

Words of Paradise

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Lynn's Place
No More Clichés:
Writing Fresh Description
by Lynn Raye Harris

"With its flat roof and squeezed windows, the house looked like a constipated man crouched back in the trees" – from Last Car to Elysian Fields by James Lee Burke



Wow. Double wow. Bet you never thought of describing a house quite like that before. Me either. I'm jealous. But doesn't it paint a picture of a house you can almost reach out and touch?

Good description, the kind that grabs you by the throat and doesn't let go until you see the picture the author wants you to see, is hard work. In fact, it's much easier to slap a cliché in place and keep writing. That's okay—at first. Write the cliché if it keeps your story moving forward. You can fix it later. But if you spend six hours staring at the screen and trying to think of how to say "The sun set behind a mountain" in a new way, you're probably obsessing a bit much. For romance writers, the danger often appears when we start describing gazes and bodies and hot kisses.

So how do you say something differently, describe that sunset for instance, when it's been done a million times before? You could try to see the image with a fresh eye, try to think of a different way to describe the sun going behind the mountain. Or you could simply say the sun went down and leave it at that. Is the sunset an important image in your book? If not, any verbal gymnastics are more likely to knock a reader out of the story rather than keep her reading. And you don't want that, do you?

Likewise, instead of describing how his lips puckered and slowly lowered to smash against hers, and

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www.rwaaloha.org



President: Leslee Ellenson
Vice President: Lynn Harris
Treasurer: Sally Sorenson
Publications: Michael Little

how his tongue entered her mouth, and how her body melted under his touch, why not say he kissed her? Focus on the way the kiss makes her *feel*, not on his technique. Use simple words, not flowery phrases about silken heat and mating dances.

Let's look back at James Lee Burke's example. He used two adjectives—flat and squeezed—and a simile of a constipated man to paint an unforgettable picture of a small, squat house set among trees. Simple, huh? No, of course not, but it *looks* simple, and that's the best kind of writing. Writing that's unobtrusive, that doesn't call attention to itself (okay, this example wowed me and therefore called attention to itself, but I'm not sure anyone except a writer would stop to admire that sentence), writing that carries the reader forward because she just *has* to find out what happens next—that's the kind of writing you want to do. Can you use a simple adjective or a simile to describe that kiss?

Let's take a look at another example, this one about setting. In Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), the landscape is an important part of the novel because it's vastly different from where the two French priests grew up. Setting is a character and the priests must learn to overcome it in their efforts to spread the Gospel in 19th century New Mexico. Now, take a look at this masterful description:

The ride back to Sante Fe was something under four hundred miles. The weather alternated between blinding sand-storms and brilliant sunlight. The sky was as full of motion and change as the desert beneath it was monotonous and still,—and there was so much sky, more than at sea, more than anywhere else in the world. The plain was there, under one's feet, but what one saw when one looked about one was the brilliant blue world of stinging air and moving cloud. Even the mountains were mere ant-hills under it. Elsewhere, the sky is the roof of the world; but here, the earth was the floor of the sky.

Did Miss Cather use any clichés? Did she use any adverbs? Any strange words that sent you running for the dictionary? No. In fact, she used everyday words and she used them in a fresh way, comparing and contrasting two different elements. The earth as the floor of the sky? Oh my. Can't you picture a gigantic blue sky and a tiny desert beneath it?

I'm not going to pretend that description is easy, but it *is* possible to write fresh description that flows if only you take your time and pick your battles wisely. If you try to make every word different in an attempt to be fresh, you're gonna get noticed. Noticed, and your manuscript returned to you on the next mail truck out of New York. Don't be cute in an attempt to be different. You know what I mean: *her pneumatic pillows shook prettily as she heaved a breath*. Trust me, this ain't the kind of description you want to be known for. (It's been done before anyway—see clichés.) Likewise, be ruthless with all those pulsating, heaving, throbbing body parts, especially when said body part is also a euphemism. Most of these phrases are clichés.

Try to write as real and as true as you know how. Some category lines prefer not to have body parts named, but that doesn't mean you have to resort to heaving pillows and pulsating manhoods. Think about it, try to find a way of describing what you mean without resorting to hack phrases. The words and phrases we turn to most often have become clichés because they are tried and true—and tired. Don't make your writing tired when you can have *oomph*.

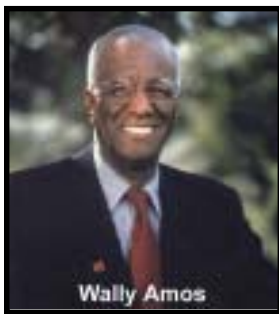
What if Miss Cather wrote that the sky was big and dwarfed the desert floor beneath it? Ho-hum. Instead, she turned an image on its head to give us that memorable picture of the earth as the floor of the sky. Gorgeous, brilliant writing that paints a vivid picture that's as true now as when she wrote it in the 1920s. How can we fall back on tired, lazy writing when it wasn't good enough for Willa Cather or for James Lee Burke? Take a hard look at your manuscript. Ruthlessly pluck pulsating, heaving, throbbing things, rosy-fingered

dawns, and surges of moisture from your vocabulary. I know it's difficult, but your readers will thank you. And just maybe, eighty years from now, someone will write an article and gush about your brilliance. It could happen.

