In his review of The Last Brother: The Rise and Fall of Teddy Kennedy, a tell-all bio by the recently deceased Joel McGinniss, Washington Post critic Jonathan Yardley wrote the following: “Not merely is it a textbook example of shoddy journalistic and publishing ethics; it is also a genuinely, unrelievedly rotten book, one without a single redeeming virtue, an embarrassment that should bring nothing except shame to everyone associated with it.”

The review didn’t kill Mr. McGinniss. In fact, he went on to write several other tomes, including The Rogue: Searching for the Real Sarah Palin, which New York Times critic Janet Maslin dismissed as “caustic, unsubstantiated gossip.”

While these reviews weren’t listed as the cause of death in McGinniss’ recent obituary, also in the New York Times, they were both quoted it it! Real scrapbook material for the kids and grandkids, huh?

Negative reviews are, of course, one of the hazards of publishing, the chance we take when we lay ourselves out there in print or cyberspace. “You can’t please everyone,” Rick Nelson wrote in Garden Party, after a bad experience at a reunion concert at Madison Square Garden, “so you got to please yourself.”

And wouldn’t most of us gladly endure a few negative reviews as the price to pay for having a book not only published but bought, read, and discussed?

But what’s the point, really? Other than venting their spleens, did Yardley and Maslin really accomplish anything positive by blowing away McGinniss’ efforts with an Uzi?

“With the publishing industry in general and novels in particular struggling (or so we’re told), why tell someone not to buy a book?” author and reviewer Francine Prose asked in a recent piece in the New York Times Book Review. “[W]hy drive another nail into its sad little coffin?”

She admitted to having written negative reviews, “a wicked sort of fun,” in the past, adding that “Sadly, it’s easier to be witty when one is being unkind.”

She stopped, she says, because she decided she’d rather spend her time urging people to read things she loves. “And writing a bad book didn’t seem like a crime deserving the sort of punitive public humiliation (witch-dunking, pillorying) that our Puritan forefathers so spiritedly administered.”

Good for Ms. Prose!

But wait. Like an AA drop-out diving back into the bottle, Prose soon went back to writing negative, railing against a list of literary offenses, including:

* talented writers phoning it in.
* gossip masquerading as biography
* name-dropping passing as memoir

Continued on next page
* characters who are compendiums of cliches
* sentences like “His eyes were as black as
  night.”

(The latter, by the way, was cited by another
critic as proof of the author’s “lyrical gifts.”)

She realized that she wasn’t going to save the
world from bad books with her reviews, she
admits, but she felt like the boy in Hans Christian
Andersen’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” who
“didn’t stop the parade but who feels he must tell
the truth.”

In the same February 16, 2014 issue of the
*Review*, Zoë Heller decried what she called a
trend in recent times to spare the author an unkind
accounting because it is “more important to
respect and protect an author’s feelings than to
pass judgment on an inferior book.”

“Writers ... scrap and struggle, often for
years, to have their work published,” she noted.
“Being sentient creatures, they are often
distressed by what critics have to say about their
work.” Oh, aren’t we, though! “Yet,” she
continues, “they accept with varying degrees of
resignation that they are not kindergartners
braving home their first potato prints for the
admiration of their parents, but grown-ups who
have chosen to present their work in the public
arena. I know of no self-respecting authors who
would ask to be given points for ‘effort’ or for the
fact they they are going to die one day.

“Banning negative reviews is not only
bad for the culture,” she concludes; it is
unfair to authors.”

I don’t write negative reviews. I either praise a
book’s virtues and the benefits to be gained by
reading it, or I leave it alone. It’s a personal
decision. I don’t think Prose and Heller are
wrong. I’ve just decided that my given mission in
life does not include trying to save the culture
from lousy books. It does include trying to nurture
and promote writing I consider worthy of
attention and writers whose work I’d love to see
more widely read.

That’s just me. How about you? Do you read
negative reviews (or books, movies, restaurants?)
Do you (or would you) write them? Are they
useful-- or just a guilty pleasure? Are you
dissuaded from buying a book by a negative
review-- or, for that matter, moved to buy one by
praise in print?

Let the rest of us know what you think at
mcook@cs.wisc.edu.

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**YOU COULD LOOK IT UP**

Brought to you be *Extra Innings*, the
newsletter that’s full of

Hooey

hū-ē\n
n: foolish talk or writing

Origin unknown

First Known Use: 1912

Synonyms

applesauce [slang], balderdash, baloney (also
boloney), beans, bilge, blah (also blah-blah),
blarney, blather, blatherskite, blither, bosh, bull
[slang], bunk, bunkum (or buncombe), claptrap,
codswallop [British], crapola [slang], crock,
drivel, drool, fiddle, fiddle-faddle, fiddlesticks,
flannel [British], flapdoodle, folderol (also
falderal), folly, foolishness, fudge, garbage, guff,
hogwash, hokeypokey, hokum, hoodoo, nonsense,
horsefeathers [slang], humbug, humbuggery, jazz,
malarkey (also malarky), moonshine, muck, nerts
[slang], nuts, piffle, poppycock, punk, rot,
rubbish, senselessness, silliness, slush, stupidity,
taradiddle (or tarradiddle), tommyrot, tosh, trash,
trumpery, twaddle

Related Words

absurdity, asininity, fatuity, foolery, idiocy,
imbecility, inaneness, insanity, kookiness,
lunacy; absurdness, craziness, madness,
senselessness, witlessness; hoity-toity, monkey
business, monkeyshine(s), shenanigan(s),
tomfoolery; gas, hot air, rigmarole (also
rigamarole); double-talk, greek, hocus-pocus

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**Witty bookstore clerk’s revenge**
In Part 1 of this column about writers and depression [#52, February, 2014], I raised the question of how we continue writing when depressed or start writing again if we've stopped.

