

MARK CHESTER PHOTO
Doctor-turned-author Michael Palmer and Dr. E. Connie Mariano joke at a book signing at The Poisoned Pen in Scottsdale, Ariz. Mariano was White House Physician from 1992 to 2001. She wrote of Palmer's book, "Dr. Palmer has written an incredibly realistic, frightening thriller that is every White House doctor's nightmare." Bill Clinton wrote: "The First Patient" is an exciting thriller that is full of surprises and captures the intense atmosphere of the White House, how the medical system works, and how the 25th Amendment could be brought into play."



DOCTORS WHO WRITE

More Than Prescriptions

BY MARK CHESTER

What do W. Somerset Maugham, Anton Chekhov, Robin Cook, Michael Crichton, Tess Gerritsen and Michael Palmer have in common? They are physicians turned published writers. Gerritsen and Palmer stand out because they stand up for two days teaching the craft of writing to other doctors at the Sea Crest Oceanfront Resort and Conference Center in Falmouth.

"Michael and Tess are the yin and yang of writing," said Vondell Clark, a family and holistic doctor in North Carolina. He came to Cape Cod to mingle with 200 colleagues at the 8th Annual SEAK Medical Fiction Writing for Physicians course.

It was difficult to distinguish radiologists from obstetricians, internists, psychiatrists, surgeons and other specialists dressed in casual attire. But one thing was certain. This was the

About the author

Mark Chester, a professional photographer since 1972, works primarily in black and white, favoring the richness of shading it affords. His photographs appear in a wide array of well-known publications, including the books "Dateline America" by Charles Kuralt and "No in America," with a foreword by Edwin Newman. Chester also teaches his craft; visit www.markchesterphotography.com for a workshop schedule. Chester grew up in Springfield, Mass., and now lives in Woods Hole.

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place to be sick.

Bruce, a physician wrote in an e-mail, "My first SEAK conference was a watershed time of my life. I found out that there are other people out there who hear the music I hear in my ears that seems to escape most of those around me. That music is a passion to express ideas and tell stories that will entertain and inform... When I found myself in a room full of people with this same passion, the music that was in my ears became a symphony as we all shared our music together.

"I learned that my dream is not about an event. It is about a process. Just as a child does not spring full grown into adulthood, a writer does not spring full blown onto the bestseller list. But the fun is in the process; the adventure is in the journey..."

It was a wake-up call each morning with taskmasters Tess Gerritsen and Michael Palmer sounding off the alarm about the gamut of publishing, from editors to literary agents, and teaching the mechanics of writing, outlining, plots, subplots, cemetery plots (humor), character development, dialogue, conflict, romance, research, synopsis, revising and editing.

Physicians Gerritsen, 54, and Palmer 65, have both been New York Times bestselling authors for the last 20 years. Palmer's "First Patient," his 14 book was released in early 2008. "... Gerritsen's "Madam X," her 12th (not including her nine romance novels for Harlequin Press), will be released this year.

In the workshop the two doctors-turned-authors practice a new kind of healing, by helping doctors discover their voice and write stories based on experiences: the people they've saved, the stress they've dealt with, the tragedies they've seen, or cases they've resolved.

"No doctor could write and not have his patients and life in medicine become woven into the fabric of his work," says Palmer, formerly an internist and E.R. physician, now working part time (20 hours) for the Massachusetts Medical Society as an associate director of their physician health program, guiding doctors with physical and mental illness or substance abuse to put their lives together.

Tess Gerritsen no longer practices medicine. She has been writing full

time since leaving her position at a Honolulu hospital. Gerritsen tells the story about her transition from doctor to writer. A patient gave her two shopping bags of romance novels. She read them within the week. "I could write one of these," she thought. And so, during maternity leave, she completed a book, followed by eight more for Harlequin Press. Now she inserts romance into her medical thrillers, one of which she sold the film rights for a seven-figure sum.

But the doctors in attendance are not lured by promises of money. They are not going to give up their day job. They just want to be able to tell their story in a cohesive, sensible and readable way.

