



## What's So Funny, Anyway?

By Erika Hoffman

The other night on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, David started out his monologue saying that only one man wrote the Gettysburg Address, and “it takes seven guys to write this crap!” That got a big laugh.

The line was funny for several reasons. One is that Dave’s duck face, his contagious chuckle, and impeccable timing deliver the humor. Another is his last word: “crap.” “Crap” is a funny word without being too offensive as others that some co-

comedians might use to convey the message. “Crap” is a lot funnier than, say, a tame word like “stuff.” Often words with the “k” sound make folks laugh. The third reason this joke succeeds is because it’s true.

Writing humor isn’t easy. Everyone still cries at Shakespeare’s tragedies. Who plows through his comedies? Words on a page aren’t necessarily funny. You take away Dave’s stance and voice and atmosphere on the *Late Show* and this line could be read in a flat way.

Often funny folks are humorous because of their oral presentation. When a reader sees your black letters on a white page, there is no voice, no funny face, no back drop, no timing, no gestures. Only words. Because of this fact, I caution writers on three things.

First, if you can write funny, but can’t talk funny, stay away from reading your works to audiences. The image of you and the sound of your voice are all wrapped up in the delivery, and the words might not be laughable if your mug resembles, let’s say, that of Lon Chaney, Jr. or if you’re a doppelganger for the Wicked Witch of the West.



Next, when you take your pearls of witticism to a writing critique, be alert to the edits offered. Make sure your fellow writers have a sense of humor and one similar to yours. Some people possess a knack for destroying the punch line of any joke. This can happen in a critique group.

This observation ties in with my third piece of sage advice regarding the business of one man versus seven. Sometimes, two heads are better than one, like when doing a crossword or figuring out a jigsaw puzzle or wearing two pairs of eyeglasses at the same time. Nonetheless, too many cooks can spoil the broth. Seven folks may not have the same vision. Lincoln's address is poetic in its clearness, brevity and poignancy. No purple prose crept in. Sometimes, a simple line can be slaughtered by too many artists adding their graffiti to it.

At writers' conferences, I am leery of readings. Unless you are a Mark Twain type, who is both storyteller and writer, beware. You might hurt the very prose you're trying to promote. Unless folks naturally hee-haw at your stories, don't stand up and deliver.

I was at an Erma Bombeck Conference a few years ago where they have an amateur stand-up comedian night, and conferees can try their hand at being like the legendary Erma. I had not signed up in advance. After listening to several women rehearse and giggle at each other's shticks, I phoned my husband and told him I might try it.

"Don't do it!" he said.

"Why not?" I asked

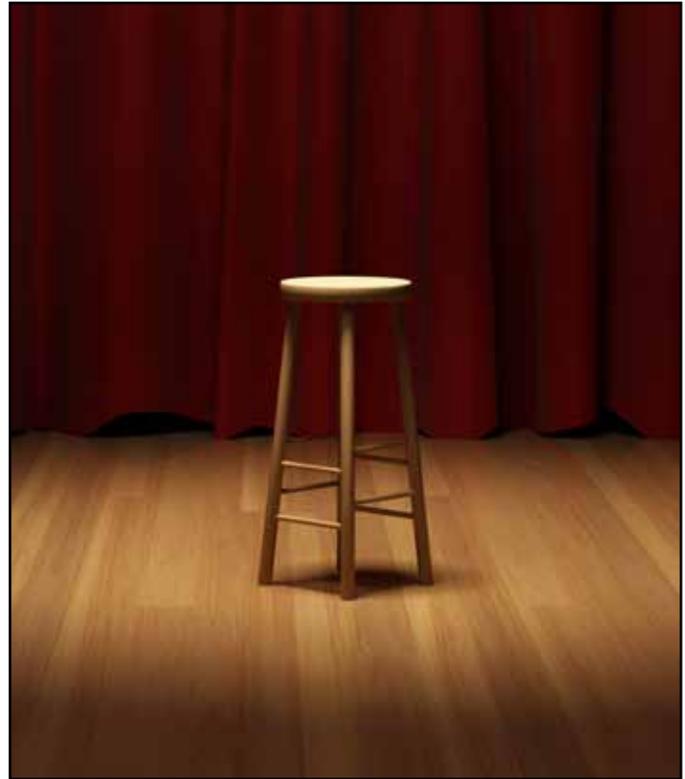
"You'll regret it."

