Write about what you don’t know

By Madonna Dries Christensen

Fledgling writers are often urged to write what they know. Good advice? Well, it’s a launching pad, but if taken literally it can back you into a stifling corner.

Writing from familiar territory has merit and can bring acclaim. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings had an affinity for and a commitment to writing about her adopted state’s frontier days. Through observation while living in the Florida woods, Rawlings developed an authentic sense of place and language. She used this knowledge in two novels, *The Yearling*, which won the 1938 Pulitzer Prize, and *Cross Creek*.

Former lawyers Erle Stanley Gardner, Scott Turow, and John Grisham found success writing courtroom dramas.

Atlanta-born Margaret Mitchell didn’t grow up on a plantation, but her ancestry (Irish Catholic, Scots Irish and French) mirrored her heroine, Scarlett O’Hara. The men in Mitchell’s background fought in Irish uprisings, the American Revolution, and the Civil War. Having grown up listening to battle stories told by ancestors and other veterans, she put what she knew about the subject into *Gone With The Wind*, a 1937 Pulitzer winner.

Nelle Harper Lee claimed that *To Kill A Mockingbird* was not autobiographical, but she clearly wrote what she knew about racial bias in the south during the 1930s. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, became the fictional Atticus Finch, and the diminutive neighbor boy, Dill, depicted young Truman Persons (later Capote).

Using an old typewriter belonging to her father, Nelle and Truman whiled away the hours writing stories. *To Kill A Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize, but Lee subsequently published only two essays. Now in her eighties, she recently broke her dry spell with a short piece for *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

Somerset Maugham’s education qualified him as a doctor. He never practiced medicine, but many of his books and plays reflect his medical background. Although *Of Human Bondage* reads as semi-autobiographical, he called it “more invention than fact.”

Many others write about what they don’t know but can find out

The prolific James Michener had a stable of aides who supplied material for his historical sagas. Zane Grey was a dentist in Ohio when he began writing about gunslingers and lawmen and posses. Fortunately, Stephen King hasn’t actually lived through the horrifying events depicted in his novels, and...
only Anne Rice knows if she is personally acquainted with vampires. These writers researched what they didn’t know.

Learning about any topic is as near as a computer, a library, or newspapers and magazines.

A writer’s group is fertile soil for gleaning information. Among the members might be a police officer, a fencing coach, a plumber, a chef, all of whom would be flattered if asked for their expertise.

When a woman in my writer’s group told me about riding the Orphan Train as a child, I became intrigued. After some research I wrote a short story, using a fictional child aboard the train. Themata literary journal published the story and nominated it for the Pushcart Prize. A nonfiction piece about the Orphan Train later appeared on Dana Literary Society’s Online Journal.

Donna Singer, a feature writer for Florida Monthly, never knows what assignment she’ll get, but it’s nearly always a subject about which she knows little or nothing; she must do her homework. She says, “With every story I learn something new and exciting.”

Although I don’t know a weed from wisteria, I’m a frequent contributor to Florida Gardening magazine. My husband, a Master Gardener, helps with that subject. I’ve written about a Healing Garden, a Reading Garden, Memorial Gardens, a Children’s Garden (fun, fairies, fantasy), and how to use antiques as focal points in gardens.

As writers, we must blend what we know with what we can learn and make it appear seamless. We must read, study, delve into the past, and let our imaginations run free. We must gather information and mull it. Then it’s time to work magic with words, soaring far beyond what we know in any literal and limited sense of the word.

Extra Innings #19

In which we celebrate writers, their enablers, and daffodils of every race, color and creed

Madison, Wisconsin May 2011

Our stars: Madonna Dries Christensen, Sharon Kingan Young, Den Adler, Jacob McLaughlin, Rex A. Owens, and Jim Herod.

