Is there
a Santa Claus?
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Yes, an elephant talks!!!

Please open before Christmas

Despite the grinches who annually attempt to ban Christmas, carols are heard everywhere during the end of the year holiday season. Chances are you sing along with the tunes, often unaware you’re doing so.

There’s also no shortage of Christmas anthologies available, most of them nostalgic memoirs. One new anthology, Sing We Now Of Christmas, takes a unique approach. Each of the 25 stories was inspired by a carol, with the selections meant to be read like an Advent calendar, one day at a time leading to Christmas.

The conductor of this songfest is Michael D. Young, a teacher, writer, community theater actor, musician, and member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. At the beginning of this year, he electronically spread the word about the proposed book. He asked writers to select a carol and let him know the title; each carol would be used only once. I chose White Christmas and told the story of its creator, Irving Berlin.

Under Young’s orchestration, this compilation sprang to melodious life and appeared on the market prior to Advent. As readers journey from Biblical times to the Victorian age and on into the present and future, they meet King Wenceslas, the little drummer boy, an elderly man who lost his singing voice years before, one of Santa’s mischievous and astute elves, a disgruntled department store Santa, and dozens of other characters.

Because Christmas is about giving and sharing, authors from across the country donated their stories, and editors, artists, and technical gurus gave time and expertise to the book. Lastly, all royalties are donated to National Down Syndrome Society, in honor of Young’s two-year-old son, Bryson.

For promotional fun, Young organized two special events: A Twelve Days Of Christmas drawing for prizes donated by the writers in November and a December book signing at a library in Utah at which some of the authors will read their story and carols will be sung.

Young is so enthused about this project, he’s begun collecting stories for another volume next year, with different carols. His other son is autistic, so royalties will go to Autism Speaks.

Advent will have arrived by the time you read this, but don’t let that deter you from ordering a few copies of Sing We Now Of Christmas. At only 12 dollars a copy, you might surprise those on your gift list with a package marked: Please Open Before Christmas. Or put the package under the tree with a reminder to save the book for next Advent. Recipients could start a tradition, with family members taking turns reading one story per day throughout each Advent season.

Whatever you do to celebrate and close the year, God bless us, every one.
Sing We Now Of Christmas is found at Amazon or at https://www.createspace.com/3988322
“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”
The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

How about it, Virginia-- do you believe in Santa Claus?

The Virginia in question was eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon, who in 1897 confronted her father, Dr. Philip O’Hanlon, with that age-old and dreaded question, “Daddy, is there really a Santa Claus?”

The good doctor, apparently adept at passing the buck, suggested she write to a prominent local newspaper, the New York Sun and ask them because, as he explained, “If you see it in The Sun, it’s so.

A former Civil War correspondent named Francis Pharcelius Church drew the challenge of responding, and he wrote what is perhaps the most famous editorial in newspaper history, the one headlined,

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus

“Virginia, your little friends are wrong,” Church began. “They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. ...

“He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy,” he went on. “Alas! How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias.”

We can’t see Santa Claus nor, for that matter, “love” or “generosity” or “the spirit of giving,” but we can see manifestations of these loftiest of human impulses everywhere, at least we do if we’re open to seeing them..

“Seeing is believing,” we like to say. On the contrary, I’ve grown to think that it’s often the other way around, that believing enables us to see those realities that don’t exist in verifiable empirical form.

But even taken at face value, why is the expression “Seeing is believing,” rather than “Seeing is knowing”?

We believe before we see, right? Afterwards, we know-- or think we do.

I don’t know as I’ve gotten any wiser as I’ve surely gotten older, or if the quality of my foolishness has just changed, but here’s one thing I’ve come to believe (not know): almost everything we call “knowing” is actually “believing.”

Big Bang or Creationism, take your pick, both are rooted in belief. Scientists offer proof, you say. Yes, but so do Christians. Each draws on empirical evidence of a sort; a believer will tell you she has seen proof of the Christ manifested in her personal experience just as surely as a scientist will cite lab results.

Tomorrow’s lab results may contradict today’s and set the scientist off in a whole new direction. The scientist, no less than the Christian, must keep an open mind to the possibility of new “proof,” that will either confirm or refute current belief.

The writer’s job is not now, nor has it ever been, to prove to your reader that your words, ‘fact’ or ‘fiction,’ are true. You don’t want knowledge. It’s belief you’re after.

If you’re creating fiction, you must build a credible world for your reader to dwell in. You ask her to suspend disbelief. Yes, Virginia, there is a Joad family, and they did come west on the Mother Road during the great depression, seeking work in California, the land of milk and honey.

If you’re writing non-fiction, you’d better get your facts straight-- ‘facts’ as we believe them to be today, anyway, for we constantly revise history as new ‘facts’ come to light, disproving the old-- but your job is still to engender belief. You could have all those ‘facts’ lined up just right and still not gain your reader’s trust and belief. There’s a
difference between telling the ‘truth’ (as you believe it to be) and having your ‘truth’ believed.

In the age of photoshop, even seeing isn’t believing. It’s too easy to be fooled by a perfectly credible, cleverly manipulated image-- as so many were recently by all those dramatic-- and false-- images of Superstorm Sandy that flooded (pun intended) the Internet in the wake of the real floods.

We knew the picture of the Statue of Liberty trying to keep her skirt from billowing up (ala the iconic Marilyn Monroe image from Seven Year Itch) was a phony. But the one of the huge cloud, looking for all the world like an alien spacecraft looming over Lady Liberty’s shoulder? That one sure looked real, and many believed.

Does this mean we can’t know anything or that all knowledge is subjective? No verities at all? No, Virginia, I don’t think it means that at all. I do think it means that we are guided largely by belief, just as our decisions are made largely out of emotion, not rational analysis, and that through our beliefs, we can come to grasp truths that go far beyond our knowing.

