very finest work of which he's capable.

This structure system will be elaborated upon in Lesson 2 (story building) with additional elements or ingredients added that must go under each of those three parts.

For convenience, the instruction in this book is broken down into three types of stories, but only the first one should be used by beginning students.

1. The "purpose achieved" story is where the main character has a tangible objective and reaches it after hard struggles. This is the only story a young writer should attempt because it's the easiest and most satisfying.
2. The "purpose failed" story is where the character does not succeed in reaching the goal. However, I heartily discourage this kind of narrative because the writer is never challenged to figure out how to have the character succeed.
3. The "purpose abandoned story" is where the focal character gives up trying, or deserts his goal. This type of story should also be avoided because children's stories and writings should stress the concept that winners don't quit.

Even though the endings on the above stories are different, they all fit nicely under the Triple "O" Method because all well-told stories have the same basic structure and elements.

This method will work for your students, whose first complaint when assigned to write a story often is, "I don't know what to write about."

The learner often has no ideas, yet they are all around us every day. All stories begin with ideas, so the learner needs to first be taught how to recognize them, then what to do next. Where do these concepts come from? We'll see in the first lesson, but first, here's the simplified overview of story structure from my handout that has proven helpful for beginning students.

## INTRODUCTION TO SHORT STORY GUIDEBOOK

From the Bible to classic literature to comics, all well-told stories have three parts with certain elements under each section. Before starting to write, the young author should plan to use all of them, including answering certain questions. Examples will be given in the lesson, but for now, here are the pertinent questions:

1. **CONCEPT OR IDEA:** In a simple sentence of a few words: What is this story about?
2. **CHARACTER:** Who is the motivated main character about whom readers will care?
3. **SITUATION:** What changed circumstance presents a problem for this character?
4. **OBJECTIVE:** What tangible goal must the main character reach in order to resolve the problem?
5. **OBSTACLES:** Who and/or what prevents the character from reaching the objective?
6. **STORY QUESTION:** Will the main character achieve his goal?
7. **OUTCOME:** How does it end, and does it answer the story question either yes or no?
8. **THEME:** What does the character learn, or what life lesson does the author show through the story without preaching?

These questions need to be answered within the three parts of a story's structure of Beginning (Objective), the Middle (Obstacles), and Ending (Outcome).

### BEGINNING: OBJECTIVE, OR WHAT DOES THE MAIN CHARACTER WANT?

1. **SITUATION:** Set up an opening set of circumstances that are changed by introducing an intriguing main character with action, and swat him with a story problem leading to a tangible **OBJECTIVE** and various **OBSTACLES**. Everything thereafter should be related to the character's efforts to overcome obstacles to reach this goal.

2. **MOTIVE:** Give the main character a strong reason to go for the objective.

3. **CONFLICT:** The heart of a story is conflict, including person versus person (relationships), person vs. self, or person vs. environment. The latter includes everything not in the first two. Try for all three kinds of conflict in a story.

4. **ELEMENTS:** Include the stakes with dangers or risks, plus time, place, motives, descriptions, character flaws, theme, etc.

5. **STORY QUESTION:** Ask: "Will the main character achieve his goal?" The answer should always be positive (purpose achieved).

6. **DECISION:** A story's beginning ends when the focal character chooses to go

for the goal in spite of obstacles. This decision provides a smooth transition to the middle of the story.

#### MIDDLE: OBSTACLES, OR WHAT PREVENTS REACHING THE OBJECTIVE?

1. The middle begins with the main character taking the first step to achieve the goal and encounters various OBSTACLES, including an adversary. This initial effort fails.
2. The main character tries again in spite of complications that increase suspense about the outcome. This second effort may seem about to succeed, but it eventually also fails, resulting in a still worse situation.
3. The middle of the story ends with a crisis where the focal character tries again, but an unexpected development (plot point) makes it seem impossible to reach the objective. A plot point is a surprise incident that dramatically worsens the main character's problem and catches readers unaware.

#### ENDING: OUTCOME, OR HOW DOES IT TURN OUT?

The ending has three parts:

1. Crisis: In facing disaster, the main character has very limited choices to get out of his predicament. One is hard, but morally right.
2. Climax: The character makes that right moral choice and attempts one final valiant effort to resolve his problem.
3. Conclusion: The main character snatches victory from defeat and solves his problem. Someone changes (usually the main person), showing character development or that he has learned something (a moral, virtue, or theme). Loose ends are tied up, rewards and punishments are given, the outcome answers the story question either yes or no, and preferably in a way that surprises the reader.

