Alex asks: How can I become a writer?

By Suzanne Beecher
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DearReader, Friday, October 7, 2011
Alex, your question reminded me of the man I met when I'd been standing in line for three hours at LaGuardia airport, waiting to get my canceled airline ticket changed. When he found out what I did for a living, he popped the familiar question. "How can I become a writer?"

I told him to go to the store, find any kind of notebook and then carefully choose a pen that makes you feel like a writer when you hold it in your hand.

"Why, the words will practically write themselves when you use that pen; you can just feel the inspiration. Pay for the items--but if you happen to forget don't fret--I hear jailhouse books do well these days. Then head home and sit in a comfortable chair, open the notebook and start writing. It's really that simple."

"Absolutely," I replied. And I meant it. You become a writer by writing. It sounds way too simple, but it's true. The hard part of simply writing is allowing your mind to wander. My mind is full of creative ideas and interesting stories. The tricky part is how to get them down on paper.

When I'm stuck, I start writing with no purpose in mind. I'm not debating whether the idea I'm writing about would make a good book or column, or whether it's just plain stupid. 'Who would want to read about this?' Filling your mind with questions like that chases away creativity.

Alex, the secret to becoming a writer? "Simply start writing."

Go to www.dearreader.com for a daily dose of Suzanne’s wit, warmth, and wisdom and excerpts from new books, all for free.
In a dream, you can do things you can't in real life.

So, I'm lying in bed waiting for a program to begin. A man stands to talk, but suddenly there's a raucous noise. I tell him to hold up, then cross the room to where the noise is and reach down, check cords, then yank one from the wall. The noise keeps going, and I'm miffed because I know I'll have to reset my clock. The second cord pulled fails to stop the noise. The third cord fails. Finally I wake enough to realize my alarm is screaming at me, but I just let it scream as I think back and realize I'd been down on my knees to check the cords and stood back up without any help. I liked that feeling. Then I got out of bed to shut off the clock and nearly fell because I was so stiff from lying in one place too long.

Oh, how your mind can fool you.

Give me a few more days and I won't have that buzzer-screaming dream because I won't set an alarm. Well, on special occasions I might, but Willie Nelson better be standing at my front door waiting to take me to Scotland.

In dreams you can marry two disparate things, so who's to say Willie Nelson might not show up and offer to take me to Scotland? Don't know why, but I've got a soft spot in my heart for Scotland, and I've always been a fan of Willie Nelson.

In more than a quarter century of interviews, my interview with him remains my favorite, even if I was so scared waiting to talk to him, I couldn't have told you my name.

But, I digress. I'm known to do that. I won't be setting an alarm because as of Thursday, I'll be retired. Officially retired. By some golden blessing of the god of wishes, I get to continue writing this column. So, if you have anything you'd like me to know, just drop me an email at mcsalt@frontiernet.net.

Word of warning, though. DO NOT call me before 10 a.m., and even then you'll be slicing it fairly thin. My only plans so far for retirement are to stay up till 3 and to sleep till 10. If you haven't noticed, there are a lot of good movies on the tube early, early in the morning.

I wanted to write a going-away column telling you what it's meant to me to be part of your lives for the past 12 years. I had beautiful phrases thought up, crafted perfectly to say exactly what I felt. There are people I've met I don't think I can live without, and I wanted to tell them how I feel.

Then I read it aloud. I always read what I've written aloud to make sure I haven't said anything insidiously stupid. By the time I had to make that decision, though, I couldn't see. Walls of water flushed my eyes, making sight impossible.

I can't do that to you. Just know you mean a lot to me and it's been wonderful chatting with you on Sunday mornings.

Now, however, I'll be able to eat lunch at Big John's in Bode with my friend Dee anytime I can catch her home. I don't have to wait until there's a story in that area to cover, then arrange my going or coming home around lunch time.

When I'm in Laurens, I can actually take the drink that's been offered at The Pub. Don't know what kind of a drink it will be. Likely a Diet Coke. That's just about all I drink.

And when I'm driving south through Boxholm, I can pull over and just look at the school yard ball field. My dad played ball there for years, and there are a lot of good memories in that little town. Good friends, too.

Good memories count. Good friends count more.