I’ll let William Shakespeare, a pretty fair hand at getting folks to suspend disbelief for the last 400 years, say it as only he could:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
Hamlet, scene v

Postscript:
By pure coincidence (if you believe in such things), I wrote the first draft of this piece on the Saint’s Day of St. Albert the Great, patron saint of scientists. Yes, the venerable holy, catholic, and apostolic church has a patron saint of scientists. Science and religion aren’t at war. We’re all seeking truth, based on our experience-- all kinds of experience.
Advertising slogans we’d like to see

We can’t think of any other uses for it, either

KY Jelly
Dude, we totally forgot our slogan
American Medical Marijuana Assn.
Come check out our stool samples
IKEA
Keeping Kids Off Your Lawn Since 1886
Daisy Air Rifles:
We’re proud of our privates
U.S. Army
Dyslexics Untie
www.dyslexia.moc
Where are all the news crews when we’re NOT spilling anything?
EXXON
Face it. You’ll never come up with anything clever on your own.
Hallmark
FOR THE LOVE OF WORDS
Esther M. Leiper--Estabrooks

KUDOS TO KUDZU

Do you remember “The Eggplant That Ate Chicago”? It was a novelty pop song years back, but the kudzu vine easily shows up that purple veggie! Kudzu travels fast—yet no one thinks it’s going away! The vine was introduced via the Japanese pavilion at the 1876 World Exposition in Philadelphia, being touted as an ornamental that could control erosion.

Currently kudzu has swallowed half the South and is working on the other half, engulfing fields, houses, or any car parked long in the same spot. One photo shows a massive vine topping a light pole. Eerily, greenery creates a profile of a huge bearded figure, arm out-stretched like Moses pointing to the Promised Land. In fact, for kudzu Dixie may well be a vine’s Heaven-on-Earth! The stuff has become a secular icon; love or hate it, kudzu can’t be ignored, plus it offers poets a fresh new subject. James Dickey wrote these lines from a longer piece titled—well, guess!

The night the kudzu has
Your pasture, you sleep like the dead.
Silence has grown oriental
And you cannot step upon ground.
Your leg plunges somewhere
It should not, it should never be;
Disappears and waits to be struck
Anywhere between sole and kneecap:
For when kudzu comes
The snakes do, and weave themselves
Among the lengthening vines;
Their spade heads resting on leaves…

Stephen Hedrick’s Kudzu Blues begins:

Our quaint kudzu vines at first seem benign
but quickly entwine whatever they find.
They blanket the ground, each gullily or mound;
the streetlight they crown and billboards
surround.
On telephone wires they grow like wildfire;
cross rooftops and higher to wrap the church
spire.
Your backyard, once trimmed, is covered with
them;
Plus the kid’s jungle gym; the jacuzzi’s
condemned.
Here’s Kedrick’s finale, but I suggest switching
the last four words to “poison ivy—their kin.”

You smile, though chagrined, these vines don’t begin
to ravage your skin like their kin—poison ivy!
A takeover artist for sure, yet kudzu has uses.
The tough strands are woven into baskets, and
Ruth Duncan, “Kudzu Queen,” makes over 200 a
year. A photo shows her sprawled in a huge
creation, nearly boat-size. Moreover, kudzu can be
used as cattle feed, while its blossoms
(reputedly grape-flavored) make jelly tourists buy.
And the stuff does halt erosion. Yet dried kudzu
proves a wicked fire hazard, while its tendrils can
grow a foot a day and are nearly impossible to
root out. Even when attacked with chemicals the
plant recovers swiftly. I warn:

DARK DESIGNS

No animal (it’s lacking a spine)
Yet kudzu won’t stay in line:
Honeysuckle’s no fun,
But this stuff can outrun
All it encounters—a sinister vine.
Run, tot, lest the stuff wrap you
With tendrils to swiftly entrap you.
Oh, where is your mother,
Big sister or brother?
Beware, for kudzu will jlap you!

Yet should we blame the Japanese? They don’t appear to have trouble with kudzu and presumably didn’t anticipate our dilemma. Still, with global warming an increasing reality, it could soon become our planet’s dominant life-form, and I confess to mixed feelings. The plant is a determined survivor and looks pretty, so isn’t that good? Of course, in chilly New Hampshire I don’t deal with it, so, for right now, here’s my take:

STICK TO IT!

Persistence is a pleasant trait;
At least I always thought so,
But now I realize folks are feared
That kudzu has them caught so!

Doug Stewart, writing in the Smithsonian, declares the vine “a mythic feature of the Southern landscape,” while by now it may be as feared as old King Kong, plus being vaster and more unstoppable! Still, it hasn’t climbed the Empire State Building—yet!

Esther’s numerous recent publications include the poem “Expectant” and illustration “Lilith’s Wedding” in Touchstone, the magazine of the poetry society of New Hampshire, and “River-Boat Dreams” used as a frontispiece in Susan Solar’s mystery novel, Murderous Magnolias.
In an oxymoronic frame of mind

If a vacuum really sucks, that’s good, right?

If a word is misspelled in the dictionary, how would we ever know?

Why do "slow down" and "slow up" mean the same thing?

Why do "fat chance" and "slim chance" mean the same thing?

Why do "tug" boats push their barges?

Why do we sing "Take me out to the ball game" when we are already there?

Why are they called "stands" when they are made for sitting?

Why is it called "after dark" when it is really "after light"?

Doesn't "expecting the unexpected" make the unexpected expected?

Why are a "wise man" and a "wise guy" opposites?

Why do "overlook" and "oversee" mean opposite things?

Why is "phonics" not spelled the way it sounds?

If all the world is a stage, where does the audience sit?

If love is blind, How does Victoria’s Secret stay in business?

If you are cross-eyed and have dyslexia, can you read all right?

Why is bra singular and panties plural?

Why do we put suits in garment bags and garments in a suitcase?

How come abbreviated is such a long word?

Why do we wash bath towels? Aren't we clean when we use them?

Why doesn't glue stick to the inside of the bottle?

Why do they call it a TV set when you only have one?

Christmas - That wonderful time of year when we sit in front of a dead tree and eat candy out of your socks!
The next time your hand curls around a frying pan, think of all the fabulous cooks you’ve had the honor of knowing -- both famous and not so famous.

Visions of my Aunt Mary leap to my mind. I am sitting on the kitchen floor, looking up at her. I see Aunt Mary, sky-blue eyes surrounded by soft wrinkles, cracking an egg into a mound of flour, whisking it furiously with a fork, rolling the dough, slicing it and lowering it into a huge pot of boiling water. These steps Aunt Mary accomplished in just a few minutes. Then in a separate pot she dumped from a mason jar her own special sauce using tomatoes from the garden.