I've been going through a period of depression, and it's taken me two months to get this second part underway. Other times, it's taken me much longer to start writing, even years. I don't claim to have all the answers on this topic, but I do have some ideas I've used for myself that I share here.

I believe we all know deep down when we're smiling without happiness, hiding behind our gestures or behind our doors, hurting, and hating ourselves. At times, I've likened my depression to pulling back the shower curtain after a hot shower and being struck by freezing air that seems as though it is of a world that will never be anything but cold and stark.

Sometimes, I feel as though a pitcher of syrup has spilled into my brain so I can't slog through my painfully slow thoughts. I'm unable to write when my mind is full of words about darkness and failure. Other times, I've wanted to cry and stay beneath the covers all day. I do not write then at all.

I remember well-meaning people telling me I needed a vacation or a long walk when I said I was feeling down. I still know people who think depression is shameful, to be suffered in secret. I went along with that thinking for a long time.

Not anymore.

I am not a downcast, degraded person. I will not think that of myself. I know that there are times when the knowledge and skill of a therapist or counselor help immensely. I didn't come to that realization quickly. It can be a real act of courage to take the step beyond suffering alone.

Since I find my depression is a recurring condition, I try to prepare myself for it during the times when I feel upbeat:

* I read the poetry and stories I've written and may change words as I do, but, mostly, I read them to like them, and I do. I congratulate myself for the idea of a poem, for the words I've chosen, for the time I've spent writing, and for my perseverance to create. I like something about myself, and this is very important to me later on when I do start feeling depressed.

* I joined a writing group. There are pros and cons to such groups, and there are personalities that sometimes grate, but when I go to the meeting, there are friends there, too. I am writing and know I must continue writing and set up a schedule for myself and write to read to the group.

* I've learned to listen more to other people, plus becoming more aware of my manipulation to avoid others and even hide within depression. Not too long ago, I stopped going to several groups I normally attend. In a way, I wanted to go, but depression had sapped my energy, or, at least, so I told myself.

I met a woman from one of the groups when I ventured out to the grocery store. I didn't know her well, but she stopped me to talk. She told me she'd heard I wasn't feeling well (a type of bug being my excuse for my absence without saying I was depressed) and told me she'd been praying for me. I was stopped in my tracks. Floored. She was praying for me; I couldn't fathom that -- me, a useless, insignificant person. I thought about her words for days and still do, and they give me comfort. I learned I was not alone and had been shutting out someone who cared.

When I'm having a problem getting started with writing, I turn to other writers and read their words. I was surprised at first to learn that so many writers have been depressed and even taken their own lives. I find sadness in that fact and in their writing at times, but I also experience not only closeness to another writer who has suffered but also great joy in their wonderful creativity that impacts me so much. When I lay down their novels or books of poetry, I always try to remember to ask myself why I write, and reach for those words that may touch others.

-- Continued on next page
I don't look upon this sharing or my attempts to get through depression and write as tricks or sure self-help methods. I look upon these as my ways to examine myself as I have been, am, and want to be -- ways to know the person I need to love to write.

FOR WHAT IT’S WORTH

REX OWENS

Are book clubs staving off a new dark age?

I have recently come to believe that book clubs will save the world-- much as the Irish monks did during the Dark Ages.

Several weeks ago I heard a report on NPR about reading in America. Since I was driving at the time, I wasn’t confident I heard the information correctly, but I do remember being shocked by it. So, in the week the World Wide Web turned 25, I searched on Google for “reading statistics.” This is what I found:

* 33% Percentage of U.S. high school grads who will never read a book after high school.
* 42% Percentage of college students who will never read a book after they graduate.
* 80% Percentage of U.S. families who did not buy a book in 2013.

Looking at the data in reverse, 67% of high school grads and 58% of college grads continue to read books as adults. It’s a mystery why the percentage of college grads that never read a book following graduation is higher than that of high school grads. I guess the college grads just get tired of reading, but the data is counter intuitive.

The data on families is even more alarming.

Even with this dismal report, there are pockets of hope; they are called book clubs.

In March I meet with a local book club to discuss my debut novel, Murphy’s Troubles. I was invited to attend their monthly meeting and was even asked to lead the discussion. It was thrilling because this was my first chance to talk directly with my readers. Before the meeting I prepared a series of questions to spark discussion. In my introduction I talked about my journey to write and publish the book.

