

PALS FOREVER

by Jim Woods

In the end, it was Joe Beckett who shouldered the blame for, and suffered the consequences of the fight between Abigail Rothsberg and Julianna van Sloote. His troubles began when he accepted the commission to assemble the new membership directory of the Poughkeepsie Authors League, or PAL, as the members affectionately referred to their elite society. The individuals who made up the group did not refer to themselves as members, but as Pals. The League had grown to over two hundred members in recent years and the latest directory, The Pals List, was several years behind in its usefulness. The League president, Miss Sarah June Gleason, sent out additions and deletions to the directory with the quarterly newsletter that she edited in her hobby room.

Joe had remarked to Sarah June, at the monthly brunch meeting at the Hudson House, that he had more hand-written entries in the margins of his copy of the directory, and on loose sheets inserted between the pages, than he had original printed information. He then suffered through her lecture on the cost of printing and postage for a non-profit organization, and all the work necessary just to keep the group operating. Her rebuke ended with the challenge that if he thought he could do any better than the elected officers of The League, then perhaps he should volunteer to compile an updated directory.

Sarah June sure can get sharp-tongued over the least little thing

Of course, she had served as President of the Poughkeepsie Authors League for as long as anyone could

recall. Most members couldn't find the time to help keep the organization running on a day-to-day basis. The forty to fifty regular attendees to the monthly brunch meeting felt they were doing their fair share by showing up and eating. Sarah June held the group together, and was rewarded each year with re-election to her post, her constituents greatly relieved that she agreed each time to accept another term. In a moment of weakness, admittedly due to Sarah June's scathing remarks, Joe Beckett agreed to collect the data for a new directory.

Well, the task opened his eyes about The League. As he received back the questionnaires he had mailed to the members, he became extremely impressed with the background and experience of this group of writers. In his short time as a member, getting acquainted with just the few others who happened to share his table each month at the Hudson House dining room, he had not been aware of the wealth of creative talent that marked the membership of the Poughkeepsie Authors League. He knew that his own credentials, based on a long career in and around publishing, were solid, but he had talked with a couple of truly accomplished novelists who made him feel like a wannabe writer. True, some of the members hadn't written anything lately, or even in the past several years, but their credits were not belittled by the passage of time. It took as much dedication and effort to write a bestseller of decades ago as it did now, and probably more, given today's word processors and computers that improved any writer's productivity.

Joe also was impressed with the diversity of subject matter addressed in the writing record of the group, from important scientific works to the sleaziest of best-selling novels, but he was more in awe of some of the individual lifetime authorial careers. The twenty-five years since his own byline first saw print was a source of pride to him until he discovered writers who had been at the game for twice that, such as when he ran afoul of Abigail Rothsberg and Julianna van Sloote.

Abigail's resume was very impressive in the list of writing

credits. Her romance novels and gardening books had been published by some well-respected houses that long since had been swallowed up by corporations that put their umbrella over every sort of product from magazines to munitions. Abigail, though, had written for them when they only published books— when they lost money on every printing and hoped to make it up on the next one— publishing’s good old days. Abigail’s own good old days were recalled in her claim to being the only surviving founding member of the Poughkeepsie Authors League.

Say, thought Joe, this could be important. Who even considered that The League actually was the brainchild of a real person let alone one who was still with us? He knew that The League dated to before World War Two; that much of the organization’s history was common knowledge, but who in the current membership even knew of Abigail, let alone knew her personally? He sent a fax message to Sarah June telling of his discovery, and she telephoned right back. Yes, of course she was aware of Abigail. Her name was on the mailing list but Sarah admitted to never actually having met her. At Abigail’s age and state of health, Sarah explained from having talked with her at one time by telephone, she couldn’t make it to the meetings anymore, and really wasn’t active as a writer; but, according to Sarah June, Abigail paid her dues each year. And yes, Sarah June agreed, a special tribute to Abigail in the directory certainly would be appropriate.