I still see her standing at the kitchen counter, fully engaged in her task. When I tasted Aunt Mary’s spaghetti, her love for me shimmered with every bite.

Every day Aunt Mary wowed her family with her creations. She never glanced at a recipe. She knew each by heart. Aunt Mary determined how much basil or garlic to use, how much olive oil to drizzle, how many times to whisk the fork in the egg and flour. She created amazing dishes such as split-pea linguine, pig’s feet spaghetti, eggplant fusili, wedding soup with elbow pasta, and angel wing cookies. Each tasted fabulous and used only a few ingredients. How did she accomplish so much with so little?

Her recipes had specific measurements and ingredients. Use white onions and not red ones, use homegrown plum tomatoes when possible. If she put in too much salt or poured on too much bath-tub red wine, the dish would be ruined. She was a chef, the creator, artist in the kitchen.

Just like Aunt Mary, I am an artist, a writer. She cooked with passion, I write with passion. With each story I whisk the recipe together using characters, setting, plot, villain -- all through my own unique style.

I want to wow my reader. If I, the writer, do not have passion, then who does? Lack of enthusiasm will come through and the reader will see it and feel it deep in his soul. It all flows from me, working hard, pounding on the keyboard.

Dare to release your passion. Focus with your entire being. You shall not allow destructive thoughts to squeeze creative juices out of you. You define your writing life. You define your own mind-set. Your passion ignites your power, and your power ignites your passion. Your story is just a few strokes away.

Thirty-Minute Pasta Sauce
Serves 4

1. In a large fry pan, drizzle the olive oil, and set the pan on low.
2. When the oil has heated up, put in the tomatoes and garlic. Add salt as desired.
3. Put a lid on the pan and let simmer for twenty-thirty minutes until most of the juice from the tomatoes evaporates. Do not let all of the juice evaporate. Stir every five minutes.
4. Take off the heat and stir in torn basil leaves.
5. Serve over cooked pasta. Enjoy!

Thirty Minutes to Bubble Passion Into Your Story

1. Set timer for one hour.
2. In notebook write three times: Only I can tell this story.
3. Write your story.
4. When the timer rings, take a ten-minute break. Drink water, stretch, and pet dog.
5. Celebrate every time you finish a piece, every time you submit, and every time ideas bubble up.

Marion Young taught students with blindness and visual impairments for twenty years. She lives with her husband, daughter, and dog in Texas.
Aged humor

Just before the funeral services, the undertaker came up to the very elderly widow and asked, “How old was your husband?”

“How old was your husband?”

“98,” she replied, “two years older than me.”

“So you’re 96,” the undertaker marveled.

“Yes,” she responded. “Hardly worth going home, is it?”

Reporter interviewing a 104-year-old woman: “And what do you think is the best thing about being 104?”

“No peer pressure,” she replied immediately.

I've sure gotten old! I've had two bypass surgeries, a hip replacement, new knees, fought prostate cancer and diabetes. I'm half blind, can't hear anything quieter than a jet engine, take 40 medications that make me dizzy, winded, and subject to blackouts. Have bouts with dementia. Have poor circulation. Hardly feel my hands and feet anymore. Can't remember if I'm 89 or 98. Lost all my friends. But, thank God, I still have my driver's license!

I felt like my body has gotten totally out of shape, so I got my doctor's permission to join a fitness club and start exercising. I decided to take an aerobics class for seniors. I bent, twisted, gyrated, jumped up and down, and perspired for an hour. But by the time I finally got my leotards on, the class was over.

It's scary when you start making the same noises as your coffee maker.

These days about half the stuff in my shopping cart says, "For fast relief."

THE SENILITY PRAYER:

Grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway,

The good fortune to run into the ones I do,

and the eyesight to tell the difference. .
Every fall for the past 11 years something magical happens in Madison called the Wisconsin Book Festival. For all 11 years the events have been free, thanks to the financial support of over 30 sponsors. The Wisconsin Humanities Council organizes this class cultural event.

2011 was a transition year for the Festival with outgoing Director Allison Jones-Chiam providing support to incoming Director Megan Katz. The two working together made the change in leadership seamless.

Day to day operations of the Festival depend on over 100 volunteers doing a variety of tasks. The Festival is a five day event, November 7-11, 2012 this year, with 16 different venues. The five days held 107 events to chose from, something to attract a broad spectrum of people. This year’s theme was Lost and Found.

This year Katz created a volunteer venue coordinator position. With a background in running the Kohl Center during its fledging years, I decided to volunteer.

The Festival draws presenters from three sources. The Humanities Council sponsors statewide and nationally recognized authors, such as Richard Russo and Jerry Apps this year. The Council also accepts applications from Wisconsin authors to present their fiction, memoir, poetry, non-fiction, or film work related to the theme. Finally, groups submit applications to participate. These included the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, Wisconsin Labor History Society, the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, Wisconsin Center for the Book, Monsters of Poetry, Mimosa Books, Anthology, A Room of One’s Own, and The Children’s Museum. The variety of programs is eclectic.

Of the 16 venues this year, seven were Madison Public Libraries. Materials for display-- posters, book marks, special coupons, donation forms, podium banners, and schedules-- were put into plastic bins or envelopes to be delivered to each site. My job was to assemble and deliver the bins before the event. I also had to move some of the bins from one location to another during the five-day festival. During the event I made sure each location was stocked with whatever they needed.

I also filled in at the central information booth located n the lobby of the Overture Center. Volunteers staffed each of the venues to make sure attendees found the right event, had a schedule, had the opportunity to buy books and get author signatures. Other volunteers introduced authors, staffed the book seller’s lounge, and provided directions to events. Volunteers were easily identified by the yellow Book Festival t-shirt each wore.

On Monday, after all the events, I collected all the bins and returned them to the Wisconsin Humanities Council.

Most of my work was prior to and after the event, so I took advantage of attending many events. The highlight for me the presentation by Richard Russo and his artist daughter Kate. Both were relaxed, engaging, thoughtful and humorous. They’ve created a tribute to the book by publishing a four volume set, each with a painting. The book contains Russo’s novella, Intervention, and three short stories. Russo’s memoir, Elsewhere, released in October, was also available.

