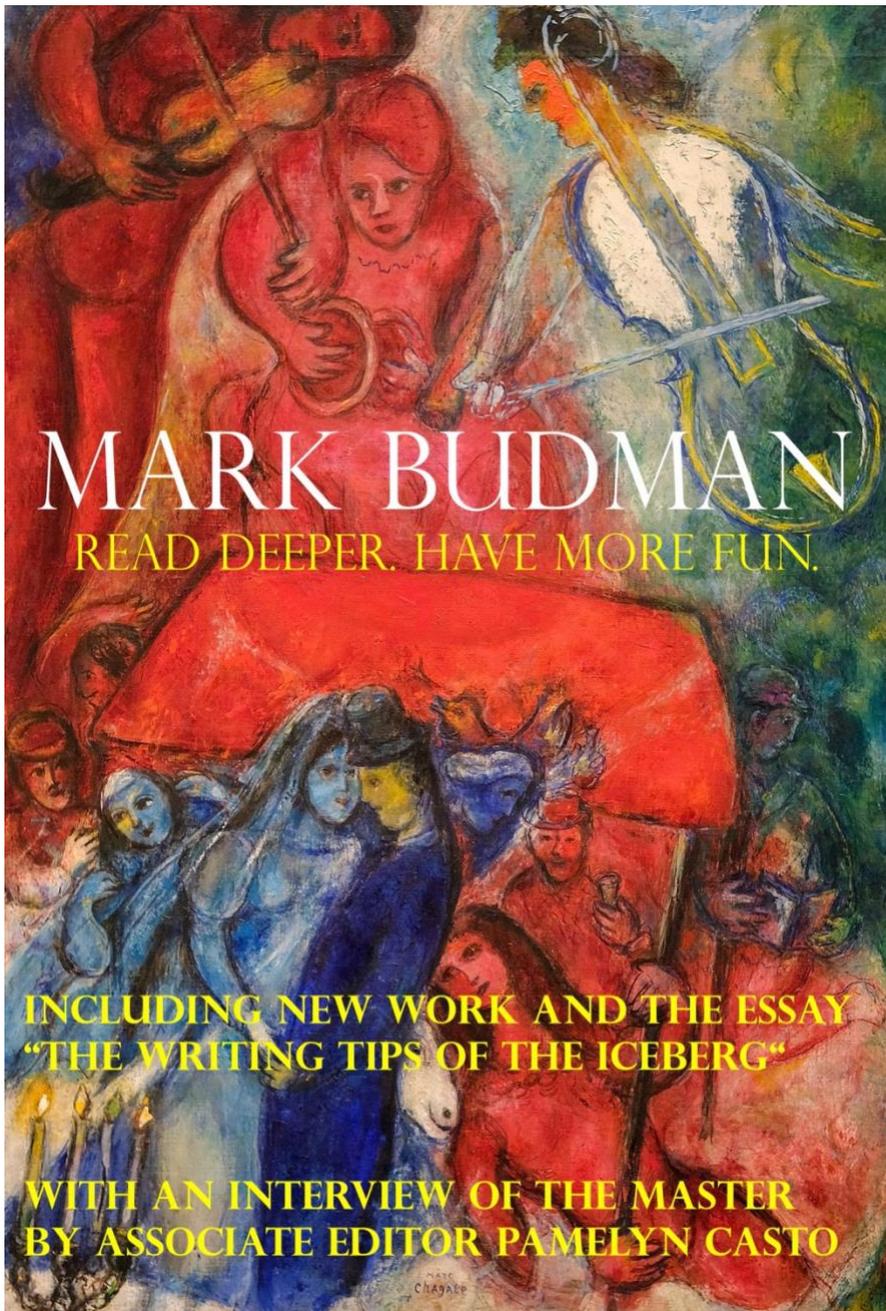


THE O:JA&L MASTERS SERIES  
FLASH FICTION

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MARK BUDMAN  
READ DEEPER. HAVE MORE FUN.