Joe’s efforts on the directory had been going on for several weeks. He was down to making phone calls and sending reminder post cards to the few delinquents, and working on the tribute to Abigail Rothsberg when Julianna Van Sloote’s letter ambushed him. He started transcribing the extensive credentials of this yet another unfamiliar name when he was startled to see that Julianna claimed, among her credits and distinctions, to be one of the founders of the Poughkeepsie Authors League.

“Sarah June,” he blurted into the telephone, “We have a

delicate problem here that needs a presidential solution.”

“No, I really don’t know Julianna,” responded Sarah June, after the crisis was presented to her. “She’s like Abigail, a name on my list and we cash her dues check every year, but she doesn’t come to meetings. I think she’s pretty well up in years though, old enough that she could be a founder.”

“Suppose we just ignore both their claims to being founders. If they protest we can claim editorial decision based on space availability.”

“I really don’t think so, Jo3. If either of them actually is a founder, it’s something we should recognize and commemorate.”

“But Abigail says that she’s the last surviving founder, and Julianna claims to be a founder. Obviously, Julianna’s not dead so Abigail can’t be the last surviving founder. If we recognize Julianna, it’s the same as calling Abigail a liar; if we publish Abigail’s claim then we say that Julianna is lying. Can’t you check the records and see which of the old gals, if either, actually rates the honor?”

“Joe, I don’t know if you lived here in sixty-six, but the Wappinger flooded that year. The Hudson did too and it got all of the national attention but the Wappinger did a lot of local damage. I was teaching then and my school was right on that little river. I had just joined The League and had been appointed secretary. All The League records were in my desk and file cabinet at school. I went over there during the flood and waded waist high into the classroom to try to save something— anything— but everything was lost, ruined.”

“I’m sorry Sarah June. That’s pretty tough. What did you do?”

“After the water went down and things got back to normal, I contacted the members I knew, but I hadn’t been in The League long enough to know everyone. By word of mouth, several of us got together for a meeting and made a

roster of all the members we could recall. We elected officers– they made me president– and we tried to remember everything that was in the bylaws. No one could locate a copy.”

After a long pause, during which Joe detected a sigh in Sarah June’s voice, she went on, quietly, “It seems like I’ve been president ever since, except twice when I just refused so I could write my books. Since The League has grown so, being president takes all my time. I don’t know how I could ever write and hold this office too. The Pals List project is yours and so is the decision. I just have too much to do as it is.”

“I’m sorry to have bothered you with this Sarah June. I’m just going to credit both of them as founding members. Probably no one but themselves can dispute either claim, and since neither of them are active in society business, one won’t even notice the other,” he finished hopefully.

That was asking too much of the elderly ladies. At the brunch meeting following issuance of the new directory, Joe basked in the praise from the members about his dedication and work on the project. Most of the members were just glad someone else had been suckered into doing the task, so they were lavish with their compliments. Then Abigail approached the dais where Joe was being lionized and quieted the entire assembly.

“Young man,” she started loudly, and compared to her, all other persons in the hall were young, “I wrote you that I was the only surviving founding member of this society. You chose to not only downgrade that distinction but also to recognize some imposter as a founder as well. I demand that you set the record straight, and re-issue that album of untruths of which you are so proud!”

If the hall had not suddenly become so silent at Abigail’s tirade, the members might not have heard the tiny voice from the rear.

“I have something to say about that,” determinedly whispered the second little old lady to disrupt this usually genteel gathering. Sarah June, standing alongside Joe as he was receiving accolades from his fellow members, dropped her gavel on the dais and stepped back in horror as her orderly conclave commenced to fall apart before her eyes.

The newest interloper’s mousy voice strengthened as she gained everyone’s attention, “I am too a founding member of this society. I am not an imposter! This old biddy doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” She emphasized her claim with the swing of her handbag in the direction of Abigail.

