Entertainment Weekly recently issued its “100 All-Time GREATEST” lists for movies, TV shows, novels, and, as the cover breathlessly announced, MORE! (which turned out to be plays and music).

Their lists made me mad. Just as they were supposed to. That is the motivation for publishing that sort of thing, isn’t it?

Here are a few of my annotations, by category.

**Movies**

They ranked *Citizen Kane* the #1 movie of all time. That’s a gimme. You have to. I have to. Everybody has to.

They had *The Godfather* #2. Okay, if you must. *Casablanca* #3. Sure. We’ll always have Paris. But what in hell are *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Nashville* doing so high on the list? *Psycho* at 5 and *It’s a Wonderful Life* at 6, yep, yep, great movies. *The Gold Rush* at 8-- fine, but the only Charlie Chaplin on the list, and it’s not even his best. That’s absurd.

At #10-- *Gone with the Wind*-- boring, overblown soap opera.

*The Searchers* 12-- A great movie, John Ford’s masterpiece-- But the only western on the list!!! Are you kidding me? No *Shane*? No *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*? Heck, *Cat Ballou* was a better movie than *Gone with the Wind*.

*Bambi* 14-- but where’s *Dumbo*? Find me a more poignant scene than the incarcerated Mrs. Dumbo rocking Baby Dumbo with her trunk through the bars of her prison cell window.

*SINGIN’ in the Rain* 16-- but no *Music Man, West Side Story, or South Pacific*? This list’s got trouble with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for Pool!

*Some Like It Hot* 21-- but where’s *The Apartment*, Wilder’s true masterpiece?

And no *Places in the Heart*, no *Murphy’s Romance*, no *The Great Escape*.

**Television**

Yes, *All in the Family* #6, *The Andy Griffith Show* #7 (talk about strange list-fellows!), *Your Show of Shows* #10, and *I Love Lucy* #11 were wonderful, and each in its own way opened up new territory. But *The Carol Burnett Show* is buried at 33, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* an embarrassing 93. Guys, there would be NO *Comedy Central*, NO *Saturday Night Live*, no nothin’ without Tom and Dick and their lead writer, Mason Williams.

*Hill Street Blues, Mash, The Bob Newhart Show, the Fugitive, The Rifleman*, yes, all great, but *Friday Night Lights*, way behind them at a lowly 48th, was better than all of them.

And *The Muppet Show* doesn’t appear until #49. Really?

And where are the pioneers, the brave ones, the ones who made kids’ shows that cracked adults up, like the subversive *Soupy Sales* and the sly, satirical *Rocky and Bullwinkle*-- and before them *Crusader Rabbit* and Bob Clampett’s immortal *Beany and Cecil*.

And where, for the luvva your mother’s cathode ray tube, is *Maverick? Where’s You’ll Never Get Rich* (aka *The Phil Silver’s Show*)?

**Novels**

*Anna Karenina* #1-- Yeah, again, you kind of have to, but did you actually read it?

*The Great Gatsby* #2-- Oh, please! The most overrated novel in American literature.

The *Rabbit* quartet??? One was more than enough.
The Sound and the Fury not until #12--and the ONLY FAULKNER on the list?? This is madness.

To Kill a Mockingbird isn’t in the top 5? (It came in at 13.)

Atlas Shrugged? You put Ayn Rand on a list of great novelists????? On any list of novelists? You guys really are on crack!

The Sun Also Rises #37-- I wouldn’t have it on my list, but I understand. But I do not understand the omission of The Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway’s true masterpiece.

Huck Finn is #62. Marinate in the shame of that for a moment. The novel from which all American novels spring, according to Hemingway? The novel with perhaps the greatest scene of ethical and moral crisis in all of literature, and you fools rank it 62nd?

And where for the luvva all that’s holy is The Grapes of Wrath?

Where’s James Agee’s A Death in the Family?

Where Kesey’s Cuckoo’s Nest or, for that matter, his Sometimes a Great Notion, which was even better.

Where’s The Story of Edgar Sawtelle, a modern retelling of the tragedy of Hamlet-- with dogs!

You see the utter impossibility of crafting a “top” anything list, don’t you? Everyone who reads it is sure to hate many of the choices and omissions. You probably hate many of mine. It’s all so subjective-- and we’re all limited to what we’ve actually seen and read.

But it’s kind of fun, isn’t it?

I hope I’ve spurred you to write a bloviation of your own. If I don’t at least hear from my friend Mo on the utter omission of Bonanza from the top 100 television shows, I’ll be bitterly disappointed.

You know where to find me: (mcook@dcs.wisc.edu).

Let me hear from you.
So God Made A Dog

And On the ninth day God looked down on his wide eyed children and said
“they need a companion.”
So God made a dog.
God said:
“I need somebody willing to wake
up give kisses, pee on a tree, sleep all day, wake up again,
give more kisses. Then stay up until midnight basking in the glow of the television set.”
So God made a dog.
God said:
“I need somebody willing to sit, then stay, then roll over, then with no ego or complaint
dress in hats they don’t need and costumes they don’t understand. I need somebody who
can break wind without a first care or a second thought.
Who can chase tails, sniff crotches, fetch sticks and lift spirits with a lick. Somebody
who no matter what you didn’t do or couldn’t take or didn’t win or couldn’t make will
love you without judgement just the same.”
So God made a dog.
God said:
“I need somebody strong enough to pull sleds and find bombs,
yet gentle enough to love babies and lead the blind.
Somebody who will spend all day on a couch with a resting head and supportive eyes to
lift the spirits of a broken heart.”
So God made a dog.