"Why?"

"You're not funny."

"But, but, but these women aren't either!" I replied.

I didn't do it. Actually, I am told all the time that I am funny—by my friends. Seriously, I have performed in front of Rotary congregants, teacher sororities and writers' groups and gotten laughs, but my husband had a point. He didn't think I was funny enough in a room full of strangers who are wannabe comediennes to pull off getting a



Peeradach Rattanakes/Shutterstock.com



positive reception by reading my own material.

Since that time, I have taken note of readings at conferences and even the best writers—the presenters and famed authors—don’t necessarily do their works justice. Some words are better on the page than spoken aloud. In fact, they say Lincoln’s address was like that. He had a high pitched squeaky voice with a silly Kentucky backwoods accent that lacked gravity. Honest Abe was better at delivering a joke than a serious elegy. Not everyone has Barry White’s vocal chords.

So, this gets me back to my original premise about humor. Make sure your lines are witty on the page, and they are not dependent on the other senses for the joke to go over. In addition, if they are clever on the page, don’t spoil them by reading them aloud behind a podium, unless you

also possess the savoir-faire of a Jay Leno, a Ray Romano, or a Lucy Ricardo. Besides something called “vanity publishing,” there is also the little mentioned affliction I’ll call “vanity storytelling,” and it often rears its ugly head at writers conferences!

Below are some writing websites that focus on humor. Check them out!

<http://www.writersdigest.com/whats-new/how-to-mix-humor-into-your-writing>

<http://www.humorpower.com/blog/2006/04/41-tips-for-writing-funny-lines/>

<http://thewritepractice.com/not-funny/>

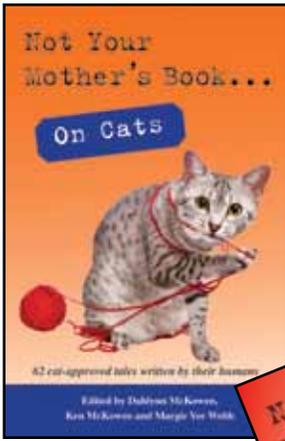


## Meet Erika!

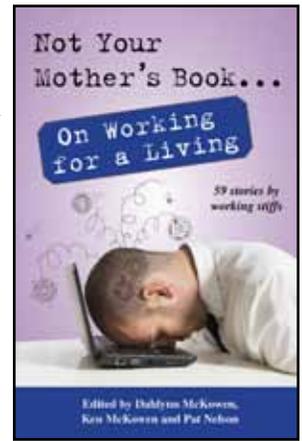
Erika Hoffman is a frequent contributor to *Not Your Mother’s Book*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and *Sasee Magazine*. Besides writing non-fiction personal essays, she also pens articles on the craft of writing. Her niche seems to be humorous and inspirational tales, but she enjoys writing mysteries, too. The online magazine *Page and Spine* features one of her articles—*Chew on That! The Deadly Ink Anthology 2009*, and the 2010 version, also contain her mysteries. Proceeds from these two anthologies go to the Christopher Reeve Foundation for Literacy.



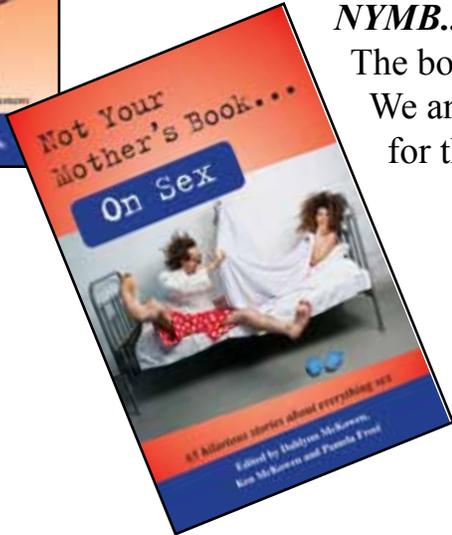
# Book Updates



***NYMB...On Cats:*** The book is available for presale now through your favorite book retailer. The official release date is October 7th.



***NYMB...On Working for a Living:*** The book has been sent to the printer. We anticipate a November release for this title.



## ***NYMB...On Sex:***

The book is under production. Permission Release Forms will begin going out the week of September 29th. If you've been putting off submitting, this is your last chance!