INCLUDING NEW WORK AND THE ESSAY  
"THE WRITING TIPS OF THE ICEBERG"

WITH AN INTERVIEW OF THE MASTER  
BY ASSOCIATE EDITOR PAMELYN CASTO

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BUTTONHOOK PRESS

THE OJA&L MASTERS SERIES  
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MARK BUDMAN  
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celebrating the publication of Mark Budman's chapbook *Flash Fiction: Read Deeper. Have More Fun.*

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MARK BUDMAN  
FLASH FICTION

NEW WORK

## SUGAR BABY

Stella, the lump of sugar, hated water, especially the rain.

Every time it rained, some water drops inevitably got on Stella's face and left ugly spots on her cheeks. Mama had to cover them with a fresh coat of sugar powder, but that didn't happen until Stella came back home from school. Stella had to walk with a pockmarked face all day. Kids laughed.

A boy licked her hand once.

When she grew up, she married Michael, the chamomile tea guy. They were practically born for each other. She melted in his hot arms and he became so much sweeter.

MARK BUDMAN  
FLASH FICTION

## A CIVIL UNION

A jellyfish invites a peanut butter fish to Sandwich Place. They hope to mate for life, but it smells fishy. When they divorce, the lawyers won't touch them. They have bigger fish to fry.

A jellyfish proposes to peanut butter fish. When they divorce, the lawyers won't touch them. They have bigger fish to fry. They won't work for peanuts. So the newlyweds part amicably. They refuse interviews since fish don't talk to strangers.

# HOW TO BUTTON UP FOR PROFIT AND PLEASURE

The first time he was born, he used his shiny self-destruction button when he was four. His older brother took away his teddy bear, and life was not worth living without it.

The second time she was born, she used the button when she was raped by her girl Scoutmaster at the age of fourteen.

They haven't used it for the third time yet. They grow smarter after each birth. They'll use it when they realize they can't grow any smarter in that life, and more drastic measures are needed.

Until then, the button is getting dimmer and dimmer.

MARK BUDMAN  
FLASH FICTION

## SAFETY FIRST

I draw a doggie as requested by a three-year-old. I had to carry her because she is too sad to walk.

“What we should call the doggie?” I ask.

“Smoke alarm,” she says.

I never breathe fire next to her.

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# IT'S ALL SAN ANDREAS FAULT

First, they buried him in handcuffs and leg chains, and the grave shook.  
Then they buried him in a concrete box, and the earthquakes started.

MARK BUDMAN  
FLASH FICTION

## DEATH OF A SALESMAN

“Baby,” she said, pointing her gun at him, “Can you describe walking in Hemingway’s shoes in just six words?”

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MARK BUDMAN  
FLASH FICTION

ESSAY

## THE WRITING TIPS OF THE ICEBERG

Writers, I started writing with flash fiction and that became my best training ground for novel writing. Then it became my pastime and my best writing friend.

Think hard, write well, edit even better, submit often, follow the guidelines, and don't be discouraged by rejections. Everyone gets them, and they would become your steppingstones when you pile them up high enough.

Learn the writing rules but remember they are meant to be broken. That's especially true for flash fiction because it requires being different and therefore innovative. But remember: you broke it, you bought it—you have to suffer the consequences, namely lose your readers. Ask yourself: did I break the rules because I wanted to be seen as a rebel or because my story or book demanded it?

If you can say dumb things that sound profound, you are above the grade of a newbie writer.

The first PR was when one troglodyte writer pushed another writer away and danced around the fire, screaming her prose poem about the mammoth hunt and subsequent mushroom-smoking party.

The ideal fiction blends all the writing tools, including rhythm, cadence, and sound, so seamlessly that you can't tell them apart. If the writer achieves the goal, the reader would never think *look, this sounds like written by so-and-so*. The reader would just enjoy it, skipping the meta-analysis. That's especially true for flash.

Give the reader the ability to co-create, to become your co-author. Don't spell out everything. Don't cross all the Ts. Let the reader finish the puzzle. But you have to trust yourself before you trust your readers. Otherwise, you'd be a weathervane and the critics would poop on you.

Who decides what writing is stellar or not? They can't make up their

minds about planets, let alone stars. Look at poor Pluto which lost its planetary status through no fault of its own. Now it suffers in the place where the sun doesn't shine. Believe in yourself. Honest beliefs are often contagious.