It had to be somebody who’d remain patient and loyal even through loneliness
Somebody to care and cuddle snuggle and nuzzle and cheer and charm and snore and
slobber and eat the trash and chase the squirrels.
Somebody who would bring a family together with the selflessness of an open heart.
Somebody who would bark and then pant and then reply with rapid wag of tail
when their best friend says let’s go for a ride in the car.
So God made a dog.
Something happened to me this evening. I had, after watching the accursed Dodgers find yet another way to lose, taken a nap. I dreamt: a goofy interlude involving baseball and the word moiety; upon awakening, laughing, I found it impossible to say just what had been so all-fired funny about that word, other than it seemed to be associated with a new, incomprehensible baseball statistic: the mean moiety average, or MMA.

In my dream, a baseball announcer, typically vacuous, kept insisting that so-and-so's MMA was as good as it had ever been, or worse than ever; it hardly mattered.

I just had to find a way to work this MMA foolishness into “Witch Hunt,” which I am just beginning, just feeling my way into, getting a general idea of plot, introducing the characters to each other, the Marlow-narrator and myself, whoever this last guy is. I logged on and entered a general, all-purpose, insert-anywhere paragraph about MMA and then decided to work on two characters, who were just beginning to take shape in my mind.

These two, about both of whom I had only the vaguest notion, had to be dealt with before I could go any further. So I tackled each of them in turn and, in doing so, realized how intensely first-person and egocentric almost all my writing has thus far been.

But, it was funny, the more attention I paid each of these wholly imaginary people, the more relaxed and confident I became. I was relieved, I think, no longer to be so excruciatingly precise about explaining myself, myself, my precious self.

Instead, I could let the internal logic of each character emerge, sentence by sentence, and, while doing so, while writing and reading them into existence, I got a clearer and clearer idea about how each of them could and would act. I realized that I didn't have to think of anything for them to do or say. In the context of time, place and dramatic conflict, their actions would suggest themselves. All I need do is consider how each of them would act or speak in a given situation.

The craft of fiction, approached methodically thus, is far less spiritually taxing than the death march of memoir-based narrative. This might be fun! Imagine that! I may be free at last from all this painful self-examination, free to play the game of English gentlefolk: Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Thackeray, greatest of all Conrad (English sea lord gentry by mutual adoption); free to let my characters say something that I think needs saying; free to make a difference in the wayward here and now.

I must proceed judiciously. I don't know the way yet. If I rush, I'll only have to backtrack and start over. No more 5,000-word days, one after another for months at a time. From now on, the story and its people mean everything; the narrator can play hide-and-seek and possum. He'll have his say, when the time is right and not before.

It took me 50 years to learn this little lesson, 50 rather miserable years, knowing I might have a talent, knowing I didn't have a clue how to use it.

Oh, well, better latent than never, as the girls in West Hollywood say. Yours for the evolution,
It was time to write the book. I had returned home in May 1983 from my 30-day, 16,000-mile train trip around America ready to write about it and my similar 1976 trip.

That same spring, my son, Eric, had joined the Janesville Fife & Drum Corps, a youth band that played and marched to colonial-era music. It’s his thing, I thought, but in late June I attended a parents’ meeting to help plan the group’s Independence Day weekend marches in Dundalk, Md.; Philadelphia, Pa.; and Washington, D.C. I put my name on a sign-up sheet for alternate chaperones, figuring I’d appear cooperative. I didn’t want to go, but I wasn’t worried: All the chaperone positions were filled.

A few nights later a corps member called to ask if I’d replace a chaperone who dropped out. I suggested she call the others on the list first.

“You were the only one on it,” she said.

Eric and most of the corps left Janesville on July 1 for the July 2 parade in Dundalk (near Baltimore), and the next day I helped drive another parent’s conversion van with six corps members who couldn’t leave until the 2nd.

We caught up with Eric and the corps near the Philadelphia Art Museum on a humid day in the 90s, and I photographed them marching down Benjamin Franklin Parkway, around the fountain at Logan Circle, then around City Hall and down Market St. to Independence National Historic Park, where many corps members played in the fountains to cool off.

Several, however, became sick from the heat, including Eric’s friend David Zimmerman, who was taken to a hospital and given fluids intravenously. Doctors ordered that he not march in the Washington parade the next day.

In Washington, the heat was worse, and corps director Bob Williams ignored instructions to gather in a sunny staging area. Instead, he ordered corps members to wait in the shade across the Mall from the Smithsonian Castle until they were called to line up on 7th Street for the march down Constitution Avenue to 21st Street.