During his presentation Russo said he liked to support new authors by writing blurbs on their books. After the presentation I met Mr. Russo, had him sign my copy of Elsewhere, mentioned that my debut novel is due to be released soon, and asked him to write a blurb for me. He told me to have my publisher send him an e-version of the book. I gave him one of my book’s business cards showing the book cover on one side and my webpage and publisher’s webpage on the other side. I have this delightful fantasy that once back in Maine, he pulled that card from his pocket, was curious and paid my website a visit.

I enjoyed working with Director Megan Katz and all the volunteers. I think I’ll do it again next year and hope to be a presenter, too.

And when he is, I’ll be there to see him! Coach
Not to be difficult, but...

I am incorrigible. Please do not incorrige.

I don't expect everything to be handed to me. You can just set it down anywhere.

Quando Omni Flunkus Mortati. (When all else fails, play dead.)


Two wrongs don't make a right, but three rights make a left.

If you’re going through Hell, keep going. – Sir Winston Churchill

If Life gives you lemons, keep ‘em cuz - hey, free lemons!

Earth without Art is just "Eh."

Sharks hug with their mouths.

Listen & Silent have the same letters. Coincidence?

I don’t mean to brag, but I can still fit into the earrings I wore in high school!

    Remember, when you stop believing in Santa, you get socks and underwear.
My 1950s Main Street was Atwood Avenue on Madison’s East Side. The one mile stretch was home to special places for my kid’s imagination. My sister, Carol Lynne, and I attended morning Mass at St. Bernard’s, with its imposing gothic architecture. We sat by grade and then went to our classes. I was petrified the few times I served Mass for the elderly and sometimes gruff priest at 6 a.m., about the only time parishioners could verify he was still with us.

My St. Bernard’s Class of 1955 still gets together; this year 19 of our original 46 had lunch and went over old times at the Esquire Club. Security State Bank, a Georgian Revival design by Frank Riley, anchored the avenue’s top end. I felt as if I were petitioning a Founding Father the time I asked Ray Sennett for a car loan. Ray Sennett’s community contributions have been recognized with a school named in his honor.

Eastwood Theater’s Italianate Renaissance look stood out. I made it there once – Mother was not much for movies, except an occasional Lucille Ball. We saw Danny Kay in the Inspector General, which became my benchmark for characters who righted society’s wrongs and had a hilarious time doing it.

Rennebohms pharmacies anchored the avenue at each end, one at Schenks Corner and the other at Fair Oaks. The founder of this Madison institution, Oscar Rennebohm, was Wisconsin’s governor. Rennebohms soda counter nurtured our communal obsession with grilled Danish along with a cherry Coke. They also supplied the #1 Recommended Pepto Bismol when you needed a chaser. To this day I search pastry shops for crispy Danish to take home and fry in butter.

My hangouts while I made the rounds on my bike were more obscure—not landmarks. The impressions they left are fuzzied by time and leave little trail for fact-checkers. Some are gaudy or broken down or replaced. Blink them out and Atwood Avenue appears unchanged.

Atwood Avenue was blessed with not one but two watch shops that sold buck-fifty pocket watches just like my mother’s uncle used on the railroad. I couldn’t leave my watch alone—the do-it-yourselfer in me took things apart. When I couldn’t get it back together, the jeweler suggested I save up for another one.

Another blessing that came in twos was those small stores kitty corner from the church, the amazing candy and Yo-Yo places. Candy? We’re talking hard penny candy spread out on tables that you fingered, picked over, and scooped up in bags. Yo-Yos? The Duncan Yo-Yo man came by annually to find out which of us kids was best at “walking the dog” and “rocking the baby.”

We had two shoe repair shops, no longer in business now. What remains are the odd buildings, one on a triangular parcel where the railroad tracks cross the avenue and the other a shack now upgraded by new owners who made it a woodworking shop.

I mustn’t forget the two clothing stores where Mother annually bought pairs of gray work pants that took me through the school year.

We had all we needed on 1950s Atwood Avenue. We had a Clark’s gas station, we had Leske’s Steakhouse, where the UW crowd hung out, we had an active East Side Businessmen’s Association, we had a bowling alley, and we had The Last Chance Tavern, the Avenue’s farewell as you entered the sticks.

Roundy’s column once noted that Atwood Avenue was a place to “…go down the street and clasp the hand of a good fellow American.”
Signs of the times

In a hotel:
TOILET OUT OF ORDER. PLEASE USE FLOOR BELOW

In a Laundromat:
AUTOMATIC WASHING MACHINES: PLEASE REMOVE ALL YOUR CLOTHES WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OUT

In a Memphis department store:
BARGAIN BASEMENT UPSTAIRS

In an office:
WOULD THE PERSON WHO TOOK THE STEP LADDER YESTERDAY PLEASE BRING IT BACK OR FUTURE STEPS WILL BE TAKEN

In an office:
AFTER COFFEE BREAK STAFF SHOULD EMPTY THE COFFEE POT AND STAND UPSIDE DOWN ON THE DRAINING BOARD

Outside a secondhand shop:
WE EXCHANGE ANYTHING - BICYCLES, WASHING MACHINES, ETC. WHY NOT BRING YOUR WIFE ALONG AND GET A WONDERFUL BARGAIN?

Notice in health food shop window:
CLOSED DUE TO ILLNESS

Spotted in a safari park:
ELEPHANTS PLEASE STAY IN YOUR CAR

Seen during a conference:
FOR ANYONE WHO HAS CHILDREN AND DOESN'T KNOW IT, THERE IS A DAY CARE ON THE 1ST FLOOR

Notice in a farmer's field:
THE FARMER ALLOWS WALKERS TO CROSS THE FIELD FOR FREE, BUT THE BULL CHARGES.

Message on a leaflet:
IF YOU CANNOT READ, THIS LEAFLET WILL TELL YOU HOW TO GET LESSONS

On a repair shop door:
WE CAN REPAIR ANYTHING. (PLEASE KNOCK HARD ON THE DOOR - THE BELL DOESN'T WORK)
Late in 1963, just a few months into my first year at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I was still trying to make my way in a different world after spending six years in a Catholic seminary boarding school. I had recently met Judy Hansen at the Catholic Students Eating Co-op that then existed beneath St. Paul’s University Chapel on State Street, and three years later Judy and I married. (And yes, three years seemed a lot longer then than it does now. In fact, when I subtracted 1963 from 1966, I didn’t believe the answer at first.)