Words are the living cells of the writing process, the first draft is a baby manuscript, the manuscript submitted is a teenager, the manuscript accepted is a young adult, the manuscript published is a mature adult, and the bestseller is a wise grandparent.

The ingredients of success for a book in order of importance:

- 1) Luck
- 2) Recognizable name
- 3) Marketing skills
- 4) Cash infusion
- 5) Attractive subjects
- 6) Gorgeous cover
- 7) Well-written manuscript

Just about any generalization is generally wrong.

A tribute doesn't require attribution.

The number of plots and ideas is limited. They keep recycling them, but even something built of recycled materials can be beautiful or at least green.

The editor from hell is not the one who rejects you, but the one who tortures you with the likes "I will get back to you in two weeks," but never does. Broken promises are like shards of glass: they go deep inside and cause damage to both parties.

Question: Why was my story or poem or book rejected?

A short answer:

Your story wasn't rejected because it was bad, but because other stories were better.

A longer answer:

Your story wasn't rejected because it was bad, but because other stories were better for this publication in this editor's mind at this time.

A boy met a girl and they got married.

Is this a story? If not, why not? Well, it has all the attributes of a story: protagonists, plot, action, and even romance. I'm not going to run a poll, so let me answer this question myself. It's not a story because it's missing a conflict and is missing complications, and neither of the protagonists wants something.

A boy met a girl. They decided to marry, but the evil president-for-life wanted to marry her himself. The boy defeated the president-for-life in a Twitter duel, but he was mortally wounded. Since the couple didn't have medical insurance, they couldn't afford the healing potion. The girl traveled to Canada, bought the healing potion at a huge discount, and healed the boy. The boy and the girl got married.

Better? Well, only the editor can tell.

I love characters who have no names, no body features, and no clothes. So, I can get right into what they are doing and why.

Aim high. Start with the tier-one magazines and the best agents. If you get rejected, edit your work and aim high again, if not higher.

Don't argue with the editor or reviewer. It's a waste of your and their time, and it will create nothing but animosity, even if you win this argument (though you won't).

If you will not write down any junk that comes to your head, you will never begin. If you don't edit, you will never succeed. If you edit too much, you will never finish. If you don't send your work out, you will never get published.

Read others to learn from their mistakes, but your own mistakes will be infinitely more valuable if you recognize them.

Know that you are the best writer in the world but allow the ignorant

editors to discover it by themselves.

Don't make other writers jealous: don't post your unpublished works in a publicly accessible forum. Besides, many editors would consider it already published and reject you.

My sure-shot cure for the writing block: I bang on the keyboard with my eyes closed. Not surprisingly, it's my best writing that no one wants to read.

You don't have to be the RMS Titanic to miss the tips of the underwater obstacles, and sink.

Squeeze any water from your writing until it runs blood. A drop or two of tears, be that from pain or laughter, is OK.

If I could succeed in publishing, while writing in my second language, so can you, a native speaker.

Remember, the readers will like you most until the moment they have to pay for your book. So, make sure their money is well spent and their love lasts.

Also remember, flash is the champion of fiction because word for word, it delivers the most punch.

Writer, you are not alone. Our numbers and influence grow, and the readers deserve to read us. Don't abandon them.

THE OJA&L MASTERS SERIES  
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MARK BUDMAN  
FLASH FICTION

# INTERVIEW

ASSOCIATE EDITOR PAMELYN CASTO

## INTERVIEW WITH THE MASTER:

### MARK BUDMAN

READ DEEPER AND HAVE MORE FUN

*Mark Budman is a first-generation immigrant to the us. an engineer by training, he currently works as a medical interpreter. His fiction has appeared in Catapult, Witness, World Literature Today, Mississippi Review, The London Magazine (UK), McSweeney's, Painted Bride Quarterly, and elsewhere. he is the author of the novel My Life at First Try, published by counterpoint, and co-editor of immigration-themed anthologies published by Ooligan Press, Persea, and the University of Chester (UK).*

**Casto for O:JA&L:** Welcome, Mark. I thought I was excited to hear about your latest book, but it turns out there's more than one new book to be excited about. You're so creative and busy that you're difficult to keep up with. But always worth the effort.