So long friends, until the next time when we're together.
In which we celebrate writers, their enablers,
and all who share their leftover candy

Madison, Wisconsin November, 2011
Our stars: Madonna Dries Christensen, Jacob McLaughlin, Rex A. Owens, Den Adler, Perry Stone, Norma Sundberg
Web Weaver: Celeste Anton
Poet: Bonny Conway
Hilarious headline hunter: Ann Meyer
Fisher of the Internet: Steve Born
Editor-in-Coach: Marshall J. Cook,
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and the Odyssey Project

No added sugar, carbs, trans-fats, or taste. Contains your recommended daily dose of nouns, verbs (transigent and intransigent), gourds, adjectives, adverbs and other artificial sweeteners, pronouns, antinouns, prepositions, propositions, conjunctions, contradictions, contractions, eruditions, bloviation, chiasmus, charisma, metanoia, paranoia, trace metaphors and the occasional halfwitticism.

Back issues available at:
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The doting grammarian
Oft-overlooked rules of English
1. Always avoid alliteration.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. Avoid cliches like the plague.
4. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
5. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
6. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
7. One should never generalize.
8. Don’t use quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
9. Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary; it's very overly superfluous.
11. Understatement is always best.
12. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
13. Sentence fragments? Never!
14. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
15. The passive voice is to be avoided.
16. Go around the barn at high noon if necessary to avoid colloquialisms.
17. Even if a mixed metaphor soars, it should be derailed.
18. Who needs rhetorical questions?
19. While a transcendent vocabulary is laudable, one must nevertheless keep incessant surveillance against such loquacious, effusive, voluble verbosity that the calculated objective of communication becomes ensconced in obscurity.
20. In a sentence, the nouns has to match the verbs.
21. Proofread your work, so you don't leave some out or forget to finish
22. Run-on sentences are really bad because the reader saturates and what you really should be doing is using commas and semicolons and even periods to break the sentence up into more digestible chunks.
23. To have been using excessively complex verb constructions, is to have been bopping the literary baloney.
31. A friend I spoken with recently told me he been forgetting his helper verbs.
For Veteran’s Day, I salute my brother David, who served in Vietnam. He’d been an easily frightened child, fleeing anything noisy; airplanes, barber’s clippers, food mixer. He outgrew those fears; his military record speaks for itself, as do his years spent tilting at windmills, public and personal.

He went off to war a boy, naïve and irresponsible. He came home a man; burdened by what he'd participated in and witnessed. His gray eyes registered a sad and frightened look.

Like many veterans, David didn't tell war stories. His closest friend for many years was unaware that David earned the Bronze Star. When prodded by an older brother for the reason for the medal, David said that although he had a desk job, he once volunteered to go out on patrol. There, he lay down covering fire while the rest of his group retreated.

David’s letters to me indicate that he supported the war while there. He later discarded his medals, joined Vietnam Veterans Against The War, and worked for VISTA, United Farm Workers, and other causes.

I’ve written about David on my website and in a book, The Quiet Warrior. I do not make him out a hero; I simply tell his story.

At David’s memorial service, a young woman rose to speak. No one seemed to know who she was. She said, "I didn't know David well, but he seemed so kind."

I can't think of a nicer way to be remembered. Ironically, I believe David learned to be kind through his experiences in one of the unkindest acts known to man—war.

Here, David’s stepdaughter, Penny Tharp Ozinga, reveals the impression he left on her.

Today marks the 15th anniversary of the passing of my dad, David. He died young, at 50, of a heart attack. And while the years have continued to tick by since his passing, his spirit and talents live on in the paintings he did that are in my home, in the face and disposition of my sister Rosie, and in the love of art and all things musical and visual that exists in me. My dad was an artist and an avid music lover. He painted on canvas; he was a writer and poet; he loved taking pictures, and he was an avid music fan. I spent the years of my youth looking at his 1,000 + record collection and absorbing the images of the 60s and 70s art and music culture.

I watched him paint on the weekends in his little makeshift studio in our house. We wrote poems together and talked about writing, philosophy, politics, and how to be of service to those less fortunate.

As a child and teenager, I created my own artwork, mainly pen and ink drawings and designs, and he would hang things up, or give me his praise and critiques. I became serious about photography after he died, but I know that my style and sense of imaging are inspired by him and what he taught me. I feel that his Bohemian spirit lives on in me and my desires to experiment, to find beauty in both the traditional and the strange and abstract, and to create images rather than just capture them.