I wore the green hunting shirt of a Culpeper, VA., militia man, so I could be in the street and photograph the corps along the route. Eric wore a white uniform with red trim under the white flag.

Several times as I stopped to photograph the corps before racing ahead to my next shot, I ran into David Zimmerman. He looked fine as he walked the entire route back and forth along the length of the corps, covering more ground than if he had marched in the parade.

On both days I saw a beautiful camaraderie between the kids as they battled the heat and gave the holiday crowds a good show despite the swarming news photographers who got in their way near the reviewing stand.

At the end of the parade, however, several more members were sick, and David, who wasn’t allowed to march, ran for help from corps leaders.
The heat left us short of water, and I hurried to several lemonade stands to buy ice-cold drinks for the kids. We stayed for the fantastic fireworks but missed the controversy about Secretary of the Interior James Watt’s replacing the Beach Boys concert with Wayne Newton.

My wife Judy eventually joined the corps, too, and we were with them during most of their parades for the next five years. I photographed their performances and presented a slide program at each end-of-the-year banquet. I seldom worked on my train-trip book, however, and eventually, in 2006, I realized I needed to take another trip to update my information about Amtrak.

But I’m not sorry about taking the time to chaperone and photograph the kids in the JFDC. The train book was, and is, important to me, but so were the corps and its people. By 1990 Eric was living out of state and was no longer active in fife and drum, but several of his friends were, and they left the JFDC and formed a new corps called the River Valley Colonial Fife & Drum Corps. Both groups are still active, though mostly with adult members now. However, 30 years after their “DC in ’83” parade, the friendships are still strong among many of the corps’ members who marched down Constitution Avenue that July 4th.

And it’s time to finish that book.

**Jan Kent is**
**The Word Whisperer**

**Pro bono fide reflections on Latin words**

More foreign words – this time in Latin.

There's **pro bono**, which is anything done without charge. What's not to love about that?

**Quid pro quo** means we don't get something for nothing, but in return for something else. Still a pretty good deal.

**Vox populi**, the voice of the people, is always a good thing to hear, especially when it's **viva voce** – by word of mouth.

And then there are our everyday favorites: **bona fide, de facto, delirium tremens, ad nauseam**.

Those ancient Romans really knew how to turn a phrase.

**Bar jokes for English majors**

A comma splice walks into a bar, it has a drink and leaves.

A dangling modifier walks into a bar. After finishing its drink, the bartender asks it to leave.

A question mark walks into a bar?

**Two inappropriate quotation marks “walk into” a bar.**

A gerund and an infinitive walk into a bar, drinking to drink.

**The bar was walked into by the passive voice.**

Three intransitive verbs walked into a bar. They sat. They talked. They left.

**They said it**

“I’ve done a lot of horrible things in my life but I never taught creative writing.”

Richard Price, *Clockers Lush Life*

“I saw the best minds of my generation distracted by their smart phones.”

Daniel Alarcon, *Lost City Radio*

“Every time there is an unnecessary prologue a good chapter dies.”

Roxane Gay, *Ayiti*
Several years ago I wrote about a friend, Tom DeBaggio, who had early onset Alzheimer’s disease. From the day he was diagnosed, this former newspaper journalist chronicled his treatment and debilitation in two books, Losing My Mind and When It Gets Dark. By the second book, readers could discern the author’s deterioration. He and his wife also did an interview series for NPR and appeared on Oprah. His haunting view of this terrible illness broke ground for a new genre in writing.

Currently, the storyteller is 15-year-old Ido Kedar, author of Ido In Autismland: Climbing Out of Autism’s Silent Prison. Because the child was nonverbal, his parents didn’t know until he was seven that he could read. Introduced to a letter board, he demonstrated he could also write. He pointed to each letter, and his mother recorded his thoughts on paper. At age 12, angry and frustrated, Kedar wrote about his struggles. Thus began a series of essays that became his book.

Approximately one in 88 children is diagnosed on the autism spectrum. (The majority are boys). There are many theories on what causes autism, but it remains a mystery. Internet blogs written by parents and medical experts relate their experience with autistic children and adults, but Kedar brings stunning insight into what he calls “this shitty neurological illness.” You have only to read his essays to know that his intelligence surpasses his chronological age.

“I am an autistic guy with a message,” he writes. “I spent the first half of my life completely trapped in silence. The second—on becoming a free soul. I had to fight to get an education. Now I am a regular education student. I communicate by typing on an iPad or a letter board. My book is an autism diary, telling the story of my symptoms, education, and journey into communication. I hope to help other autistic people find a way out of their silence.”

It upsets Kedar when he recognizes that people are disappointed when they try to interact and he turns away. He explains that he cannot control impulses that cause anti-social acts.

Kedar scorns the assumption that because someone can’t speak, he doesn’t understand, doesn’t hear, doesn’t learn. At an early age, he resented his parents and teachers discussing him in his presence and talking down to him by using incomplete sentences in a babyish tone of voice.

He hated being repeatedly tutored on his ABCs and $1 + 1 = 2$. He feels that being rewarded with a treat or a high five for giving the right answer or obeying a command belittles the child.