One person had lived in Ireland for three months on a teacher exchange; another had traveled to Ireland and taken a driving tour, and two others had Irish heritage. I asked the members to be frank with me because that is how I will improve as a writer. The group wasn’t reticent. They were frank but not unkind.

The first comment was: “Well, if you want us to be frank, I think the paragraph on the back of the book gives too much of the story away.”

I was surprised how some of the club members reacted to various characters in the novel. We talked together for just over two hours. Following the discussion we had tea and a few snacks. They joked that they had never discussed a book for so long before, which I think was a compliment.

As an author there’s nothing better than sharing the experience of your book directly with readers.

We may not be a book reading nation, but there are enclaves of book clubs that maintain a fierce devotion to books-- whether hard copy or ebooks.

During the Dark Ages Irish monks saved the collected knowledge of Europe up to that time. I think book clubs are serving a similar function today and saving the world.

I’m a member of the Tuesday Morning Book Talk in Madison. Our Extra Innings founder and editor, Marshall Cook, leads the discussion of one book each semester; Professor Emily Auerbach leads the others. For information contact Professor Auerbach at eauerbach@dcswisc.edu.

If you’re a member of a book club, e-mail me at rexowens00@gmail.com and share your experiences.

Coach’s note: I had a few heartfelt responses to Sandy’s first column on depression. The writers asked me not to share their comments. If you have experiences or thoughts you could share on the subject, please do, as I think they would help others to discover or rediscover that they are not alone. You can send them to me at mcook@dcswisc.edu.
AN E.I. SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE REPORT: PART ONE

Why did the chicken cross the road?

SARAH PALIN: The chicken crossed the road because he could see Russia on the other side!

BARACK OBAMA: Let me be perfectly clear, if the chickens like their eggs they can keep their eggs. No chicken will be required to cross the road to surrender her eggs. Period.

JOHN McCAIN: My friends, the chicken crossed the road because he recognized the need to engage in cooperation and dialogue with all the chickens on the other side of the road.

HILLARY CLINTON: What difference could it possibly make at this point why the chicken crossed the road?

GEORGE W. BUSH: The chicken crossed the road, mission accomplished!

DICK CHENEY: Where's my gun?

COLIN POWELL: Now to the left of the screen, you can clearly see the satellite image of the chicken crossing the road.

BILL CLINTON: I did not cross the road with that chicken.

AL GORE: I invented chickens.

JOHN KERRY: Although I voted to let the chicken cross the road, I am now against it! It was the wrong road to cross, and I was misled about the chicken's intentions. I am not for it now, and will remain against it.

AL SHARPTON: Why are all these chickens white?

DR. PHIL: The problem we have here is that this chicken won't realize that he must first deal with the problem on this side of the road before it goes after the problem on the other side of the road. What we need to do is help him realize how stupid he is acting by not taking on his current problems before adding any new problems.

OPRAH: Well, I understand that the chicken is having problems, which is why he wants to cross the road so badly. So instead of having the chicken learn from his mistakes and take falls, which is a part of life, I'm going to give this chicken a NEW CAR so that he can just drive across the road and not live his life like the rest of the chickens.
Where do writers get ideas? John Barth once stated, “We live in an ocean of story, and wherever you decide to drop your bucket, when you haul it up it’ll be overflowing.”

I recently dipped into the digital files of my hometown newspapers and scooped up three ideas—one of which grew to book length, a biographical sketch of John and Lyn Glover.

During my childhood, Lyn Glover, one of the town characters, was in his early sixties. He stored a vintage car in a neighbor’s garage, and on rainy days we kids climbed onto the running board and hoisted ourselves inside, where we pored over a musty rummage of law books, photographs, diplomas, and documents related to Lyn’s father, John Glover.


At various times he was a Republican, a Mugwump, a Democrat, an Independent, and a Republican again. He was a prohibitionist, a suffragist and supporter of women’s rights—even in the church.

If there was a county fair baking contest, a Golden Wedding, a funeral, a patriotic holiday, a need for Santa Claus to appear or an auctioneer for a basket social, John Glover was the go-to man for master of ceremonies or eulogist. He was revered by many, disliked by rivals. His funeral in 1921 was the biggest ever seen at that time.

Lyn, whose mother died when he was nine, chose the road less traveled but became visible in his own right. As a young man, he apprenticed with a mason in plastering and lathing and became skilled at the craft. He handled other odd jobs, for which he charged a low fee, often accepting a meal for a small job. He wasn’t homeless but looked like a beggar. We kids called him, simply, Glover.

While Glover’s father donned professional and honorary hats, Lyn’s choices were utilitarian and seasonal, light weight caps in summer and a knit stocking cap or one with flaps that covered his ears in winter. Beneath the head gear his unkempt gray hair straggled to his shoulders. Layers of tattered clothing bore the marks of his trade: plaster, wallpaper paste, Spackle, paint, and brick and mortar dust.

Short, stocky, and slightly stooped, Glover shuffled his feet to keep his unlaced shoes or galoshes from falling off. He hummed as he ambled about, toting his tools in a handmade two-wheeled pushcart. Without fully glancing up, he greeted passersby with a wave—a half salute. Folks responded in kind but allotted a wide berth due to his lack of hygiene.