One day in November or early December, I received an advertisement from an outfit called United States Purchasing Exchange, a liquidating company which was selling sets of Winfield China. Winfield, I learned recently, started in Pasadena, CA., in 1929 but moved to Santa Monica in 1946. After a glut of overseas china began entering the United States, Winfield went out of business in 1962. which led to the liquidation a year later.

The Purchasing Exchange was offering sets of eight in two designs, the one in the photo called “Dragon Flower” and another called “Bamboo.” Both were advertised as hand-painted, and there were slight differences in the designs on each piece, but the price was so cheap that even I, a poor student working part time at the University Book Store, could afford to buy one set as a Christmas present for my parents. I decided they’d like the Bamboo design, and that's what I ordered.

The company eventually responded that it had shipped my order, but they were sending the Dragon Flower design, as they had run out of the Bamboo. Christmas came, but not my china; my “gift” to my parents that Christmas Eve as we gathered in front of the fireplace in their basement was a slip of paper promising “a package—soon.”

“Dragon Flower,” current sellers claim, was a Winfield design from the 1940s, so it's as old as I am. A quick look at the dishes proves they’ve weathered the years better than I have. Mom liked the dishes so much that she wanted a second set of eight so she’d have 12 settings to use for company. The extra four, she promised, would become mine when I married.

Dad wrote to the company to ask if they had any Dragon Flower sets left and was confused when his letter came back in a U. S. Purchasing Exchange envelope. Then he spotted a red “Yes” scratched at the bottom of his letter.

After the second set arrived, Mom had 16 settings, and sometime after Judy and I married, I made my claim for the four Mom promised me, but she didn’t recall offering them. She might need them, she said. I don’t remember her using all 16, but in this photograph several of them are laid out on my parents’ dining-room table to celebrate Thanksgiving in 1991.

Mom died in 1994, and Dad gave me most of the dishes, keeping a couple settings for himself. I don’t know if he ever used them, and I suspect he kept them mostly for the memories. After he died in 2009, I added his settings to the others, and Judy and I use them for holidays and parties.

This year they added to our celebration of the centennial year of the 1912 American Craftsman Style stucco house which has sheltered us for 41 years. We set out the china for Thanksgiving, which we hosted for our son and his family, and for my youngest sister and her family. And we will use them again in December for our annual holiday dinner with three other couples.

After almost 50 years of use, our Winfield Dragon Flower china brings back many great memories of get-togethers with family and friends, and so they fit perfectly into this year’s celebration of Thanksgiving and Christmas.
I applaud the Daniel Craig series of James Bond films for taking him in a new direction, even if I do not think it is an entirely successful direction. In *Casino Royale*, he truly falls in love and actually has to convalesce from his wounds for an extended period of time. He even has to be saved from poisoning by his love interest. *Skyfall* continues along this same vein.

This is a Bond that feels, a Bond that bleeds, a vulnerable Bond at times. This makes the endless chase scenes more exciting, because we are keenly aware that this Bond could fail (perhaps even die?)

It’s hard for me to evaluate a modern Bond film because of my memories from boyhood. My mother took me to see my first Bond film when I was around 11. I can’t match the enthusiasm or willingness to suspend disbelief that I had then. To my failing, jaded adult eyes, this film scores a solid B. I don’t give A’s to many films, and *Skyfall* never approaches anything near perfection.

The talents of Judy Densch and Ralph Fiennes are largely wasted in this film. Oh, their characters are likable enough, but I wanted much more from their interactions with each other and the rest of the cast. These are heavyweight actors in an action fantasy, I know, but why cast them if you’re not going to let them reach their full potential?

There is a deliberate lack of gadgets (which is the source of self-referential humor in a brief scene between Bond and the new Q). I’m ambivalent about how that plays out. I like exploding pens and cars with ejector seats. More of that, please.

That’s not what this Bond is about, though. He’s about blood and guts, real blood and guts, and he demands the suspension of your disbelief through shock and awe as Bond is battered by forces that are largely beyond his capabilities to effectively confront for much of the film.

Roger Moore never seemed to so much as spill a drink on one of his suits. This Bond goes to work with bullet holes in his. One is left to wonder-- in fact the very question is posed by more than one of the characters in the film-- why Bond perseveres through it all.

If you’re looking for a fairly innovative take on the Bond character, go see this film. The old theme music is worth hearing at a theater. If you’re at all nostalgic for cars that turn into submarines and watches with lasers in them, you’re going to be disappointed, but perhaps not entirely. There is a notable cameo from Goldfinger towards the end of the film. I could have lived with shorter car chases if it brought the film down to 2 hours instead of nearly 3.

**Craig’s Own Cryptogram**

**Janice Kaat, Cryptologist**

I was very glad to see that others were anxious to know what the author had to say in my last cryptogram. This cryptogram is just for Craig Steele, the winner of the last contest. Good job Craig.