Addressing teachers and therapists, Kedar advises: “I feel that you, who are embarking on careers in special education, need to know that a kid like me will be in your class—that is, a kid like me before letter board or iPad—who can’t get his ideas out. To be a great teacher you can’t be his prison guard. To be a great teacher you must find intelligence and give the hope of freedom in communication. To be a great teacher you must give a real education to those kids who may look stupid in the eyes of many, but who think, and feel, and pray every day for the chance to show who they are inside.”

As the grandmother of a nonverbal six-year-old, I find Kedar’s words to be invaluable. I’m aware of what William might be thinking and feeling. I’m careful with the language I use to communicate. When he turns away, I understand that it’s not necessarily me he’s rejecting.

If you know someone with autism (and who doesn’t these days?), read Kedar’s story. It will open your eyes—and your heart—beyond imagination.
Love, marriage, and self-preservation

One day, a man came home and was greeted by his wife dressed in a very sexy nightie. 'Tie me up,' she purred, 'and you can do anything you want.' So he tied her up and went golfing.

A woman came home, screeching her car into the driveway, and ran into the house. She slammed the door and shouted at the top of her lungs, 'Honey, pack your bags. I won the lottery!'

The husband said, 'Oh my God! What should I pack, beach stuff or mountain stuff?'

'Doesn't matter,' she said. 'Just get out.'

Marriage is a relationship in which one person is always right, and the other is a husband.

A wife was making a breakfast of fried eggs for her husband. Suddenly, her husband burst into the kitchen. 'Careful,' he said, 'CAREFUL! Put in some more butter! Oh my gosh! You're cooking too many at once. TOO MANY! Turn them! TURN THEM NOW! We need more butter. Oh my gosh! WHERE are we going to get MORE BUTTER? They're going to STICK! Careful. CAREFUL! I said be CAREFUL! You NEVER listen to me when you're cooking! Never! Turn them! Hurry up! Are you CRAZY? Have you LOST your mind? Don't forget to salt them.. You know you always forget to salt them. Use the! Salt. USE THE SALT! THE SALT!' The wife stared at him. 'What in the world is wrong with you? You think I don't know how to fry a couple of eggs?' The husband calmly replied, 'I just wanted to show you what it feels like when I'm driving.'

Fifty-one years ago, Herman James, a North Carolina mountain man, was drafted by the Army. On his first day in basic training, the Army issued him a comb. That afternoon the Army barber sheared off all his hair. On his second day, the Army issued Herman a toothbrush. That afternoon the Army dentist yanked seven of his teeth. On the third day, the Army issued him a jock strap. They’ve been looking for Herman for 51 years.
FOR THE LOVE OF WORDS
ESTHER M. LEIPER-ESTABROOKS

The mystery of the mound

I spotted an odd sight hiking in the woods one winter day, only a half mile from home. Snow had bent branches down far enough to reveal a steep hillock several hundred feet off the well-packed snowmobile trail. Lacking snowshoes, I judged the white stuff over-deep to trudge through, so I filed the place for further exploration. Was it an Indian mound? Until whites came, this land had been Abenaki territory for thousands of years.

In May I returned and eagerly pulled myself up what proved a symmetrical oval earth pile covered with scraggly grass. Seated on gritty soil at the top, I pictured myself finding an ancient arrowhead, but the few loose stones were mundane. Next I scanned the view hoping to spot a buck rubbing velvet off antlers or to hear a bull moose bawl his mating call—but no; the world was still.

With rear-end growing chilly, (May in New Hampshire can be cold and can even snow), I clambered back down, then circled through budding foliage to discover the mound’s far side relatively open. By now you’re likely scoffing: Yet if discovering an unrecognized Native American site seems unlikely, for several summers archeology digs were conducted along Israel’s River at a site a mere quarter-mile away.

Dr. Richard Boisvert headed the 2012 expedition whose crew found fluted points of local rhyolite in pits which (news accounts assured) “proved productive.” I jumped into fantasy: An Indian mound? Perhaps this hill was just that, which led me to ponder who, in time hence, might discover our artifacts? What would future folk make of computers, i-pods, and discs? What records would we leave? Author Paul Gallico wrote, speaking of cats, “When in doubt, wash.” Well, when I’m in doubt, puzzled, or excited, I write a poem to lick my thoughts into shape. So--always carrying paper and pencil--I perched on a boulder to jot the following:

STRANGE HILLOCK
Down in a valley on flat, low ground
There rises a small and oval mound
Some fifty feet long and twelve feet high;
A pudding-shaped hump deer trails go by.
Why it is there; what else it might be
Is a question that always puzzles me.

--Did Abenakis shape it ages ago--
And has it deep secrets to bestow?
Brush surrounds so it’s nearly hidden;
Dark burial barrow, or kitchen midden
From refuse tossed in a heedless pile;
Has it been thus for a long, long while?

I shall sit at the apex now and again
To ponder the secrets of time and men;
Queries which may never yield an answer;
Elusive, say, as the “cure for cancer.”
All I can tell is, from low, flat ground
Down in the valley there rises a mound.