Joe had stepped between the two ladies-of-letters and turned to seek help from Sarah June who was somewhat glassy-eyed at the proceedings, and didn’t offer any recognition of him. Abigail’s attention was directed to him though, as she snatched up Sarah June’s gavel and shook it in his face. “I am the only surviving founder and I want you to have the Sergeant-at-Arms escort this woman out of this meeting.”

At that unfortunate moment, Julianna’s purse landed a resounding whack on Joe’s shoulder, causing him to jerk forward to escape the beating, just as Abigail was punctuating her threats with the gavel. The heavy mahogany mallet struck Joe right on the nose, and exploded blood all over Sarah June’s papers on the podium. Sarah June screamed, and Joe did as well. The audience and the combatants were suddenly quiet. As Abigail studied her opponent, a glimmer of recognition lighted her face.

“Who are you, Child?”

“Don’t call me child! You may be fifteen years older than me, Abigail, but I’m eighty-two and I’ve earned every wrinkle. I’m Julianna van Sloote, and you should know me. I was at the founder’s meeting that we held at the old Lutheran Church in 1936.

“Oh, Child,” Abigail went on, ignoring Julianna’s obvious

dislike for the juvenile label, I remember you now. My Dear, that wasn't a founder's meeting. Five of us— and she went on to call the roll of that absent august body— organized The League in my parlor two weeks before that meeting. The meeting at the church was simply the first regular one of The League. If you'll recall, we put a notice in the paper announcing the meeting and invited all interested parties to attend. Don't you remember?"

"I think you're right, Abigail. It seems like I do recall now that The League was already named in that announcement. All this time I prided myself on being a founder, but I see now that I wasn't, really. How've you been keeping Abigail?" Julianna queried fondly of her newly found old friend as they exited the hall arm-in-arm.

The remainder of the membership was on its feet, milling about and buzzing excitedly about what had occurred and what to do, when Sarah June recovered and nudged the still-bleeding Joe aside. Snatching up the familiar gavel and pounding the podium, she managed to gain enough attention to declare, "Attention, please. I have an announcement."

Reluctantly, the membership quieted enough to allow her to be heard, and crowded closer to the podium, mainly to get a better look at Joe's futile attempts to stay the flow from his nose.

"At the close of this meeting, I will resign as President of the Poughkeepsie Authors League." Over the protestations from the members, Sarah June rapped the gavel again and again, harder and harder, until the shaft broke and the mahogany head flew off into the standing crowd. Someone scrambled among the feet of the throng and recovered the damaged gavel and returned it to Sarah June, who, grasping it in her palm, continued rapping the podium until the hubbub subsided once more.

"The Chair will entertain a motion first, that the normal succession of officers be set aside. As everyone here knows, our esteemed vice-president, Paul Duncan, has no real

interest (she didn't have to say 'qualifications') in serving as president . . ."

"Motion so offered"

"Thank you Paul."

"Seconded."

"No, Paul, you can't second your own motion. Do I hear a second? Thank you Audrey," Sarah responded to the frantic waving of The League's recently appointed secretary.

"All in favor? . . . Opposed? . . . The ayes have it. The Chair now will entertain a motion that Joseph Beckett be elected President of the Poughkeepsie Authors League by acclamation."

"Motion so offered."

"Thank You Paul."

"Madame President, I object!"

"A motion is in progress, Joseph. Your objection is out of order. Do I have a second? Thank you Audrey. They'll have to watch her. She's much too eager. A motion has been made and seconded . . ." Applause drowned out the balance of the ex-president's pronouncement. She handed over the gavel head to Joe who tried to refuse it, and then unwillingly took it from her.

"What are you going to do Sarah June?"

"I'm going to write a book," she responded triumphantly, "or perhaps just read one."

"But, what are we going to do?"

"Mister President, I suggest that you close this meeting," and tucking her purse under her arm, she made her way through the dumbstruck mass. She managed the hint of a smile at the faint thumping of the broken gavel behind her as

she closed the door on the Poughkeepsie Authors League.