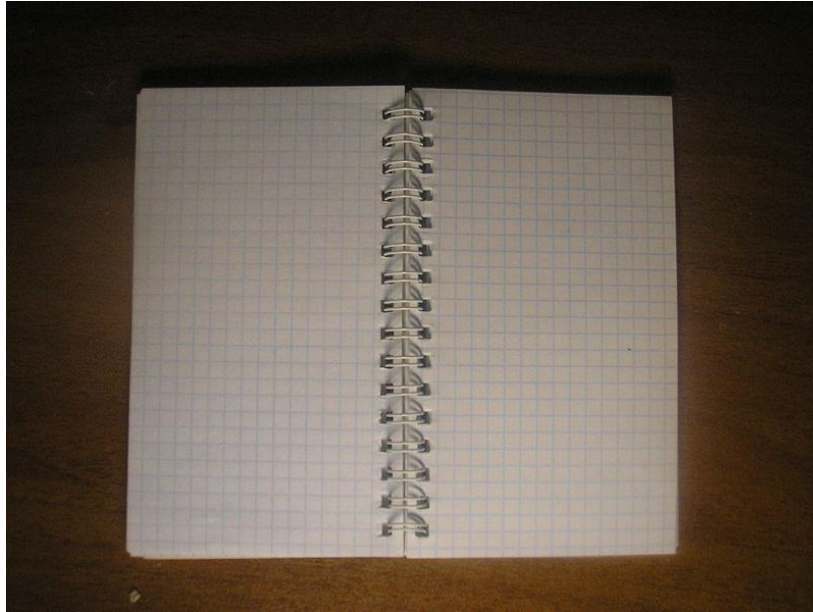


# The Fiction Partner Challenge

## W.M. Akers



Brian looked at his teacher, Mrs. Applegate. He looked at the girl sitting next to him, whose name he was pretty sure was Stacey. He looked back at his teacher and then squeezed his face into the most horrified expression he could manage.

“What do you mean we’re going to write a story together?”

“Just what I said,” said Mrs. Applegate, whose eyes said she was tired of having that discussion. “You write one sentence, then Stacey writes one sentence. In fifteen minutes, you have a two-page story, and you’ve both learned something about teamwork.”

“What if I don’t care about teamwork?”

“This is school, Brian. You’re required to care about teamwork.”

“Do I get a say in this?” asked Stacey. “Because I’m opposed to it as well.”

“Just listen to her!” said Brian. “She says stuff like ‘opposed to’ and ‘as well.’ I don’t want to write with anybody who talks like that. She’ll probably make us write a story about ponies who have a tea party and argue about grammar.”

“Well I bet you’re going to want to write about ninjas who ride around on robots and fight other ninjas who ride on dinosaurs.”

“That is a pretty awesome idea.”

“Forget it. We’re not doing this.”

“Uh, Stacey?”

“What?!”

“Mrs. Applegate left. I think we *are* doing this.”

Stacey took her glasses case out of her book bag, handling it like it was as delicate as TNT. She unfolded her glasses and pushed them onto her nose, hoping her precise movements would convey how dissatisfied she was with the state of education in America. Responding to her precision, her tidy clothes and good posture, Brian slumped as low as he could and scratched his knee through the hole in his jeans.

“This stinks,” he said.

“Yes. Yes, it does.”

She took out a pencil, a ruler and a sheet of paper. Brian’s jaw dropped as he watched her draw a border on the page labeled:

*Stacey Whitfield and Brian Cantor*

*Mrs. Applegate’s Class*

*Wilmington Elementary*

*Eighth Grade*

“I haven’t seen anybody make a heading on a paper since third grade,” he said. “Are you a robot?”

“Why do you want to know? So you can put me in some stupid science-fiction story?”

Before he could answer, she put up her hand to silence him. “Forget it. We need to get to work. What are we going to call this masterpiece?”

“I liked your idea. We’ll call it, ‘The Ninjas That Rode Around On Robots And Fought Other Ninjas Who Rode Around on Dinosaurs.’ Whoa! Are you really writing that?”