Even though the man, the father, the friend as I knew him is gone from this realm, I am blessed that he passed on his love and style and talents to me, and it keeps him alive not only in my memory, but in my heart and in how I choose to see the world and make sense of it. May all that I create bring honor to him.

Once, a lady told me if you write a page a day you will be 365 pages into your novel at the end of a year. Boy, was she wrong.

She should have said if you write a page a day and if you don't spend four days editing each page. I just spent six hours writing and editing, which in this house is the same thing. Some times I rewrite every sentence after if appears, some times a paragraph, other times a page, once in a while a chapter.

I started typing when I couldn't read my own hand the next day. Now my typing is almost as bad. Getting better with practice, which is to say I make faster, more efficient typos hidden in words almost spelled right.

And punctuation is just stuck here and there. I wished I had never loaned out my Penguin book on language and punctuation. It was a fun book to read, reference and learn from.

Apparently someone else thought so, too, enough to keep it. Most likely one of the girls took it to school, where it never found its way home.

Did you say, "Yeah, blame it on the kids" with a smile?

I do, without mad or malice. My artist book on "How to Draw Faces" disappeared for almost a year. It was discovered in the trash when their mom made the girls clean their room. This is why a rational concept of community property is invaluable, especially when kids are involved. For example my children and grandchildren reason that, if it can be found in the confines of our home, garage, yard or vehicle, it is as much theirs as mine. Their first thought when coming through the door for a visit is to go over and open the refrigerator and then check the cabinets.

My set of ink tibs are scattered across three counties. My old computer was confiscated. Tools have been left around the yard wherever they where used or might be used in the future.

Anything I have the kids are welcome to. However it boggles my mind how 500 sheets of typing paper can be used in one afternoon. And I wonder what lead them to believe dead batteries in a CD player were appropriate conductors to exchange for the new batteries in the TV remote.

**When I got my electric wheelchair,**

**Jimmy rode it through the house, stopped right in front of me and proclaimed, "I really want this when you die grandpa."**

Naturally I told him when I die it was his. I’ll go back to making typos now, right after I stick a note on the calendar to buy a new used Penguin Language and Punctuation book on the third of next month. Later, during those efforts of writing, my subconscious will be thinking of the kids, wishing they were here, playing, exchanging batteries, going through the icebox. Bless you and yours, Paw Joe

**POLICE BEGIN CAMPAIGN TO RUN DOWN JAYWALKERS**

That’s going too far!

**The Missouri Muse**

Perry “Paw Joe” Stone

**What’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is...yours**

Never squat while wearing your spurs

There are three kinds of men:
The ones who learn by reading,
The few who learn by observation, and
the rest of them, who have to pee on the electric fence and find out for themselves.

Never slap a man who's chewing tobacco.

Never kick a cow chip on a hot day.

Never miss a good chance to shut up.

**The wisdom of Will Rogers**

Thanks to Pat Fitzgerald
by Norma J. Sundberg
The only remembrance I have of how I came to write An Odd Fable is my mind just starting to fashion the story, complete with a little princess who solves a serious situation with a dilapidated drawbridge, after a session in Claudia Greenwood’s creative writing class at Kent State University-Ashtabula many years ago.

I sent the story out, and it kept coming back. Finally I sent it to Esther Leiper, poetry editor of Writer’s Journal. [Profiled in the last E.I.] We’d connected in the 1980’s when the publication was titled The Inkling, sharing letters and poetry through snail mail. She made some suggestions. I followed most of them, including eliminating a brother, Prince Mirth, who had no particular function in the story.

Discovering a contest for children’s stories to be published by Linden Hill, in a volume titled, Beyond Time and Place, I entered An Odd Fable. It made the cuts for the final 25 and was published in 2004.

**It only took 30 years to finally see print!**

In the meantime, as a member of TWA, Tallahassee Writers Association, I met Lee Raymond, who has an Independent company, CyPress Publications. I asked him to look at the book to see if it was publishable. It was. I had to wait a year before the book was released from Linden Hill, the contest publishers. Esther Leiper asked to do the illustrations. In the process of editing and getting the story ready for publication, Lee sent me this message:

> I really liked your skill at phrasing throughout the manuscript. It reads more like poetry than prose; it's mellifluous. The sentences feel like they're rolling and flowing out of your mouth as you read. Readers often aren't aware of such techniques on the part of the writer; they just know that they like what they just read, without realizing why. The sign of really good writing.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson's book, The Frugal Book Promoter, was key in giving me good information as well as confidence in marketing the book.