Inky poet: Bonnie Conway

Proofreader: Guinness MacFarlane

Officer Mousers: Whisper and Lacey

Sentries: Sprecher and Pixie


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Back issues available at:

www.dcs.wisc.edu/lsa/writing/extrainnings
The touch of a letter

By Sharon Kingan Young

My husband Don and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary in 2008. During that time I discovered two boxes of handwritten love letters tucked away in their original boxes. With both Don and I attending colleges miles apart, those letters kept our long-distance love alive. It was 1955, and many of Don's letters were sent via airmail at 6 cents each. A first class stamp was 3 cents. All those years later, rereading those letters with Don's promises of love was a perfect prelude to planning our anniversary celebration.

My letter-writing began much earlier than our love letter exchanges. I was in junior high and had friends in several cities in Illinois and Iowa. I wore a path to the nearest mailbox with letters to Gloria, one of the first friends I corresponded with. Now almost 60 years later, we are still corresponding, but e-mail is our method of staying in touch.

Now in my 73rd year, and despite the wonders of the electronic world, I am mourning the death of hand-written letters. They have virtually disappeared with the advent of the age of technology. I used to be eager to go to the mailbox, but now the box is mostly filled with credit card applications, bills, advertisements, catalogs, and the few magazines I subscribe to. And I have reached that certain age when the inevitable pieces of mail often appear, ads for hearing aids, long-term care insurance, funeral services, and supplemental insurance.

I haven't been forgotten completely. I still receive birthday greetings and an occasional letter, and I consider Christmas a bonanza when cards and letters fill my mailbox.

I have accepted the fact that we are in a changing society, and I am moving along with the changes. I joined the electronic world years ago and use e-mail every day. It's efficient, fast, and necessary—an excellent way to correspond in my personal and business life. And the Internet is a vital part of my research for information needed, not only as a writer, but for many other projects.

But those early letter-writing days made an impact on my writing life. Letter-writing was a warm-up for me, practicing the art of the written word and developing skills. I attribute my love of handwriting to Miss Warner, my third grade teacher, who taught the Palmer Method. Pen in hand, bent over the white lined paper, dipping the pen in the filled inkwell on my desk, I practiced the cursive writing method with rhythmic motions. There are few Miss Warner's in the 21st century, lovingly teaching the art of hand-writing.

I fear most that the future will not include hand-written love letters, and archives of the famous will not likely include letters at all. And you won't find copies of e-mails stored in a box tied with a ribbon.

I admit I'm hanging onto the old-fashioned tradition of letter-writing, despite all I've said about embracing the electronic world. But the tradition is as vital today as it was 50 years ago, keeping us connected to family and friends. As a computer savvy senior, I'm simply making a plea to bring back letter writing. The electronic means of corresponding is here to stay, and I'll keep sending those e-mails, but the computer and other methods of corresponding can coexist. My granddaughter Emily is a college freshman, and I am delighted that as a 21st century young woman, she finds time to pen her grandmother and grandfather a note.

I challenge you to pick up a pen and a sheet of paper and compose a letter to a friend, a child, grandchild, a parent or grandparent. Or better yet, rekindle the romance in your life and write a love letter, and seal it with a kiss--SWAK!!

P.S. I promise your touch will be felt.

Sharon Kingan Young resides in West Des Moines, IA. Her work has been published in a Cup of Comfort For Weddings: Something Old, Something New, a piece titled "Small Packages of Love" in Chicken Soup for the Coffee Lover's Soul; a piece titled "Coffee Talk," and in magazines including The Iowan, ByLine, Collectors News, and Grit. Sharon directed the Green Lake Christian Writers Conference in 2008 and 2009, and co-directed in 2010.
By Den Adler

I "discovered" the Camera Obscura Gallery in 1990. It was a delightful fine-art photography gallery crowded into a two-story, 1906 mission-style duplex across Bannock St. from the Denver Art Museum. Since then I've subscribed to its PFA Newsletter: *Photography in the Fine Arts Quarterly*. In it, Director Hal Gould announced Camera Obscura's new shows, provided a biography of its artist, listed exhibitions at other galleries across the nation, gave an Auction Report about fine art photography sold by Sotheby's, Christie's, Swann, and others; and finished with "Quarterly Quotes," a bit of wisdom about photography or art.

