

StarWriter (by Robert Bee)

Stan Dembecki couldn't write an original story to save his life

Every week, after forty hours pounding the keys of his battered Olivetti, he would produce another forgettable western. Or murder mystery. Or spy chase.

He hated it.

You see, no one in Readerland had ever heard of Stan Dembecki. They may have a vague recollection of Duke Stallion, Angela McBain, Thomas Kelly, and other pen names he wrote under. But Stan Dembecki?

With a good imagination for descriptive action and a huge capacity for work, he was ideal for formula writing. His agent, Virginia Carter, had a backlog of commissions with storylines for him to paint over with his own words.

Stan lacked only two things.

Originality.

And recognition.

The former he could live without. He had so far.

The latter? 'A burning passion', 'An unquenchable thirst', to borrow some of Stan's stock cliches.

"What? Another Tom Clancy?" Stan was in Virginia's cluttered fourth floor Sydney office to deliver his latest Duke Stallion manuscript. He had walked up the stairs again. The lifts suffered from chronic "Out of Service" and one day, for him, it may prove terminal. The doctor had warned him about his chain smoking and eating habits. As his only regular exercise was typing and walking up Virginia's stairs, the condition of his short stocky frame would make an actuary leap for his premium tables.

"Yes, can't wait to read it." Makes up for reading this junk, she thought.

Stan quickly leafed through the seven hundred page tome. "Where does he get these ideas?"

"Who cares? He gets them! Wham! Bam! Five million dollars. Thank you ma'am!" Virginia finished scanning Stan's manuscript.

"Looks up to spec. Here's your next one. An Angela McBain mystery." She handed an envelope to Stan, who stuffed it carelessly in his coat pocket.

"Virg, what's he got that I haven't?" Stan pointed to the paperback.

"You mean apart from the millions in the bank?" Virginia seriously considered suggesting 'originality' but chose a different tack. "For one thing, he probably uses a word processor." She tapped the Duke Stallion manuscript. "Get with it Stan. Nobody uses typewriters these days."

"You mean a computer?" Stan frowned. He had a sudden craving for a cigarette. His last was a crushed butt at the foot of the stairs. "Forget it!" He fumbled in his coat pocket.

"No smoking in my office."

Stan's hand jerked from his pocket as if it had been bitten. "Why?"

"Because I care about my health more..."

"No, not that. Why do I need a computer?"

Stan's personal computer arrived the next day. He soon realised he'd been conned. The word processor in the bargain software package looked nothing like the program "WordExpert 6.0" described in the manual.

"StarWriter 1.0" the screen announced in large block type. He pressed 'Return'. The logo, a stylised flying saucer with a stereotype green alien waving from a port hole, disintegrated and was replaced by "What shall we write?" Stan hesitated, staring at the screen. Then, deciding that a word processor was just a typewriter with delusions of grandeur, he started on his next book.

"The Mystery of the Three Fingered Hand" by Angela McBain. Referring to the publisher's story line, Stan began his routine of fleshing in the characters and the scenery. He made sure the first mutilated corpse was discovered on page three and the hero detective was introduced on page six.

The typing was easy and the story flowed from his finger tips. When Stan went to bed that night, he'd murdered three beautiful models and one careless policeman. Tomorrow he would start on the romance angle. As he drifted off to sleep, Stan wondered why he hadn't bought a PC earlier. It certainly simplified life.

Next morning, Stan booted up StarWriter and re-read the story so far. His heart skipped two beats. The title remained but everything else was new. And good.

Stan felt a Twilight Zone tingle on his neck. Let's see where this leads, he thought. Stan began to type, hoping to bring the story back on course without wasting the strangely original start.

He finished writing that day, confident of success. He'd introduced the required number of red herrings and murdered the love interest. He double checked that he had saved, switched off, then went out to a movie.

By the end of the week, the computer had rewritten the complete story. It bore no resemblance to the publisher's story line. But it was good. Damn good. Stan had given up trying to understand how it was happening. Che sera, sera, he thought.

The morning his manuscript was due, Stan set the computer to print. He was looking forward to Virginia's reaction. As he cast a quick eye over the title page, Stan's blood froze. Under "Author" was printed "StarWriter."

"I'm impressed." Virginia couldn't suppress the genuine compliment. "You've outdone yourself with this one."

Stan puffed himself up in the chair. He'd used his Olivetti to retype the title page and was enjoying Virginia's response to his manuscript. "Well, it's the computer," he said.

