

Memories of Rita Gallagher, author, teacher, co-founder of RWA

By Jessica Trapp (with deep appreciation)

Meeting Rita was a miracle in itself—one of those impossible synchronicities that make you believe in Divine intervention. “When the student is ready the teacher will appear,” says Julia Cameron. I believe it.

At my first RWA meeting I met two people—my then-and-always critique partner Babette deJongh and Susie Nickson, the woman sitting next to me at lunch. I talked to Susie about her writing, and, in her quiet way, she told me Rita was starting a new class. I was green enough to ask “Rita? Who’s Rita?” I was floored to find out “Rita” was THE Rita as in THE Rita awards and THE founder of RWA.

It took me three weeks to get up the courage to call. I expected an answering machine—had my speech all planned out. So, I was shocked when THE Rita answered the phone herself. My palms sweated and I tried to sound composed, controlled.

“Yes, I’m calling about the writing classes.”

“Oh, the deadline was last week,” she said. She told me she already had thirty-five manuscripts to read, and the class wasn’t open to the public. I needed to be “invited to apply” and she asked—demanded, really—who had given me her number.

My heart sank and I felt like a fool. I guess I mumbled something coherent. Or at least something pitiful. Rita was always willing to extend herself to someone with drive and persistence who really wanted help. She asked if I had my first chapter ready.

I lied and said yes.

She told me if I’d mail it immediately, she’d let me apply for the class so I stayed up the next twenty-four hours revising chapter one. Several months later, I got a letter. “This is a very talented writer” was written at the top. There were three more pages telling me how to re-write the whole chapter.

She was the first person who ever believed in me. She saw the good stuff through all the writing flaws and knew how to help me.

Rewritten chapter on the passenger seat of my cluttered van, I drove the hour across town to attend my first writing class with Rita. I found her place out in North Houston and climbed the steps to her condo feeling sorta lost and crazy. The door stood open and four other women were there. We sat on the overstuffed couches in

her living room, waiting. And waiting. And waiting. My nervousness got the best of me and I spilled hot tea all over my skirt.

After thirty minutes, Rita appeared, wearing a colorful silky muumuu and house slippers. Her hair was perfectly coifed, and her skin had that beautiful pale, translucent quality that Hollywood stars pay thousands to copy.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, girls,” she said, but later we learned she did so on purpose—she knew how hard critique was, and she felt we needed space to get comfortable with each other.

She made introductions, welcomed us and showed us a library of books her students had written. She had a poster on the wall—a copy of the cover for *Passion Star*, one of her novels. The original oil painting sold for a lot of money at auction. She said she couldn’t have afforded it. I told her she should have borrowed the money, signed the painting and re-sold it for five grand more than the loan. We laughed and Rita gave me one of her looks—direct eye contact, a smile, and one eyebrow lifted.

“I like the way you think, honey,” she said.

The first few months of Rita’s class were rough. Rita would read us a lesson. We would write it word-for-word on paper. (Later we graduated to laptops and AlphaSmarts.) Then she’d read our work aloud in a sort of monotone voice. It was excruciating. All our “perfect” words read with such... nothingness. Some of us grumbled about this away from class, but after someone read my work to a group in a singsong voice like she was making fun of it, I decided Rita was a genius. She left her ego behind in order to teach us how to make the writing speak for itself.

Rita never pulled punches in critique, and this didn’t exactly always win friends and influence people, if you know what I mean—so several people quit. I can’t blame them, but I feel sorry for them all the same. They missed an amazing opportunity.

She was one of those independent, opinionated women who got herself into a lot of trouble. I can think of several well-known people she didn’t mesh with because she refused to pretend something she didn’t feel, or say something she didn’t mean. Rita would say, “If I don’t tell the truth about your work in critique, God will take my talent away from me.” She was one of the most authentic people I’ve ever known. You could trust her not to B.S. you just because it happened to be depressing or irritating that your first drafts weren’t Pulitzer Prize material.

It was harder than hell to get chapter one “approved” so you could move on to chapter two. You’d work and work and work... bring it into class. Rita would read it aloud and everybody would tell you stuff you needed to fix. So you’d take it home

and cry and get angry and bitch and whine. Then you'd work and work and work... bring it into class (surely to God it was perfect this time) and everyone would tell you stuff you needed to fix. So you'd cry and get angry and bitch and whine. Then... well, it was six months before mine got "good enough" to move on.

I learned more about critique and alligator skin in those six months than some people learn in six years. If I hadn't honestly seen other people's material getting better, I would have quit. My friend Babette told me to quit—that I was obsessing and making myself nuts.

She was right.

But then my chapter finally passed, and instead of quitting, I talked her into joining the class. Rita hadn't been planning to add new members, but gave Babette special consideration on my recommendation. One of the other students, Betty Pichardo, and I exchanged phone numbers. We started having long phone conversations outside of class to bolster our confidence.

Rita had rules like "don't critique outside of class with anyone." We ignored these, although we were never brave enough to confess our defiance to Rita—she was a bit like Mother Superior in that aspect.

Now that I really think about it, I bet Rita would just smile at our naughtiness and tell us she never really obeyed rules and dictates either.

It didn't take Babette nearly as long to get through chapter one. We both learned so much. We'd ride to class together, then complain and analyze and decompress all the way home. We held each other's hand when the writing and critique got rough, we celebrated each other's joys and we worked like crazy toward our writing goals.

Other people came and went. Betty, Babette and I stuck it out. For a while it was just the three of us. Sometimes our chapters got approved right away; sometimes we just gave up on a section of our writing and went to the next chapter anyway. Whenever I got too stubborn about not wanting to change something, Rita would just shrug and say, "It's your story, honey." Every now and then she would smile, look delighted, and say, "Perfect." Up and down we rode the waves, learning persistence and determination along the way.

After critique, Rita always said, "I love your story, honey" or "You are a very talented writer." She always had cake, coffee and tea for us. She always hugged us at the end of class and told us she believed in us. She told us stories about other writers who'd made it after going through the same tears and frustrations we were going through. Sometimes I'd call her mid-month in despair and she'd reiterate, "you're going to make it."

One time I decided I was going to bail—I was convinced I wasn't getting enough out of the process and it was taking too long. Then Rita re-did some lesson that month on scene and sequel. And I got it...really GOT it. I went back to thinking Rita was a genius, and I knew right then and there, I wouldn't quit her class until "death do us part." She was eighty-two years old by this time. I knew whatever time she had left wasn't long, and I needed to be counting my blessings that she'd come into my life.

Rita always gave 100%, even when it was bloody. One time she argued with me for an hour and a half after class about how I needed to change my hero, make him less "disgusting." I'll never forget this, because it was a real turning point in my writing. I thought I was writing him one way, but the reader was seeing something else. I fixed him—I didn't *change* him—I just fixed my writing so the reader could see him the way I saw him. I still had a lot to learn, but I started finaling in contests after this.

I am deeply grateful for my two and a half years with her. In one way or another, every success I have had in writing I owe to her. I am inspired by her. I love her so much. I miss her so much. I have been so blessed to have known her. My life has been forever changed—not just my writing but my whole sense of being. Thank you, God, for letting Rita Gallagher come into my life.