

# THE *BAG* OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER



## WRITERS & UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES

### **For this column, I interviewed five writers**

(including myself) who are alumni from the University of California at San Diego. Whenever I have taught creative writing at the undergrad level (usually at UCSD), some students confess that they're worried about getting a degree in writing, literature, English, etc., and look rather enviously at their classmates who will graduate with hard science degrees and, therefore will have "real jobs." Meanwhile, the science majors confide in me that they envy the writing/literature/liberal arts majors because they're studying what they're really interested in. Good day job or the artist's way? Each side has been concerned that they might not be doing it right, and this is the main topic of discussion that occupies my office hours.

Recent UCSD-and-Clarion graduate Dana Huber echoes the frustration I felt when I graduated from UCSD with a degree in Mass Communications. Other than Ray Feist, the writer-as-student I knew best during my college days wound up working in a comic book store, and I became Head Salesclerk of the Dolphin Lagoon at Sea World. I don't know what happened to Alex, but Ray and I soldiered on, and eventually made careers for ourselves as writers.

Since I've already discussed MFA's, I wanted to concentrate on undergraduate degrees for this roundup, and so some SF/F authors who received advanced degrees from UCSD such as David Brin, Gregory Benford, Vernor Vinge, and Suzanne Hadette Elgin are not included. A glaring omission is Kim Stanley Robinson (BA in Literature, and PhD in English), as well as an instructor at Clarion, and a fellow member of the Clarion Foundation Board, which is solely a product of timing—mine, not his. So many writers have spent time at UCSD that the university held a one-day event about us called "There Must be Something in the Water." If you'd like to see more on undergraduate and/or graduate degrees and writing careers including interviews, please email me at [nancyholder123@gmail.com](mailto:nancyholder123@gmail.com) and let me know. I can resume the subject in another column.

Meanwhile, I want to thank my fellow UCSD alumni interviewees for taking the time to reply to my questionnaire. We are:

- RF: Raymond E. Feist, novelist; see <http://www.crydee.com/>
- NH: Nancy Holder, novelist and short story writer; see [www.nancyholder.com](http://www.nancyholder.com)
- DH: Dana Huber, recent UCSD/Clarion graduate, on Facebook
- CP: Cindy Pon, artist and first time novelist, see <http://cindypon.com/>
- ES: Eugene Son, script/screenwriter, see [www.eugeneson.com](http://www.eugeneson.com)

**Ray [Feist] told me he was switching to Communications and he sold me on the major. But about two quarters before I was going to graduate, I went to my advisor and asked him what I was supposed to do with this degree. He said (and I quote), “We’re working on that.” I took a leave of absence and worked on a TV script. That should have told me something. (Nancy Holder)**

Here are my questions and our answers.

*What was your route to UCSD? Did you enter as a freshman or transfer?*

**RF:** I got to UCSD via Grossmont College where I became interested in both linguistics and psychology. I entered as a junior transfer.

**NH:** I deferred entry to UCSD and did my first two years at Grossmont Community College, then transferred.

**DH:** I came in as a transfer, starting at UCSD as a third-year/junior.

**CP:** I entered Revelle College straight out of high school at eighteen. Funny story is that I had never visited until I arrived on campus. I asked a Warren friend currently attending which college best suited me. He suggested Revelle knowing my interest in literature and writing, because Revelle has an excellent Humanities program. But neglected to warn me about the hardcore math and science requirements. It was definitely a challenge!

**ES:** Entered UCSD as a freshman.

*What was your major and from which college?*

**RF:** I got a BA in Communications Arts at Muir.

**NH:** Communications, Muir.

**DH:** Writing, from Sixth College.

**CP:** Sociology, Revelle.

**ES:** Literature-Writing. Revelle College.

*Did you change your major?*

**RF:** Yes, from Psych to CA.

**NH:** Yes, from Linguistics to Communications.

**DH:** Nope.

**CP:** I did. I was originally a lit major. But the lit department back then required a fluency in another language for the major. And I knew I wanted to study Mandarin and would not be fluent with only four years of study. I was also more interested in the aspects of creative writing rather than studying and analyzing literature.

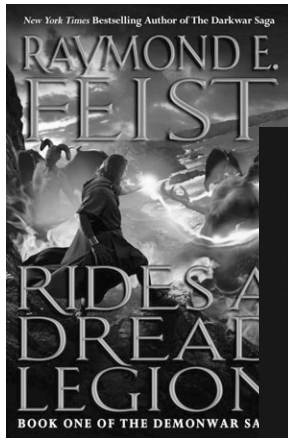
**ES:** Nope.

*Why did you choose your major/why did you change it?*

**RF:** I chose it because it covered a variety of topics that interested me, and was as close to a degree in Marketing as I could get. My emphasis was Mass Markets and Public Opinion.