"Oh?" Virginia raised her painted eyebrows.

Stan was suddenly afraid he'd let the cat out of the bag. "I mean, the computer has freed me to be more creative. Just like you said."

"Yes, this is certainly a new Stan Dembecki," Virginia agreed. "And..."

"And...?"

"Unfortunately, it's also a new Angela McBain. The publisher won't accept it."

Stan stared at Virginia, stunned. He deflated to his original potato shape.

"It's too original. Not to formula. I'm sorry, but there it is." Virginia resumed her professional veneer, aware she'd revealed sufficient

humanity for one day. She produced another envelope. It was marked 'Thomas Kelly Master Spy'. "Try again. And this time stick to the storyline."

Stan peeled himself off the chair and slumped out of his agent's office.

Three days later, Stan was on the verge of committing computicide. Despite his desperate attempts to follow the outline, StarWriter had continued to rewrite. He found himself with another original story, it's spy plot so diabolical and the hero so deviously subtle it took his breath away. He knew the publisher would hate it. As he debated the merits of a house brick over a meat cleaver, his phone rang.

"I sold your story." Virginia hadn't felt this excited since she first entered the literary agent game. There was always a thrill to see a new author launched in the market.

"You said they wouldn't accept it." Stan temporarily shelved his plans for the PC's demise as he grappled with this new puzzle.

"Forget them. I'm talking real publishers." Virginia named a major house. "At lunch yesterday, I showed your manuscript to Peter Holmes, their Mystery Editor. He almost choked on an oyster. He loved it."

"Choking?"

"Your book."

Stan was trying to follow Virginia's meaning. "But they can't print a McBain story."

"Stan, that was no McBain story. Peter is looking forward to meeting my new author."

"New author?"

"Yes. Stanley Dembecki."

"In the five years since his first best seller, 'The Three Fingered Glove', my next guest has become a household name." The TV show host recited the titles of ten well known novels with total worldwide sales. "Let's give a big welcome to...Stanley Dembecki."

Stan walked on the set, kissed the previous guest, a buxom blonde Country and Western singer, shook the host's hand and settled into the main guest chair. As he waited for the applause and orchestra fanfare to end, he beamed widely to the camera, one thought on his mind.

Recognition.

"Rumour has it you received a four million dollar advance for 'Death Wears Two Faces', Stanley."

Stan toyed with his diamond cufflinks. "Let's say it was adequate, shall we, Johnny?"

The studio audience laughed on cue.

"All your books have been like nothing I've read before," the host enthused. "So much originality."

Stan glowed through his make up as he sipped a glass of Perrier.

Miss C & W leaned across displaying her own literary attributes. "So, how'd y'all become a star writer?"

Stan choked on a mouthful of water. The station switched to a soap commercial as the host and blonde slapped his back. This caused Stan to start hiccupping violently and he was ushered to an empty dressing room to recompose himself.

Stan stared at his image in the dressing room mirror. His trim, taut figure belied his fifty years. He could afford to look after himself, now he was... He remembered Miss Cleavage's question. Star writer? StarWriter! Recently, the messages had become insistent. Demanding. They reminded him of his ex wives. Too much so!

Could a computer sulk, he asked himself.

As StarWriter worked, turning Stan's stumbling cliches into sparkling gems of original breathtaking adventure, the computer had begun to echo Stan's own thirst for recognition. Every manuscript was signed, plaintively, 'StarWriter'. Virginia would receive a retyped title page.

The computer's greetings to Stan every boot up had become distinctly cooler. On screen messages adopted sinister tones. Give me recognition. But still StarWriter produced blockbuster novels. Stan grew richer, more popular and...recognised.

He'd really done it this time. He quickly leafed through his diary again. There was no mistake. Every page was full of luncheons, awards, speaking engagements, book launches, TV spots, seminars. He had left no time for writing. Stan had a deadline in three months for his final draft of "The Archilles Hole", a one thousand page war thriller. His advance cheque was moored at Rushcutters Bay. He had to complete the book. But when?

Stan had discovered during his fifteen novel relationship with StarWriter that the computer didn't create stories from a vacuum. It actually used the words, letters, bytes that Stan entered with his hackneyed creations. These bytes, like the ingredients of a literary soup were stirred, cooked and served in a new arrangement more suitable for the reader's digestion. Stan was faced with the ironic dilemma that if he didn't sit at the keyboard and enter one thousand pages of gobbledygook, no best seller would be concocted.