In his Jan. 2006 issue, Hal quoted Aristotle: "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." On the cover of that issue was Phil Borges's 2005 image of "Rufo, Age 7; Yabelo, Ethiopia." I've seen it reprinted in books. Hal has also shown the work of famous photographers such as Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston.

The last issue came as a shock in early March; it announced that the gallery would close April 30, and the final exhibition--by Gould and associate director Loretta Young-Gauthier--would open with a reception on Friday afternoon, March 25.

I had been back to Denver and Camera Obscura only once, in 2006, but I'd always read the newsletters and knew I could visit there if I ever got to Denver again. And now I wanted to see the nationally known gallery and visit Hal Gould once more before he closed this wonderful place he’d opened in 1979. My wife, Judy, and I rode Amtrak's California Zephyr to Denver.

Late that Friday morning, Hal was still hanging photographs for his final exhibit.

"Yes, Hal's upstairs," a friendly helper told me, "but he won't have time to talk."

Once I got upstairs, however, Hal smiled and started telling me the story of the photograph he was hanging. It wasn't that he remembered me after only two visits in 21 years; that was just Hal's way.

The first time I had talked to him in 1990, I confessed I couldn't afford fine art photography.

"But it doesn't cost anything to look," he told me.

Internationally known photographer Phil Borges of Mercer Island, Wash., who has had five shows at Camera Obscura, was quoted in an article in the previous Sunday's *Denver Post*:

"Hal--you could tell that he is just in love with photography. When you would go into his place and he would bring out his prints, he was like a little kid showing you his new bicycle or something."

I snapped several pictures of Hal hanging his photos, worrying as he stretched his 91-year-old body between a short steel ladder and the wall. When I showed him my favorite shot of him, Hal asked, "Will you send me a print?" (Digital photography is great: You get instant gratification and can share the image immediately.)

Half an hour before the reception was to start, Hal still had five framed pictures to hang. "Anything I can do to help?" I asked. "No," he said, but after a moment he smiled and added, "Well, maybe you can catch me if I fall."

By 4:30 Camera Obscura was crowded, but even then Hal took time to pose for me under a portrait of him several decades younger (on the wall at far right in this image). I took this photograph of Hal in his trademark bolo tie and vest talking to someone at the center of the reception crowd. "I hope we see each other again," he said.

I left soon after, though I hated to. I kept thinking of the words of John Grant, a member of the Denver Art Museum's photography advisory board, quoted in the *Post* article: "It's going to be so odd to wake up and think, 'Well, you can't go there anymore.'"
Meandering with Madonna

One county’s greatest generation

Author’s note: The letters used here were written before political correctness became a part of our language. Altering the text to conform to today’s standards would tamper with authenticity. Nor did I correct spelling errors. I donated a copy of this scrapbook to the World War II Museum in New Orleans.

By Madonna Dries Christensen

Osceola County, Iowa, occupies only 397 square miles in the Northwest corner of the state. In the 1940s, like other towns and cities, this agricultural community sent its youngsters to fight a war in lands they never expected to see. Barely more than children, they turned off the tractor or rose from their school desks and headed for the enlistment office. As green as field corn, they joined friends who’d been stocking shelves at the market, pumping gas at the filling station, working as secretaries, or plugging a probe into a receptacle and saying, “Number, please?” at the telephone office. Some were in college; others already ran a business. An earlier generation of men who once believed they’d fought the war to end all wars squared their shoulders and held back tears as they put sons and daughters aboard trains and waved them out of sight.

As the war accelerated, Mrs. George Rehms began clipping from the weekly paper any news related to these young people. She and her husband had two sons in the service. Later put in a scrapbook by someone else, the clippings range in size from two inch items about a serviceman home on furlough to a long account from a soldier who spent three terrible years in a prison camp in Manchuria after being captured at Bataan. There are letters in full and excerpts, reports of Bronze Stars, Silver Stars, Purple Hearts, and too many headlines reading: Killed In Action.