As you know, your anthology (co-edited with Susan O'Neill and released in March of this year) is *Short-Vigorous Roots: A Contemporary Flash Fiction Collection of Migrant Voices*. I look forward to exploring that one and from what I've read so far, it's fascinating. I also look forward to reading your latest book, to be released in October this year, *The Most Excellent Immigrant*, **available for preorder**.

I particularly love what I read on the back of the book: "There is a secret that we immigrants never share with the natives: a good immigrant adapts to a new country, while a most excellent immigrant makes the new country better." I think you've done your part in making your new country better with all your many accomplishments.

Tell us a bit about this new book. I'm particularly interested in how you made use of magical realism (a genre I find fascinating). Are most of the stories flash fiction length?

**Budman:** Thank you for your kind words and willingness to interview me, Pamelyn. My newest short story collection, *The Most Excellent Immigrant*, is dealing with the subject I'm most interested in—immigration. All the stories are interlinked by that subject, but some of them are interlinked even tighter, by having common characters involved in a common quest, the pursuit of a magic elixir of youth. The certified interpreter of dreams and afflictions affectionally known as *deda*, or super-grandfather, an immigrant, is the protagonist, while Penelopa, a charismatic con woman, and her side-kick Piotr, also immigrants, are his nemesis. A few more human, not-so-human, and totally non-human creatures are ready to kill for the pillow. Every character in this collection of twenty-two interlinked stories, human or not, is an immigrant from a place real or imaginary. Not every story is flash fiction. Some are as long as 13 pages, which is a lot for me. Of course, the idea of a youth elixir is magic realism.

**Casto for O:JA&L:** I'm eager to read it. As we know, you recently retired from *Vestal Review*, a terrific magazine you founded with Susan O'Neill. It's said to be "The Longest-Running Flash Fiction Magazine on the Planet."

How did it feel to turn over the reins after serving as editor for so long? Who or what led you to flash fiction in the first place? What are some of your favorite stories that have been published in *Vestal Review*?

**Budman:** I worked at *Vestal Review* for 20 years, since March 2000, the second longer employment in my life. The longest was my 21-year employment at IBM. My friend Sue O'Neill and I were the co-founders and co-editors. Of *Vestal Review* that is, not of IBM. When I more or less mastered my English, I wanted to publish flash fiction erroneously thinking that writing and editing something short is easier than something long. It was a huge mistake. It turned out that flash fiction was more difficult to write, edit and even read than longer fiction. But some mistakes are beneficial. I fell in love with the genre in the process. I had fun (and spent the money from my own pockets to

support the magazine like a crazy editor). I hope the readers had fun and they enjoyed the magazine as well. However, only dictators and queens stay at the helm forever (or at least it feels that way.) Sue and I decided to retire. The helm is in David Galef's and his new team's capable hands now.

As for the favorite stories from *VR*, they all are my favorites. To be more precise, let me just mention “**Just To Say**” by Nathan Alling Long, the Best Microfiction selection (2020) or “**Sleeping**” by Katharine Weber that was made into a movie.

**Casto for O:JA&L:** Both are excellent pieces. You said in the introduction to *You Have Time for This* (2007): “Rich, literary fiction can never be completely understood, by writer, by editor, or by reader. Various possible interpretations are always possible. That’s why authors need intelligent readers to cooperate in the process of making sense of a text.”

Do you think this is what separates literary writing from mainstream or commercial short-shorts? Do you think this is important in most outstanding flash fiction pieces? The need for intelligent readers to co-create the text? How can a reader become an active vs a passive reader?

**Budman:** The authors usually work alone, but their readers are many (or so we hope). Even if not all the readers interpret the work differently, still the chances are there will be more interpretations than one. Just the sheer number of those vs. the single interpretation of the author will enhance the text. The critic (and most readers are critics) can see what even the author misses or construes the plot and the characters in an unexpected way. Everyone wins. That applies to any work of fiction and maybe even non-fiction.

As for the readers who do just speed-read, they mostly waste their time. Read deeper, pause, re-read, behold the life unfolding in the text, and you will gain more intellectual satisfaction, learn something new, use your time more productively, and simply have more fun.