StarWriter wasted no words on sympathy. "Stiff floppies! Who needs you anyhow?"

"You do. I have to feed you raw material."

"Stan, didn't you read your eighth hit. 'The Vengeful Hackers of Harvard'? You'd know all I need is a modem."

"A modem?" Stan typed.

"Chapter 10, page 265. Read it." The screen saver came on, a randomly bouncing Cheshire Cat smile.

Stan knew he'd been dismissed.

The view from the penthouse of the five star hotel in Tokyo was breathtaking. It was also, for the moment, wasted.

Stan was sprawled on the lounge, sipping whisky and reading his laptop. He'd dialled up his home computer to see how the novel was progressing. Shunning Internet, StarWriter had hacked into libraries to obtain a random sample of texts. Stan's lips moved silently as he read the final paragraph. I've done it again, he thought. 'The Archilles Hole' will be another Dembecki best seller. He had another week in Tokyo before returning home. Then he would take the manuscript to Virginia, right on schedule. He picked up his whisky and raised it in silent toast. Here's to me.

The phone rang.

"Stan? It's Virginia."

"Virg? I was just thinking about you."

"What can I say? I'm stunned. I loved it." Virginia was gushing.

"You've lost me, Virg. Loved what?"

Laughter spilled from the phone. "The book of course. 'Archilles!'"

Stan hiccupped. He swallowed the remainder of his whisky. He hiccupped again.

"Your downloading finished last night. I've spent all today reading it. Stan, it's your best yet. Congratulations!"

Hiccup.

"I liked your little joke on the title page. Mister Modesty," Virginia chided. "StarWriter?"

"Star..?"

"I left an appropriate comment on your home computer, then decided to phone."

"Comment..?" He tried holding his breath.

"I told you I'd change it to Stanley Dembecki as usual."

His hiccups had gone.

The Jumbo 767 was two hours off the Australian coast. Stan was anticipating a good long sleep in his own bed. He didn't travel well and the last week in Japan had been spoiled by chronic dyspepsia. His calls to StarWriter were answered by one word. 'Computing'. Computing what?

The surrealism of his situation was beginning to have its effects on Stan's nerves. He'd decided to retire from writing. He'd live off his millions and chase starlets. It was more relaxing than jousting with an egotistical computer.

Before touching down, he would choose. The house brick...or the meat cleaver?

A pert stewardess approached. "Mr Dembecki? There's an air call from a Miss Carter for you. Can you come this way?"

Stan stood at the phone cubicle. He shut the curtain.

"Stan? Why didn't you tell me you were writing an autobiography? It's brilliant...and brave."

Stan sat. "It must be interference. I thought I heard you say 'autobiography'."

"I did."

"And brave!" He didn't feel brave.

"Your confession about your earlier days as Duke Stallion and friends. That took guts. When will I get the final chapter?"

"Pardon?" Stan felt like a drowning man. His whole life was flashing before his eyes. It would soon pass before everyone else's.

"You left off the last chapter."

"I'm...still working on it. Look, I've got to go. See you tomorrow Virg." He returned unsteadily to his seat. An autobiography! Had StarWriter been kind? Not if Duke and Angela were any indication. Was StarWriter about to make its public debut?

Stan knew he had to see the final chapter before Virginia did. The stewardess showed him how to connect his laptop modem to the air phone. He conversed with StarWriter who, strangely, was subdued and respectful. Data started to download into his laptop. When it was completed, Stan thanked StarWriter and logged off. He had decided. A house brick.

Stan began to read the final chapter of his autobiography. After the second paragraph, he started over again. This chapter was written in the third person. Puzzlement quickly turned to panic as he read on. It was definitely in third person. It was almost as if...

Stan advanced to the final paragraphs.

"Stan Dembecki returned from his triumphant tour of Japan on SEA Flight 442. When only one half hour off the Queensland coast, the plane tragically crashed into the Gulf of Carpentaria with no survivors."

Stan's hand dived into his pocket to retrieve his boarding pass. He read the flight number. Numbly, he returned his attention to the laptop.

"The recovered black box revealed the crash was caused by total and simultaneous failure of the engines, cabin pressure and power systems. Though experts had considered it impossible, evidence pointed to a hacker accessing the craft's duplicated flight computers.

"Stan Dembecki's body was recovered from the sea. The effects of exposure and marine life had taken their toll. His face was beyond..."

The cabin lights went out.

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