Pleased with this spontaneous effort, when I returned home I read the poem to my husband Peter, who laughed loudly. “Hunters saturate the woods every fall,” he pointed out. “So if the mound truly meant anything, that Boisvert guy would investigate.”

Nonetheless, as faultless recollection assures me, I did persuade Peter to walk down the trail and observe the hillock up close. Not, of course, that he was much impressed. Reluctantly he followed me around to the far side. There, where woods thinned to meadow, he declared, “Look close; timber was cut here. See how earth’s disturbed? Note old ruts and track marks, plus that dip in the ground: Loggers scooped it out so they could drive their truck down in, which made skidding logs easier. The dirt removed formed your “Indian hump.” Oh yes, I admitted this sounded logical, yet the mound seemed bigger than any trace left of a pit. Still, I’m a dreamer, while Peter has an engineer’s mind (and an engineering degree among various others). By contrast, my imagination--like a campfire out of bounds--fuels whole forest fires of speculation.
So matters stood, till I asked Peter to walk to the mound again. This occurred a full year later; with the weather pleasantly breezy and offering a welcome prospect of exercise. My dear husband stared at me oddly and declared, “The mound? I never went there in the first place; you must have dreamed it. Anyway, I’ve plenty to keep busy here.”

Well, he was right about that fact. We live in a fixer-upper requiring constant fixingupping. So, miffed, but puzzling over my own memory, I headed out by myself and soon sat at the mound’s top, again hoping to spot a moose, deer, or even rabbit, while a flock of crows croaked loudly, “Intruder alert, intruder alert!”

Perched on high thus, I tried to picture the Abenaki in olden days and idly took a stick to scrabble at rough soil. To my amazement a shard of shiny chert with clear flake marks gleamed up, topaz-hued and semi-transparent; just the sort of arrowhead I’d long-envisioned.

Now all my belief in the mound can truly show is that Abenakis at least visited, or where else could this artifact come from? If logic suggests Peter’s truck explanation for the mound’s presence is more accurate, I still do not prefer it to my own. Moreover, I’ll continue to visit the place, puzzling over a past I can’t recreate and a future I can’t foresee. Do I really believe the hillock is an ancient relic? Of course; why not? Yet that’s mostly because I wish to, while as Peter claims with customary irony, I’m never wrong, and if I thought I was once, I very soon found I was mistaken! And no matter what else, I got a poem and this column from the situation, didn’t I?

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**The Punny Side of Life**

**Ed Pahnke**

**Hit ‘em where they ain’t**

Often time nicknames are the opposite of the persona of the individual. A tall, heavy person may be called “Tiny.” A quiet person may go by “Gabby.”

So it was with “Slugger” Slone. In the field at his shortstop position, Slone shone. He patrolled the area between second and third base with winged feet and a sure glove. Only five feet six inches tall, he often leaped almost five feet off the ground to snare a ball hot off the bat of an opposing player.

When batting, however, his prowess plummeted. More often than not, leg singles were his only contribution to his team’s offense. When a sports announcer mentioned that Slugger was coming to bat, it was often with a snicker – not the candy bar.

His lack of power hitting kept him off the rolls of the highly paid players. Determined to change his image and up his pay, Slugger decided to go after the long ball instead of popping the ball over the infielders’ outstretched hands. He practiced facing a pitching machine, successfully pulling the ball.

He was ready. He smiled and rubbed his hands together. “I’ll show ‘em.”

The test came the next day. Bob Feller was on the mound, and fast balls came thick and fast, zooming across home plate.

Before Slugger left the dugout, Jack Oakie, the manager, clapped Slugger on the shoulder and said, “Bunt.”

Muttering, Slugger strode to the plate. “Ha, I’ll pull one along the leftfield line.”

He swung from the heels. Three fast balls later, Bob Feller registered another strikeout.

His face crimson with rage, Jack benched Slugger.

Slugger never again tried to pull a fast one.
Sophie to the rescue

For those of us lucky enough to be teens in 1950, Madison’s summers were filled with baseball in the park, dips at the beach, and evenings at the carnival when it came to town. We watched a neighbor’s TV if we didn’t yet have one.

Good summer times, yet the fear of polio was as real as a tornado warning. Polio left victims paralyzed and hospitalized, and it visited our family when my mother was stricken in mid-August, 1955. I don’t remember being scared, but our lives, mine at 14 years old, my sister’s at 11, and my Dad’s, would change in ways we had never considered.

Mother was quarantined at St. Mary’s Hospital for the first weeks. She was paralyzed but not life-threatened.

September arrived with the three of us home alone adjusting to a new normal, for me waking to the radio’s farm report, peddling papers, cramming in breakfast, and riding my bike out to Edgewood as an incoming freshman.

Help kicked in. Neighbors brought food, and one of our grandmothers came, but the house was in disarray.

Fortunately St. Mary’s is near Edgewood. I rode my bike through Vilas Park after school, past the zoo, stashed the bike at the hospital’s back door, and walked up to Mother’s room. (Notice the easy-access; try that today.) Every day mother and I enjoyed wonderful visits, some of my best growing up memories. The hospital staff cheered on each small improvement. I remember – and it took weeks – when Mother hobbled down the hospital hall the first time on crutches. She now required four points of contact with Mother Earth, no longer just two, to maintain balance.

