

SCHMOOZING

"Schmooze" comes from the Yiddish *shmusen*, meaning "to chat," which in turn is derived from the Hebrew *shemu'oth*, which means "rumors." The etymology contains both the harmless aspect of schmoozing—friendly talk—as well as its less appealing side—gossip mongering. The creative

writing graduate student at the Associated Writing Programs' annual conference who gushes to the eminent writer, "I *loved* your latest. Can I buy you a drink?" is schmoozing, even if she is entirely sincere in her praise. That same unknown writer who repeats every word of her conversation to entertain an editor who just *may* publish her short story is schmoozing again (see "Conferences, Colonies, and Residencies"). To schmooze is tacitly to declare that you have some inadequacy that you cannot address yourself; you need the help of the person you are schmoozing.

Obviously, schmoozing takes place in all walks of life, and to their credit, most writers seem to feel morally tarnished (though not permanently) by the activity. Nevertheless, literary schmoozing goes on in a number of different guises. There is, for instance, the time-honored gambit in which a writer feigns interest in a publisher's latest offerings merely to have an opportunity to introduce the subject of his own work. Likewise, the editor of a new or obscure magazine may play the sycophant in order to wheedle a contribution from a big-name writer. There is also a kind of cautionary schmooze, in which writers of higher rank cater to someone of lesser renown based on the speculation that while that person is not yet worth a full-scale schmooze, he or she may soon be. Perhaps the most distasteful schmoozing goes on among writers who are putatively friends, but whose real interest in one another is as allies against some other, more noxious rival. It is here, where insincerity is barely masked as goodwill, that the regrettably petty nature of so much of the business plainly emerges.

The great irony is that schmoozing is frequently less effective than a writer might have wished. Granted, there are authors whose chief talent seems to be their ability to work a room, but unless a writer has at least a modicum of talent to back up her cocktail party skills, she probably won't get far. And those few talented writers who don't actively schmooze will probably still get published eventually, even if not as widely or as well as their more socially skillful peers.

Still, attendance at any writers' conference might lead one to believe that the writer with absolutely *no* tendency to schmooze is rare indeed. Even Charles Bukowski, the very emblem of the Anti-Schmoozer, is revealed in his published correspondence to be as adept at flattery, cajolery, and name-dropping as anyone in twentieth-century American letters. Thus, creative writers might as well confess their gift for blarney and take as their motto: *If Bukowski schmoozes, so must we all.*