Gerritsen personifies organization and feminine beauty. She is methodical, at ease, warm and personable, a straight man to Palmer's, droll, funny deadpan delivery. Both get the audience's attention.

Palmer, a tall, big youthful man, is an open book himself, unabashed to reveal his flaws and faults, his frustrations, lack of knowledge and mistakes. He keeps no secrets about his writing process. He shares personal information for the benefit of those in the room. His mantra is, "There are no rules. Writing is hard. Be fearless."

Gerritsen and Palmer move about the raised platform in front with cordless microphones, in spontaneous synchronicity with the other, almost like a vaudeville team. They are fluid. To the sides are huge reproduction book covers of their novels.

Other than these graphics the conference is low-tech. This is not a scripted, power-point presentation. Gerritsen and Palmer impart high-end knowledge and amusing repartee. Since giving their first seminar in 1999, nearly 2000 attendees have taken the course. They continually update and perfect their presentation each year.

No longer roaming antiseptic hospital floors, Gerritsen and Palmer now wander through imaginary scenes where they control their story world. They conjure up riveting fiction to keep readers reading and publishers publishing their medical thriller books.

Their cornerstone for the premise of a book is, What if? Doctors write their "what if?" on a flip chart in front ... "What if very premature babies are being euthanized because

they're too expensive to the medical system?" "What if a whistle-blower Marine Corp Brigadier General in Kuwait was murdered to cover up a multi-billion dollar military contract fraud?" Then Gerritsen and Palmer discuss approaches of developing the "what if?"

Words are very powerful, as physicians know from counseling families and patients or from the test results they write. Gerritsen and Palmer teach how to structure words to advance the plot, to develop the protagonist and supporting characters, how to apply words to real-life dialogue between people.

Gerritsen and Palmer know conflict; they create it in their stories. They invent characters that cause problems and invent others to fix them, told in nail-biting twists-and-turns chapters.

Doctors come to hear them because they are successful. They speak the same language. But they want to learn how to write that language.

They stress to their physician colleagues to think out of the box, steer from their scientific leanings and learn to "lie" – make things up; to write in an active voice – "He cut the skin," rather than in the passive "He made an incision." Show action. Don't just tell it, they advise.

Gerritsen and Palmer created a 169-page syllabus given to every doctor. They use it as a guide, but talk informally and ad lib with personal anecdotes. "The less preparation, the better," said Palmer during a break.

On Sunday morning, doctors can pitch their book idea, ask questions about query letters, discuss manuscripts that were submitted in advance to invited literary agents who hold court at their individual tables in the ballroom. Doctors make the rounds, probing each, looking for answers. Ironically, they become the patient.

The syllabus is filled with useful reprinted articles on writing, the 101 best Web sites for writers, and inspiring bons mots such as: "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club." – Jack London, or "I think you must remember a writer is a simple-minded person to begin with and go from there. He's not a great mind, he's not a great thinker, he's not a great philosopher, he's a storyteller." – Erskine Caldwell

Explains Gerritsen, "It's my im-

pression that people who are highly educated in the sciences have a disadvantage when it comes to fiction. It's so ingrained in scientists to think objectively, to come to logical conclusions. But real life – and human beings – are not logical. And what we writers must do is create characters who seem like real people, with all their imperfections, all their inconsistencies and craziness."

She adds, "Most importantly, you have to feel what they are feeling, channel their emotions. To do this requires a different kind of smarts, something that's not measured on those IQ tests. Some people might call this 'emotional intelligence,' the ability to connect with the feelings of other human beings, to understand what's going on in their heads. Whatever it is, it's an instinct one absolutely has to have to be a powerful writer."

Gerritsen and Palmer connect with the doctors. They create a homey, personal fireside chat quality with honesty. The physicians can appreciate, and identify with Gerritsen's and Palmer's writing block dilemma with their own personal writing frustrations. They can talk it through and offer resolutions. Writers like doctors feel stress, too. According to Beth Wechsler, 80 percent of what is taught in the workshop is taught in any fiction-writing course.

"But this is a niche conference, tailored to doctors. The difference between this writing conference from others is that the people here are with their colleagues. They are inspired by each other," explains Wechsler who is hired to read the first three chapters of any manuscript submitted by attendees before the conference start date.