An Edgewood sophomore who worked after school on mother’s floor became like my big sister, keeping track of how mother was doing in ways I understood. My insider.

You can bet Dad and my sister waited for daily updates. Although Mother’s progress was heartening, our domestic situation was in shambles. We needed a housemother.

Where could we turn for help? I don’t recall bureaus or agencies focused on family life. Our aunts and uncles all lived out-of-town. What we had going for us were friends, church and community, neighbors helping neighbors, the good old-fashioned word of mouth.

Sophie Johnson, a Sun Prairie farm wife and grandmother, came to help. I am sure Sophie did not need more work. A hefty Scandinavian woman, she’d raised her family and was more than capable of handling us. Sophie never hesitated to yell out the window, “Where you going on that go-kart? You be careful; don’t take that go-kart on the street.” Or else. Sophie cooked yummy dinners that brought us scrambling to the table without her having to holler.

When Mother came home, Sophie stayed on. She was family by then, no agencies, no paperwork, just Sophie as long as we needed her.

Recovery was slow, Mother using crutches for years. We went back to one car; Mother never drove again. My sister and I were among the first kids to get the Salk Vaccine, eliminating the polio fear. We still had Sophie, who stopped by for years to say hi and check on us.

A wheelchair complemented the crutches. Mother wheeled around the house, rested in the chair and would watch an occasional show on our new TV. I became curious about that wheelchair when mother was out of the room. I noticed its two large wheels with two tiny wheels up front, a four-point balance.

Fooling around, I moved the wheelchair backwards, stopped, lifted the front wheels off the floor and found a two-point balance on the rear wheels, its legs. (See the YouTube “Scrubs Wheelchair Balance” video to watch the doctors on that show demonstrate.)

Balancing the wheelchair on two wheels became my wish for Mother, a way of praying. “Mother, you can learn to stand on two legs again. It takes practice. You can do it.”

Mother did practice. It took time, but she regained her balance and learned to walk again, a triumph.
I am writing poetry again after a hiatus of many years. I won't mention how many years to scoot quickly around the question of whether or not I am a poet without writing poetry. I personally think of the magnificent J.D. Salinger in his reclusive fiction dome. However, I do have a kind of excuse for my lack of poems over time. I picture myself in the Old West writing lines in the dust before Bics and notebooks and computers came along. I watch my words blow away and think: I should have waited a hundred years. I can't seem to stop the lines from coming now. I'm beginning to think I am half reincarnated, and the only thing showing up from my predecessor are the poetry lines. I hope this guy or gal turns out to be Wordsworth or Dickinson.

New lines appear suddenly in the midst of mundane chores, like making the bed or folding laundry. Apparently, lines percolate from an event or word said to me, a memory, most anything from days before. I can only blame this on my father, a tremendous coffee drinker who always had a pot on the stove. Perhaps this should read "prolific" coffee drinker. Usually in my writing, I'm more like my mother, sipping tea slowly with the bag in the cup forever until it's cold. I do sometimes perch in front of my keyboard with my pinkie bent, but then I curse when I hit "Return" rather than "Shift."

My lines, or the critique of them, also arrive in my sleep. The other night I wrote a poem I thought I liked, but the mice in my dream didn't. They chewed on it until I awoke and felt I had to change that poem. Lines of different poems I'm writing flash into mind all at once, and I try to write them down, but I fear I'll end up with pages similar to those with my useless telephone numbers with no name. Who is this? What does it mean?

I can never find any good paper when so inspired. If I write on the back of a check, will the bank cash it? Can I write on the paper separating the cheese slices? Prescription labels are too small. Did everyone read this newspaper? Well, they have now.

I don't mean to say that everything I turn out is good, though a certain writing coach says it's all part of the process. Several days ago I was feeling depressed and wrote a poem. I looked at it later. There is good blue and trite blue, and mine would have changed to purple in relief. So I am learning once again that I need to be a quality expert as well as a poet. Revision kills, literally for the word. However, being this expert is difficult, and I just don't know how to be one consistently. There is always some phrase or word I like that compels me to persist with a certain poem. I think there is more process drivel than I'd like to admit, but I am working at keeping honest about myself. Still, I'm not sure I want to be a reincarnated hack who squeezes through the ages to be me. I do know that if you come to my poetry book signing, you need adore me only if I am wearing my Burger King hat.