While there were differences between father and son, there were many similarities and a strong and companionable bond. John was known as a walking encyclopedia, and Lyn was well-read, too. John practiced theatrics at the podium, the pulpit, and in the courtroom. Lyn’s life was not without drama. He witnessed a murder and was taken to court by neighbors who claimed his property was a public nuisance. He was acquitted. He watched his father have a stroke and sat with him until he died a few hours later.

John Glover was known as The Orator, and Lyn was dubbed “The Sage of Sibley” by a newspaper editor. My book, The Orator And The Sage, documents their lives as well as the growth of a small town from 1871 to the mid-fifties, when Glover died.

The second story idea relates to a 1920 murder (not the one Lyn witnessed), when a 15-year-old boy shot his father. It has potential for a novel. Writing this column about where writers get ideas.
LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA
MAUREEN MITCHELL

Man and whales

In April 2006 I visited the Whaling Station at Albany, Western Australia, where they had three ships that had been used for the slaughter of thousands upon thousands of whales, for the rendering of their oil for lamps, cosmetic and pharmaceutical uses, and also for export to the United Kingdom and Europe.

Fortunately for the whales (or what was left of them) the beginnings of conservation put a stop to the killing, and it was made illegal in 1978. Way too late!

According to the tour-guide the whales are only now increasing in numbers.

Working conditions for the employees who had to carry out the brutal murder of these magnificent creatures were deplorable. They wore only shorts, t-shirts and work boots. They got paid according to how many whales they put in the cookers. No insurance company would cover them.

Our tour guide was most descriptive regarding the extraction of blubber (for the oil) from the head and body of the whales. We saw framed descriptive photos of the cutting-up of the animal. One lady from the group walked out of the room. Blood and guts poured out of the animals onto the wharf and into the sea. Now the sea looks serene.

As we viewed the Cheynes 11 (the whaling boat), an audiocassette highlighted the crew’s delight in the capture of a whale.

As a friend said to me: “It’s history, that is what happened, you cannot change it.”

Why do our communities stop and remember September 11th and Bali and not reflect on the animals that are slaughtered for humans’ pleasure and profit? When I witness what has happened to the creatures of planet Earth, all I can think of is one horrid mistake after another, all for the Holy Dollar!

HAHNKE PAHNKE
ED PAHNKE

The tale of the tee

When Bantam Ben Logan retired from professional golf competition, he planned to teach new players the game. Maybe he could impart to others some of the love of the game he felt. He smiled at the thought.

He chanced to meet a man in a remote corner of Montana. The man had never seen a golf course or a golf club. Thinking that this would be a real challenge to his teaching ability, Ben offered to show the man, Stan Lee, the principals of playing golf.

Smiling and nodding, Stan jumped at the chance. He quickly changed from soiled scruffy clothes into clean scruffy clothes and scrunched a USA cap on his round head. Using Ben’s car, they drove to the nearest golf course, 120 odd miles from Stan’s wilderness home.

When the two men stepped onto the golf course after paying the small green fee, Ben proceeded to point out the grassy fairways, greens, holes, and roughs. He showed Stan the golf clubs and explained the basics of the game.

Then they got down to the nitty-gritty. Stan watched intently while Ben teed up, and Stan did likewise. Ben whacked the ball down the fairway. Stan steadied himself, took a deep breath. and swung the club mightily, topping the ball, which bounced several feet along the fairway.

The two men made the short walk to Stan’s ball.

“You’re away,” Ben noted. “It’s your shot.”

Stan frowned at the tee he had retrieved and now held in his sun baked hand. “Am I supposed to tee up again, Ben?” he asked.

“Try to remember what I told you,” Ben urged.

Stan looked from tee to ball to tee, as if hoping they’d tell him. “To tee or not to tee,” he murmured, “that is the question.”
AN E.J. SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE REPORT: PART TWO

Why did the chicken really cross the road?

ANDERSON COOPER: We have reason to believe there is a chicken, but we have not yet been allowed to have access to the other side of the road.

NANCY GRACE: That chicken crossed the road because he's guilty! You can see it in his eyes and the way he walks.

PAT BUCHANAN: To steal the job of a decent, hardworking American.

MARTHA STEWART: No one called me to warn me which way the chicken was going. I had a standing order at the Farmer's Market to sell my eggs when the price dropped to a certain level. No little bird gave me any insider information.

DR SEUSS: Did the chicken cross the road? Did he cross it with a toad? Yes, the chicken crossed the road, but why it crossed I've not been told.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY: To die in the rain, alone.

GRANDPA: In my day we didn't ask why the chicken crossed the road. Somebody told us the chicken crossed the road, and that was good enough for us.

BARBARA WALTERS: Isn't that interesting? In a few moments, we will be listening to the chicken tell, for the first time, the heart warming story of how it experienced a serious case of molting and went on to accomplish its lifelong dream of crossing the road.

ARISTOTLE: It is the nature of chickens to cross the road.

BILL GATES: I have just released eChicken2013, which will not only cross roads, but will lay eggs, file your important documents, and balance your checkbook. Internet Explorer is an integral part of eChicken2013. This new platform is much more stable and will never reboot.