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YVCLFZLAL OS KZL DQYK Q WVT FQY WVAS. ZL DXQTLG FOKZ FVAGY, QSG FZLS ZL NALF VXGLA ZL MLXX OS XVRL FOKZ FVAGY. ZL WLUQCL Q DVLK. ZOY SQCL OY SVSL VKZLA KZQS UAQON YKLLXL. UVSNQAEXQKOV SY UAQON, MVA YVXROSN CT XQYK UATDKVNAQC.
```
I wanted to write an article on my five worst films of the year, but I didn't even see five bad movies this year. Three of the four weren't bad enough to really talk about. *Snow White and the Huntsman* was a bore, but at least the dwarves were entertaining. *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* was dumb but not terrible, and *The Hunger Games* was just overhyped and dull.

**But the one film this year that I have pure hatred for is Ridley Scott's return to the sci fi genre, *Prometheus*.**

My gosh, I have not hated a movie this much since the second Transformers movie. There was a lot of hype around this atrocity, speculating that it was a prequel to the original *Alien*. I didn't really care if it was or not. I just wanted a good sci fi thriller. Boy, was that asking for too much. This is a movie of sheer stupidity trying to be something more than it really is.

The story is that a group of scientists travel to a foreign planet to discover the meaning of life. It sounds deep, but the movie is anything but. The scientists are the dumbest, most unlikable group of people I have seen in a movie in quite some time. The one character even remotely likable is David, the crew's android, played by Michael Fassbender. Fassbender is quickly becoming one of the best actors working today. It's a shame his really good performance is wasted in this sack of garbage. David is responsible for the death of one of the crew members, and I was glad. That's how much I hated the rest of these characters. Even before they reach the temple they find on the planet, I wanted all of them to exit the film as quickly as possible. They take no precautions at all, and it is absurd. I would expect this from the typical slasher film, but this is ridiculous.

In the temple the group finds the head of an alien, and the character played by Logan Marshall-Green is disappointed! I for one, would be amazed if I found some strange head of an alien creature! Heck, I would just be amazed to be on another planet with a breathable atmosphere.

Not only is he disappointed, but he decides to then start drinking heavily and becomes even more unlikable and idiotic. His death scene is one of the most welcome parts of the movie.

The other major annoyance occurs when Noomi Rapace's character is impregnated with an alien and gets an emergency c section in the ship's medical pod. Her abdomen is cut open, the squid alien is taken out, and she gets stapled up. For the rest of the movie, she's running and jumping as if nothing happened. I don't care if this is sci fi; if you have your abdomen cut open and then Stapled back up, it's going to take awhile to recover.

It's hard to cover all of the stupidity in these two hours of wasted time. I have admiration for bad movies like *Manos: The Hands of Fate*, but movies like *Prometheus* are so bad there's no enjoyment to them. This movie insults its audience's intelligence by trying to be something deeper than it is. It has no deeper meaning than being about a group of unlikable people who travel to a planet and die stupid deaths. Skip it and watch the original *Alien*. 

**CRAZY COLLECTIVE NOUNS**

**CONCOCTED BY NORMA SUNDBERG**

a leap of lizards
a threatening of thugs
a tense of teenagers
an echo of eloquence
a giggle of girls
a gang of ghosts
a tank of tortoises
a grin of geezers
a terse of tenses
Did I already print these last issue?

If walking were all that good for your health, the postal carrier would live forever.
A whale swims all day, only eats fish, drinks water, and is fat.
A rabbit runs and hops and only lives 15 years.
A tortoise doesn't run and does nothing yet lives for 450 years.
Exercise?? Forgettaboutit!

My wild oats have turned into prunes and all-bran.

I finally got my head together, and now my body is falling apart.

Funny, I don't remember being forgetful.

If all is not lost, where is it?

Older is inevitable; wiser, not so much.

Funny, I don't remember being forgetful.

Kids in the back seat cause accidents.

Accidents in the back seat cause kids.

It's hard to make a comeback when you haven't been anywhere.

The only time the world beats a path to your door is when you're in the bathroom.

If God wanted me to touch my toes, he'd have put them on my knees.

When I'm finally holding all the cards, why does everyone want to play chess?

It’s not hard to meet expenses . . . they're everywhere.

These days, I spend a lot of time thinking about the hereafter . . . I go somewhere to get something, and then wonder what I'm hereafter

Funny, I don't remember being forgetful.
**HOLIDAY HAIBUN**

**A Christmas Letter**

by Norma J. Sundberg

Dear Mama,

I wish you were here. I remember so many Christmases you spent with us, when husband would take the littlest children to go fetch you while Santa came to our house.

There were snowy ones when we wondered if we'd even get to your house to bring you back!

- first snowflakes
- falling on a small red mitten
- and outstretched tongue

One particular Christmas I remember when we were kids was the grade school pageant. They did *A Christmas Carol*. The director/teacher decided they would have a real dinner. When my friend Doris, as mother Crachett, tried to carve the chicken, she found it so tough she finally placed her fingers in the bird's midsection and ripped it open. I can still hear you laughing about that lo these many years later. It really tickled you.

We are gearing up for the season—with everything displayed before or just after Halloween. The day after Thanksgiving is the largest day for Christmas shopping. Daughter has gone for several years in the wee hours of the morning before going to work, or now, before delving into the everyday work of her growing family.

I remember the years we would go to the dime store after hours for the families of employees' discount shopping with you, then putting our purchases in layaway. Remember the kids slithering around out of our sight to buy for the family?

Remember the rug that was shaped like a foot, complete with toes?

- heat of August
- at the dime store
- pricing ear muffs

I miss your laughter and that sparkle in your eyes when you found something amusing. Like the time at my sister's home when you walked past the poster that read: “TUMI.” You looked at it and said, “Sock-it?” Or all the great word-play and puns we'd spout and groan about afterwards?

So I'm talking to you from memory thinking about those years. Wishing to talk to you in person, or come fetch you for our Christmas celebration. I'll write this note hoping we might connect in some emotional or spiritual manner.

If you get this would you send me a sign?

- reaching for the phone
- to tell my mother something
- she's not there any more

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**WRITER’S BLOCK**

by Craig W. Steele

Fingers dance, drumming a random rhythm, tapping in place
like the limbs of a wooden puppet
pulled by lifeless strings,
as QWERTY blocks the path forward…and the screen stays blank.

Unbidden, a character from an earlier story strolls through my mind.