**A friend listened to me going on and on about my publishing success and said, "Oh! we all know you like to brag!"**

**“NO, I told her. It's called MARKETING! And we all know that marketing is a whole 'nuther world' altogether??!!**

An Odd Fable was published in 2007 with CyPress Publications. Norma J. Sundberg has been writing on and off for nearly 50 years. Off during pregnancies, on between those events. Those 10 little souls offered much grist for the writing mill: for instance, a weekly column, “Nidbits from Norma’s Nook,” in an Ohio newspaper, The Free Enterprise, for 10 years. Norma has had poetry and articles in a wide range of publications, including Writer’s Journal, Christian Science Monitor, and little and literary magazines, as well as feature articles in the Tallahassee Democrat.

An Odd Fable is Norma’s first children’s book. A volume of poetry is the next scheduled project.

**Coach’s note:**

**Speaking of marketing...**

Recently I agreed to take on the project of grouting the main bathroom tub in our home. I had tried to use easy-apply silicon that you squeeze out of a tube like toothpaste. Three times I applied the white magic stuff, and three times it welled and pulled away from the tub/wall surface. Finally, I compared the visitors’ bathroom with the major bathroom and learned I had been using the wrong product. I needed grout.

I consulted the omniscient Google for instructions on how to apply grout with the skill of a journeyman craftsman. Next I bought tools designed specifically for grouting and consulted my local hardware guru on the process.

It took me a week to remove the old material, allow the wall to dry out, apply the new, and allow the grout to dry, remove the excess and clean the tub. I found myself resenting the grouting project because my skill level was minimal, I derived no pleasure from it, and I had to move to the visitor bathroom for daily needs.

As I worked away, it struck me that this was the perfect solution to writer’s block. Just find some activity that drives you nuts, and writing looks pretty good in comparison. How often have you said to yourself, ‘I'd rather be writing’? Grouting catapulted me to that place.

While in the final day of my project, I learned another unexpected lesson. I watched how I applied the grout and spread it out, then used a wet finger to smooth it out until it glistened. I discovered that grouting the bathtub was a metaphor for my writing process.

Slapping the grout on roughly is like the first draft of a writing project, getting the words down on paper without any internal editor-- almost automatic writing. The next step is smoothing the grout out and removing the excess. This is like the second or third draft stage. Is the story arc right, is there tension, is there a sense of place, are the characters credible? Most importantly, have I used the delete key enough?

The final step to grouting is to use water and smooth it out until it shines. In writing it’s the step where you ask beta readers to give you feedback, and then you polish the piece for publication.

After the final clean-up on the seventh day, my grouting project looked pretty good – not professional – but acceptable. The test will be if it remains water tight. In writing this is equivalent to publishing and waiting for reviews and sales.

Although my grouting project did rob time from my writing, I did learn two important lessons. The first lesson was one approach to attacking writers block, and the second was that a household project can be a metaphor for writing.

Here’s hoping the tub remains watertight and, when published, my novel receives critical recognition and, of course, sales.

There’s no doubt that I’ll keep writing.

JUVENILE COURT TRIES SHOOTING DEFENDANT

Sure cheaper than a trial!

Will Rogers on getting older

Eventually you will reach a point when you stop lying about your age and start bragging about it.

The older we get, the fewer things seem worth waiting in line for.

Some people try to turn back their odometers. Not me; I want people to know ‘why’ I look this way. I've traveled a long way, and some of the roads weren't paved.

When you are dissatisfied and would like to go back to youth, think of algebra.

You know you are getting old when everything either dries up or leaks.

Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.
Coming back to Wisconsin from New York recently, I rode Amtrak’s *Pennsylvanian* into Pittsburgh. There, around midnight, after a four-hour layover, I bedded down in a sleeping car on the *Capitol Limited* for the trip to Chicago.

That layover in Pittsburgh brought back memories of an earlier trip.