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This just in from [www.WritersMarket.com](http://www.WritersMarket.com):

WritersMarket.com lists hundreds of magazines for writers of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, writing for children, and more. Here are three markets open to freelancers:



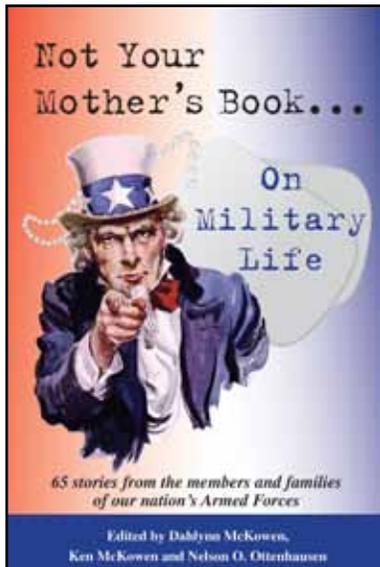
- Atlas Shrugged Essay Contest is offered annually to encourage analytical thinking and excellence in writing—open to high school seniors, undergrads, and graduate students. More than 80 cash prizes, including a \$10,000 top prize. Deadline: October 24.
- Gerald Cable Book Award is offered annually for the best previously unpublished debut poetry collection. Top prize is \$1,000, publication, and 25 copies of the book. Deadline: Oct. 15.
- Indiana Review Fiction Contest is offered for the best previously unpublished short story. The winner receives \$1,000, publication, and contributor copies. Deadline: October 31.
- Bonus contest! Writer's Digest Popular Fiction Awards is an annual prize for the best previously unpublished genre fiction (up to 4,000 words). There are six categories: romance, thriller, young adult, crime, horror, and sci-fi. There is one grand prize of \$2,500 cash, a trip to the 2015 Writer's Digest Conference, and more! Each category winner also receives \$500 cash, recognition in Writer's Digest magazine, and more! While it has an early bird deadline of September 15, the hard deadline is October 15.

WritersMarket.com lists more than 8,000 publishing opportunities, including listings for contests, magazines, book publishers, literary agents, conferences, and more. Log in or sign up today to start submitting your work. [www.WritersMarket.com](http://www.WritersMarket.com)

# Last Page! Last Page! Last Page!

## *Not Your Mother's Book...*

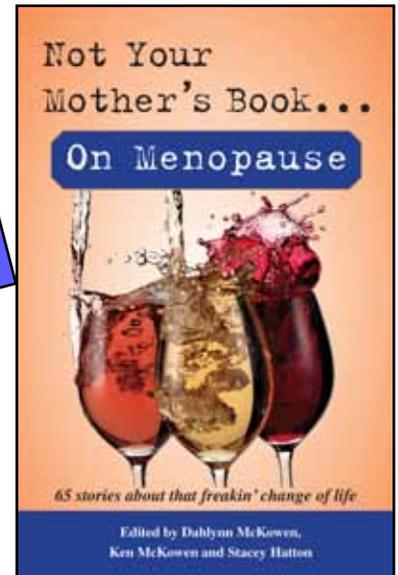
NYMB caters to mature readership, thus, submissions must be written by people age 18 and older. **Click on a book cover** for more info or visit the PS website.



### *On Military Life:*

Submissions due January 1, 2015

Submission guidelines at  
[www.PublishingSyndicate.com](http://www.PublishingSyndicate.com)



### *On Menopause:*

Submissions due by January 1, 2015

## Book Proposals

Publishing Syndicate is now actively accepting fiction and nonfiction book proposals for possible publication. If you have a **completed** book manuscript, we would love the opportunity to review your book proposal.

### Basic Author Requirements

- Know how to use a computer, Microsoft Word and “track changes” (we’ve had too many people who can’t set a simple auto indent, but use multiple spaces and tabs instead).
- Authors must have a strong social media platform in the subject of their proposed book. This includes being active on at least two major social media sites (i.e., Facebook, Twitter).
- Understand that the publishing process can take up to two years, if not longer.

We are interested in:

### Fiction

- Juvenile chapter books
- Young adult

### Nonfiction

- Travel (First-hand experience only)
- Wine (Requires expertise with the subject)
- Women's issues (Subject experts only)
- Entrepreneurs (Biographies)

Click on the link below to go to the Book Proposal Submission Guidelines page:  
<http://bit.ly/1pf5IYU>



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Publishing Syndicate LLC  
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