Lynn

Lynn is an RWA-PRO member and has completed four novels. Her published work includes a romantic suspense story in the Hui Lei Magazine, as well as a couple of short stories and poems published elsewhere. For some crazy reason, she recently decided to build a website. You can visit her at www.lynnrayeharris.com.

Aloha Chapter News



Wally Amos

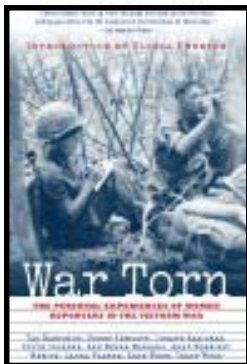
Welcome, Wally Amos!

Aloha Chapter welcomes its July guest speaker, Wally Amos, author of *Watermelon Magic: Seeds of Wisdom, Slices of Life*. We're delighted to have Wally visit us! As founder of Famous Amos Cookies in 1975 and father of the gourmet chocolate chip cookie industry, he has the experience of multiple entrepreneurial endeavors to share with his audiences. He has also generously used his fame to support educational causes.

Since 1979 Wally has been a literacy advocate and serves on the board of many organizations. His latest venture, www.chipandcookie.com, which features two plush chocolate chip cookie dolls, named Chip and Cookie, are the newest additions to Wally's long line of amazing entrepreneurial success stories. His honors and awards include the President's Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence, the Horatio Alger Award and Outstanding Business Leader Award. Two of his trademarks, his famous Panama hat and shirt, have been on display at the Smithsonian Institute.

Denby Fawcett Visits in August!

On August 6, Aloha Chapter warmly welcomes Denby Fawcett, KITV government reporter and one of the authors of the remarkable *War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam*.



In *War Torn*, for the first time, nine women who made journalism history talk candidly about their professional and deeply personal experiences as young reporters who lived, worked, and loved surrounded by war. Their stories span a decade of America's involvement in Vietnam, from the earliest days of the conflict until the last U.S. helicopters left Saigon in 1975.

They were gutsy risk-takers who saw firsthand what most Americans knew only from their morning newspapers or the evening news. Many had very particular reasons for going to Vietnam—some had to fight and plead to go—but others ended up there by accident. What happened to them was remarkable and important by any standard. Their lives became exciting beyond anything they had ever imagined, and the experience never left them. It was dangerous—one was wounded, and one was captured by the North Vietnamese—but the challenges they faced were uniquely rewarding.

2005 Aloha Chapter Meeting Dates

Saturday, 10 a.m. to noon

Aina Haina Library

January 8

February 5

March 5

April 2

May 7

June 4

July 9

August 6

September 10

October 1

November 5 (luncheon, Waikiki)

Take Five

Back to Earth

by Michael Little

A friend in Seattle once told me, years ago, that I was living too much in my head. I had to agree. It seemed like a good idea at the time (my mind told itself). The fantasies in there were plentiful, there was lots of empty space, and the rent was cheap.

Not so much lately though. I moved to Maui, felt the sun warm on my skin and the trade winds cool in my hair, tasted papayas and mangos, got sand in my toes, and listened to the waves, while my eyes feasted on the daily show that nature puts on in the islands. So much for living in my head.



Then I moved to Honolulu and began writing more. Back into the head. The moving van backing into the cranial loading zone. Beep, beep! Back it up. Then the stories began. All those characters, getting into all that trouble, story after story, all taking place in the strange movie house between my ears.

You can't stay there forever though. The stories keep playing, but you have to leave the cinema at some point and come out into the light. I could go back to the beach, and I will, but for now I'm connecting to mother earth. It's a small lawn and garden out front, and on the side of the house a few palms, a couple of orchids, and a lazy bird of paradise. Not too ambitious. Modest really. Much smaller, and less work, than Thoreau's beans at Walden. Thoreau didn't grow beans the second year, he tells us. Enough was enough.

I haven't gotten around to beans, or any vegetables, yet. There were three exquisite limes this spring, with a promise of many more next time, for those future Dr. Peppers and Cuba Libres. Also a dozen lemons on a very small young tree that is so busy producing fruit it keeps forgetting to put out more leaves. To its left, however, the orange tree is a champion at the leaf business, but is in no hurry to make fruit. To its right, a pineapple top sits very quietly. I have no clue what it is thinking. It's been through a lot, no doubt. I continue to believe in second chances.

For color there are two coral bushes with bright small blossoms. A small ti plant is doing quite well, thank you, right at home. We won't talk about the papaya trees, which look more like pickle trees at the moment, based on the shape of the fruit they are producing. The bird of paradise, facing the driveway and assigned to greet visitors, put out one or two excellent flowers each spring, for a few years, then decided that enough was enough. It likes just being green. All these things I accept.

It's a young garden out front, only seven months old. Weeds love it. I've become one with the weeds. They teach me to get my hands dirty, on my knees, pulling out the plants that do best, knowing that they will be back in a

couple of days. There's a lesson in there somewhere, but I'm not sure what it is. I do find myself looking forward to their return, so I can dig into the earth again. I stopped using the hoe months ago—too impersonal.

The garden exists outside of time. I open the gate to enter, never knowing how long I will remain. I may stay ten minutes, no more than an inspection tour, or I may stay three hours. I work hard at times, but never at a fast pace, and it's not work. It reminds me of writing. Open the gate, watch the stories grow and time stop, rewrite to pull the weeds and discover new things to plant, and three hours later it's time to call it a day. Close the gate. The garden will be there tomorrow.

Michael