In many ways, I feel like a kid again in school who is falling over waving her hand with the answers and doing extra work and getting so enthused about my "project" (not the science one). I didn't anticipate that in these older years of writing. I thought that kind of feeling was for the young me who wanted to be a journalist. Still, this has a frightening side to it, too: what to do with these feelings; is it going to end suddenly and I won't think of another line; am I being delusional, or, maybe more delusional? A lot to work out here. I think I sound like I'm ten years old.
Grandma and the Tomboy

My Mom said my Grandma was neat as a pin. I didn't know exactly what that meant except when the church bells were about to chime, she'd be smoothing on her bleached white gloves, one finger at a time. Next to her, I felt uncombed, a ruffled rooster awake to stumble through a day already half astray. She woke up at five. My Mother knew the routine when she sent me to sleep with Granny. I had to be more pristine than just a tomboy mucking in the mud on her fanny. I had to be buttoned, ironed, and breath so fine I could be mints on a plate after we dined. Grandma was always interested in ears where potatoes could sprout, and elbows, I didn't doubt I should hide by my side. She'd look appraisingly at me and say, "Don't hump your shoulders. Don't slump. People judge you by what they see." I knew I was in trouble, and the bubble gum wad in my mouth, "Oh, dear," could cause apoplexy. We'd finally be ready as I'd ever be, carefully waiting by the door for her final act, a whiff from her compact across her nose, and hanky with starched lace stuffed someplace between her neck and her toes. Then, off we'd go. She said with pride. I liked to take her hand, and one thing I knew, Grandma'd never say a bad word in public about me, but I sure heard her whispers about common decency.

Sandy Rafter
A Poet’s Pantoum

Overcome with elation,
I shouted, “Hallelujah!”
the moment I wrote
my first poem—enraptured.

I shouted, “Hallelujah!”
as I gripped the pen that formed
my first poem—enraptured,
its ink streaking out ‘tween my fingers.

As I gripped the pen that formed
the deft lines of my verses,
its ink streaked out ‘tween my fingers—
they were the crafters.

The deft lines of my verses
gave voice to my thoughts—
they were the crafters
turning ink blots into an Epic.

Gave voice to my thoughts
the moment I wrote,
turning ink blots into an Epic—
overcome with elation.

Poet’s note: I discovered a new-to-me non-rhyming, free verse variation of the pantoum when I read “The Painter’s Pantoum” by Jessie Carty in the 2013 Poet’s Market. I thought it would be interesting to try writing one, and that if painters had a pantoum, poets should also. This poem is the result.
PAYERS, PREYERS & PRETENDERS
REX A. OWENS

Creative distractions

In the June Extra Innings I reviewed Steven Pressfield’s The War of Art, in which he explains his notion that resistance is the evil that distracts all of us well intended writers from our job – writing. Pressfield defines resistance as anything that distracts or prevents us from doing the work of writing. All of us have experienced this type of resistance, sometimes daily. In the summer time, especially, there seems to be an increase in the number and variety of distractions we writers face. In my case there is:

My grandson Ross (2 ½ yrs.)
Gardening
Cooking
My grandson Ross
Kayaking
Bicycling
My grandson Ross

I also have a wonderful granddaughter, Vivian Grace, 8 months, who lives in Omaha. Thanks to Skype I get to see her once a week. She, too, is a delightful creative distraction, from a distance.

You get the point. Yes, while each of these activities distracts me from time in front of the laptop pounding on the keys, in other ways they are creative respites that provide an opportunity to rejuvenate, improving writing. While I concur with Pressfield in general, I believe there is a case to be made to allow creative distractions in your life to ultimately deepen and enrich your writing.

My grandson Ross always greets me with a wide grin and an enthusiastic “Papa O!” Then he asks, “Papa O white car?!” That’s his way of asking if we’re off for a day of fun. Ross activates the part of my brain that’s still a child, and some adult inhibitions to experience the world disappear. Of course, he brings me great joy and a unique zest for life that only a child can share with a grandparent.

In my early sixties I still get a kick out of gardening and no longer see at as a chore, as I did growing up. This year my wife and I decided to grow vegetables from our own seeds rather than relying on the greenhouse. In March our living room with a west facing patio door became the indoor greenhouse where we nurtured tomatoes, cabbage, broccoli and other vegetables. I still believe it is a miracle for a small seed to evolve into a large plant that bears food that nourishes us. The act of gardening also nourishes my soul.

Several years ago we were involved in a boating accident and our canoe was toppled over. As a result we decided to find a different form of boating and took kayak lessons. I was hooked with the first lesson. A kayak is made to slither along the bank of a river or lake where you can have a great view of a variety of wildlife. You can paddle a kayak making very little noise so you don’t disturb the wildlife in their habitat. My wife claims I change personality when I’m on the water with my kayak. I slow down, I observe, I feel at peace.

I only bicycle on the extraordinary State of Wisconsin bicycle paths, most of which are reclaimed train track beds. Trains can only tolerate a very small grade, so for most paths the grade is no more than 3%, something even an old guy can handle. There’s often wildlife to be seen and a variety of landscapes—woods, marsh, farm fields, pine forests and many others. I don’t ride for speed with my head down, pumping for all I’m worth. My normal pace is about 10 miles an hour, enough to know I’ve had some exercise and gotten the opportunity to take in all aspects of the bike path. I often get passed, but I don’t care.

Yes, all of these activities take me away from my laptop. All of these activities give me ways to experience my world and people that invariably end up on the page, often in very subtle forms. Do E.I. readers also have creative distractions? Share yours with me at rexowens00@gmail.com.