ALBERT EINSTEIN: Did the chicken really cross the road, or did the road move beneath the chicken?

MARTIN LUTHER KING: One day, right there in Alabama, little black chickens and little white chickens will be able to join together....wing to wing, and walk across the road.

COLONEL SANDERS: Nuts. One of ‘em got away!
To Kill a Tree

Vic Johnson

The onyx limbs of the maple
spread in graceful gothic traceries
against a somber-gray January sky.

Borne on a cold northwest wind
a buzz, an angry rampant snarl,
a chainsaw’s rage tearing into wood.

In a cherry picker bucket a man
raised up by hydraulic lift, riding high,
dismembering one branch and then another.

Pin wheeling into the snow they fall,
shedding twigs, and pregnant buds —
a squander of stillborn leaves and seeds.

Years of growth cut away. This shield to
summer heat, tempered sun and drank the rain.
A half-day’s work to kill this tree.

From top to bottom, sheared of limbs,
the trunk stands naked; thence “truncated,”
piece by piece thudding down on frozen ground.

Not left standing long, the noble stump,
then sawdust rendered, sent down wind,
drifting in a golden yellow mist.

A vacant space reveals a new horizon’s reach
all different now of sky and distant trees.
This murdered maple mourned by doves and crows.
An Artist
Larry Tobin

She sat hourly at the window and brushed the daylight across pretty pages,
Splashing ambers and reds and greens into the morning rush of Market Street
Or stroking the imp into a sandy-haired schoolboy's eyes.
To say "she was an artist" was like noting simply that "Babe was a ballplayer."
She could very nearly paint the warmth of a late-autumn fireside.
To view her magic was to feel the Bay fog creeping off the canvas and into the room,
Or to smell the pickle-colored rain that fell in sheets from the tip of her brush.
But for all her multi-colored talent, she lived alone.
Just as she could not rearrange the night to paint the sunshine in,
Neither could she love through a window.

Electronic Age
Norma J. Sundberg

No communication
between friends,
several young bodies who would
normally share experiences,
talk of clothes, of guys, of the Saturday dance....
Each with cell-phone glued to her ear
or punching letters into “text-messaging”
to an unknown entity out there
in cyberspace…
No real-speak among friends…. This short-hand texting;
how did they talk bcp, before cell phones?
What did they do btm, before text-messaging?
Has someone written a manual for
short-hand text-terms? Or are they
to be found on the keys?
What happens next? Will panic ensue
when they lose power and get NS?
No SIGNAL!

Cellular
Norma J. Sundberg

“Scuse me?” I say,
But I get no reply,
The person
Is talking to herself,
NO—directing her words
into a tiny silver
box attached to her ear.
She ignores
my query and continues
conversation
into this mini-machine,
further distancing
those around her
by choice,
by chance,
to advance her
long-distance
word affair
into the air—
This ceaseless winter’s tormented since fall,  
Dreariest of seasons, ‘tween football and golf,  
I’ve done all the chores I intend to indoors,  
The movies’ flaming crashes long ago bored,  
Christmas books read or not worth reading,  
The polar vortex showed no sign of receding.  
Leaving lots of time to think.

The political middle offers plenty to ponder.  
Its forbearance of extremists makes me wonder:  
Pusillanimous moderates afraid of the Kochs?  
Plotting reelection sitting on their tokus?  
Be skeptical when you read the pundits,  
For your own peace of mind, skip reader comments.  
Think for yourself.

Think of Syria, Iraq, the whole Middle East,  
Taxes and budgets, income inequalities.  
Understand, if you can, the dedication  
To Congressional obstruction and prevarication.  
Both parties have their avaricious pols,  
Chasing lobbyists through Capitol halls.  
Somebody’s got to think. Are you doing your share?

Oddly, some people get paid just to think,  
One’s Jim DeMint, (in a tank, not a drink).  
I doubt Descartes had think tanks in mind,  
Five centuries ago when he proclaimed  
“I think, therefore I am.”  
I think, so by his definition, I am.  
Now I’m looking for a tank that will pay me to think.
Novice
Sandy Rafter

Fuzzy Cat,
The Choo Choo Train,
and Princesses with Peas and not,
I sparkled, jumped, and twirled
my baton as I led the book parade,
waiting to try the stumbling words
at Christmas and my birthday, reaching
eagerly to tear the wrappings, read
to Grandma or Mother who'd snuggle
close, exclaim along, correct a word
or two as I skittered my fingers beneath
the lines, and afterward, begged for a kitty
as my Mother stretched and smoothed
the sheets where I felt the tiniest
lump she could not quite see.

By the Meter
Craig W. Steele

A blank page lies
like a fallow field,
longing to sprout ink-soaked seeds
nourished
by inspiration.

I scan the plot,
ballpoint poised to sow
succulent trope, meter by meter,
with perspiration.