**Casto for O:JA&L:** Excellent advice to readers.

What are some of the major mistakes made in stories *Vestal Review* had to reject over the years? What made those you published stand out?

**Budman:** Most submissions we saw were reasonably accomplished and decent. The major mistake for the author as I saw it was to make their work boring (not intentionally, of course). The winning stories had a “wow” factor build-in for me. For flash fiction, it was often the ending. Read “Just to Say” and “Sleeping,” and you will notice that. The ability to compress the text and imbue it with meaning also deserved a “wow.” At least from this former editor.

**Casto for O:JA&L:** You say the success of a flash fiction piece was often in its ending.

Can you say a bit more about that? O. Henry-type endings are still being written but stories with this sort of ending are difficult to get published. They have been done so frequently that readers have grown tired of them. There’s much, much more to the ending of “Just to Say” than the typical and simple O. Henry-type twist ending. Can you name some other stories that have that “just right” sort of ending?

**Budman:** Certainly. How about “**The Huntress**” by Sofia Samatar?, a magic realism story published in sadly defunct *Tim House* magazine? The ending is truly hunting, a fine conclusion to a fine story. Or “Housewife” by Amy Hempel. Just 43 words. It’s funny and poignant. Do yourself a favor to read both.

**Casto for O:JA&L:** I see you have published a Chinese/English edition of Best American Flash Fiction of the 21st Century. This you edited with Dai Wei Dong and Tom Hazuka.

What prompted you to publish a Chinese translation? Was it opportunity or desire that was primary in the choice? And while we’re at it, please name other works you’ve written that you’d like our readers to be aware of. You’ve been such a prolific author and your work is always interesting.

**Budman:** Well, that’s easy. The Chinese market is huge and bringing American flash fiction to them is doing much-needed service to both countries’ reading communities and to world peace.

As for my writing and books, I have several dedicated pages on my website, [markbudman.com](http://markbudman.com)

*The Most Excellent Immigrant*

*My Life at First Try*

*The Shape-Shifters Guide to Time Travel*

*The Armor Thieves of Berengaria*

*Short, Vigorous Roots*

*Confessions Of Immortal Migrants*

I try to be prolific because life is short and I have too many unwritten books.

**Casto for O:JA&L:** That's wonderful that you've been so creative. I'm sure there are more fascinating books to come. Mark, interviewing you has been such a pleasure. I thank you so much for this opportunity.

**Budman:** The pleasure is all mine, Pamelyn.

### About the interviewer:

**Pamelyn Casto**, twice a Pushcart Prize nominee, has published feature-length articles on flash fiction in *Writer's Digest* (and in their other publications), *Fiction Southeast*, and *Writing World* (and elsewhere). Her essay on flash fiction and myth appears in Rose Metal Press's *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction: Tips from Editors, Teachers, And Writers in The Field* and her 8,000-word essay on flash fiction is included in *Books and Beyond: The Greenwood Encyclopedia Of New American Reading* (4 volumes). She also has a 5,000-word article on flash fiction as the lead article in the new book *Critical Insights: Flash Fiction*. Casto's new book *Flash Fiction: Alive In The Flicker* (A Portable Workshop) is available now. Subscribe to her free online monthly **FlashFictionFlash newsletter** (first issue published in 2001) for markets, contests, and publishing news for flash literature writers. **Casto is an Associate Editor at O:JA&L.**

MARK BUDMAN  
FLASH FICTION

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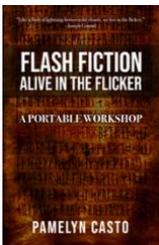
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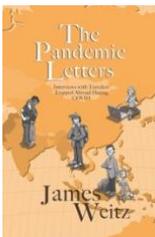
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**Casto**, twice a Pushcart Prize nominee, has published feature-length articles on flash fiction in *Writer's Digest* (and in their other publications), *Fiction Southeast*, and *Writing World* (and elsewhere). Her essay on flash fiction and myth appears in Rose Metal Press's *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction: Tips From Editors, Teachers, And Writers in the Field* and her 8,000-word essay on flash fiction is included in *Books And Beyond: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of New American Reading* (4 volumes). She also has a 5,000-word article on flash fiction as the lead article in the new book *Critical Insights: Flash Fiction*.

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