The above simplified story basics have helped many young writers produce their first good short story. It is hoped that many more youthful authors will get their start with these fundamentals and progress through the more detailed lessons in this guidebook.

For those students who are ready to undertake more detailed study of the craft of writing, the first full lesson deals with ideas. All success begins with an idea. But where does the writer get ideas? How are they developed into stories? We'll answer those questions, and more, in Lesson 1.



# STORY BUILDING OR DEVELOPING YOUR SHORT STORY

## LESSON 2: STORY BUILDING

**Student's Objective:** After studying this lesson, the learner will know some of the elements necessary to build or develop a story within its three-part structure.

**Teacher's Objective:** In this lesson, we'll elaborate upon the story structure briefly mentioned in the introduction. After completing this session, the teacher will be able to judge how well a student has understood the way to develop a story in three parts.

### BEGIN LESSON:

Everything has some form or structure: a birdhouse, a mansion, a car, a rocket ship and even a jellyfish. Each has a structure designed for the specific purpose of holding their elements in the right places. So it is with a story.

The writing student needs to understand the three structural parts of a story, and which elements must be inside each section as the story is developed. After the entire story structure is presented, three separate chapters will be devoted to the Objective, Obstacles and Outcome, along with elements that must be under each segment.

The learner needs to differentiate between structure and development. Structure refers to the story's invisible form of beginning, middle and ending. Structure can be set up as a paradigm (example or pattern) to assure a strong line of dramatic action. This lesson includes a three-part form to visually show that.

Story development means the basic narrative elements as character, situation, problem, etc., as envisioned by the writer and organized within the structural parts. These elements give the story life so it's held together under the structure.

### REVIEW:

As mentioned earlier, all well-told stories have three parts: Beginning, Middle and Ending. These can be summarized as Objective, Obstacles and Outcome.

A story idea is started with the Set-up which introduces (1) a likeable, motivated and believable main Character, (2) a changed Situation leading to (3) a serious Problem with high stakes leading to (4) a tangible Objective and (5) a decision to go for the Objective in spite of various risks.

In the story's middle, the character takes the first step to achieving the goal and struggles with obstacles that stand in the way of reaching that goal. The middle ends with a crisis where the main character seemingly cannot possibly reach the Objective.

## STORY BUILDING OR DEVELOPING YOUR SHORT STORY

The last part of a story shows how the character triumphs over the final Obstacle and reaches the Objective, which is the Outcome.

With this in mind, the writing student needs to begin developing a story in three steps.

### OVERVIEW OF THE BEGINNING: First “O” FOR OBJECTIVE:

The narrative will be developed with certain elements under each of these triple “O” words.

Comparing this to a game, it means the favorite team has the objective of defeating the other team which represents obstacles to winning, which is the outcome.

To understand what must go into a story’s three-part structure and which elements must be included under each section, let’s begin with an overview. The triple “O” structure will not change, but the elements will, as you’ll see.

The first part of a story is fairly short, and runs from the beginning sentence on page one to a decision the main character makes to go for the objective. This marks the final part of the story’s beginning before moving to the middle section (obstacles).

We start with a review of what we have already studied about the **SET UP**: After the Idea, those beginning elements are:

1. A changed **SITUATION** that sets up ...
2. A major **PROBLEM** with risks and stakes for...
3. An appealing and motivated main **CHARACTER** with a...
4. Tangible **OBJECTIVE** of resolving the problem.
5. A **DECISION** to go for the objective ends the story’s beginning.

We’ll use those in a moment, but before starting to write, the author needs to answer some basic questions about the entire story so it can be seen as a whole entity. These will be discussed in detail and put them where they belong under the three-part structure. Here are the questions:

**CONCEPT OR IDEA:** In a simple sentence, what’s this story about?

Here’s an example from my novel which was also a prime-time television series about Grizzly Adams: “This is the story of a man exiled to the wilderness and how he learns to survive.”

**SITUATION:** What change in the situation is going to lead to a serious problem for the main character?

## STORY BUILDING OR DEVELOPING YOUR SHORT STORY

Example: Grizzly Adams, wrongly accused of murder, has to flee for his life.

**CHARACTER:** Who is the likeable and motivated main character for whom readers will care? The entire story revolves around him, and everything is consistently told from his viewpoint.

Example: Grizzly Adams, an historic California character, was romanticized in a fictitious version for the novel, so the story focuses on him and his environment.