Except that its sleeping car rates were almost double the *Capitol’s*, I would have ridden Amtrak’s other New York-to-Chicago train, the *Lake Shore Limited*. Its route goes up the east bank of the Hudson River, then along the Erie Canal and Lake Erie through Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. The route’s owner, the New York Central Railroad, used to advertise it as the “Water Level Route—You Can Sleep”—a slam on the competing Pennsylvania Railroad’s *Broadway Limited* route to Chicago through Altoona and the Allegheny Mountains, where the locomotives had to work extra hard.

**My train, the Pennsylvanian, follows that old route over the mountains and around world-famous Horseshoe Curve west of Altoona, PA. It’s a beautiful ride.**

The *Broadway Limited* was still running in 1983 when I made my second around-North America train trip. (The first was in 1976, a personal bicentennial tour of the country). I rode the *Broadway* to Pittsburgh, arriving near midnight to discover that the “station” was a double-wide trailer between the train-shed and the old Pennsylvania Railroad station, which was being refurbished into condominiums.

That year’s layover, like this year’s, had me waiting for the *Capitol Limited*, but then I was headed the other way, to Washington, D.C. My train wouldn’t come through until almost 8 a.m., which meant enduring eight hours on the station’s hard wooden benches.

Pittsburgh’s Amtrak station is now a simple but functional room in the basement of the old depot. The classic building is now 12 floors of condos called The Pennsylvania. In its basement, the wooden benches I remember have been replaced by padded seats, which are much more comfortable.

In the waiting room, I recalled the night I spent there in 1983, when a Conrail policeman walked over and said he’d heard I was spending the night there. I was sure he was going to tell me the station was closing and I couldn’t stay.

Instead he said, “Those benches aren’t comfortable, and we have a train sitting outside that isn’t going anywhere until after your train leaves in the morning. If you’d like, I’ll let you into one of the coaches. I’ll wake you around five so you have time to wash up before your train to D.C. gets here.”

He led me to the *Pennsylvanian*, silent and dark under the train shed. He opened one of the vestibule doors, helped me and my suitcase up the steps and into the coach, and turned one set of seats backwards so I could sit with my feet up.

I thanked him, adding that I planned to write a book about my trips. “If I use your name, will you get into trouble?” I asked.

He shook his head “No.”

But I’ve always wondered. No one among the dozens of train riders I’ve told this story to has had this happen to them or heard of it happening to anyone else. And even in that more relaxed era, before 9/11 led to a huge increase in travel security, that officer’s job was to protect the train. I was a stranger traveling by coach, not in a first-class sleeping car, and he didn’t know me from any other passenger. But his willingness to take a risk and offer me space in that empty train led to a much more comfortable night.

Today, every time I ride a train through Pittsburgh, I remember that officer’s kindness, and I’m still grateful.

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*Essays from Images*

*Den Adler*

**Changing Trains in Pittsburgh, PA: 1983**

This photo, taken that night, shows the building reflecting the lights on the Greyhound bus station across the street.
In the Projection Booth
Jacob McLaughlin

The five worst movies of 2011 (so far)

This has been a great year for horrible movies. It's brought us not one but two bad Adam Sandler comedies, a handful of unnecessary remakes, and a certain sequel from Michael Bay. I know it's only November, but I've already seen five awful movies, and I really don't want to suffer anymore.

5. The Green Hornet-
The only one of these five movies that I would perhaps watch again-- but only because of Christoph Waltz. He plays the over-the-top villain perfectly. As for the rest of the movie, it's a weak film with dull performances and a bland story. As much as I like Seth Rogen, he's miscast as the title character.

4. The Tree Of Life-
What's this? A film loved by many critics on my bottom five list? This seems to be a love it or hate it film. I, for one, really didn't like it.

   This is the first, and most likely last, Terrance Malick film I have seen. This film has barely any plot and feels like watching two and a half hours of a picture album. It's an endurance test. If you watch the trailer, you've seen the movie.

   I honestly didn’t care about these characters (even though Brad Pitt is great as the father.)

   The one thing the film does right is the cinematography, which is absolutely stunning. It's a beautiful movie, but that's about it.

3. Green Lantern-
Another green bomb, the worst superhero movie of the year. The characters are one dimensional. The tragic setup is ridiculous and predictable.

   The overload of CGI in this movie is irritating.