The letter-writers rarely complained and often advised Mom not to worry. The most requested items were letters, cigarettes, candy, and socks.

Bursting with what might have been false bravado, J.E. wrote: Sometimes I have to get down in the foxhole as the Germans try and lob a few artillery shells. We’ve got about all the snipers cleaned out of this area now. The boys don’t have much love for snipers. When we locate their position they come out with their hands in the air yelling “comrad.” Well, they don’t want to come yelling comrad at me. A person can’t take any chance with them. I don’t believe in taking prisoners.” Later wounded at Normandy, J.E. received a Purple Heart.

My brother wrote to his wife: I see by Mom’s letter that you were worried by the Jap’s claim of singeing some of our transports and that you went to church and prayed. It’s a good thing someone else prayed because I hope to tell you I prayed. I saw a couple of them go down myself. When we left San Francisco we went to Pearl Harbor and from there to Eneivetok, thence to Vlihi in the Carolina Islands, and as we passed Yap and Truk we had some Jap planes come over. We got a few of them, and the rest of the yellow birds turned tail and ran. We also had a sub attack but our escort destroyers took care of him in a hurry. From Vlihi we went to Okinawa where our outfit got it. The Jap suicide planes are the real thing, as I saw it happen. We brought Marines back from Iwo Jima and also 300 Jap prisoners which we left at Guam. I got some Jap money, will send it later.

During one period, 13 members of the medical unit of the Iowa National Guard were MIA in North Africa. They were later found in German

Continued next page
and Italian prison camps. Letters from the prisoners kept townsfolk covertly updated on their whereabouts, condition and, finally, their release. Photos tell their own stories:
* A woman seated next to pictures of her seven sons in uniform.
* J.C. Penney’s two display windows filled with pictures of uniformed men and women.
* A smiling, youthful airman beside a headline announcing he’d been killed in England. On the day word reached his parents, they received a letter from him saying that he was okay and that Christmas packages were coming through.

Among the scrapbook’s last entries near the end of the war is this letter to the woman saving the clippings.

Dear Mrs. Rehms:

Recently your son, Technical Sergeant Elmer L. Rehms, was decorated with the Air Medal. It was an award in recognition of courageous service to his combat organization, his fellow American airmen, his country, his home, and you.

He was cited for meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flights in the Pacific from December 10, 1944, to April 2, 1945. Your son took part in sustained operational flight missions during which hostile contact was probable and expected. These flights aided considerably in the recent successes in the theatre.

Almost every hour of every day your son, and the sons of other American mothers, are doing just such things as that here in the Pacific. Theirs is a real and tangible contribution to victory and to peace. I would like to tell you how genuinely proud I am to have men such as your son in my command, and how gratified I am to know that young Americans with such courage and resourcefulness are fighting our country’s battles against the Japanese aggressors. You, Mrs. Rehms, have every reason to share that pride and gratification.

Sincerely, George C. Kennedy, General, United States Army, Commanding

Another man, George Braaksma, returned home and began farming; he and his wife raised nine children. In 1983, he bought Mrs. Rehms’s two to three thousand clippings at her household auction and painstakingly glued the pieces chronologically into a scrapbook. He offered to let people stop by his house to see the collection. Interest ran high, and the local printing company produced a short run of copies. They sold out, as did a second printing. The scrapbook is 140 pages, spiral bound and about the size of a U. S. road atlas; its content, however, circles the globe.

Newspaper Clippings of Osceola County WWII Veterans could be the most thorough record of one county’s participation in any war. Knock on any door across America during World War II and you’d find someone touched by the battles raging across Africa, Europe, and Asia. But it’s unlikely that another collection like Mrs. Rehms’s would be found.

**Ink**

When writing a business letter black ink seems to be official where you usually begin with “Dear sirs: a note to inform you there is a huge discrepancy.”

Red Ink in your account ledger is a flame-thrower hurled at you--Time to call in a CPA hoping his wily ways staunch wounds so your business remains solvent.