**PROBLEM:** What serious difficulty and urgent problem, developed from the changed situation, will affect the main character? This story problem is a threat to this character's happiness, health or even life (the stakes). There are many risks. Older students should add a personal problem. (Grizzly Adams is forced to leave behind his small daughter while he tries to clear his name.)

Example: In the 1800s, Grizzly Adams is forced to leave his little daughter behind and flee to the wilderness. His story problem is how to survive in a hostile environment and eventually clear his name of the false charges while exiled from most people, so he is unable to seek the real culprit who let Adams take the blame. His personal problem involves the mental anguish of being separated from his daughter.

**OBJECTIVE:** What tangible goal does the main character have to achieve in order to resolve the problem? Everything in the story should go toward helping the character get to this goal.

Example: While surviving in a hostile environment, Grizzly Adams must find a way to prove that he is innocent of all charges so he can return to his little girl.

**OBSTACLES:** What prevents the character from reaching the objective? Even though this will occupy the middle part of the story structure, the writer needs to have some idea of what those obstacles will be and at least hint at them in the opening.

Example: Grizzly Adams faced about every danger the wilderness offered, including human and nature. (I made a list of possibilities before writing the novel).

**STORY QUESTION:** Will the main character achieve his objective? The story is kept on track by knowing the answer to this question before starting to write. The answer is either yes or no; preferably yes (purpose achieved).

Example: Yes, but in a way the reader didn't expect.

**OUTCOME:** How does the story end? The writer needs to know from the beginning whether or not the main character is going to reach the objective. This should be a logical but unexpected solution brought about by the main character's own efforts. At the beginning, the writer may not yet know HOW the character is going to overcome the final obstacle and reach the objective, but the writer MUST KNOW the way the story is

## STORY BUILDING OR DEVELOPING YOUR SHORT STORY

going to end. The ending must answer the story question.

Example: Grizzly Adams learned to survive by making friends with the animals while clearing his name so he could return to his daughter.

**THEME:** What does the character learn, or what point, moral or life lesson does the story prove?

Example: A highly motivated man with a just cause will find a way to overcome all obstacles to reach his goal.

**DECISION:** The beginning of a story ends when the main character decides to go for the objective in spite of the obstacles.

Example: In the case of Grizzly Adams, the beginning ended when he said a tearful goodbye to his little girl but promised he would be back a free man.

Now the student should begin planning his own story in outline form so the entire narrative can be seen at a glance. Answering the following questions will help.

### THE BEGINNING STRUCTURE: FIRST “O” FOR OBJECTIVE:

1. Main character: Who is the appealing principal character?
2. Situation: What has happened or is about to happen that will present a problem for this character?
3. Objective: What tangible goal does he seek?
4. Motive: Why does the main character want this? This involves stakes to be won or lost, depending on whether he fails or reaches the objective.
5. Locale or setting: There must be a clear sense of place.
6. Time: When does the story take place? Past? Present? Future? Etc.
7. Others: Who are the other necessary characters, including an adversary who will oppose the main character in striving for his goal?
8. Theme: What subtle point or lesson does the writer want to make through the story's action without being heavy-handed or preaching?
9. Decision: What choice must the main character make at the end of the opening segment to go for the objective in spite of the obstacles?
10. Story question: Will the main character achieve his objective? The writer must know the answer before writing because this is the main track on which the story train will run from the beginning to the ending.

### THE MIDDLE STRUCTURE: SECOND “O” FOR OBSTACLES:

After the decision is made to end the first part of the story, the long middle section begins with the main character taking the first action toward achieving the goal. This initial action knocks over the first domino. At first, the individual pieces may fall slowly, but each knocks over the domino next to it. This action continues along the line

## STORY BUILDING OR DEVELOPING YOUR SHORT STORY

until the last domino falls.

### THE MIDDLE OF A STORY CAN BE OUTLINED THIS WAY:

1. What prevents achieving the goal? In a short story, there may be only two or three obstacles blocking the main character's path to the objective.
2. Complications: What kind of difficulties will the main character encounter in his ongoing efforts to reach the objective?
3. Conflicts: The heart of any story is in the conflicts. All of these can be summarized under three headings:
  - (1) Person versus person (that is, relationships),
  - (2) Person vs. self (internal doubts, fears, etc.), and
  - (3) Person vs. environment (time, culture, nature, race, etc.)
4. The main character cannot quit or the story's over. So he must try but fail, yet try again and again until the climax. In a short story, two failed tries may be enough. Sometimes it seems the character is about to succeed, but there's always a setback until a final major one threatens all chance of ever reaching the objective.
5. Character change: Epiphany. During the crisis, the main character must not only deal with the horrible realization that chances for success are virtually non-existent, but if a personal problem has been introduced earlier, he must also resolve that. Near the end, there must be an intuitive grasp of reality (as an event), or in other words, a moment of enlightenment, or sudden illuminating discovery.