A licensed social worker, Wechsler estimates she has read 400 manuscripts since working with the conference in 1999.

"Probably 25 percent of the doctors submit. The majority of physicians are in an early stage of their writing and just starting out. Others are further along. Some show a glimmer of something with a compelling story that makes me want to keep turning the page," said Wechsler, who writes a critique that is inserted in the doctor's registration packet. She is also available for a personal consultation at the conference.

One physician was happy to read

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his.

called “the Cowboy Doctor” back home in Kingman, Arizona. In practice for 30 years, now in a multi-specialty primary care group with nine partners, Jackson works as a family doctor and obstetrician, use to delivering 300 newborns in a year.

He conceived his own “baby,” a 26-chapter novel called “Manifold West” years ago and recently finished it after 15 revisions. Jackson submitted his chapters to Beth Wechsler. She gives suggestions, chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph how to polish the work or to make it more clear to the reader:

“Chapter 1, Page 1, paragraph 2: beware of overuse of adjectives...

By page 2, I want to see Dr. Ganson and I don't have a visual image...

Wechsler is not a book doctor, rather a writer and journalist. “I am an avid reader. My husband used to say that I regarded all of life as an intrusion between me, my bed and my book,” said Wechsler laughing.

“There are 250 literary agents in New York City. Our conference has probably hosted half of them over the last eight years,” said Steve Babitsky, founder/creator of SEAK, Inc., a medical education company that produces the writing conference. He employs a full-time staff of 12 people, including managing partner Jim Mangravatti, Jr. Both are “recovering” attorneys, trainers and authors (12 books) who run 30 conferences annually, nationwide, though most are on Cape Cod.

SEAK, Inc. is a niche marketer, targeting professionals in medicine and law who want a change in their life, or want to add something to their life.

A Falmouth resident since 1973, Babitsky discovered that doctors were interested in writing fiction, as well as non-fiction. His first medical fiction-writing workshop (1999) attracted 80 physicians from as far away as Alaska. Babitsky observed that doctors were happy to be with other doctors interested in writing. One female cried with joy that she was not alone in the world sharing the same passion.

“I think that the course is a pressure valve for doctors. Doctors are under a lot of stress, dealing with sick patients, families, insurance

companies, lawyers and everyone else,” explained Babitsky in his home office. They need a release, something they can have fun doing. They really have fun here. It's cathartic. And it's cheaper than playing golf.”

Babitsky says that many physicians return a second or third time, depending on their writing progress. He outlined the course idea and attempted four times to meet Michael Palmer who said the first three times that he was not interested; the fourth time he finally looked at the outline and ripped it to shreds. Palmer accepted the offer with the proviso that he co-teaches it with Tess Gerritsen. Both share the same agent, play a musical instrument and are good friends.

Michael and Tess are slated to teach in October 2008 and however long they want, according to Babitsky.

The conference has remained steady with 200 to 225 registrants each year. “Its one thing to create a course and quite another to keep it running. We're in our ninth year now. That's longer than “Cats” performed on Broadway,” said Babitsky, a Brooklyn native.

SEAK, Inc. mails more than one million catalogs six months in advance to physicians, of which there are 850,000 practicing in the U.S.

Vondell Clark received one and was intrigued. “I had minimal expectations. I figured that this would be a rich doctor's course,” said Clark who carries a Stephen King quote in his wallet for inspiration: “It is, after all, that dab of grit that seeps into the oyster's shell that makes the pearl, not pearl-making seminars with other oysters.”

Clark enrolled to see what the writing conference offered and what other doctors were thinking. “I am fascinated by why we do what we do, and by watching others. I'm a student of human behavior. I wanted to meet real writers and talk to other doctors,” said Clark who published a short story in *Medical Economics* (May 6, 2006) about memories of his grandmother's black walnut cake and one of his patients.

Babitsky puts his finger on why the course keeps going strong. “The conference is like a brotherhood convention. It is taught at a high level because everyone is highly educated and motivated. You don't get to be a doctor without being smart, motivated and hardworking,” he said.