If you’re talking romantic sepia is the ink of choice, smooth, rounded words with silk shoulders, news running off the paper to you in soft, tea-colored prose with swirls.

For everyday letter writing blue ink has an ambient effect, reminds of calm skies all around gullible on most stationery swallowed up by the receiver.

Now take green ink. It’s for Sundays, the day he wrote his son in college every week with an old fountain pen, fine handwriting coming from home in assuring letters he still misses.

**Bonny Conway**
In this issue I'm reviewing the new film, Paul. The film is full of references to other sci fi classics, so I thought I'd review a couple of those, too.

**Paul: A-**

Making a sci fi film can't be an easy task. But a sci fi comedy must be even harder. Jokes and references could fall flat, the story could be stupid, but *Paul* does everything right.

The film stars Simon Pegg and Nick Frost as Graeme Willy and Clive Gollings, a couple of sci fi geeks who come to America on vacation. Their plan is to visit Comic Con and travel cross country to the country's UFO hot spots. The Comic Con scenes are great; it's fun to see Pegg and Frost geek out.

As they start their journey across country, they witness a car crash in front of them. They get out of their RV, and out of the shadows comes a grey alien who needs to get off Earth and back home. Voiced by Seth Rogen, Paul is one of the coolest computer generated (CG) creations I've seen in a long time. It didn't take long for me to forget he was CG. He fits into the film perfectly.

*Paul* turns into a chase film as government agents, led by Jason Bateman's Agent Zoil, try to capture Paul and, well, like any agents in these types of films, kill him.

Kristin Wiig is much better in this than anything else she's been in. She usually annoys me terribly, but she was good in this. Pegg and Frost's chemistry is great as always, as they are real life best friends. This is also the first film they've written together.

The script is great, full of references ranging from *Star Wars* to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to *Mac and Me*. There are some great cameos in the film as well: Jeffery Tambor, Jane Lynch, Sigourney Weaver and a great third act appearance from Blythe Danner. There's even a voice cameo from Steven Speilberg, which was a huge pleasure for me, being a fan.

This film is a lot of fun, full of great references and good humor. *Paul* is the funniest film of the year so far. Also the final line is perfect-- and reveals what happens after the alien ship leaves.

**Raiders of the Lost Ark: A+**

I first saw this, the greatest adventure film of all time, in the seventh grade, and I was in awe the entire time. This film defines perfection.

Harrison Ford really brings Indiana Jones to life. I think he's my favorite film character of all time. The fedora, the whip, heck, even the brown jacket are icons.

There are so many great scenes-- the idol, the giant boulder, the ark, the desert chase, the "sword fight"-- I could go on.

This film really has everything you could ask for and more. This is how a blockbuster is meant to be made. I honestly think this is Steven Speilberg's best film ever. This film stands the test of time. There will never be another film quite like it.

**Back to The Future: A+**

The trilogy follows Marty McFly and Doc Brown. It's easy to see why people love these characters so much as soon as the first film opens. Marty (Michael J. Fox) is a really cool guy, and Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) has that wacky scientist vibe that works perfectly with these films. Plus he's a genius, creating a time machine out of a DeLorean.

* The first film is the best of the trilogy, a classic, with a unique idea.
* I have always had a huge love for Westerns, and I’d rank the third film in the series as second best. It's one of my favorite sequels.
* The second film takes place mostly in the future and is somewhat of a repeat of the first towards the end but still a lot of fun.
Mail call in the bullpen

Conway raves for E.I.’s gang of great writers

Dear Marshall, What a great thing to see my limerick in your Extra Innings, along with my other tales! Thank you so much.

The baseball article by Pat Goetz was really good. I wanted to be a baseball star when I was a kid! We played after school every night too!


The story jar article (Andrea Lozinsky Schoenthal) was super. In later years, when my Dad would come home for a visit, we had a similar deal. But it was my Dad's hat, not a jar, and one of us five girls ahead of time would write those dumb things we said at home that you wouldn't really want the public to hear and put them in the hat. We would reach in and pick one and read it aloud and laugh our heads off.