   Ryan Reynolds is miscast as Hal Jordan. He comes off more annoying than heroic, his love interest is bland, the villain is poorly developed, as is the rest of the movie. What a piece of junk.

2. Sucker Punch-
I am not a fan of Zack Snyder. His first film, 300, was awful, and Watchmen had many flaws. But this is his worst movie yet!

   He’s supposedly is trying to make a movie about women being empowering, but the result is far from that.

   And of course, if it's a Snyder movie, you are guaranteed to have many scenes of unnecessary slow motion. It would be about an hour shorter if you cut all of the slow motion out.

   The plot is almost nonexistent. The main girl is put into an insane asylum after accidently, and very stupidly, killing her younger sister. So, she makes friends with some of the inmates who have absolutely no personality, just like her. They have a dance studio, and she’s forced to dance. We never see her dance, instead watching the ridiculous scenarios of fighting random monsters and robots going on in her head. It’s just an excuse to see the girls scantily clad.

   This would have been the worst of the year if not for ...

1. Transformers: Dark of the Moon-
I will admit right now, I didn’t watch the whole movie. There was no way that I was going to sit through another two-and-a-half hour Michael Bay stinker. The hour I did watch was just like that last two Transformers movies.

   From what I saw this was worse than the other four movies on this list combined. I’m not sorry I skipped the final hour of the robots beating the crap out of other robots that I don't care about.

   Michael Bay’s ‘humor’ is sexual, racial, and entirely painful to watch, the action sequences are boring, and the acting is atrocious.

   For those who say that this is just mindless fun, I say these abominations are just stupid excuses for entertainment. If this is the future of movies, then that is just tragic.
Bullpen Mail Call

Readers have their say on Sendak, Silverstein, & Seuss

I loved reading about the children's authors you wrote about, funny, I bought those books for our kids when they were young. I have passed them on to the grandgirls the past years. All except *The Giving Tree*. I still have that one.

Thanks again for somehow being a light in my world. You are so upbeat, and I will take note for sure. Take care.

Thanks for putting my poems in your *Extra Innings*.

Bonny Conway

I read *E.I.* this morning and want to thank you for the article on Sendak, Silverstein, and Seuss. I wasn't familiar with Sendak but now will add him to reading for Ross. Silverstein and Seuss were already on the list. I also found Susan Henderson's piece very grounding; thanks for including her article. I definitely plan on visiting www.DearReader.com

Rex Owens

Yes! Thank goodness for writers who write for real children!!

Stories Make the World Go Around,

Mary Garrett

Thank you. I look forward to receiving these.

Gus Knollenberg

I enjoyed the piece about the three S authors, Seuss, etc. Each is unique.

Madonna Christensen

Madonna draws praise, too

Really good one this time. Madonna's piece was beautiful, the poetry also. All a good read.

Norma Sundberg

It was a great issue --as always. I especially loved 'No Barriers Friendship.' It has always amazed me how Alisa remembers special friends she loves. Her first bus driver quit, and Alisa was so sad for a month. After two years the woman moved back, and Alisa saw her at Wal-Mart. She rushed up and hugged her, saying her name and crying. Beverly remembered Alisa with tears in her own eyes. She and Alisa have a wonderful connection.

Perry Stone

Just want to say how much I enjoy *Extra Innings*. You and the staff do a great job inspiring and motivating writers.

A grateful reader,

Mary R. Dunn

Freelance Writer

Uh, staff?

Thanks Marshall, always fun.

I read *Snow in August* a long time ago. Really liked it! (Have been to Prague, and grew up in NY with the Dodgers!)

Hilde Adler

Praise, 9/11 memories, and a response to Rex’s challenge

I loved your piece on Sendak, Silverstein & Seuss. How clever of you to send out this issue on Silverstein’s birthday. Loved the autumn poems. Made perfect sense to me. This little piece was my favorite:

she laundered Queen Annes Lace
and draped it over clouds to dry
then looped and knotted billows
tatting curtains for the sky

The bike story [Den Adler’s Essay on Images, last issue] caught my attention because of the highlighted quote about leaving the trail on 9/11.

On 9/11 we were living just outside of Jefferson City, MO, and between our house and town was one of these same old railroad bed trails. Joel had preschool in the afternoon but I was a bit at a loss of what to do in the morning with all this tragedy unfolding in the world. I purposely kept the television and radios turned off because I thought it too disturbing for the children—Joel was 4 ½ and Anna was 2 ½.