The character needs to face up to what kind of a person he is. In this epiphany, the focal character sees himself as he really is and makes an emotional choice about whether to change or not. This vital decision is variously known as moment of truth, learns something, gains insight, point of recognition, comes to realize, turn-around or hinge scene. This involves feelings because it reveals what the central character really is like inside, or what he wants to be like.

Just as there was a change in the situation at the start of a story, there needs to be a character change near the ending. An example of this is included in my story, "The Taming of Cheetah." We'll look at that later.

6. Anticipated Catastrophic Event (acrostic: ACE): This is the crisis or so-called Dark Moment when the main character seemingly cannot possibly succeed in achieving the goal. The middle of the story ends here. The long middle section on Obstacles is over. Now it's time for the third and final part of a story: the Outcome.

### THE ENDING STRUCTURE: OUTCOME

The crisis brings on the climax before the conclusion.

## STORY BUILDING OR DEVELOPING YOUR SHORT STORY

1. Crisis: The ACE (Anticipated Catastrophic Event) has happened.
2. Climax is the high point in a story. In spite of seeming disaster, the main character sees two choices: One is easy (such as quitting); the other is hard. He makes the right moral decision and acts on it in a final dramatic effort.
3. Conclusion marks the last try, which is successful for the main character.
4. He reaches his objective and resolves the story problem.
5. The story question is answered.
6. Rewards and punishments are given.
7. The theme is proven.

### PART 1 OF THE STORY'S ENDING: CRISIS AND DECISION

Some of the following elements can be inserted into the story with a line or two, but the most important ones must be presented in a dramatic scene. They do not have to be in any particular order. After they are listed, an illustration from a published story will help clarify some of the elements. Space doesn't permit clarifying all of them.

1. The purpose of the climax is to test the story person's real character and reveal who he really is.
2. The crisis results from an unexpected development that reversed the main character's situation.
3. The focal character is boxed in with no known way out.
4. Race against time (RAT) has run out or is about to do so.
5. The anticipated catastrophic event (ACE) has happened.
6. There's a melding of personal and story problems.
7. There must be a character change, either growth or deterioration.
8. This character is still in a terrible spot, which he desperately wants to resolve. However, he sees very limited choices, including one that is hard.
9. He makes an emotional decision that may not seem right, but it's morally right, proving what kind of a character he is.
10. Rewards and punishments are given. These involve the stakes.
11. The theme is proven.
12. The story question is answered. In a purpose achieved story, the answer should be, "Yes, the main character succeeded in reaching the objective but in a way the reader didn't expect." In a purpose failed, the story question is answered, "No, the main character did not reach his goal, but failed only after valiantly trying."

With this outline and overview of how a story is built, the student should be ready to learn how to begin writing his own story. But before that lesson, the pupil should test how well he's learned about story structure and development. The following questions will help determine that.

### LESSON 2 ON STORY BUILDING: QUESTIONS FOR THE STUDENT (ANSWERS FOR THE TEACHER ARE AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK.)



## **About the Author**

Best selling author Lee Roddy's credits include 55 published novels (45 juvenile and 10 adult) that have sold millions of copies here and in 22 foreign countries. Six of these became films or television programs, including "Grizzly Adams." The first of Lee Roddy's short stories were published when he was 14. He began his professional writing career in Hollywood, California.

Before his books sold well enough that he could devote full time to that career, he was a staff writer for a motion picture and television production company, a staff novelist, a newspaper editor-publisher, a radio station manager and advertising agency executive.

He taught fiction writing for Writer's Digest across the United States and into Canada. For more than 20 years, he has been a seminar leader at countless colleges and writers' conferences. He annually speaks to standing-room-only audiences at teachers' and homeschool conventions on how to teach students to write a story.

Teachers and parents who attended Lee Roddy's writing workshops have reported great improvement with their students after using a one-page handout version of the author's material. Following years of innumerable requests, this guidebook was prepared to give instructors greater details than were possible in the handout.

Hundreds of aspiring adult fiction writers who took Lee Roddy's practical seminars went on to use his proven system to sell their first short stories or novels. Some of these students have since sold millions of copies of their novels. Current book racks at drug, grocery and other stores include titles by some of these previously-unpublished writers.

The author and his wife live in California's historic Mother Lode Gold Country. The couple has a grown son, daughter and two grandsons.