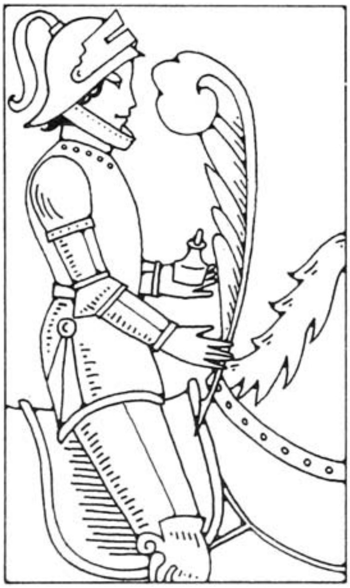
States of the Union
IN THE QUILL OF THE KNIGHT
BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



"WHAT'S IT LIKE to be a free-lance writer?" young people keep asking. "Is it hard? Is it possible? How'd you get started?"

Well, the life of a free-lancer can be chronicled in rhyme. He or she seeks romance...often takes a chance...affects an independent stance...awaits invitations to the dance...prefers to live in France.

The term "free lance" goes back to feudal times when a roving knight might rent out his spear and talents to the highest or noblest bidder. As a rule the knight was short on cash and long on independence. His loyalties were inner-directed rather than institutional; he was part of the lonely crowd.

Thus, according to my 1928 *Webster's International*, a free lance is one "who acts on his own responsibility without regard to party lines or deference to authority, as a writer who assails now one party or set of opinions, and now another. . . ."

Wielding a free lance in the Middle Ages probably entailed the same glories and drawbacks that it does today. In theory, the knight could go around slaying whatever dragons caught his eye or incurred his displeasure. He could protect the weak, defend heretics and rescue damsels in distress. (If he happened to be a feminist, he could teach the damsels how to rescue themselves.)

In practice, though, the poor fellow had to make a living with his spear—to sting for his supper—which meant that the wars he fought and the enemies he impaled were not always of his choosing. The lord of the manor, with his bagful of gold doubloons, set the agenda and aimed the spear. One can be certain that the castle proprietor granted his free-lancer as little leeway as possible. "I'll supply the ideas," he might have told his knight. "You just put them into wars."

Free-lancers can still go far just by repeating or cleaning up other people's ideas, especially the ideas of power. Years ago I was offered $30,000 plus expenses and royalties to write a small book about the Shell Oil company. The five-figure offer confirmed for me some advice I'd been given once by an elderly free-lancer as we sat side-by-side in a Philadelphia bar. "Son," he said, "never charge a client what you think you're worth. Charge him what you think *he's* worth."

The trick in free-lancing is to hold one's convictions dear even if compelled to sell one's talents cheap. William Allen White said it was the duty of an editorial writer to convert "his private prejudices into public issues," but White owned the *Emporia* (Kansas) *Gazette*, a convenient medium for his message. And he had friends in high places. Theodore Roosevelt became his boon companion; Herbert Hoover was a frequent house guest in Emporia.

By way of contrast, the beginning writer's professional assets are likely to be restricted to a ream of recycled paper (speckled), an old typewriter (the "r" sticks), and one or two dubious connections in the publishing world.

Most of the bully pulpits in America are occupied by the rich and their servants. That is why free-lancers often come in out of the cold. They get jobs in corporations or in government agencies and live happily, if unadventurously, ever after. Chance helped me to do it the other way around. I had newspaper jobs in Chicago and magazine jobs in New York. Then I ventured out into the cold.

My break came in 1962 when a shrewd publisher mercifully fired me. The event shook me up—I've never been much good at judging my own performance—and I had no idea what to do next. "You keep saying you're a writer," insisted Diane, my wife. "Why don't you try it?" She apparently preferred a happy husband to a full larder.

Well, why not? A friend in New York told me to go see Howard Cohen, the editor of *Pageant* Magazine. *Pageant,* you may recall, was a digest-size, low-budget monthly that ran about three-dozen short articles every issue. I discovered later that Howard's problem was finding passable writers willing to work at the magazine's niggardly rates. Beginners were welcome.

At Howard's request, I wrote down five paragraphs, each embodying a different article idea, and mailed them in. When I called on him a few weeks later—taking a rickety freight elevator to his attic office in Manhattan—he immediately dismissed all five ideas. But he suggested a sixth.