It was such a gorgeous fall day, crisp air, crystal clear blue skies, fall leaves just beginning to turn, it seemed the best thing to do was go walking on the trail with Anna in the stroller and Joel always eager to run free. Den Adler felt the need to leave the trail that day, and I felt compelled to go to it.

I also liked Susan Henderson’s piece on dealing with rejection. No need to say more there.

And finally to the question on the relevance of where a writer lives [Rex Owens, last issue]. Of course being Russian compelled Solzhenitsyn to write *Gulag*, just as being an American compelled Twain to write *Huck Finn*. I do think where you live and the culture from which you were grown must certainly influence what you write. It seems hard to imagine that an American could have
written *Gulag* or *Crime and Punishment* or any of those Russian novels-- just as only an American could write *Breakfast at Tiffany's* or *The Great Gatsby*.

But don’t you think it’s more than just where a writer lives? It’s not just about living in a particular place; it’s about citizenry, language, culture and what you’ve been steeped in your whole life. It’s about how the writer views the world. Isn't that why there’s an outcry when students only read just American literature in school?

Lisa Krenz

**THE JELLY MAKER**

*By Bonny Conway*

Purple grapes sweeten under honeyed autumn skies in country orchards at harvest time the jelly maker envisions ancient grapevines in the garden of Babylon

wonders if grapes taste exotic grown near soil of pomegranate, fig and quince, watered by the River Tigris

writes on his jars:

" SPOON WITH CARE DREAMS INSIDE "

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**Bullpen Bookshelf**

**There’s magic in this thief’s tale**

*“A Thief's Magic”*  
*by Monette Bebow-Reinhard*

The author had me from the first sentence, as her narrator, an undead named Arabus, tells his tale. He is a vrykolakas, for whom time is irrelevant, but he seeks to die again, to join Althea, his last mortal love.

Arabus chooses Corny, a little thief, to kill him, and Corny almost steals the story.

The author remains faithful to the conventions of the undead but goes beyond them and imbues them with fresh meaning. I felt what Arabus felt, the yearning to bite into someone's flesh-- and the overwhelming sensual release when you do.

I also get a sense of some of the drawbacks to being an immortal. Arabus knows his demons by name but cannot always control them. He can read thoughts but has learned that the thoughts of others are seldom worth listening to.

This story is not for the weak. It is vivid and evocative. The details are convincing, the writing fresh, original, and fun.

Who will kill whom? Will Arabus be reunited with Althea? I wouldn't spoil this great story even to gain the power to read minds! You can buy this story on amazon. (You don’t need to have a Kindle. You can simply download the “free Kindle reading app.”) Or email the author and promise to review it, and she’ll buy you a copy herself! She’s at: moberein@yahoo.com

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**Addendum: What else I’m reading now**

*Because of Winn-Dixie*, by Kate DiCamillo. A graceful, charming, and true story of love and growing up. Loving dogs not a prerequisite, but it doesn’t hurt.

*The Wake of Forgiveness*, by Bruce Machart. A compelling read. So far, lots of anger, lust, and desire for revenge, and I’m sticking around for the forgiveness part. Loving horses not required but also a bonus.

*Ulysses*, by James Joyce. By the time you read this, I’ll be approaching page 600 in my second odyssey through this sprawling, uproarious, outrageous yelp of a book. Don’t ask me why.

*Collected Short Stories of William Faulkner*, another rereading, to prepare for a book talk session. “Barn burning,” “A Rose for Emily,” “Dry September,” and “That Evening Sun” can teach you everything you need to know about storytelling.
Don’t wait for me to give you a copy of this book

Don’t expect an objective evaluation of Tom Crawford’s new book of poems, *The Names of Birds*. You won’t find it here.

I’ve known Tom Crawford for over 40 years, taught with him in the long, long ago at a community college in Northern California.

Fact is, I love Tom Crawford, keep him on the short list etched in my heart of the people I treasure most in this world.

He’s a sturdy man, built for hard work. Along with making poems, his work now includes cooking food for himself and Mary. (And for all I know, he feeds Walt from the same table.) He wears simple work clothes and shoes and wears his hair long and combed back from his receding hairline. (At what point do we call it “receded,” Tommy?).