Cross-genre Clamor
Craig W. Steele

I pity the poet who yammered
that his writing was deeply enamored.
Befuddled, bewitched
and finally ditched,
his fiction was overly-glamoured.
E.I. SPECIAL REPORT

The art of Bob Dylan

By Brenda Roper

The recent dustup over Bob Dylan’s appearance in a Chrysler ad during the Super Bowl has got me thinking again about the mercurial singer/songwriter who continues to mystify even after a five-decade “calling.” (He doesn’t like the word “career.”)

Rather than debate the appropriateness of his commercial endeavor, I dove back into one of my favorite books, his 2004 memoir Chronicles: Volume 1. What a fascinating read. The way his mind can peel an abstract thought, or burst into expansive vistas—like an impressionist painter. It’s with these broad brush strokes I imagine him writing some of his now legendary lyrics.

In the book, he credits discovering the world of art in the early ‘60s as “opening up” his mind— not only the great paintings of the past, but more particularly the modernist work of Red Grooms. “What the folk songs were lyrically,” he explained, “Red’s songs were visually.”

Best known for his multimedia pop-art constructions, depicting scenes of frenetic urban life, Grooms embodied a no-holds-barred style that appealed to Dylan. By juxtaposing everyday items, such as a pair of old tennis shoes with the Staten Island Ferry or castle turrets with grinning nude models, the artist could express vibrant complex wholes—a world strong, yet fragile. Some may perceive Grooms’ work as a distortion of reality. But it’s actually the opposite. He finds deeper truths in revealing the obvious— a reality boldly apparent.

At least that’s what I think Dylan was drawn to. He appears to have extracted a few lessons that I rejoiced in tracing back to some of his lyrics.

For example, the way Grooms (as Dylan puts it) “used laughter as a diabolical weapon.” In “On the Road Again” (1963), the tale of a worn-out romance, Dylan uses this technique to shut down the lovers’ ongoing argument in the final verse:

Well, there’s fistfights in the kitchen
They’re enough to make me cry
The mailman comes in
Even he’s gotta take a side

Even the butler
He’s got something to prove
Then you ask why I don’t live here
Honey, how come you don’t move?

In “The Death of Emmett Till” (1963), Dylan, again like Grooms, wades in to expose “figures from history…with graphic finesse.” The brutal murder of a 14-year-old black boy, recounted with clear-eyed resolve, simmers with rage towards the southern township that allowed it.

If you can’t speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that’s so unjust
Your eyes are filled with dead men’s dirt, your mind is filled with dust
Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains, and your blood it must refuse to flow
For you let this human race fall down so God-awful low!

And finally, in a nod to Groom’s deft handling of “all the bums and cops, the lunatic bustle, the claustrophobic alleys,” Dylan aims his sights and psyche on a homeless man inches away from death in “Only a Hobo” (1963).

A blanket of newspaper covered his head
As the curb was his pillow, the street was his bed
One look at his face showed the hard road he’d come
And a fistful of coins showed the money he bummed.

The visual arts world not only inspired Dylan with his lyrics; it also led him to take up the craft himself. In the intervening half-century, he’s published a book of his drawings and hosted multiple public exhibitions of his paintings. In Chronicles he described the pursuit as “putting an orderliness to the chaos around…It purified the experience of my eye.”

When he and his wife and five children lived in East Hampton, he began painting landscapes (probably early ‘70s). The area was a refuge for artists, writers and wealthy families. “Not really a place, but a ‘state of mind,’” he says, reveling in the property that backed up to “the pristine Atlantic sandy beach.”

Dylan also plunged into reconfiguring hard metals, not surprising for someone growing up in Minnesota’s Iron Range. When asked about the wrought iron gates he created for a 2013 showing, he said “Gates appeal to me because of the negative space they allow…They can shut you out or shut you in. And in some ways there is no difference.”
Brenda Roper is a CPA living in Maryland with husband and CPA partner David. She's at work on her first novel, a contemporary love story (working title: Shane: A rock-n-roll love story) with (“surprise, surprise,” she says) its feet planted in the '70s rock world. “I have a whole photo album of ticket stubs and related concert reviews, loving maintained, going back to my first concert-- Led Zeppelin,” she notes.

The problem with politicians
Thanks to Barry Bishop

If God wanted us to vote, he would have given us candidates. ~Jay Leno~
We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office ~Aesop~
If we got one-tenth of what was promised to us in these State of the Union speeches, there wouldn't be any inducement to go to heaven. ~Will Rogers~
Why pay money to have your family tree traced; go into politics and your opponents will do it for you.~Author unknown~

Politics is the gentle art of getting votes from the poor and campaign funds from the rich, by promising to protect each from the other.
~Oscar Ameringer~
I offer my opponents a bargain: if they will stop telling lies about us, I will stop telling the truth about them.~Adlai Stevenson, campaign speech, 1952~

A politician is a fellow who will lay down your life for his country.
~Tex Guinan~

Instead of giving a politician the keys to the city, it might be better to change the locks. ~Doug Larson~
The rest of the story

One year on December 22nd, the winter solstice, a poor farmer realized that he and his wife wouldn't be able to afford Christmas presents for their children. He scrounged up some produce from his farm, hitched up his horse, and took a wagon into town to try to sell enough produce to buy some gifts. He couldn't sell a single thing, and as evening came and it began to snow, he had to head home. He was almost home when he became overwhelmed with the shame of telling his family about his failure, and as if it sensed his mood, the horse stopped, and the man wept. Eventually, the horse jingled its bells, and the farmer collected himself and headed back home to his family.