**NH:** I changed from Linguistics to Communications in part because I saw no career path in Linguistics other than to stay in school to get a PhD. I knew Ray from Grossmont; we transferred at the same time and hung out at UCSD. Ray told me he was switching to Communications and he sold me on the major. But about two quarters before I was going to graduate, I went to my advisor and asked him what I was supposed to do with this degree. He said (and I quote), “We’re working on that.” I took a leave of absence and worked on a TV script. That should have told me something.





**DH:** I chose to major in writing because I wanted (and still want) to write fiction for a living as a novelist. At the time, I didn't realize how pointless a degree in pursuit of this was.

**CP:** Sociology seemed interesting enough for me to just get a degree in. I knew I would pursue a masters in higher education administration in the future.

**ES:** I always loved telling stories. I was waffling between Film or English majors, then saw that UCSD had a specific Literature-Writing major. Rest is history.

*Can you talk about if your major has been helpful to your writing career?*

**RF:** All of it. The essence of communication is to convey thought. Human behavior is the heart of fiction.

**NH:** Yes, although it took me a long time to realize that. When I graduated, I had no idea how to get a job. UCSD had told me they were preparing me for life, not a career, and I was very angry about it. But over time, I see that my degree has stood me in good stead. I was able to take as many writing classes as I wanted; got to keep my linguistics studies; get proficient in French and German; and I think I have a whole systems approach to my work that keeps me employed. My emphasis was Mass Communications, and I'm pretty much a mass-market author.

**DH:** It really has not, overall. If you are actually looking to sell your fiction, the editor or slush reader you send a manuscript or short story to doesn't care where you went to college or even if you went to college—they are judging your story based on what you send them. So in the aspect of "I can put UCSD on my resume", it hasn't been much of a gain there.

The other major aspect would be of course what I was taught at UCSD. With the exception of the very last class I took at UC San Diego [yours, Nancy], none of my professors seemed interested in teaching one how to *sell* one's writing. All of the

classes, both workshop and other, were geared entirely towards theory and the craft. It wasn't until the aforementioned last class, taught by a non-regular UC professor who actually makes her writing as a freelance author, that I ever even heard the words "manuscript", "agent", "rates", "contract", "market", or "publishing house" brought up in a classroom.

One professor, of a short fiction class, went so far as to tell us on the very first day that if any of us thought we would ever make money/a living as writers—we wouldn't, and we should forget about it right now, because it simply wouldn't happen.

In terms of finding an audience for your writing, the push seemed to be entirely towards being 'published' in academic or university-sponsored publications or contests—nothing at all towards producing viable commercial fiction.

The third aspect would be contacts, which in a roundabout way has helped me some—it was through a fellow UCSD student that I learned about a workshop (Clarion) which *did* actually focus on the things I needed to learn to seriously enter publication, and has itself opened up more contacts for me.

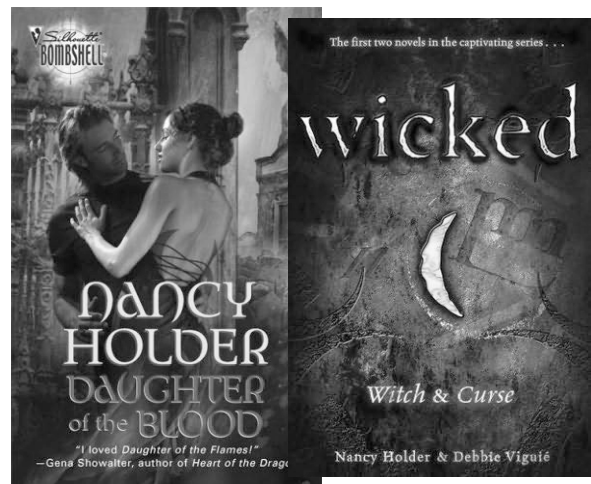
Still, that one contact was not perhaps worth my current \$10,000 in student debt.

**CP:** I wouldn't say my major per se. But my entire academic and social experiences really contributed to my journey from girl to young adult. I became more confident, better able to juggle tasks, was more responsible, met deadlines, led and mentored because of my time at UCSD. Without those experiences to help with my personal and intellectual growth, I'm certain I wouldn't have had the courage or tenacity to write a novel and find a literary agent, etc.

**ES:** Absolutely. At UCSD, in addition to constantly writing, I was exposed to writers and stories and plays and movies that I'd never have chosen to seek out myself, I was surrounded by other talented and driven creative types, I was surrounded by a wide diversity of intelligent people from diverse backgrounds that I learned from.

And I learned how to enjoy poverty. That's invaluable experience when you're starting out as a writer.

And I learned how to buckle down and stay up all night writing while under the influence of caffeine...which is pretty much what I do now for a living.



