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Avoiding Mistletoe in the Family Tree

by Jonathan Pearce

Fiction writers have enough barriers to overcome in this world of television, video games, manga, and comic books without making the act of book-reading a chore. So my own stories are designed not to strain the patience, intellect, morals, or eyeballs of the reader. Although the NYT may describe one of my books as "insubstantial pap," Trollope has comfortingly observed that authors should rejoice at any mention of their work in the public press. I describe my books as "mostly happy fiction for grownup-tolerant teens and teen-tolerant grownups," and the mail I receive from flesh-and-blood readers attests more often to their appreciation than to their irritation.

But I discovered early on that planning relationships in fiction can be as hazardous as matchmaking in real life. This is especially true if an author is engaged in writing what amounts to a series. In one of my very early books I was unthinkingly about to wed an innocent young thing to a swinish fellow who was, I discovered just in time, her uncle. In itself this is not a terribly unhealthy development in "Balona, CA 95232" where oddballs abound, but as my colleagues in biology attest, it is "unsound." When that realization struck me, I decided that Balona somehow needed a census.

Stein, Bickham, and a host of other experts on writing fiction, urge us to create "back stories" for our characters so that we may more easily fit them into situations, knowing in advance how they are likely to respond to stimuli. I suspected that creating back stories would be rendered much easier within a computer program in which an author might plug in any number of characters and range of relationships, retrieving the data printed or on-monitor whenever the need arose.

For documentation of my own ancestry, I use a fine program known as *Reunion* <http//www.leisterpro.com> for Macintosh. There are many very good programs for Windows users. Within *Reunion* I have created a Balona folder. The *Reunion* program enables me to establish individual files,

husband and wife dyads, add children and grandchildren ad lib., note all manner of data for each (dates for birth and death, illnesses, schooling, odd characteristics, etc.), show relationships down to, for example, fourth-cousin-twice-removed, create visual "trees," and retrieve all such data via an index. I have now created a Balona index for my folder, and that document, including 88 mostly-unused characters, has been a major plotting and planning advantage that helps prevents embarrassing liaisons—unless planned, of course.

When not composing, revising, or marketing, I find joy in refining the back stories for characters I have not yet brought into a narrative. It is fun to do so, especially as I have immediately at hand in the program a variety of relatives of the character, perhaps already with interesting foibles of their own. Creating back stories has even provided stimulus for my introducing a character because of the possibilities in the relationships among members of his/her family.

At the moment I am working on a vampire story. In Balona, one encounters such beings occasionally. They usually don't stay around for long because of competition from the indigenous population, if not for blood, then for attention. The vampire in my story happens to be a subsidy publisher, the preference of some of the breed for authors' blood perhaps well known to this readership. There is no known vampire strain in Balona bloodlines, so it is necessary either to create a new line or, more likely, to feed locals to the beast for a time. The question then arises, which locals deserve such a fate? Then is when my index comes in really handy, for characters' predilection to goitre, fat necks, high blood pressure, neck tumors, pharyngitis, and other features said to attract the attention of vampires, can be reviewed and acted upon literarily.

I can attest to the truthiness of the old Balona saying, "the nuts don't fall far from the tree." So I can wholesomely advise writers, beginning and hoary, to consider the virtues of the family tree as another work helper.

(Jonathan Pearce is now brand-new publisher of at seven Balona stories —newly included is the vampire story he alludes to above, *Verga's Blessing*—and author of many more. The Balona Web site is at <http://www.balona.com>)