Tom Crawford is not a fancy clothes and comb-over kind of man. There’s no pretense in the man or in his poetry.

I don’t claim to be any kind of expert on poetry, or, for that matter, on truth. But I do know truth’s opposite when I encounter it, and you won’t find any of that here. There’s no artifice, no phoniness.

**There is a good bit of craft, for Tom is a skilled workman, but you won’t notice it. Good craftsmanship doesn’t call attention to itself.**

I read no more than one of Tommy’s poems a day, and I read each one several times, sometimes out loud. You can read them any way you like, of course, but my method works well for me.

I’ll share one here, but just one. If you want more, you’ll know where to find them.

**TO MAKE ON OWL MAKE A POEM**

No tools required.

Not so hard if you start small, say with the beak which is entirely manageable, pinching a little ball of soft stoneware between the tool of your thumb and index finger the head begins to sprout from the spontaneous eyes the tips of the fingers just naturally make so you see immediately where the broad shoulders want to begin.

To make an owl is to forget yourself, the coins in your pockets, failed love, the fame you’ll never have.

To make an owl make a poem you have to be very nearly out of control in the squish and push and pull of it to make a poem stand up solitary for you like that and be an owl.

I’m sure I’ll buy several copies to give away. If I don’t give you one, it doesn’t mean I don’t hold you in high regard. But if I do, you’ll know I hold you in very high regard indeed. I wouldn’t give such a gift to just anyone.

You can of course buy your own copy. I highly recommend that you do.

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Bullpen Bloviations

In praise of boredom

“Because it’s boring.”
-- Novelist Haruki Murakami, explaining why he likes baseball

I have a very low tolerance for boredom. Doing nothing is not one of my talents.

I’ve been laid up with illness or injury at various stages in my life, and I put in my time, but once up, I’m my old fidgety self.

But I don’t hate boredom. In fact, I embrace it. Boredom, like writer’s block (the bastard child of boredom and fear), is actually a good thing, a gift, a goad.

Kids don’t even know what boredom feels like any more, and that’s a shame. If we aren’t bludgeoning them with more homework than is good for them, we’ve got them running from soccer practice to piano lesson to origami to yoga. Any remaining waking moments they no doubt spend twittering their tweets and updating their status on Facebook.

We stave off any hint of boredom in our own lives with endless business and business, with getting and spending and entertaining ourselves to death.

Just what are we afraid of-- that a stray creative thought might surface and demand that we entertain it instead?

Back when I was a boy (Look out! Grandpa is starting in again!), a summer day stretched out endless and empty before me, and I faced the task each sunny morning of deciding what to do.

I rode my bike. I played baseball with other derelicts on the asphalt playground. I shot hoops for hours, the wire net rewarding me like Pavlov’s bell when I swished a jumper. I pitched endless innings with a tennis ball against the garage door.

I climbed the deodar tree in the front yard. (That tree scraped the sky!)

If I had money, I walked to the corners and picked out a comic book or maybe a pack of Topp’s baseball cards and something disgustingly bad for me to eat. (Do they still even make Mountain Bars?)

If I didn’t have any money, I might bike all the way to the Santa Catalina Branch Library for a book.

I hiked in the same mountains John Muir once explored, pretending there were still wildcats in the canyons, as there were when he roamed there. Once my brother and I hiked all the way to the top of the rangers’ trail, eight miles (or was it 11, or 111?) in the blazing sun (111 degrees at least) to the Mt. Wilson Observatory.

Pete Crum and I played Wild Bill and Jingles. Craig Marvel and I played Hardy Boys. I taught myself to set type, upside and backwards, and printed a neighborhood newspaper.

I read, of course, after getting the habit when I was bedridden for long months when I was 11 turning 12 years old. I listened to stories and baseball games on the radio. I started writing stories of my own.

I still read and write and listen to and watch stories; story is at my core.

All because of boredom.

I have no idea how much of human creative endeavor springs from boredom, but I’ll bet it’s a lot, just as many marvelous inventions have been nurtured in the fertile soil of laziness, the desire to find an easier way.

So the next time you feel bored (or blocked), should you be fortunate and wise enough to allow yourself such feelings, embrace the feeling and then invent your way through it.

That’s 30. Until next time--