

SU magazine professor finds formula

By Howard Smallowitz

Frank Kendig, divides the world into two kinds of people: those who know how a refrigerator works, and those who don't. Kendig, a visiting M. Lyle Spencer professor at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, is definitely one who does.

The former executive editor of Omni magazine, Science Digest and the Saturday Review of Science seems to know the scientific facts behind everything. For instance, the reason why he is balding. Or why we perceive his corduroys as rust-colored, but his flannel shirt as light green. And what makes his neatly-trimmed beard brown.

Now a freelance writer, Kendig, 40, commutes from New York City to Syracuse every Tuesday to teach two classes: Reporting public affairs science and magazine writing. A major part of his teaching concerns breaking into the publishing industry.

For example, Kendig tells beginning writers that in order to get published they must make their manuscripts stand out from the hundreds of others on an editor's desk. He recommends submitting stories on oddly-sized or colored paper, or even making them smell.

Math major

Kendig's own career began with a degree in mathematics from Villanova University in 1962. He wanted to be a musician, but his father insisted he

personalities

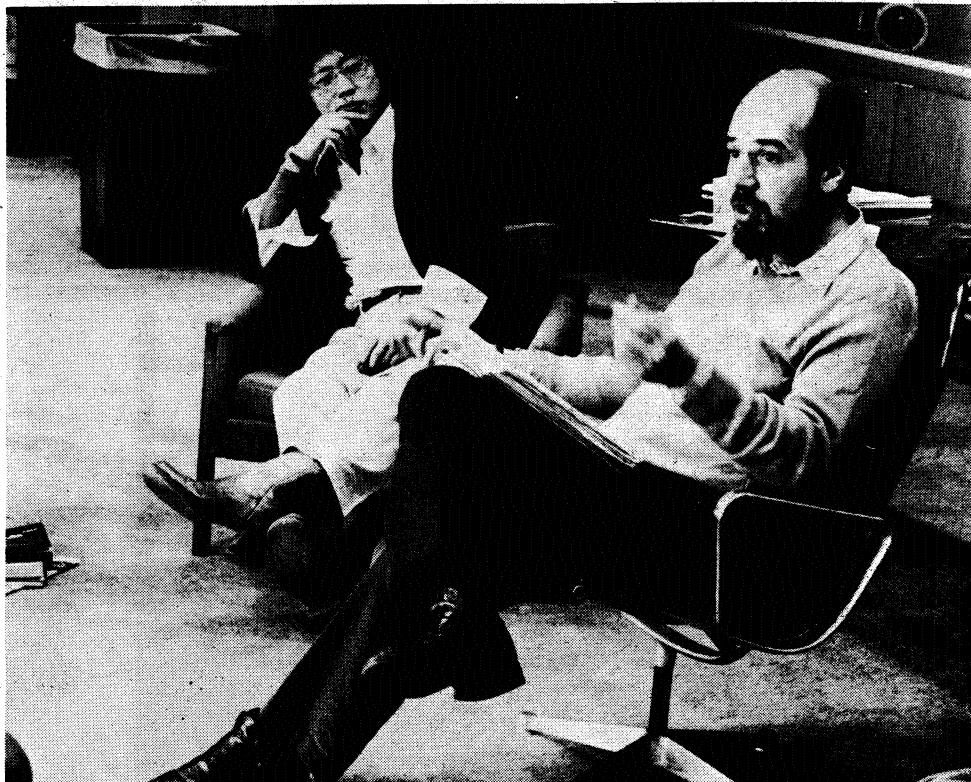
attend college instead. "I had to major in something, so I started out to be an engineer," he said. "I hated engineering, because three days a week I had to stay until 7 o'clock in some dingy lab. Then I discovered that the pure science majors, mathematics and physics (majors), didn't go to labs. They did everything theoretically. All you needed was a pencil and paper."

In 1964 Kendig received a master of fine arts degree in writing from the University of Oregon. "I decided I wanted to be a novelist — that's what happens to a 20-year-old. I was in love, and wanted to write poems and all that."

After a short stint as a page at NBC television, Kendig became a staff writer with Time-Life Books, an experience he compares to graduate school.

Holding an unlit cigarette, he told of the time he wrote the same four-line caption 24 times. The 25th time, he resubmitted the first version he had written. "They not only took it, they wrote me a note saying, 'Why didn't you do this all along?'"

He lit the cigarette, using a lighter with the Omni logo stenciled on the side, and said, "By the time I got out of there I had pretty well-developed skills. But beyond that, I knew a lot of people.



Visiting professor Frank Kendig, who developed the popular science magazine Omni, speaks to a class in the Newhouse I lounge.

Photo by L. Lamade

"I had seen the world pass through the doors of Time-Life. Four years later, when I went to freelance, the first place I went was to all the Time-Life people who were elsewhere."

Word of mouth

Writing, he said, "is a word-of-mouth business. Don't let anyone else tell you that it isn't. I sell stories by calling up editors who I know."

He crushed his cigarette, though he had taken only one puff from it, and said, "If you want to sell a story to an editor, if that editor lives next door to you, if you worked as his secretary, if you cleaned his office, if you did something that gives you a reason to talk to him, you have a much better chance of selling a story to him than the best writer in the world."

From 1967 to 1971, Kendig was the editor of the Saturday Review of Science. Later, he became editor of Science Digest.

In 1978, Bob Guccione, publisher of Penthouse magazine, asked Kendig to develop a new national science magazine. The result: Omni, the now-celebrated magazine of science fiction. Kendig remained Omni's executive editor for its first 18 issues.

English traditions

He attributes Omni's success to a "huge market," which was largely ignored by the publishing industry. "The people who ran the publishing houses were people who came out of business, or worse, English traditions. The problem is that they're the very people who are petrified of science.

"My theory is that there was a general fear of the subject matter. I think the rationale was, they weren't interested in it, so why would the public be interested in it."

He insists that anyone is capable of understanding science. "We make a big effort in our educational system to turn people off to science. We make it dull, we make it boring, we color it in all kinds of ways. I think you can take any sixth-graders and make them never comfortable with a scientific thought for the rest of their lives."

But his students seem to be comfortable with his style of teaching and brand of journalism.

Terry Siegel, a junior magazine journalism major in Kendig's magazine writing class described him as "incredibly upfront. He doesn't care if he goes against traditional ideas or ways of thinking."

Lisa Buck, a senior selected studies student in Kendig's reporting public affairs science class said, "He'll tell you things that are almost taboo. You almost feel like he's giving away trade secrets."

Kendig has learned the "secrets" of the trade as author of or collaborator on more than two dozen books, 150 magazine articles, three film scripts and two musical comedies in addition to his work as magazine editor.

"I think to go into the profession, you have to have some reason other than making money or having a job. Some people love to write — the most valid reason."