I suddenly realize what would have been the perfect line for her to speak, years ago.

Fingers dance to the rhythm of a different drumming
in celebration of a momentary respite, a brief break…and the screen stays blank.

*Craig W. Steele’s poetry has appeared recently or is forthcoming in* the Aurorean, Sketchbook, Astropoetica, Stone Path Review, Popular Astronomy, The Lyric, and *The Edge Magazine.*
FIRST PERSON SINGULAR
E.P. NED BURKE

Jimmy was no saint

The first time I saw him he was lying on his back in my neighbor’s backyard with his tongue hanging out. A few minutes earlier, Mrs. Haddock had knocked on our door and begged my mother to help her.

“It’s Jimmy!” she had said excitedly. “I think he’s had a heart attack.”

My mother, never having met the new neighbors, who had moved into the neighborhood the day before, was shocked at the news. “Do you want me to call an ambulance?”

Mrs. Haddock shook her head. “No. Just come with me. He’s in the backyard.”

When my mother discovered “Jimmy” was a dog, a huge Saint Bernard, she was reluctant to check on his status.

I was eight years old at the time and had no fear of dogs, but this canine had a head like a buffalo. His mouth was open as wide as a drawbridge and his eyes were closed. He looked dead. But when I took a timid step closer, he leaped up and knocked me to the ground.

Then he slobbered all over me and my mother screamed and Mrs. Haddock tried to pull him away. But I was not afraid. I could see in his big brown eyes that he meant me no harm.

When I finally pushed away his head and got to my feet, Mrs. Haddock apologized and said Jimmy liked me. The feeling was mutual. I loved that big dog at first sight. But it surprised me that he was only two years old. Heck, he already weighed nearly 170 pounds.

Anyway, I helped Mrs. Haddock tie Jimmy to a tree. A few minutes later, he snapped the rope as easily as a piece of thread and took off after a gaggle of little girls. That dog sure loved kids. As the days passed, parents became concerned with his habit of knocking their little tykes on their keisters.

I always knew when Jimmy had broken loose; I’d hear a neighbor scream. For some reason I felt it was my job to get to him before the police did.

Eventually the Haddocks chained Jimmy to a doghouse that was about the size of my dad’s DeSoto. They were certain it would restrain Jimmy from terrorizing the neighborhood again. However, they underestimated the strength of a large Saint Bernard. Jimmy dragged that huge doghouse up and down our street as if it were a tin can on a car bumper.

The Haddocks then built an even larger doghouse. Sadly, the result was the same. Finally they opted to enclose Jimmy behind a heavy wire fence, cemented into solid concrete. But it didn’t take long for Jimmy to figure out that the wire door was the weak link, and he crashed through it easily, leaving his chain and doghouse behind.

**One time he bolted free and followed me to school. He emptied the schoolyard in record time. Screaming kids huddled behind barricaded doors and one teacher hollered, “Take that beast home!” So I got on Jimmy’s back and rode away, much to the envy of every boy in school.**

Another time I made the mistake of tying Jimmy to one of our front porch posts so I could go inside for a cool drink. As fate would have it, Mrs. Muldoon, whom we kids called the “Cat Woman” because she had a mess of stray cats living with her, sauntered by. The cat scent must have driven Jimmy to distraction. He lunged and our entire house shook as if from a violent earthquake. My mother rushed to the front door and shrieked, “He’s pulling down our house!”

Before I could get to him, Jimmy snapped his chain and with a loud baritone **Woof! Woof!** galloped off after Mrs. Muldoon. She went screaming to her house, but when she opened her front door a column of cantankerous cats rushed out, hissing like mad vipers.

Jimmy braked to a stop, took one look at the cats, and then hightailed it back to me.

Over time, the big dog matured and settled down somewhat. However the “aroma” that came from his coop proved too potent for the neighbors, especially in the summer months. It annoyed my mother the most because she enjoyed picnicking in our backyard. Finally she sent my father over to have a talk with Mr. Haddock about the odor. As a goodwill gesture, my father took along a piece of cooked liver for Jimmy.

Mr. Haddock was sitting on his front steps with Jimmy when my father gave a friendly wave and approached. Jimmy must have smelled the liver in my father’s pocket because when my father reached the first step Jimmy opened his big mouth
wide and then clamped down on an area right between my father’s legs and wouldn’t let go.

My father was a pipe fitter with big strong hands. So he punched the dog in the snoot, and Jimmy pulled away a little dazed and confused, but in the process he had given my poor dad an embarrassing injury. My father limped back to our house holding his groin and headed upstairs to the bathroom. My modest mom asked me to check his injury and report back to her. I respectfully declined, stating that if he were severely damaged the sight would no doubt traumatize me for life.

**Thank heaven the doctor arrived and assured my mother that my father was fine. Still, I recall my mother crying for weeks after that episode. Or maybe it was laughter.**

My last recollection of Jimmy again concerned his love for playing possum. We had this small dog. One day he was run over by a car. Tearfully, my mom and I carried him to the backyard and then waited on our front porch for the men from the city’s animal control department to come and pick him up.

The men arrived and my mother motioned where the deceased was located. One of the guys took out a small shovel and went around our house. After a few minutes he came back and told his buddy, “We need a bigger shovel.” They talked for a while and eventually opted for a large piece of canvas and long rope.

My mom and I were a bit confused until the two guys came racing across the Haddocks’ front lawn screaming, “That dog ain’t dead!”

Momentarily amused, we watched them bolt into the cab of their truck with Jimmy close behind. The two men’s faces turned white when the big Saint Bernard pounced upon their truck and began rocking it back and forth. We had to laugh because the driver couldn’t find the ignition key fast enough and the other guy looked scared to death. Eventually they did get the truck started and peeled away, never to return for the canine corpse behind our house.

After four years, the Haddocks got tired of all the complaints about their huge dog and moved away to a farm in the country. They wrote to us that Jimmy enjoyed his new surroundings, especially chasing the cows. Most likely it was because they were similar to him in size.

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**December 7, 1941**

By Janet Taliaferro

The way he told the story, he stood on the wheat colored carpet shortly after a winter dawn dressed in rumpled striped pajamas draped over a skinny eleven-year-old body as he heard the incredible news from Dad that someone had attacked our country sunk most of our Navy and that we were assuredly at war.

What I remember is sitting in Bishop’s Restaurant in my gray wool jumper and red taffeta blouse after Sunday School.