# Then my third book hit the New York Times Bestseller list and everything changed. [Raymond Feist]

*When did you know you wanted to be a freelancer writer? If you were still in college, did you alter your degree path to accommodate your wish to become a freelancer?*

**RF:** I didn't know I wanted to be a freelance writer until after I sold my first novel and lost my 9 to 5 job in Health Marketing/Administration. Then my third book hit the New York Times Bestseller list and everything changed. Writing is what I do best and get paid the most for; it became a no-brainer to do it full time.

**NH:** I had deferred my entry to UCSD to go to Europe to be a ballet dancer. An injury made me re-evaluate my plan and I decided to go to college and then get a "real" job. After I graduated with my communications degree, I applied to graduate school at San Diego State, which I perceived as a more practical university with actual career paths laid out for its students. To apply, I had to get letters of recommendation from UCSD profs and one of them, Dr. John Waterhouse, said that he thought I could be a professional freelance writer if I chose to, as I was talented and driven. That shocked me. It took the wind out of my graduate school sails a bit; I started the MBA program (finance major) at State and thought of switching to speech pathology, then toyed with getting an MFA. But I eventually quit grad school and started writing. A year and a half later, I sold my first novel.

**DH:** Essentially all my life, in some fashion or another. I probably consciously made the decision about twelve or so.

**CP:** I've been a writer since I was in elementary school. But it was never a career option for me. My family and I both saw it as a hobby, something I did "for fun". To this day, I'm still a little amazed I get paid for doing something I love so much. I didn't decide to try and become a published author until I had my two bubs back to back (they are 4.5 and 6 now) and was staying at home full time. I really needed something to call my own again and remembered my love for writing. I had stopped writing creatively all through my twenties. So I went back to take some writing classes through UCSD Extension!

And decided to try and write my first novel. After I finished, I loved it so much I thought I'd try and get an agent. That's how *Silver Phoenix* became published!

**ES:** I knew I wanted to tell stories for a living when I was twelve. Other than that, there was no plan to specifically become a freelancer. My goal was to get a wide range of writing skills, and then hope some sort of writing job came along.

*What part of your education has proved most useful to you as a writer?*

**RF:** Again, all of it. Every aspect of the human condition is addressed in some form or another in the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, science is helpful in understanding things you may wish to write about. Math, not so much, but then I was never very good at it.

**NH:** In retrospect, everything. Now that I'm looking at colleges for my daughter, I must say that I see what a truly excellent education I received from UCSD. I think the most important thing I learned was rigor.

**DH:** As mentioned above, the contacts, likely. In terms of what I learned about writing itself in the workshops—again, nothing was geared towards commercial, dare I say, accessible, fiction. Even the workshop classes I took at UCSD, which should in theory be the most practically geared, were never about critique over whether something was of a publishable quality, but all geared instead towards interpretations and personal experimentation with form/style/etc. This may be valuable from a sheer creative perspective, but some variety on the practical side of the spectrum would have been nice as well.

**CP:** I think multi-tasking. As well as pushing myself out of my own comfort zone—the willingness to try something new and different—to take risks.

**ES:** Every writer has a toolbox - they learn something, then toss it in the toolbox to pull out and use at some later point. My writer's toolbox is filled with stuff that I picked up from every





part of my UCSD education. That German film course, that 19th century women's lit class, even that chemistry class I took for my requirements freshman year. You learn it, you save it, and someday you use it

*Did your education at UCSD help you find a sustainable day job, if you have or have had one?*

**RF:** Not at first, but then yes, at a health services

company in San Diego where the combination of my degree and previous work I had done in para-professional counseling and training got me an administrative gig combining training of new workers, overseeing them, and working on marketing for the company.

**NH:** Not when I first graduated. I felt entirely cast adrift. I seemed to be either under- or overqualified for everything I applied for. I felt very ill prepared for job seeking. One interesting thing happened a bit late in the process, though: I finally received a call for an interview for a UCSD job, working in a substance abuse program, and I realized somewhere deep down that if I took that job, it might become a career position. And I turned down the interview. I couldn't explain why at the time, but I think I knew that if I took a job like that, the demands would take away from my time and energy for my eventual writing career.

**DH:** A big, resounding no, which is probably my largest source of frustration with the academic approach. The hard science majors of UCSD come out of the program with (presumably) the skills and qualifications necessary to enter an entry-level lab position in their field; as a writing major at UCSD, I came out of it with the skills and qualifications necessary to deconstruct Kafka and giant cockroaches.

Obviously I don't expect UCSD to turn out award-winning novelists as the goal of its BA program, but there are jobs open to English/Writing/Literature majors— the sustainable day jobs— that one could work at while paying down one's student loan or working on that Great American Novel— jobs like copy-editing, et cetera. I heard this briefly mentioned once in the Literature department as a suggestion, but never any concrete information on as to how one leveraged one's BA into getting into this profession or the others like it. There were certainly no classes in copy-editing that you could have taken to fill out your degree, and thus have a little grounding in the profession.