The incident inspired a poem.

The man was Robert Frost. The poem was of course "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," published in 1923. The horse's name was Eunice.

And now you know the REST of the story.

Extra Innings #54

Madison, Wisconsin April, 2014

This month’s All-Star Lineup:

Rex Owens, Madonna Dries Christensen,
Ed Pahnke, Sandra Rafter, Maureen Mitchell,
and special guest star Brenda Roper,
with Jan Kent as The Word Whisperer

Poetry from Vic Johnson, Norma Sundberg,
Larry Tobin, Bill Spevacek, Sandy Rafter, and
The Writer's Poet, Craig W. Steele.

Staff toddler: Liliana Lenore Cook
Web Weaver: Kerrie Louis
Internetters: Steve Born, Barry Bishop, and
Norma Sundberg
The Masked Man: Brace Beemer
Coach-in-Chief: Marshall J. Cook

I publish Extra Innings monthly and distribute it free to an open enrollment mailing list. To get on the list, email the Coach at: mcook@dcs.wisc.edu

Extra Innings comes to you through the good graces of the writing program at the Division of Continuing Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, led by Christine DeSmet. Find out about workshops, courses, conferences, and critiques services at:

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The Writers Institute
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Next Deadline:
Monday, April 21, 2014

Oft-confused phrases

Consider jury-rigged. Sounds like something that should be handled in court, doesn't it? But a jury-rig is a replacement mast for a sailing ship, hence, a makeshift repair. That term has been around since about 1788.

Jerry-built refers to something constructed in a crude or improvised manner. That's been around for a while, too, but in 1959 a new term – jerry-rigged -- appeared.

Jury tampering – that's the one that should be handled in court.
DeSmet to receive award for excellence

The woman behind the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Continuing studies writing programs, Christine DeSmet, will receive the university’s highest academic staff honor, the Academic Staff Excellence Award, at a ceremony on campus April 23.

Among her many accomplishments, DeSmet launched the Writers’ Institute, which celebrates its 25th anniversary April 4-5 and is recognized as the finest writers conference in the Midwest. She also created the popular Write by the Lake and Weekend with your Novel programs, along with scores of workshops and online courses for adults seeking information and inspiration on all aspects of writing and publishing.

DeSmet is herself a successful playwright and novelist, currently working on the second in her Fudge Shop Mystery series, Hot Fudge Frame-Up which, like its predecessor, First-Degree Fudge, is set in Door County, Wisconsin and published by Obsidian.

As many of you know, I had the joy and honor of working alongside Chris at the University for over three decades and can attest first hand to just how richly she deserves this recognition.

Congratulations, Chris!

Negative reviews are one thing, but...

Negative blurbs???

We began this issue with my little ramble about negative book reviews. (If you missed it because you start at the end of the magazine with Lily’s picture and skim forward, I don’t blame you.) Recently I came upon this rare phenomenon, a negative blurb (you know, the snippets on the book jacket that let you know that the book you’re holding in your hands is the greatest thing since Gutenberg).

Blurbs also appear on movie, play, and concert ads, of course, and that’s where I found this one, for comedian/banjoist Steve Martin’s first-ever television concert, “Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers”: “Some music shows just display incredible virtuosity & musicianship, while others are just completely fun. But it’s rare to see a music show that is NEITHER.”

It’s signed “Steve Martin”

So there you have it, a negative, self-published blurb.

Wild and crazy (and very funny) guy, that Steve Martin.

Thieves temporarily shut down Little Free Library

I’m posting this sign in the window of my Little Free Library out front:

Temporarily
CLOSED
due to persistent
BOOK THIEVES

I’m considering borrowing a friend’s motion-sensitive camera (he uses it to film the wildlife out behind his house) and mounting it in the tree next to the LFL to see if I can catch a thief. Each book in the library carries a stamp advising bookstores not to buy the used book, and Rick Brooks, LFL czar, has contacted local booksellers, who have pledged not to do so.

Any other suggestions as to how we might thwart this dastards?
**QUESTION OF THE MONTH**

**Guess who’s coming to dinner?**

If you could sit down and chat with any author, living or dead, you’d pick a true all-star line-up of writers and thinkers. Here are some of your choices.

**Mark Twain**
“Great writer, great sense of humor and, like me, he could be a crusty old goat when the need arose.

**Larry Tobin**

**Harper Lee**
“No question, to catch that mockingbird lady.”

**Madonna Dries Christensen**

**Flannery O’Connor**
“a very skilled storyteller who wrote no run-of-the-mill pieces I’ve ever seen. ... How I’d like to know that mind. I wouldn’t even begin to know how to talk to her. She is set apart.”