Bored with the adult’s conversation I listened to two men from the Daily talk about something I didn’t understand until we came out of the movie in the winter dusk and every young man with a uniform on had a paper under his arm with the word WAR so large I could read it down the block.
Word comes from the Everland Zoo in South Korea of a young male elephant that has taught himself to speak Korean.

Koshik can say “annyong” (hello), “anja” (sit down), “ainya” (no), “nuo” (lie down) and “choah” (good).

Koshik has to put his trunk in his mouth to replicate the proper sounds (the way some folks have to stick fingers in their mouths to whistle).

He even seems to imitate the pitch of timbre of human speech; he sounds like his trainers.

Researchers think Koshik started to talk to them because he was lonesome. Elephants are known to be extremely social, but Koshik was the only elephant in the zoo for seven years during his development.

He has a female Asian for a companion and is fully bilingual, making proper elephant noises with her but still speaking Korean with the people near him.

Elephants are some of my favorite people, and this just makes me love and admire them more.

**You can now find ‘F-bomb,’ and ‘sexting’ in your Webster’s**

** Sexting:** n (2007): The sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cell phone. You can look it up in your Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary-- can, anyway, if you have the newest edition, the 114-year-old tome’s annual revision for 2012.

The slightly salacious word joins “aha moment,” “brain cramp,” “bucket list,” and about 100 other new coinages.

So how does a word become worthy of inclusion in the dictionary? If enough folks use it and agree on its meaning, Webster’s lets down the draw bridge and welcomes it in.

Other new additions include a new meaning for “earworm”—no longer just a blight on Iowa’s number one crop but now a song that keeps running through your mind.

My favorite is “flexitarian, one whose normally meatless diet occasionally includes meat or fish.” (Especially if someone else is buying?)

So, if you’re feeling ‘gassed,’ you might swig an ‘energy drink.’ The editors of Webster’s will know just what you’re talking about.

**F-bomb:** n (1988), euphemism. Oh, come-on. You know what an ‘f-bomb’ is!

These new web words aren’t in the dictionary—yet

**Fram:** n Unwanted email forwarded to you by friends and family.

**Cornea gumbo:** n The flashing ads, links, and icons some websites bombard you with.

**POTATO:** n Person Over Thirty Acting Twenty-One.

**Threadjack:** v When someone on the e-mail list responds with a totally off-topic non-sequitur, stealing the conversation.

**E.I. Mail Bag**

**Walt stirs memories of Jimmy**

Marsh:

As always, I enjoyed your latest issue of *EI.* I especially was moved by the story about Walt [Tom Crawford’s eulogy to his dog]. One of my saddest memories was when I also had to put down my dog, Daisy, who was my companion for 29 years. Some day I hope to write about her … but the lingering pain somehow blocks the process.

Then I got to thinking about my neighbor’s dog when I was a little kid in the early 50s. Like the title indicates, “Jimmy was no saint!”

Not sure if you can use it, but feel free to do so.

Best,

**Ned Burke**

Could and did, on the previous two pages.

**Will newspapers survive?**

Dear Marshall, thanks for the Extra Innings that I have been enjoying. I really like the stories and facts. The little sweet grandbaby of yours is a real treat at the end. Thanks again for putting out a good Paper! We are worried our *Cleveland Plain Dealer* will close, or go to 3 days. It is our only daily paper. Maybe everybody will quit reading the news on the computer and phones and go back to our paper just a bit!

**Bonny Conway**
COACH’S BULLPEN BLURB

And the winner is...

Paw Joe wins Madonna’s new e-book

Two issues ago, Meandering Madonna Christensen issued E.I. readers the challenge of unscrambling the names of fictional characters, the winner to receive a free download of her new memoir, In Her Shoes.

The winner, who didn’t get a perfect score but tallied the highest total, is our Missouri Muse, Perry “Paw Joe” Stone. “The second thing I have ever won,” Perry reports, “the first being your used Writer’s Digest Publisher’s Guide (won in a long ago contest in Creativity Connection, the print precursor of this newsletter."

The puzzle with answers:

rsuen dheatrc  Nurse Ratched
llweii rktas  Willie Stark
njae dbieor  Jean Brodie
bnahilan celret  Hannibal Lector
oylhl gylgolhti  Holly Golightly
neieln lmals  Lennie Small
rhautr rdylea  Arthur Radley
eilce nsojhon  Celie Johnson

Angle of Repose

Special thanks to longtime friend and loyal E.I. reader Candace Fish, who sent me a bundle of wonderful articles on Wallace Stegner (my undergraduate advisor many years ago) from Montana: The Magazine of Western History. Thanks so much for thinking of me, Candace. It’s great stuff!

E.I. LETTER OF THE MONTH

Madonna touches a nerve with sailor story

This is about Madonna, who wrote about her brother in the Navy and how he was affected by the radiation from the atomic bomb fallout [last issue].

When I read her story it took me back to my history course in 2008. One of our texts was The Good War by Studs Turkel, interviews with various military men and women during WWII. When I got to the story about the serviceman who had been on the island when the bomb was first exploded, I was horrified. He had a leg amputated, was unable to work, and his health continued to disintegrate. AND NO FINANCIAL OR MEDICAL HELP FROM THE GOVERNMENT. He eventually got help-- are you ready for this?-- from the Japanese government, who flew him there, gave him succor, medical, financial help.

It was our country’s version of Chernobyl. As in Russia, they did not warn our men of the danger. The man I met in Israel, from Russia, who had taken the job, was told they would have minor after affects. They rotated the men so the outgoing ones would not meet the incoming ones.

I so thought of them when I read Madonna’s story. She told it in a powerfully simple way. When I saw the ‘sweet sailor’ photos, it did not prepare me for the text. Stunning. Please thank her. I know others will be touched by it.

Pat Goetz

Author of Get Shorty named distinguished author

Congratulations from the UW-Madison Continuing Studies writing staff to Elmore Leonard, recipient of the Award for “Distinguished Contribution to American Letters” at the recent National Book Awards ceremony.

The local angle? Elmore was the keynote speaker for the first Writers’ Institute, held in the summer of 1990 at UW-Madison, with director Christine DeSmet, associate directors Laurel Yourke and Marshall Cook, and program associate Sabra Stiemke.

“I am energized by this honor,” Leonard said on accepting the award. “The only thing I’ve ever wanted to do in my life is tell stories, and this award tells me I am still good at it.”

Leonard, 87, is still going strong. His works include Hombre (he started out writing westerns), Rum Punch, Glitz, Big Bounce, Freaky Deaky, Killshot, Maximum Bob, The Hot Kid, Raylan-- and a whole lot more, many of which have been made into movies.

He remains one of the best speakers and most giving, motivating mentors the Writers’ Institute has ever had.

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And now, at LAST...

Your December moment with Lily!