Madonna's story about Beverly Cleary was super.

But the last one called “My Mom's Stubbies” was off the wall awesome. Oh my, did it make me cry a bit. Very touching, very. I adored this article. I can see that green ink. I want that green ink. I want to write letters with it, maybe to my grandgirls. That green ink calls to me.

It takes me to a time we have all but lost, when father's would take the time to write those letters. You were blessed beyond blessed to have those two parents. I wish they were alive, I would write via you and tell them. Instead I will just say, I am sure you are the person you are because of a wonderful upbringing.

I am honored to have my articles in this issue with your work. Love,

Bonny Conway

Votes still coming in for essential books

COACH,

Here are my 12 books.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, by Betty Smith
Black Beauty, by Anna Sewell
Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte
Any gothic novel by Phyllis Whitney
Ditto Victoria Holt
The Dollmaker, by Harriette Arnow
To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee
The Homecoming, by Earl Hamner Jr.

Cinderella (ancient folk tale)
O Pioneers, by Willa Cather
The collected works of Edgar Allan Poe
Common Ground, short story collection by Ann Pancake
I also was not not all that impressed by THE GREAT GATSBY
Andrea Schoenthal

How to fit a whole novel into a single paragraph

Last issue, at the end of Rex Owens’ fine column on “hunting the elusive agent,” I challenged readers to send a one paragraph summary of their novels. Lynn Kuhns answered the call (and will receive a copy of my book: Give ‘Em What They Want: The Right Way to Pitch Your Novel to Editors and Agents, written with Blythe Camenson. With Lynn’s kind permission, I print her summary here.

The Lake Has Wings
By Lynn Kuhns

A contemporary literary romance/adventure novel

In Hawaii, Morgan Kohler, a newly divorced mother of a preteen son, hopes to escape the complications of big-city corporate work by returning to her cherished childhood lakeside cottage and her Wisconsin family. Nearly 50 years old, alone and homesick, she wants to make that tiny cabin her year-round home, find a man to love for life, and share things that are simple, beautiful, fun and honest with her son. Over a year at that cottage near that lake, Morgan again becomes disappointed and lonely. With nature’s beauty and brutalities shaping her laughable, romantic and frightening adventures in the raw and wondrous four seasons of the upper-Midwest, she learns about herself... and the essence of that place we all call home.

“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.” -- Nelson Mandela, A Long Walk to Freedom.
Barbara Ann Burris has a piece in one of the latest in the Chicken Soup for the Soul Series, *My Dog’s Life: 101 Stories about all the ages and stages of our canine companions* (2011). Barbara’s piece, “Mending Hearts,” depicts a wayward German Shepherd who “brought our souls to life again” and “taught us that even badly broken hearts have the capacity to mend.”

Barbara, who lives in a log cabin in rural Wisconsin with her husband, Bruce, and their Belgian Tervuren pup, Alex, was kind enough to mention me in her biographical sketch, which was good for my soul.

**My bad!**

I am pleased to see my article in this issue, as foretold. However Allegany is not spelled correctly. It is odd, I know, but the Allegheny Mountains and River are spelled one way but Allegany County, New York this way.

**Andrea Schoenthal**

*Andrea had it spelled right until I “fixed” it. Sorry, Andrea.*

**Owens spawns another published article**

Our columnist and one of the world’s newest published novelists, Rex Owens, just placed a story in *SPAWN*. (Check it out on Google.) No dough, he reports, “but the exposure in a national writer’s publication is worth it.)”

Rex recently attended the Writer’s Institute in Madison, which he rates as “excellent as usual.” He says he learned a great deal, “especially from the literary attorney, Paul Levine, from L.A.

You may remember that we mentioned Rex’s forthcoming novel, *Murphy’s Troubles*. It’s another month closer to publication.

Here’s a taste:

Ian Murphy has a secret. He’s has been a member of the IRA for nearly 30 years, wrote the IRA terrorist training manual *The Green Book*, mourned his best friend’s death from British bullets and lost his brother-in-law in a bombing. Ian’s niece, Brianna, suffered third degree burns in a freak accident while playing in a Peace Zone in Belfast. Ian bears responsibility for all these events and the senseless deaths of innocent Catholics and Protestants deep in his soul.