**Sandy Rafter**

**William Faulkner**
“How I would love to have lunch with him and ask a myriad of questions. How’d you invent your cast of characters? Did you linger in Oxford, Mississippi's square, watch the locals pass by, and think, there's a Snopes, that one's a Beauchamp? Is it possible "A Scent of Verbena" may have originated from a real-life event? What about that postmaster job? Had you not been ingloriously fired, might you have kept the job until you were eligible for a nice, cushy pension? Those Hollywood years - I understand you may have scripted some films for which you weren't credited. Which ones? Or would you rather not say? What about those hunting trips you took with Clark Gable and Humphrey Bogart? I so hope they were epic good times for you. Speaking of hunting, how come you hunted deer on horseback in Mississippi? Seems like a strange practice for us northerners.

“The questions would go on and on. I better bring a big bottle of Jack Daniels with me to keep him talking.

“I do believe it's time to reread some of his novels.”

**Pat Fitzgerald**

**Anne Lamott**
“I keep her Bird by Bird on my shelf for rereading. I own four of her other books as well. I don't remember precisely her advice to inexperienced writers, but I do remember the gist: Write for yourself; find your own voice. If you never get a thing published, you will be doing something you love.

““I like her honest take on writing, her vulnerability, and her wonderful use of words.”

**Jan Bosman**

**This month’s poser:**
What book have you always meant to read but just haven’t gotten around to yet? What do you feel ashamed/embarrassed never to have read?
Confess to the Coach: mcook@dcs.wisc.edu

**Rex’s consignment lament draws Swift response**

In the old days, I placed my books on consignment with local bookstores and, while they didn't charge $15, they did take the first 40%, and many months later, they would mail me a miserably small check for my share.

The bookstore down here in Scottsdale, by fiat, will not carry any self-published books, period. You could probably pay them $1,000,000 and they still wouldn't find an inch of space on their shelves for you. It's a tough world.

**John Swift**

“Courage to Write” draws praise

Loved the opening poem [“The Courage to Write,” by Lucia Chikowero, last issue]. So beautiful and full of truth. Then went straight to the darling pictures of Lily. (Every time I see her I imagine how much fun you have with her.)

**Lisa Krenz**

To Lucia Chikowero: You make a lot of sense, and you certainly have a lot of courage. Thank you for what you wrote.

**Sandy Rafter**
Words of Wisdom from Phyllis Diller

Thanks to Norma Sundberg

Whatever you may look like, marry a man your own age. As your beauty fades, so will his eyesight.

Housework can't kill you, but why take a chance?

Cleaning your house while your kids are still growing up is like shoveling the walk before it stops snowing.

Women don't play football because 11 of them would never wear the same outfit in public.

Best way to get rid of kitchen odors: Eat out.

A bachelor is a guy who never made the same mistake once.

I want my children to have all the things I couldn't afford. Then I want to move in with them.

Most children threaten to run away from home. This is the only thing that keeps some parents going.

Any time three New Yorkers get into a cab without an argument, a bank has just been robbed.

We spend the first 12 months of our children's lives teaching them to walk and talk and the next 12 years telling them to sit down and shut up.

What I don't like about office Christmas parties is looking for a job the next day.

The only time I ever enjoyed ironing was the day I accidentally got gin in the steam iron.

My photographs don't do me justice - they just look like me.

Tranquilizers work only if you follow the advice on the bottle - “Keep away from children.”

I asked the waiter, 'Is this milk fresh?' He said, 'Lady, three hours ago it was grass.'

The reason the golf pro tells you to keep your head down is so you can't see him laughing.

You know you're old if they have discontinued your blood type.
PHOTO ID QUIZ

Leighton Mark prevents Coach from pitching a shutout

Last month’s mystery photo was not Walt Whitman-- but a lot of you sure thought it was. “Can’t say for sure if it’s Walt Whitman or Dwight Eisenhower wearing a dress,” Bill Hickey wrote, “but my vote goes to Walt.” Diane Wittik also hedged her bets but came up empty three times, guessing Mark Twain, the popular Mr. Whitman, and Charles Darwin-- bearded famous writers all. Several others also went for Whitman, but given a second shot, Anna Lee Landen came up with the right bearded old gent. But only Leighton Mark nailed it on the first try. Take it away, Leighton: Coach “You’re getting soft when you throw a pitch straight down the middle. That of course is your great grand uncle Leo Tolstoy with his grandchildren. The tougher question would have been to ask the names of the children? (Sophia and Llya). The picture was taken in 1909 in the city of Krekshino.” Thanks to all who responded.

This month’s mystery photo

This time we’re looking for an event, not a person. What are the folks in this picture looking at?

Geek humor

thanks to Reader’s Digest for January, 2014

A computer once beat me at chess, but it was no match for me at kickboxing.

Emo Philips
I’d like the window that says “Are you sure you want to do this? OK/Cancel” to pop up less often on my computer and more in my real life.

@aaronfullerton

User: the word computer professionals use when they mean “idiot.”

Dave Barry
My dog licked the crumbs out of my computer keyboard and earned an online college degree.

@scbchbum

One can play at this game... me to my computer solitaire.

@meganamram

There are only two types of computers in this world: those that waste your precious time and those that waste your precious time faster.

Anonymous
And now, at last
Your Moment With Lily

Lily explores cyberspace with GramEllie