"Have you ever thought about Asian flu?" he asked.

"Lots of times," I lied, sniffing an assignment.

"Would you be willing to write about it?"

When I assented, Howard smiled for the first time. It was a grin of gratitude. "I've spent two years trying to persuade somebody to write this piece," he confided. "You're the first person who's shown any interest."

"Any interest" was surely an understatement. I was absolutely wild about Asian flu.

It took me two months to finish the research and write the article (2,500 words). The fee was $300. If I continued at that blistering pace for a full year, I would earn $1,800. Still, the lessons to be learned from that seminal experience were manifold.

First, beggars and acolytes can't be choosers. Howard was the lord of the manor; he could aim my spear in any direction he chose.

Second, it wasn't a foolish direction. Asian flu may not have been my top writing priority, but at least it was an honorable subject. The article did no one any harm; it even provided one or two useful pieces of information. Unlike knights of yore, today's free-lancers cannot afford to wait for the next Crusade to come along. They have to keep writing and earning. Just doing no evil is sometimes good enough—and it's harder than you think.

Third, editors are no different than anyone else: They have their peculiarities, their endearments, their little obsessions. Free-lance writers should relax long enough to find out what's likeable about their editors, and what their editors really want. (I liked Howard a lot.)

Fourth, I shouldn't have taken so long to finish the assignment, though the excessive time was understandable: Being a beginner, I was afraid to risk a mistake, an awkward phrase, a misplaced semicolon. What I lacked was a sense of proportion. After all, Howard was getting paid to clean up my prose and spare me large embarrassments. And my piece was only one of 432 that *Pageant* would publish that year alone. A writer, in short, can starve from feelings of self-importance.

Fifth, and the most difficult lesson of all: The article I was so proud of then strikes me now, on rereading, as barely adequate. From this I conclude that beginners seldom exceed their editors' expectations. They show more promise than competence. I also conclude, happily, that the more one writes, the better one writes. There is no substitute for on-the-job practice. Merely talking about writing won't do. I know—I've tried it.

Finally, inept as I seemed, I'd had the benefit of several years' journalistic experience—not a bad way to begin. Those early jobs permitted me to learn the rudiments of my craft at other people's expense. As things turned out, the corporations that employed me back then were unwittingly honing my spear, the better to skewer them with two decades later. Budding populist and Socialist writers please take note.

BUT BEWARE of economic perils. Because free-lancers think they can do well by doing good, they are highly exploitable. While the cost of living steadily climbs, writers' fees remain depressingly stable. Editors tend to shower their writers with praise rather than coin. They get away with it because there are so many writers and so few outlets for their wares. Besides, the praise is welcome.

From time to time some of us talk of organizing a union that might generate bargaining power in editorial offices throughout the land. But it is just a dream. For one thing, many writers double as editors, making them simultaneously the exploited and the exploiters. For another, free-lancers and their markets seem too varied and dispersed to meet the demands of solidarity. Where would we organize? Against whom would we strike? Moreover, it must be admitted that the free-lance temperament, with its delusions of knight-errantry, is unpromising union material. The knight-errant, says my trusty dictionary, "traveled in search of adventures in which to exhibit military skill, prowess and generosity." Although I can't speak for our skill and prowess, our generosity appears beyond dispute.

A closing note: It seems clear that free-lancers depend for sustenance and consolation on strangers and loved ones alike. I am in perpetual debt, for instance, to the trio that liberated my modest Muse: Diane, Howard and the man who fired me. The only way I know of repaying them is to keep trying to write clean sentences that approach the truth. It's a calling like any other, which is to say it is socially useful once in a while. Writers can't reform society but if they keep spotlighting its defects, society may sometimes feel bound to reform itself.

The New Deal reformer Rexford Tugwell once had occasion to address some of his younger successors in government. What he told them in 1958 is precisely what I wish to tell free-lance initiates in 1983:

"Fail as gloriously as some of your predecessors have. If you do not succeed in bringing about a permanent change, you may at least have stirred some slow consciences so that in time they will give support to action. And you will have the satisfaction, which is not to be discounted, of having annoyed a good many miscreants who had it coming to them."