After thirty years of bloodshed the dream of a united Ireland remains out of reach. Ian smashes his car into a British roadblock in an attempted suicide but lives through the debacle. He is betrayed by journalist Eileen Donohugh, his former lover, who publishes an expose of his life in the IRA.

Surprisingly the British government unconditionally grants Ian amnesty for his IRA activities. A priest convinces Ian to seek atonement by helping Sinn Fein negotiate the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The IRA feels betrayed by Ian’s sudden abandonment and wants him eliminated. Ian’s friend and long time IRA commander, Kieran Fitzpatrick, is sent to do the job.

Will Kieran betray their friendship or follow orders to execute Ian Murphy?

Mischievous Muse Press

www.worldnouveau.com

"I was sure that I was going to write stories myself when I grew up. It's important to put it like that: not 'I am a writer,' but rather 'I write stories.' If you put the emphasis on yourself rather than your work, you're in danger of thinking that you're the most important thing. But you're not. The story is what matters, and you're only the servant, and your job is to get it out on time and in good order."

**Phillip Pullman**
For our revered elders*

Life-saving love-making tips for seniors

1. Wear your glasses to make sure your partner is actually in the bed.
2. Set timer for 3 minutes, in case you doze off in the middle.
3. Set the mood with lighting. (Turn them ALL OFF!)
4. Make sure you put 911 on your speed dial before you begin.
5. Write partner's name on your hand in case you can't remember.
6. Use extra polygrip so your teeth don't end up under the bed.
7. Have Tylenol ready in case you actually complete the act.
8. Make all the noise you want...the neighbors are deaf, too.
9. If it works, call everyone you know with the good news!!
10. Don't even think about trying it twice!!

'OLD' IS WHEN...
You are cautioned to slow down by the doctor instead of by the police.

'OLD' IS WHEN..
'Getting a little action' means you don't need to take any fiber today.

'OLD' IS WHEN...
'Getting lucky' means you find your car in the parking lot.

'OLD' IS WHEN...
An 'all nighter' means not getting up to use the bathroom.

'OLD' IS WHEN...
You're not sure if these are jokes.

‘OLD’ IS WHEN
I set this in large type so we both could read it.

With thanks to Larry Tobin

The last word on aging
A distraught senior citizen phoned her doctor's office. 'Is it true,' she wanted to know, 'that the medication you prescribed has to be taken for the rest of my life?’ 'Yes, I'm afraid so,' the doctor told her. There was a moment of silence before the senior lady replied, 'I'm wondering, then, just how serious is my condition because this prescription is marked 'NO REFILLS'.