**CP:** It did! My first official job was at the admissions office at Sacramento City College—within the college system exactly where I wanted to be.

**ES:** Not specifically the major, but having graduated from UCSD definitely helped me get a day job. That UCSD degree makes your resume stand out from the others.

*What would you do differently, if you could go back in time and re-do your years at school?*

**RF:** Stop stressing as much over a few things, but very little differently. The usual stuff, ask out a different girl than the one who broke my heart, that sort of thing. I enjoyed the school-work and the time I spent at UCSD immensely.

**NH:** I would have had more fun. I hardly ever went anywhere or did anything. I was a very serious Border collie, herding my good grades. If I had extra time, I took another class.

**DH:** I likely wouldn't. However, if I was determined to go to college, the huge, major thing I would do differently is **INTERNSHIPS, INTERNSHIPS, INTERNSHIPS.**

The college does offer a very limited amount of these, and it's the best compromise between getting the work experience you will need to get a sustainable day job after college (that pays more than minimum wage) while still fulfilling your credits.

**CP:** Nothing.

**ES:** I would've taken more chances - auditioning for plays, trying to write more humor, submitting my stories for publication, asking out girls who are out of my league. You can risk failing when you're young, because taking chances becomes more and more impossible as you get older.

*Do you have any advice for aspiring and/or professional freelance writers in college, contemplating going back to college, or trying to decide to go to college now?*

**RF:** Yes. Study anything but literature. Literature is about other peoples' work and deconstructing it. Read as much good literature as you can, especially the core starting with Shakespeare and in as many different genres as you can. Then study psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, languages, political science, or anything else. Writing is about stuff, not about writing. Study stuff, not writing. And write. No one can teach you to write like you but you



**Continually challenge yourself to improve your writing. Surround yourself with other writers. Writing can be such a lonely endeavor, and only another writer can truly commiserate and encourage. [Cindy Pon]**

**NH:** Just go. If you're a writer, you're a sponge. Sponge up the good stuff. And...having a degree will eventually matter, unless you opt for another form of education, such as cooking school.

**DH:** I would ask what you want out of it. The degree is nice to have, sure, but if you are seriously intending to take your work in a purely commercial direction, it is again *not that useful* for that purpose. If you still wish to remain in college/attend college: exploit the internships, and make as many contacts as you can. If you find the workshops helpful for honing your craft, by all means, learn from them what you can (but take them at a community college where they are far cheaper and the writing quality of your fellow students is more or less just the same). If your college has the foresight to offer any classes on the actual industry, such as manuscript preparation classes, take them. And if you can find a professor who is not a tenured academic, but is actually selling their books/short stories/what have you— stick to them like glue.

**CP:** Continually challenge yourself to improve your writing. Surround yourself with other writers. Writing can be such a lonely endeavor, and only another writer can truly commiserate and encourage. Read widely, beyond the genres you usually like. Have enough faith in yourself and your writing to query and be rejected—as that's what it means to be a writer. Be humble enough to know that there is always room for growth and learning as a writer. \*Always\* act professionally!

**ES:** Be ready for anything. Don't just focus on one specific type of writing. Try your hand at different genres, different forms. You will never see opportunity coming - one day you'll be minding your own business, it'll smack you upside the head and ask you for a writing sample.

*Nancy Holder is the NYT-best-selling coauthor of the young adult dark fantasy Wicked series, which was recently picked up by DreamWorks. She writes the Possessions young adult horror series for Razorbill. Possessions: The Evil Within will be available in June.*



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## **Collaborations**

*(continued from page 35)*

**DD:** As I said at the start, my Baen collaborations have been a part of one of the closest and most satisfying friendships of my life.

**JR:** Baen believes in collaborations as a way to bring new authors along, both in mentoring about the writing process and industry and as a marketing tool. I fully support it and think it's a good idea.

However, it's not a necessity. Lois Bujold, for example, simply does not collaborate. And she has published with Baen from both the beginning of her career and Baen's.

Frankly, I think that any new author who refuses collaborative programs is insane. I learned a heck of a lot about the

writing process, the publishing industry, character, prose and plotting from my collaboration with David Weber. Not to mention making much more money off of my collaboration than off of my first two 'own written' novels.

Collaboration is an excellent tool. Sometimes challenging but always rewarding.

More publishers and authors should use it.

I would like to thank Toni, Dave, and John for taking time out of their busy lives to be interviewed. If you would like to provide feedback regarding my column, or make suggestions regarding future columns, please send them to [bill@williamcdietz.com](mailto:bill@williamcdietz.com).

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