Coach’s note: You’ll again see my #1 creative distraction on the last page of this newsletter.
Ten Days of Rain and Stinkin' Humidity

Colored chalk on the walk from the skippers on the street has disappeared. The puddles in my yard seep through the grass to trespass down my cellar wall. The beat of rain reminds me mud stains are gaining sway on the kitchen floor and the door has swollen an inch with the downpour. My rooms are dank, the kids are in and pull on me amid the din. The weather guy explains we'll get sunshine but I'd like to make a beeline to the school lab and hang myself on the skeleton's hook and be so drab that someone will do me a favor and knock me off to shatter on the tile, which won't be so vile. Even when they kick a bone, I won't care, because I'll be out of the house and alone.

Sandy Rafter

Hamburger Ergonomics

A staple of menus and restaurant profits, the classic hamburger is America’s gift to epicureans. Thank that industry too for high fructose kidney flushers, and the epidemic of corpulence. Observers of burgers’ ad-driven evolution have seen them grow vertically, our burgers to embellish: Onions, gooey sauces, lettuce, pickles, bacon and tomatoes, all expanding our thighs, butts and bellies. Who cares of the mess they leave on our clothes, from our knees to our noses? The burger’s sole role is economics. But eaters with average hands and mouth, find stains on sleeves and trousers. Burger designers: learn some ergonomics.

Bill Spevacek

Great Expectation

The old wooden pencil’s a handy creation. It’s seven slim inches of true inspiration. But one thing is horribly wrong—the eraser’s a quarter-inch long! Whoever agreed to that great expectation?

Craig W. Steele

Haiku #283

rejection letter—another editor guards my reputation

Craig W. Steele
Is there ever a movie that fills you with complete and utter joy mixed with excitement, and you can feel your inner child screaming in delight? That’s the experience I got with *Pacific Rim*.

The first films that I was introduced to other than Disney films were the classic Godzilla films that my dad loved. I had many of them on VHS, store bought and recorded off of the TV. I had a set of Godzilla figurines, and I would reenact fights between them. To this day I still love those movies. I think they are some of the best classic monster movies ever made.

*Pacific Rim* brings back many of those childhood memories and creates some fantastic new ones. This movie feels like those classic monster movies, but on a much grander scale.

The plot is pretty simple. A portal opens up deep beneath the sea and out of it come the Kaiju, giant beasts that want to destroy our world. So we build giant machines called Jaegers to fight them. The Jaegers are controlled by two pilots, one for each hemisphere of the brain.

The film begins seven years into the war. We get the backstories of some of the main characters, but I’d rather not give those away.

The performances are pretty solid for a film like this, something missing from the Godzilla films. I remember as a kid always wishing Godzilla would just show up already, not giving any thought to the people. The characters in *Pacific Rim* are interesting, and you do care for them, so that when the fight scenes occur, you care about the pilots inside the Jaegers.

Charlie Hunnam is a good lead. Rinko Kikuchi is quite good as well. There is no forced romance between her character and Hunnam’s, which was refreshing. Idris Elba is enjoyable as always. Charlie Day and Burn Gorman provide fun comic relief.

I really enjoyed Ron Perlman’s character, who runs a group of people that goes to dead Kaiju sites and harvests the organs to sell on the black market.

The action sequences are phenomenal, the best I’ve seen all year. You can feel the blows landing on Jaegers and Kaiju. The visual effects are stunning. These giant creations look and feel real. As much as I don’t care for 3D, my goodness does this film look amazing in IMAX 3D.

Each behemoth is designed with distinct features. You can tell which Jaeger or Kaiju is which, unlike the Transformers movies, where you can’t tell one robot from the other in a fight scene.

Director Guillermo Del Toro had full creative control making this film, which is a rare thing to see in movies these days. He has made a brilliant love-letter to classic monster movies. I listened to an interview with him recently, and I could tell how much this movie meant for him to make. He is so passionate about his work and just wants to make a film the audience can enjoy.

Mission accomplished, Mr. Del Toro. You have made a summer movie that is fun, lighthearted, and full of incredible action and good characters.

Go see this film and have a great time.

*Starting soon, I’m going to present my 100 favorite movies of all time in lists of 10 in each installment in Extra Innings. These won't necessarily be the greatest movies ever. These will be my favorite movies that I love so much. I hope you like it.*
A Poem a Day

I vow to write a poem a day
But this morning I get side-tracked
By the joyous sound of bird song,
The low drone of a plane
Slowing to land
At the nearby airport.
I view the neighbor’s garden,
Ready to bear fruit,
Vegetables, marigolds
Bordering the edges.
I push the stroller
With granddaughter
Drinking from her sippy-cup,
Clutching her favorite doll.
As we walk to the mail box
She points, “plane”
And “bird,” waving bye-bye
To both as plane lowers and
Birds noisily scatter from
A branch, aiming skyward.
It is warm and wonderful
Outdoors. The rain has
Deepened the green in the
Landscape; flowers bloom
In profusion.
I didn’t write today’s poem,
Perhaps tomorrow?
Besides, what was there to write
About?

Norma Sundberg
which leads us at last to
our moment with Lily