* “elder” = anybody older than Coach
By Jim Herod

“You can still drive in the daytime,” Dr. K said to me a year ago.
He told my wife something else, “Don’t let him drive on unfamiliar roads at night.”
Humph! What audacity! For a year, I lived with my wife’s admonishment, “No. You were told not to drive at night!”
“He didn’t say that to me!”
In truth, I was uncomfortable driving at night. As a result, at my annual eye exam in the early spring of this year, I said, “Okay. Let’s have the cataracts removed. Send me to a man young enough to know all the new stuff and old enough to have lots of experience.”
“I’ll make an appointment for you with Dr. D this afternoon.”
“This can be done so quickly?”
“Can you see him in two hours?”
“Well, yes. Okay. Let’s do it.”
I worried that everything was moving too fast.
Dr. D caught me reading his diplomas, certificates, and awards hanging on the wall in his examination room. For a moment, we appraised each other.
“Dr. D, there’s something I need to say.”
He was about the age of my sons, and I had no intention of being rushed into anything by some young whippersnapper. “I could get along if I lost the ability to feel, smell, taste and hear. But I need to see.”
He nodded. “Sure.”
“I read, I write, and I run.”
“You write?”
He reached for my wrist to check my pulse.
“Yes, I write.”
“Are you published?”
“I have two little novels on Amazon, as well as a co-authored text in mathematical biology”
“Who is your favorite author?”
“My favorite author? Phillip Caputo.”
He turned to his nurse. “Write that down.”
That’s how it started. Every time I’ve been with Dr. D since, we spend more time talking about literature than about ophthalmology. Even on the morning when he was about to wander around in my left eye, he wanted to talk.
My head was completely covered with a white cloth when I heard a man’s voice.
“Dr. D, is that you?”
“Yes, Jim,” he replied.
“Have you had your morning coffee?” I asked.
He laughed. “I’m fine.”
I saw the cloth pinched up in front of my left eye and scissors start to clip a slit.
“Be careful with those scissors so close to my eye.”
The scissors kept going.
“I guess we are not going to talk about literature this morning.”
“Why not? I’m reading Cutting for Stone.”
I could see something pulling my eyelids open wider. “That’s good. Are you enjoying it?”
“Look just a little to the left of that light you see.” Things blurred. “I usually don’t read acknowledgements, but I did with this one. I know three of the doctors he cites.”
I felt so easy, so relaxed. “Really?”
And, that’s the way it went.
Three weeks later, I was under the cloth again.
“Good morning, Jim.”
“Good morning, Dr. D.”
“How are you doing?” Clip, clip, only inches above my right eye.
“I’m good. Let’s change the subject. The first part of Unbroken is about Zamperini’s preparation for running in the Berlin Olympics. Were you ever a runner?”
“Some. It was never my sport.”
“I’m a little surprised that my bones allow me to continue running.”
“I’m a little surprised that your brain allows you to continue running.”
It was over in ten minutes. My one thought was, “I can see!” I said it aloud, in celebration! “I can see!”
I should not have waited so long to do this.
Thus says the Lord: This is what I commanded my people: Listen to my voice; then I will be your God, and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways that I command you, so that you may prosper.

But they obeyed not, nor did they pay heed. ...When you speak all these words to them, they will not listen to you, either; when you call to them, they will not answer you.”

Jeremiah 7

how you suffered for your sanity
how you tried to set them free.
They would not listen
they're not list'ning still
perhaps they never will.

“Vincent” (Starry, Starry Night), by Don McLean

‘and the signs said ‘The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls,
and whisper'd in the sounds of silence.’”

“Sound of Silence,” Paul Simon

We live in an ADD ward, with 24-hour distraction filling our heads with worse-than-no-sense.

The Greeks produced Socrates, the divine fool; the wiser he became, the less he knew. We produced Charlie Sheen, the man with a million twits following his twitterings, proclaiming that he knows everything.

For a long time, as a writer, I was concerned about people listening to me. When I began writing novels, the message was the thing. I wanted to teach folks how to live and what to think and believe.

I was 22 when I wrote the definitive novel about love, war, fidelity and abuse of power.

Fortunately, I’ve gotten a whole lot dumber since then.

Gradually (all learning with me has been gradual), I came to believe that the primary job of the storyteller is to tell a good story. The story should be true to life (not to “facts”). The people in all their humanity should be compelling. Above all, the reader should see, hear, feel, and care.

From giving readings, I’ve learned that folks sometimes draw meaning from my stories. I’ve been blessed to have folks tell me how profound my insights were about this and that. At least half the time, the insights they’re so kindly attributing to me had never occurred to me.

“Thanks,” I say. It’s easier than trying to explain.

The reader has a perfect right to “misunderstand” or “read into,” of course. As soon as she reads it, it becomes her story, not mine.

I should do more listening than talking, more reading than writing (but still a good bit of each, I think, because that seems to be what I was put here to do).

Focus, discipline, silence, these will sustain me.

I’ve climbed down off the preacher’s ambo and turned the job of directing the universe over to someone else.

I feel a whole lot better now.

“Be still and know that I am God.”

Psalm 46:10

* From “Hills Like White Elephants,” by Ernest Hemingway