“No.”

Stacey pursed her lips as she wrote out the title in graceful cursive font.

*Autumn In Vermont*

“That’s a terrible title.”

“It’s a neutral title. What we do in the story will either make it great or terrible. I’ll get us started with a little scene setting.”

She wrote: *Gold, crimson, orange and brown—the leaves of the forest glimmered in the crisp morning sun.*

“Now you write a sentence. Don’t screw it up.”

“I don’t see how I could possibly make that worse.”

Brian wrote: *Gold, crimson, orange and brown is also what the ninjas were wearing, to camiflage themselves in the trees.*

"I thought we weren't writing about ninjas," said Stacey.

"I know. I fixed that."

"Well that's not even how you spell camouflage."

"How do you spell it?"

"I don't know, but that's not right. Go look it up." While Brian fumbled with the dictionary, Stacey quickly scratched out another sentence, trying to make it as long as possible.

*Far below the ninjas, newlyweds Glenda and Bertram walked arm-in-arm, looking so happy and content and joyous that the ninjas hearts melted, convincing them to leave the woods forever and never ever ever return—but what the ninjas didn't know, and the husband didn't know either, was that the wife was hiding a terrible secret.*

"This is lousy writing," said Brian.

"Excuse me?!"

"You say that they're happy and content and joyous. Those all mean basically the same thing. It's redundant."

"I like adjectives."

"Then you must like bad writing, too."

"Be quiet and take your turn."

Brian took the paper, scowled at what Stacey had written, and set about fixing it.

*The secret was that Glenda's name wasn't Glenda, because nobody is named Glenda, and also that she was a robot who was programmed to kill anything that tried to kiss her—which was a problem, because Bertram was leaning in for a big ol' smooch, which would put him out of the misery anyone would feel if their name was something as stupid and awful as Bertram.*

"At least his name isn't Brian," Stacey said. She ripped the paper away from her partner, clutched the pencil in her fist, and scrawled, her handwriting getting sloppier with every word.

*Luckily, Bertram (whose name was much better than something idiotic like Brian) was a master robot scientist and had no trouble disarming his beloved's ticking time bomb, right before embracing her and delivering the most exquisite, fantastic, superb, amazing, magnificent kiss of their entire lives.*

Brian wrote: *It was also the last kiss of their entire lives, because just when they were finishing their disgusting kiss, Bertram and "Glenda" were both run over by a herd of*

*stampeding wooly mammoths that were being chased by dinosaurs and a bunch of flying sharks and some pirates.*

Stacey wrote: *The whole herd of moronic creatures kept stampeding, right off a cliff where they fell and died, much to the amusement of the group of picnicking girls on the rock above, a trio of sisters who liked to solve mysteries in their spare time, and who were currently working on the mystery of The Boy Who Was So Immature He Couldn't Even Write A Simple Story.*

Brian wrote: *'The only real mystery,' said one of the girls as she snacked on something gross like cucumber sandwiches or ants on a log, 'is how anybody could think that boy was immature, since the stories he writes are totally awesome and have lots of different kinds of robots.'*

Stacey wrote: *'Be quiet, Hilda,' said one of her sisters (who only kept Hilda around because they felt bad about how she was wrong all the time) 'and listen: This boy is so immature, so wrong about everything, and so totally impossible to deal with that if he doesn't be quiet and follow the teacher's instructions, we're both going to get F's and the whole world is going to end.'*

With an evil grin, Brian took the pencil and began to write: *And then, before Hilda, who was actually right about everything, could even finish her awful snack, the entire world blew up and the story ended forever.*

*THE END!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

As Mrs. Applegate picked up everyone's stories, Stacey squeezed her fists so hard her fingernails made imprints in her palms. Sweat poured down her neck as their teacher read, and she braced herself for the first F of her entire academic career. And then she heard something strange—a sound so unfamiliar that it took her a few moments to recognize: laughter.

Mrs. Applegate's shoulders were still shaking as she set the paper down onto Stacey's desk. She had written:

*This is a laugh riot! A+!*